

HEBREW

Most Jewish prayers are written and said in **Hebrew**. Hebrew is one of the oldest written languages. In Bible times the Jewish people spoke Hebrew. In modern day Israel they speak a language called **Ivrit**. Ivrit is another name for Hebrew.

The Hebrew alphabet is very different from ours. It has 22 letters. Some of the letters have slightly different shapes depending on whether they are in the middle of a word or at the end of a word. Here are a few of the letters. Underneath each one is its name in English and the sound it makes.

Letter							
Name	Tzadeh	Resh	Mem	Lamed	Gimel	Chet	Bet
Sound	ts	r	m	l	g	ch (as in the scots word <i>loch</i>)	b or v

All the letters are **CAPITALS**. There are no lower case letters in Hebrew. (There is a different set of letter shapes for handwriting - but that's another story!)

Hebrew writing starts at the **RIGHT** hand end of the line and reads along towards the **LEFT**.

All the letters in the Hebrew alphabet are **consonants**. Originally, there were no vowels in Hebrew writing (*of course there were vowels in Hebrew speaking - you can't talk without vowel sounds*). This can make Hebrew difficult to read. Here is some writing in English but using only the consonants. Can you read it?

CHLDRN MST G T SCHL VRY DY XCPT WHN T S HLDY R WKND.

Write down what you think it says. Can you work out which word is missing completely?

Try writing a message with the vowels missed out. Can your friends read it easily?

Here are two versions of the same Hebrew words. Can you see the difference?

ושמרו בני-ישראל את-השבת לעשות את-השבת
ושמרו בני-ישראל את-השבת לעשות את-השבת



You start reading at this end!

In Hebrew, the vowel sounds are shown by putting little dots or other signs above or below the letters. These vowel signs are called **nikud**. Here are some examples:

• • • • Either of these signs underneath a letter add an *e* (like the *e* in red) after the sound of the letter.

— T Either of these signs underneath a letter add an *u* (like the *u* in butter) after the sound of the letter.

Hebrew text with the nikud is called **pointed** text. Text without the nikud is called **unpointed** text.

Look carefully at the sample of pointed text. Can you spot two other nikud?

The Hebrew alphabet is usually called the ALEPH BET. Look at a chart showing all the Hebrew letters. Why do you think it has this name?

There are quite a few words in English that come from Hebrew and so do many names. Amen, camel, cinnamon, Sabbath and bedlam are some of the words that have been "borrowed" from Hebrew. Michael, Rachel, Susan, John, Jack, Rebecca and Simon are just a few of the Hebrew names that we use today.

Many Jewish children go to cheder (say the ch a bit like quickly clearing your throat) on a Sunday morning. Cheder is a school where they learn about their religion. (The word cheder means *room*). One of the things that children learn at cheder is how to read Hebrew. (They do not always learn how to speak it!)

Teachers' Notes

Hebrew characters are not written on lines, rather the text hangs from a line above the letters. There are few ascenders (only 1) or descenders (2). The lack of a) different heights and b) white space actually makes Hebrew quite difficult to read quickly.

Hebrew words are usually (but not always) stressed on the final syllable.

Hebrew does not use the phoneme **ch** (as in chair). When transliterating Hebrew into English the grapheme **ch** is often used to denote the sound at the end of the Scots word *loch*. (This sound is technically known as a *voiceless velar fricative and can also be transliterated as kh*). . Hebrew also does not use the phonemes **j** or **w**.

Hebrew also uses the letters of the AlephBet as numerals. The first 10 letters having the values 1 – 10 and other letters having higher values such as 50 and 100. It works rather like the Roman system, except that since values are only ever added the letters can be arranged in any order. This means that every Hebrew word has a numerical value – a fact that has been put to use in the system known as **Gematria**, which tries to elicit meaning by comparing the numerical values of words in a text. The assumption is that, since language is God's gift, any numerical links between words are not coincidental.

Vowels

As in several other languages (eg Arabic) Hebrew's vowels are far more fluid than we speakers of Romance or Germanic languages are used to. A word's vowels will change according to tense, case, number, gender. The developers of writing systems for fluid-vowel languages generally opted not to have graphemes for vowels, leaving it to the reader to insert vowels as necessary. Fluent speakers will know the right vowel sounds for any word they read, those who are not fluent will struggle to make the right noises! The use of diacritic marks to indicate vowels (without changing the basic text) came much later, for the benefit of non-fluent readers eg Jews who wanted to pray in Hebrew despite not speaking it.

Hebrew plurals

These are generally formed in one of two ways:

- Masculine words (which generally end in a consonant other than -t) form their plurals by adding – **im**; eg **devar** / **d'varim** (word/s).
- Feminine words (which usually end in –ah or -t) form their plurals by changing the **–ah** to **–ot** or by adding **–ot** after the **-t**. eg **sukkah** / **Sukkot** (temporary shelter/s), **tallit** / **tallitot** (prayer shawl/s).

Most Jewish prayers are written in Hebrew, but a few are in Aramaic, a related language, which was the dominant language in the Near East for about a millennium, between the 4th century BCE and the 6th century CE. (BCE and CE are used in preference to BC and AD. They mean *Before the Common Era* and *Common Era*). Dialects of Aramaic are still spoken in some places today. Prayers in Aramaic are written in

Hebrew script. One notable prayer that is written in Aramaic is **Kaddish**, which is used as the memorial prayer for the dead.