

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר
הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית
עַבְדִּים:

Exodus 20:2



Alef

Alef is the first of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alef-bet. By itself alef doesn't make any sound at all, but when it is paired with a vowel marking it carries the sound of the vowel. In Hebrew the vowel markings are called the nikkud. They were invented by Jewish scholars called the Masoretes somewhere around the 8th to 10th century AD. Before that Hebrew was only written with consonants, the same way modern Hebrew is written.

Anyone learning to read the language would already know how it was to be pronounced. How? The same way you learned how words are supposed to sound - by hearing them spoken. However, when Hebrew ceased to be a primary language the scholars worried that the correct pronunciation of the language would be lost forever, and thus the Nikud were invented. They are very helpful to us when learning.

Look at the verse from Exodus 20. It marks the beginning of the statements that we traditionally call the ten commandments. How many alefs you can find in the verse? Now look closely at the vowel markings associated with the alefs. How many different vowel markings do you see? Would you expect any of the alefs to be silent? If so, which one and why?

For twenty-six generations the alef complained before the throne of the Holy One blessed be He. It said before Him: 'Master of the universe, I am the first of the letters, but You did not create Your world with me.' The Holy One blessed be He said to it: 'The world and all its contents were created only for the sake of the Torah, as it is stated: "The Lord founded the earth with wisdom..." (Proverbs 3:19). Tomorrow, I will be coming to give the Torah at Sinai, and I will open it at its beginning only with you, as it is stated: "I [anokhi] am the Lord your God"' (Exodus 20:2).

- From Beresheit Rabbah 1



Mordecai Ardon
The Creation - Alef, 1970's

First we'll practice writing the aleph using a-class vowels to give it a voice. The first vowel marking we'll use is called a "Qamets" and it looks like a capital T written directly underneath the consonant. The Qamets makes a long "a" sound as in father or like the sound you make when you take a sip of delicious tea. That's how I like to remember it. Delicious "T" makes you say ah...

A clear glass cup filled with a golden-brown liquid, likely tea. A single tea bag is visible, partially submerged and partially above the surface of the liquid. The cup has a simple, modern design with a handle on the right side.

Abstract

[illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible]

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

Genesis 1:1

ב
Bet

Bet (also spelled beth or beit) is the second letter of the Hebrew alef-bet. It is also the first of the begad-kefat letters. What is that you ask? The begad kefat letters are six Hebrew consonants that sometimes appear with a dot in the middle (called a dagesh). For now, don't worry so much about why it happens, but learn to recognize it when you see it. It looks like this:

ב

and is pronounced like the "b" in boy. Without the dot in the middle (the dagesh) it looks like the bet at the top of the page and is pronounced like the "v" in vet or villian or vituperate. We'll call them both bet, but don't forget to pronounce it correctly when you see it.

Now look at the verse at the top of the page. It's the first verse in the bible. What letter does the verse start with? How many bets do you see in the verse? How would you pronounce the bets that you see? If a bet has a dagesh, note where the bet appears in the word.

In Hebrew, sometimes a single consonant can form a word. The bet is one of those consonants. It forms a preposition that's usually translated "in", "with", or "by". As you begin to build your vocabulary you'll understand when bet is simply the first letter of a word or when it's acting as a preposition.

Look at the verse at the top of the page once more. Where does the first bet occur? Do you

Rabbi Yona said in the name of Rabbi Levi: Why was the world created with the letter beit? It is because just as the beit is closed on all its sides but open in its front, so, you do not have permission to ask: What is below, what is above, what was before, and what is after, but only from the day when the world created and onward.

- From Beresheit Rabbah 1



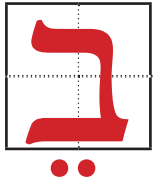
Oil on canvas by Yasha Knecht

think this is acting as a preposition or simply the first letter of a word? What about the second bet? What is the reason for your answer?

It is now time to practice writing the second letter, our friend bet. We're going to give the bet two vowel sounds, just like we did with the aleph. These are both "e" class vowels. The first is called the Tsere. It makes the same sound as the "ei" in eight. If you pushed the two dots together they would make an eight - a laying eight. You see what I did there?



