

The Joy of Hebrew
Rabbi Michael Lotker

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Things to Love About Hebrew

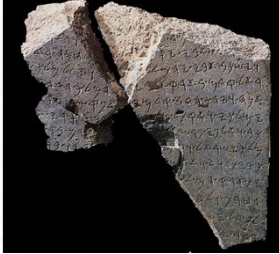
- It's the oldest living language – some 4000 years old.
- It's the only language ever to be brought back into common spoken use.
- It's wonderfully ambiguous
 - This is how one text gives birth to two religions: Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity
- It is the DNA of the universe – God speaks the universe into existence.

Our Focus

- How Hebrew insights open up the biblical text and Jewish tradition.
- How translations miss the richness of the original and may even mislead.
- Why learning a bit of Hebrew may be worth your time.

Hebrew is Written...

- From right to left – easier for right handed chisellers
- Without vowels to force us to read in context
 - Consider the consonants H & T
 - Could be hat, hot, hit, hut, heat, hate, etc.



Let's Begin With the Beginning




The First Letter of the Bible

- Is the Hebrew letter “bet” **ב**
- Why begin the text with this letter?
 - To teach that you can't ask what happened before, above, or below the Torah.
 - Physicists now say that this is also true of the Big Bang
 - To teach that there are two Torahs:
 - Written – 1st 5 Books of the Bible
 - Oral – The Talmud

We Cannot Simply Translate the Bible

- The first two words of the bible present a grammatical problem: בראשית ברא אלהים *“B'raysheet bara Elohim”* – Often translated: “In the beginning, God created...”
- But if we wanted to say “in the beginning God created,” we would write ברא אלהים בראשונה - *B'reeshonah...*
- *B'raysheet* is half of an expression – Hebrew grammar requires the next word to be a noun – but the next word is a verb.
- Rashi teaches that God was teaching us that we can't just translate – we must interpret.
- I think God put this lesson here (between word #1 & #2) so those of us with ADD wouldn't miss it.



We Can't Simply Translate the Bible - & We Shouldn't Try!

- From Rabbi Johnathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, p.207-8
 - “Every text needs interpretation.
 - Every interpretation needs wisdom.
 - Every wisdom needs careful negotiation between the timeless and time.
 - Fundamentalism reads texts as if God were as simple as we are. That is unlikely to be true”
- The Talmud says “One who translates a verse literally is a liar” [BT Kiddushin 49A]



Good Heavens!


- Creation begins by God separating the waters (*mayim* מים) below from the waters above.
- The Hebrew word for heaven is *shamayim* שמים
- The origin may be from the idea that, looking up and seeing the blue sky, you might say:
 - “There’s water”
 - שם-מים
 - שמים



The Meaning of *Olam*

עולם

- In biblical Hebrew, *olam* means eternity (time related)
 - *L’olam va’ed* – for ever and ever
- In rabbinic Hebrew, *olam* means the universe (space related)
 - *Eloheinu melech haolam* – God of the universe
- It took Einstein to teach us that these are really the same.



The Meaning of *Yisrael*

ישראל

- Jacob – *Yaacov* – gets his name changed from “heel” to *Yisrael* – Israel – when he wrestles with God/angel [Gen. 32:25-33]
- *Yisrael* means one who wrestles with God.
- If you struggle with God – welcome to the club!
- Contrast with Islam – the word *Islam* mean one who submits (to God).




The Meaning of the *Shema*

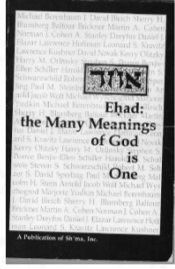
שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה | אֶחָד:

She-ma Yis-ra-el, Ah-do-nai Eh-lo-hei-nu, Ado-nai Eh-chad
[Deuteronomy 6:4]


Hear O Israel: Adonai is (now) our God, Adonai (will be) One.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai alone.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai our God, Adonai is one.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai is our God, one indivisible Adonai.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai our God is a unique Adonai.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai our God is Ultimate.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai is Unity/Everything.