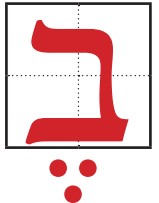
Tsere



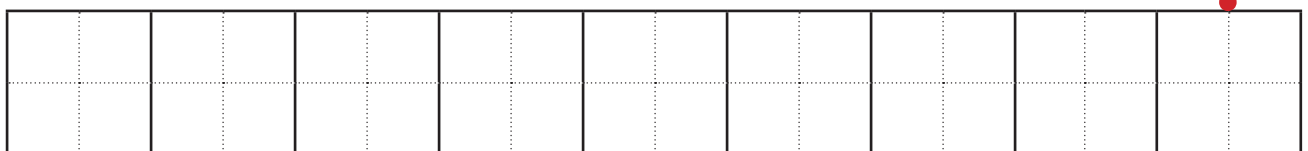
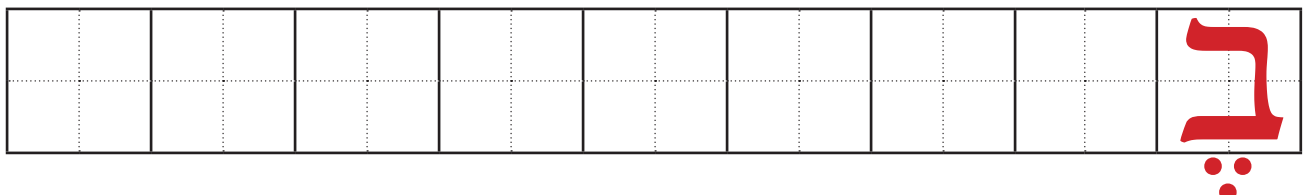
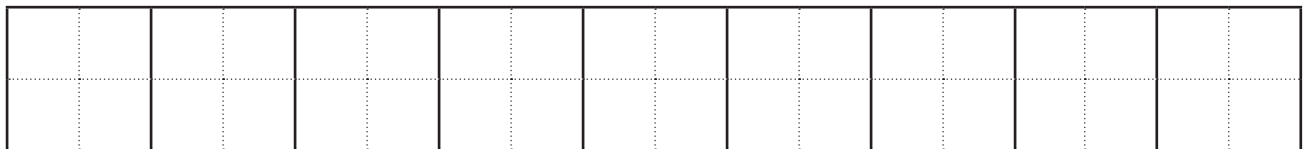
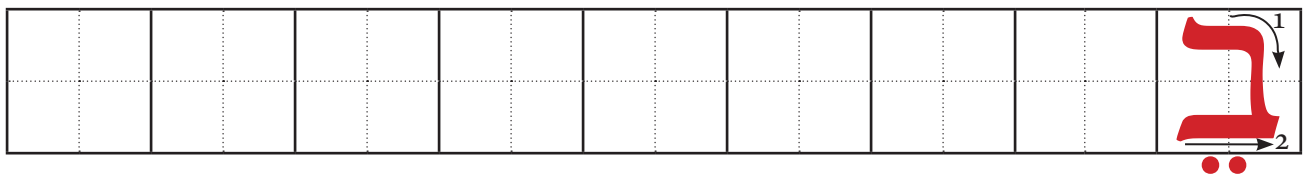
The other vowel marking is called a seghol. The seghol makes a short "e" sound, kind of like the "e" in eggs. However, if you're the type of person that pronounces egg like "ay-g" then you'll say it wrong. It's like the "e" in beg or bet or vet. Now try to pronounce egg properly and it will help you remember that the s-"egg"-hol looks like a bunch of eggs in a basket.



Seghol



Now practice writing bet in the blocks below, first with the tsere and then with the seghol. For the second row of bets in each section, add the dagesh. Practice saying the sounds as you write the letter and vowel combos.



גִּמְלוֹ עַל-עֲבֹדֶךָ אֲחִיָּה וְאַשְׁמְרָה דְּבָרֶךָ:

Psalm 119:17



Gimel

Gimel is the third letter of the Hebrew alef-bet. It makes a hard "g" like the sound in guy or gal. It is also the second of the begad-kefat letters. Unlike bet though, the sound of the gimel doesn't change, even when it has a dagesh. Still, pay attention when you see it and you may start to notice a pattern about when it appears.



If you like you can think of it as a giraffe with a long neck. That will make you think of "g" for giraffe, just don't forget that unlike giraffe, it's a hard "g".

Now look at the verse at the top of the page. It's from Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is an acrostic psalm, which means each verse opens with a specific letter, depending on which section it's in. Once we get through the alef-bet you'll be able to look at the Psalm in Hebrew and see how it's structured.

In the verse above, how many gimels do you see? Dagesh or no dagesh? How many alefs? How many bets? Which vowel markings do you recognize? Which ones do you not recognize? Which letters don't have vowel markings at all? Why do you think that is?

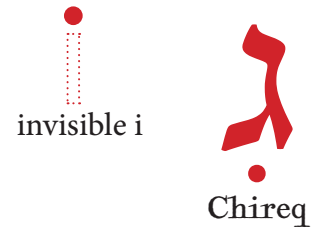
The ancient rabbis said that the gimel is a picture of a rich man pursuing a poor man for the purpose of giving him charity. Why? Because gimol (the first word of the verse above) means to give or deal bountifully, and is a homonym to gimel. But why the idea of pursuing the poor? Because the next letter we'll see is the dalet and dal, or dalim in the plural, means the needy, the poor, or the weak. Thus gimel-dalet corresponds to gimol-dalim, to give bountifully to the poor, and the gimel is the profile of a rich man pursuing after the poor for the purpose of charity.

-adapted from the Talmud, Shabbat 104a

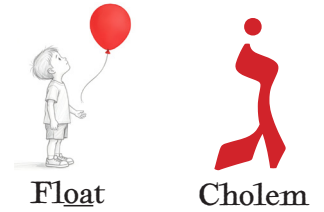


Watercolor by Dani Antman

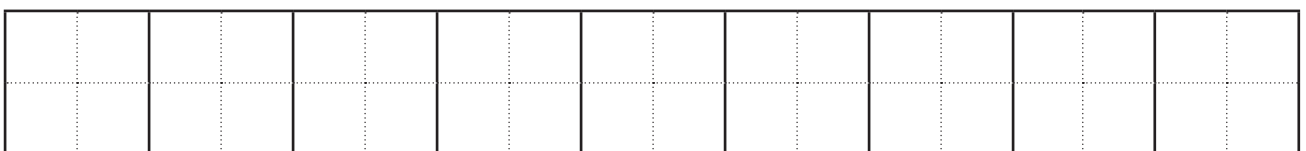
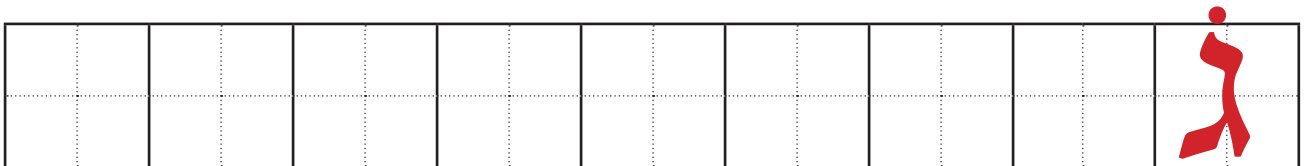
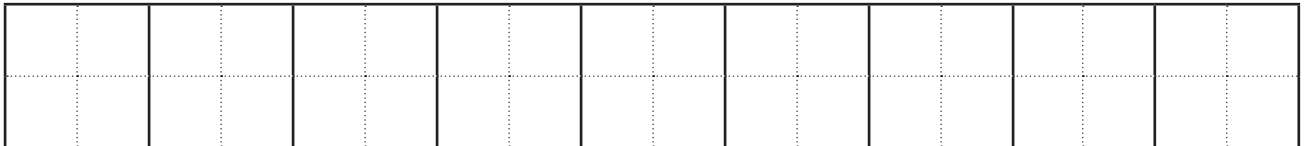
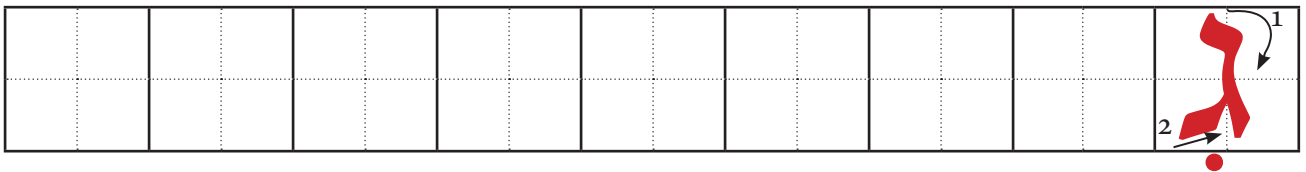
Now let's practice writing the gimel. We're going to continue our tradition of sneaking in two new vowels as well. This time we'll start with the chireq, which is an I-class vowel. It's represented by a single dot directly underneath the letter. I like to visualize an invisible "i" underneath the dot because it helps me remember that it's pronounced just like a short i, as in pig, dig, wig, or fig.