The Meaning of *Echad*: 25 Essays



Eugene B. Borowitz Elia Yis'haq Cohen to Se Michael Sternheim An Ancient Mystery Once Obscured Often Reinterpreted 1 J. David Blech One G-d, One People Sherry M. Blumberg One, God's Unity Balkeer Brinkner The Oneness that Thousands of Us Martin A. Cohen The True Way to God's Unity Norman J. Cohen Having the Heart of the One God A. Stanley Overdas The 50'na: A Remembrance of Childood Daniel L. Hazzat One God's Eternal Love Lawrence Hoffman The Creator-Speaking the Creator Leonard S. Kravitz Lawrence Kushner The Unity that is not One David Nisrak A Short Meditation on the Sh'ma	Kerry Olesky Growing in God's Image, to Greater Oneness 53 Harry M. Orlinsky "Echad" – Some One for "Many" Stephen S. Ouzo Seeking God as the Unity of Human Experience Benjye Ellen Schiller Harold M. Schulweis "One" – Testing the Profundity of Diversity 67 Steven S. Schwartzchild On the Unique God Robert M. Seltzer On One of the Many Meanings of "God is One" S. David Sperling The One We Ought to Love Paul M. Steinberg The Midpoint of our Faith Malcolm H. Stern The Unity and Obscurity of the <i>Sh'ma</i> Michael Wyszogrod This One—and No Other Margerie Yankin The Oneness Which Allows for Otherness 99
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The Calligraphy of the *Shema*

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה | אֶחָד:

She-ma Yis-ra-el, Ah-do-nai Eh-lo-hei-nu, Ado-nai Eh-chad

As written in the Torah, the large *ayin* (א) and *daled* (ד) have two explanations:


- Stand for the word "*Aid*" (אֵיד) meaning "witness"
- Large *ayin* insures that we don't read שְׁמַח (*SHEM-ah*), meaning "perhaps" and large *daled* insures that we don't read the letter as a *resh* (ר), making the last word אַחַר *echar* meaning "another"



El Shaddai


אל שדי

- This name of God appears 48 times in Bible.
- Often translated as "God Almighty," but *Shaddai* can mean
 - Mountain – a God of nature and majesty and power
 - Breast – i.e. a nurturing, feminine God
 - An acronym for *Shomer D'latot Yisrael* (Guardian of the doors of Israel) – a *shin* often appears on a *mezzuah*.
 - Could mean "the One that said דַּי *dai* – "enough" – the One who set limits in creating the universe.




Who Was That Woman?

- In the Garden of Eden story, the characters are *Adam* and *Chavah* - **אדם וחוה**
 - We have the name “Eve” because the Greeks couldn’t pronounce the guttural *chet*.
- Chava* is related to the word *chai* **חַי** meaning *life* (of a living creature)



The Role of the Woman?

- The first thing God says is not good is loneliness (“It is not good for a person to be alone” Gen. 2:18)
- So God says the man needs an *ezer k’negdo* **עזר כנגדו**
 - This is often translated as “helpmate, helpmeet, fitting helper, etc.”
 - This sounds vaguely demeaning.
- But God is called an *Ezer* and *k’neged* can have the meaning of being in balance and opposition to one (like the scales of justice).
- Thus, the woman will help by being a balance – a supportive opposite.
- In this spirit, I titled my rabbinic thesis “*Ezer K’negdo – Toward a Theology of Jewish-Christian Partnership*”



Man, Woman, Fire & God

- Hebrew word for man = **אִישׁ**
- Hebrew word for woman = **אִשָּׁה**
- Hebrew word for fire = **אֵשׁ**
- A Hebrew word for God = **יְהוָה**
- The *Talmud* (*Sotah* 17a) tells us that if a man and woman are meritorious, God dwells within them. **אֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים**
- Take God out, and what’s left is fire. **אֵשׁ אֵשׁ**



The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- The name of the tree is **עֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע**
 - Etz ha-da-at tov v’rah*
 - “The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.”
 - The phrase “good and evil” may be a merism like “soup to nuts.” [see Deut. 1:39 & 2nd Samuel 19:36]
- The nature of the fruit of the tree is not stated.
 - The rabbis say it was a fig tree since *Adam* and *Chavah* cover themselves with fig leaves.
- Was it an apple?
 - This idea enters through a assonance between the Latin words for wrongdoing, *malum*, and apple, *malus*.

The Punishments in Eden



The Punishments in Eden

- To the woman “I will make most severe your pangs (בעצב) in childbearing”
- To the man “By toil (בעצבון) you shall eat”
- So what is the meaning of *etzev*?
 - It can mean pain or toil
 - But it can also mean grieve
- Gen. 6:6 “The Lord regretted that He had made man on earth and His heart was saddened (ויתעב) ”

A Big Lesson From the Smallest Letter

After Cain murders Abel, God says to him that “your brother’s blood cries out to Me.” But the text (Gen. 4:10) says “bloods”


- דם אחיך and not דמי אחיך
- The understanding is that cry is from all the children that will never issue from Abel.
- From this single additional *yod*, the Talmud teaches “Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.”

[Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Yerushalmi Talmud 4:9, Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 37a]

An Abomination?

Lev. 18:22 – “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman – it is abomination (תועבה) *toevah*.”


- *Toevah* is generally used to proscribe Canaanite and/or idolatrous practices:
 - Kosher laws (Deut. 14:3) “You shall not eat anything abominable thing”
 - Prohibition against marrying ex wife (Deut. 24:4),
 - Prohibition against woman wearing man’s clothing (Deut. 22:5)
 - Also Deut. 18:9 (practices of other nations), 18:12 (consulting spirits), 32:16 (worshiping other gods), Gen. 43:32 (Egyptians eating with others), Is. 1:13 (sacrifices and offerings without ethical behavior)



Compassion or Insanity?

The Hebrew word *rachamim* (רחמים) means “compassion, tender mercy.” It comes from the root *rechem* (רחם) meaning a “womb or uterus.”

- Thus, the Hebrew mind associated uterus with loving compassion.
- Contrast this with the use of the Greek word for uterus, *hystera* or *hysterika*, which the Western mind associated with hysteria.




Truth vs. Lies: A Question of Balance

Consider the Hebrew word for truth אמת-*emet*

- Each letter is well balanced on a firm base
- And *aleph* is the first letter, *mem* is the middle letter, and *taf* is the last letter of the alphabet.

Now consider the word for lie שקר-*sheker*

- Each letter is unbalanced on a wobbly base
- And *shin*, *kof* and *resh* are the 3 next to last letters of the alphabet.



Killing or Murder?

- The Hebrew is clear -- לא תרצח “You Shall Not Murder”
- What’s the difference between murder & killing?
 - Murder is taking the life of an innocent person.
 - Killing is taking any life – we kill germs when we brush our teeth.
- Why the King James “Thou shalt not kill? In 1611:
 - The word *kill* meant *murder*, and
 - The word *slay* meant *kill*
 - So this translation was correct when written but English usage changed.



Angel or Messenger?

The Hebrew word for angel is, *malach* מלאך

And the Hebrew word for messenger is מלאך

Judaism teaches that God sends us into the world to complete creation:

- Are we simple messengers or divine angels?
- Speaking Hebrew, there’s no difference!

The Meaning of Messiah

English "Messiah" is a translation of the Hebrew "*Mashiach*" [משיח]

- *Mashiach* means "anointed."
 - Kings of Israel were anointed by pouring holy oil on their heads.
- When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (about 200 BCE), the Hebrew *Mashiach* became the Greek "*Christos*" [Χριστός].
 - Note that the Greek letter Chi [X] is why we have "Xmas"
- The Greek *Christos* gives rise to the English "Christ."
- This is why I never refer to Jesus as "Christ"

Halleluyah – An Entire Hebrew Sentence in 1 Word


- Hallel [הלל] means "praise"
- Add the "u" [הללן] makes the verb form 2nd person plural imperative or "y'all praise"
- Yah [יה] is one of the words for God
- Halleluyah [הללו-יה] "Praise God!"

What a Difference a Dot Makes


It took only 2 years, not 40, for the Israelites to go from Egypt to the Promised Land.

- After the report of the spies the people were afraid of inhabitants. They said [Num. 14:31] "We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than ממנו [ממנו or ממנו] [us or Him?!]"
- How many of us spend our lives at the edge of our own promised lands because we lack the faith in ourselves or in God?

Did Moses Have Horns?



Michelangelo's Moses in the Church of San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome




Did Moses Have Horns?

Ex. 34:29, speaking of the change in Moses after Sinai reads: קָרוֹ עוֹר פָּנָיו בְּדַבְּרוֹ אֵתוֹ

But the Torah has no vowels so the question is: “is the first word קָרוֹ (to shine) or קָרוֹ (horn)?”


- Jerome (4th century CE) translated this phrase into Latin as “*cornuta esset facies sua ex consortio sermonis Dei*” – “his face was horned from the conversation with the Lord.”
- The Jewish translation is “his face was radiant...”



Generally, It’s Not Hard to Read Hebrew Without Vowels

Consider the following sentence:
 Mny pple thnk ts mpssble t rd nglsh wtht vwls bt f y knw th lngage nd th cntxt f th sntnce ts nt hrd t ll.


Here’s another example along the same idea:
 For examlpe, it deson’t mttae in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod aeapap, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer are in the rghit pcale. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit pobelrm.



Goodness and Mercy

Usual translation of Psalm 23:6

- “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”
- Hebrew “אֵךְ טוֹב וְחַסֵּד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל-יְמֵי חַיֵּי”
- The verb *lirdof* means to pursue.
- So, goodness and mercy are actually chasing us – perhaps we have to slow down a bit to let them catch up.



Gematria

Aleph	א	1	Lamed	ל	30
Bet	ב	2	Mem	מ	40
Gimmel	ג	3	Num	נ	50
Dalet	ד	4	Samech	ס	60
Heh	ה	5	Ayin	ע	70
Vav	ו	6	Pey	פ	80
Zayin	ז	7	Tzadi	צ	90
Chet	ח	8	Kof	ק	100
Tet	ט	9	Resh	ר	200
Yod	י	10	Shin	ש	300
Kaf	כ	20	Tav	ת	400

Thus *Chai* = יח = life = 18

Gematria of the Tallit & Tzitzit

טלית
ציצית
Numbers 15:38-9

Ⓣ
double knot
7 coils
double knot
9 coils
double knot
11 coils
double knot
13 coils
double knot
8 Thread

Gematria of the Tallit & Tzitzit


<p>צ Tzadi = 90 י Yod = 10 צ Tzadi = 90 י Yod = 10 ת Tav = $\frac{400}{600}$</p>	<p>1st group = 7 = Number of Days in Creation 2nd group = 8 = Number of Days of Brit Milah Sum of 1st 2 groups = 15 = 1st 2 letters of יהוה 3rd group = 11 = last two letters of יהוה 4th group = 13 = value of echad אחד Total of windings = 39 = value of אחד יהוה</p>
<p>5 knots/tzitzit = 5 8 strings/tzitzit = $\frac{8}{13}$</p>	<p>More on the Value of Echad א = 1 = The one Tallit ח = 8 = The 8 strings per Tzitzit 613 Mitzvot ד = 4 = The 4 corners of the Tallit</p>

About the Word “Torah”

- *Torah* תורה is derived from a root *yareh* ירה which in archery means to shoot (an arrow) to hit a mark.
 - *Chet* חטא, a common word for sin, means to miss the mark.
 - The word for teacher, *moreh/morah* מורה, derives from the same root.
- *Torah* is understood to be meant broadly, as “instruction,” applying to all Jewish teaching.
 - Torah can mean the scroll, the 1st 5 books of the Bible, the entire Bible, all of Jewish sacred literature, or any teaching.

Torah and Nomos


- When the Hebrew Bible was translated, by Jews, into Greek (a translation known as the Septuagint) the word *torah* was translated into the Greek word *nomos* (νόμος).
 - But *nomos* has the meaning of law in a narrow sense as in a code of laws.
 - Thus the Jews reading their Torah in Greek had the sense that all the laws were strictly binding and that we had to comply with them all.
 - This led the early Christians to see the law/Torah as an impossible standard or even a curse making another paths to God necessary.
 - “... those who rely on the keeping of the Law are under a curse...” (Galatians 3:10)
 - “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law...” (Galatians 3:13)
 - “... we conclude that a man is put right with God only through faith and not by doing what the Law command.” (Romans 3:28)
- But Judaism never held that one must obey each and every commandment to be right with God.



God's Actual Name

God's actual name (like Mike or Sam) is יהוה


- The name is so holy/sacred that we are never to say it
 - In fact, we don't know how it's vocalized or pronounced.
 - The last time it was said was by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies in the Temple on Yom Kippur.
 - We don't even say the word in prayer – rather we say *Adonai* אֲדֹנָי
 - The name is so sacred that, for the number 15, we don't use יה (10+5) but טו (9+6). This is why the holiday of the 15th of Shevat is "Tu B'Shevat"



The Word Adonai


Adonai אֲדֹנָי is the word we say when we come to YHWH in the text or in prayer.

- It means "my Lord"
- It is so sacred that traditional Jews only say "*Adonai*" when praying – otherwise they say *HaShem* meaning "the name."
- As a reminder not to try to pronounce יהוה when reading the Bible, the rabbis added the vowels for *Adonai* to YHWH:
 - הַיְהוָה
 - If you try to pronounce this as written, you get *Yehovah* or, using the German, *Jehovah*.
 - We don't know how to pronounce יהוה but we know it's not *Jehovah*!



יהוה In Translation

- **When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (the Septuagint), the name is translated as *Kyrios*, or Lord.**
- **In the 4th century CE translation into Latin (the Vulgate), it is rendered *Dominus*, meaning "master/owner." This was the official title of the Roman emperors.**



The Meaning of יהוה

Of course, only God knows!

- The word has no vowels, but also no real consonants
 - All the letters are blowing sounds - rushes of air through the mouth
- The Hebrew root is ה-ו-ה H-W-H the root for "being" or "existence"
- The ה/י at the beginning signifies the imperfect tense
 - "That which is" or "That which will be"
- Rabbi Arthur Green suggests that Name may be a conflation of all the tenses of the verb "to be" in Hebrew
 - Best translated as "Was – Is – Will Be"
 - Or just "Being"

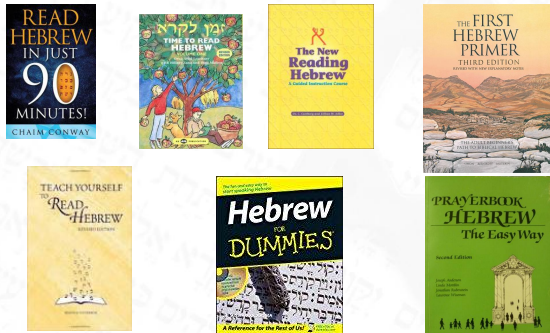
The Meaning of יהוה

- The Hebrew word for “existence” is הִיְוָה, just a rearrangement of the letters of God’s name
- If scholars are correct in thinking the correct pronunciation of the Name is *Yahweh*, יהוה then the verb may be in the *Hif’il* (causative) form meaning “He (who) will cause being (or existence).”
- I think this is a great name for God!

The Origin of *Abracadabra*

- From the Aramaic
 - אברא כדברא
 - Meaning “I create as I speak”
 - The verb *bara* is only used for God’s creation (as is Gen. 1:1)
 - Maybe *Abracadabra* is God’s opening flourish to creation???

Lots of Ways to Learn Hebrew



Bottom Lines

- There’s an old Italian saying, “*Traduttore, traditore.*” “To Translate is To Betray”
- Perhaps this is a bit strong but it does highlight how understanding Hebrew reveals some of the wonder of the Hebrew Bible.
- I hope these thoughts will inspire you to pursue your interest and learning in Hebrew.