The second vowel we'll introduce is the cholem. The cholem is unique because it sits on top of the letter. Maybe it's fragile, maybe it's claustrophobic, or more likely it just doesn't want to be confused with a chireq. If you've ever wanted a house on a hill I'm sure you can relate. It makes a long "o" sound, just like float, boat, goat, row, hoe, joe, go, and no.



Now practice writing gimel in the blocks below, first with the chireq and then with the cholem. For the second row of gimels in each section, add the dagesh. Practice saying the sounds as you write the letter and vowel combos.



Reading Practice

So far we've learned 24 unique sounds and we're only on the third letter of the alef-bet! You should already be feeling like a native speaker at this point. If you're not, that's okay too. That's why we're going to spend the next few minutes practicing putting these sounds together. These exercises are to be done OUT LOUD. Start with the letters and vowel markings on the right as a warm up. After that we'll do the double letter combos below and triple letter combos on the following page.

א א א א א א
ב ב ב ב ב ב
ב ב ב ב ב ב
ג ג ג ג ג ג

אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב

אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב אֵב

בֵּא בֶּא בָּא בַּב בְּב בִּב בִּבּ בִּבְּ בִּבֵּ

בג בג בג בג בג בג בג בג בג בא

בֵּא בֵּא בֵּא בֵּא בֵּא בֵּא בֵּא בֵּא בֵּא בֵּא

בֹּא בָּא בְּא בַּא בְּב בִּב בֶּב בֵּב

[illegible]

גב גב גב גב גב גב גב גב גב גב גב גב

Good work, now we'll move into some triple letter combos. Here's a general rule for pronunciation - every consonant with a vowel marking is one syllable. If the word has a consonant at the end with no vowel markings underneath, it is absorbed into the syllable before it. For example, the first two letter

practice word **בָּא** is pronounced Bah - ah, two syllables, because both the bet and the alef have a

qamets underneath. The combo **גַּיב** is pronounced ga - gayb, also two syllables, because the bet at

the end has no vowel marking. This is known as a closed syllable, but don't worry too much about the terminology right now, just practice your reading and pronunciation.

בָּא	גַּב	בֵּג	בֶּא	יֵב	גָּא	אֵב	בֶּב	גֵּב
אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב
בָּא	גַּב	בֵּג	בֶּא	יֵב	גָּא	אֵב	בֶּב	גֵּב
גַּב	בֵּג	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב
בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב
גַּב	בֵּג	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב
אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב
בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב
גַּב	בֵּג	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב
בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב	בֶּב	אֵב	גָּב

Letter & Vowel Recognition

Now we'll practice letter recognition in the context of scripture. The passage below is Genesis verses 1-11. Your first task is to find yourself a red, yellow, and green colored pencil. Look for the letters we've learned so far and color them: alef = red, bet = yellow, gimel = green. I did the first word for you. Once you finish write you totals in the table.

א		ב,ב		ג	
---	--	-----	--	---	--

Now do the same thing for the vowel markings we learned. Choose a unique color for each vowel and don't reuse the colors from the letters. Write you totals in the table. Note that the alef is just a placeholder. They can be under any letter.

אֵ		אֶ		אִ		אֻ		א֔		א֖	
----	--	----	--	----	--	----	--	----	--	----	--

בְּרָאִישִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תְּהוֹ וּבְהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי אוֹר וַיְהי־אוֹר:

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאוֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָאוֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה וַיְהי־עֶרֶב וַיְהי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד: פ

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וַיְהי מַבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לַמַּיִם:

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָרָקִיעַ וַיַּבְדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לָרָקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לָרָקִיעַ וַיְהי־כֵן:

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָרָקִיעַ שָׁמַיִם וַיְהי־עֶרֶב וַיְהי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי: פ

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְווּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־מָקוֹם אֶחָד וְתִרְאָה הַיַּבָּשָׁה וַיְהי־כֵן:

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיַּבָּשָׁה אָרֶץ וּלַמָּקוֹה הַמַּיִם קָרָא יַמִּים וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תִּדְשָׂא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׂא עֵשֶׂב מִזֵּרַע זֶרַע עֵץ פָּרִי עֵשֶׂה פָּרִי לְמִינוֹ אֲשֶׁר זֶרַע־וּבוֹ עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהי־כֵן: