

A Guide to the Perplexed

The words *Roman* and *script* have different meanings to the typographer as opposed to the historian or layman. To avoid confusion, in this book **Roman** (with a capital *R*) refers to the script of Western European languages, while **roman** (lowercase) denotes its typographical meaning of the default upright style of a typeface (as distinct from its *italic* form).

Similarly, the word *script* (lowercase) alludes to the general writing system of a given language or culture, while references to *Script* – with capital *S* – will be in its typographical sense of a typeface where letters *are consistently joined up* (vs. *cursive*, say, where they're not).

In keeping with the general theme of this book, Hebrew words are transliterated primarily according to visual rather than linguistic considerations, the better to condition the reader's eye to the graphic forms of Hebrew spelling. In most cases this coincides with linguistic conventions and historical origins, with one notable exception: the Hebrew letter *caf* (*kaf*) is represented here by the Roman *c* rather than the traditional (and historically correct) *k*. Furthermore, I use *ç* to designate the “soft” *caf* (pronounced like the Scottish *ch* as in *loch*). This was done in order to exploit the coincidental but compelling resemblance between *kaf* and *c*, and as a convenient shorthand for the soft version, without resorting to combinations such as *kh* or the more ambiguous *ch*. Finally, small caps are used to indicate instances of the guttural letter *Het* (pron. like *ch* in *Bach* or *loch*) and of the letter *Tet*, to distinguish between them and the letters *béḥ* and *tav*, respectively.

Your indulgence is appreciated.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the following:

- Rivka Gonen, Itaï Tamari, Melanie Garson (separately), and to Amatzia Porat of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, for pointing me in the right direction at various junctures of my research; and to Natan Nahmias, for same and for valuable tips on ancient Hebrew pronunciation
- Rivka Plesser, at The Jewish National & University Library, Jerusalem, for attentive and invaluable help in procuring various illustrations
- Ilana Tahan, Hebrew Curator at the British Library Oriental & India Collection, for similar help in London
- The Bodleian Library (Oxford), for permission to reproduce certain texts
- My aunt, Miriam Eliav-Feldon, for unwittingly getting the ball rolling all those years ago, and more recently for access to the family archives and help and comments on various Renaissance and Reformation sources
- Ada Yardeni for her inspiring work on the development of the Hebrew script down the ages, and for her personal encouragement and permission to use her illustrations
- Bairbre O'Malley, Valerie Evans, Shirley Bygott, and others who helped test the method in its early days; Donatella, Diana, and the gang at the Hebrew classes of London University's School of Oriental & African Studies for acting as the unwitting control group
- Last but not least, my mother, Yael Lotan, for teaching me most of what I know about English and about writing; for reviewing and editing the

manuscript early on for readability and style; and for serving as a tireless sounding board throughout.

◇

Introduction

The why

Mastering a new language is always a challenge. This is doubly true when you venture into a different family of languages from those which you already know. Throw in a different script as well, however, and you feel you're losing contact with solid ground.

As a Semitic tongue that shares its script with no other living language, Hebrew unfortunately scores on all three counts for the typical Westerner. Historians may find it intriguing that the Hebrew script is the only surviving writing system of antiquity that is still unique to a single national entity, but to students of Hebrew as a Foreign Language (HFL), it is only a complication they could do well without.

Just how daunting it is to be confronted by a totally unfamiliar script is something I suspect designers of most conventional HFL courses are not fully aware of. Hebrew is usually their native language, and the Roman script is also familiar to them from childhood through continual exposure on billboards, and in books, the media, and of course school. For the typical HFL student, however, the sight of the Hebrew script makes the expression "It looks Greek to me" sound positively wistful. For their sake, it seems to me, one should strive to make the task as easy as

possible, even if it means departing somewhat from tradition.

With this appreciation in mind I set out to produce this book. I have a slightly unusual perspective in that my introduction to the language was different from that of both native Israelis and most new immigrants. I was born outside Israel to a born-and-bred Jerusalemite who, homesick after fifteen years abroad, returned to her homeland and family with my sister and me in tow. I was ten at the time: young enough to learn quickly, but old enough to experience and remember the difficulties all new immigrants face when encountering the Hebrew script for the first time. With the benefit of a native-speaking mother and extended family, however, I never had to attend special Hebrew-learning classes (*ulpan*).

Instead, my education in this field began, at my instigation, the morning after our arrival. Anxious to impress my mother with a quick mastery of the language, I asked her sister (then a university student) to teach me. Caught unawares, my aunt Miri grabbed the nearest children's book to hand – the Hebrew version of *Peter and the Wolf* – sat me down, and proceeded to teach me both language and script, word by word. I knew nothing of either, so it wasn't an easy introduction, but thanks to her patient efforts and the subsequent support of the extended family, I eventually caught up with my native classmates and was promoted to the highest stream of Hebrew studies three years later. Nevertheless, I know now that the task would have been much easier had I had access to the method I describe below.

Ironically, the clues to the Three Steps method set out here were given to me by my grandfather some three years after our arrival in the

country, when I no longer needed them. But I had the satisfaction of seeing the technique they ultimately inspired vindicated years later, following a party with British friends in London, when I dismissed the notion that the script was intimidating. “I could probably teach you the knack of writing in Hebrew in three lessons – in as many weeks,” I told them, with the brash confidence of a twenty-something. Three of them took me up on it, and happily, on this particular youthful boast, I was able to deliver.

In fact, the exercise succeeded beyond my expectations. After the third lesson, not only were my friends able to write their names and simple words in Hebrew characters, but their handwriting was noticeably superior to that of a typical *ulpan* student: letters such as *shin* and *lamed*, for example, were written as they should be, instead of as approximate versions of an italic *e* and the Greek δ , respectively, as is usually the case with students of the language. This confirmed my hope that with the Three Steps method, their hands were working “with the grain” of the script instead of fighting against it.

Encouraged by this and by the surprising degree of interest I found among Jews and non-Jews alike in the subject, I began researching the literature for books based on these ideas, convinced that they must exist. When, to my amazement, I found none, I decided to develop the concept into a consistent method and write such a book for the benefit of a wider audience. When the opportunity arose in 1995 (in between writing books on computer-aided design), I did.

The wherefore

The central premise behind *Learn to Write the Hebrew Script* is that, unlike the language itself, the Hebrew script is not nearly as foreign as one is usually led to believe. It shares significant common ground with its European counterparts – one that, properly tapped, can provide the Western student with a tremendous leg-up and a familiar frame of reference. Thanks to the findings of modern archaeology, this common history is now quite well understood, and possessing even a cursory knowledge of this pays big dividends.

As we shall see, understanding the implications of the switch in the direction of writing made by the ancient Greeks around 500 BCE leads not only to an appreciation of why Hebrew characters are the way they are, but to a *natural inclination to write them that way*. Exercises with one's own native writing in Roman characters naturally make the learning process that much easier and the retention more effective.

With the skill of writing, of course, comes much of the ability to read. Once you master the Hebrew cursive, it is but a short step to conquering the traditional “Square” form in which the language is normally printed. You can thus make good headway in this area without ever having to grapple with the intricacies of Hebrew grammar or vocabulary. Yet, because the language and script are so intimately intertwined, by the time you have completed or even perused the Three Steps, you will find you have absorbed many aspects of the language almost unconsciously. This book can therefore serve not only as an amusing pastime but also as a useful complement to traditional HFL textbooks.

Breaking with tradition

It is important, though, to note that the Three Step approach departs from traditional HFL teaching methods on three important counts:

1. It teaches the skill of writing in Hebrew script separately from the language itself. In the conventional approach, which binds the teaching of Hebrew script tightly with that of reading, grammar, and vocabulary in one integrated package, this is considered a highly unorthodox, not to say outlandish, notion.
2. It introduces the Hebrew alphabet through its modern cursive forms rather than the traditional Square forms of most printed texts. This, too, may raise some eyebrows, since the modern cursive is a comparatively recent phenomenon, and the overwhelming majority of Hebrew in print is in the Square form.
3. Last but not least, it highlights and celebrates the historical kinship between the Hebrew alphabet and European scripts rather than ignoring or denying it. Traditional methods prefer to present the Hebrew script much as if it were Chinese or Korean, i.e., as something utterly unrelated to European alphabets. Hebrew letters are taught on a seemingly arbitrary, take-it-or-leave-it basis – the *this is an aleph don't ask why* approach. Sharp-eyed students who spot suspicious similarities between certain Hebrew characters and their Roman or Cyrillic or Greek counterparts are actively discouraged from pursuing this line of thinking any further on the grounds that such similarities are – in the manner of disclaimers at the end of Hollywood film credits – entirely coincidental and unintentional.

As we shall see, such objections owe more to a preference to let sleeping dogs lie, to honest ignorance, and to historical circumstance than to any objective comparison of effectiveness. Archaeological discoveries of the past hundred years or so in fact provide clear clues to a “map” by which the modern reader might navigate from the Roman script to Hebrew writing with little resort to arbitrary learning by rote. There is also unimpeachable institutional support for what I am proposing here, namely, that the skill of writing Hebrew can and even should be taught separately from the skill of reading it – particularly when teaching adults – and that the Hebrew script should be introduced to such students through the activity of writing cursive rather than Square letters.¹

The real proof, of course, is in the pudding. The results of informal experiments with my non-Hebrew-speaking friends have been encouraging. In the spirit of those live lessons, this volume is designed to be read on the train or bus, or in a dentist’s waiting room, rather than at a desk. Even the exercises are intended more as doodles to engage in while on the phone rather than as sit-down “homework.” Like riding a bicycle or typing, writing in Hebrew is a skill that you can acquire incrementally, never really lose, and continually improve, at your own pace and with your own material, as and when the opportunity arises.

Remember: this book is about writing *in* Hebrew, as opposed to writing Hebrew in the proper literary sense, which of course requires knowledge of the language and is an art in itself, much as writing in any language. If this strikes you as disappointing – or worse, as a legalistic nicety – bear in mind that many modern Hebrew words are merely trans-

literations of familiar European ones. Most – such as *informatziyah*, *telefon*, *otobus*, *qonteqst*, *alternativah*, and less academic but charming examples such as *beck-ex* (rear axle) and *front beck-ex* (front axle) – are modern innovations. Others – such as *cartis* (card), *avir* (air), *basis* (basis/base), and *itztadyon* (stadium) – have been around for over two thousand years, having been drawn directly from classical Greek before any modern European language was a twinkle in a legionnaire's eye.

Thus modern Hebrew speakers, not unlike their English-speaking counterparts, often have the luxury of choice from two parallel lexicons – one native, one Latin/Greek – with all the richness and versatility that this provides.* Thus, *informatziyah* is also *meida*, *qonteqst* = *heqsher*, *emotzionali* = *rigshi*, *alternativah* = *halufah*, and so on. For our purposes, the existence of such European words and their usually Italian-like declension means that, as a Western reader, you are unwittingly already in pos-

* A distinction is made by some Jews in the Diaspora between *Hebrew* and *Ivrit* ("Hebrew" in Hebrew) – meaning biblical Hebrew and modern Hebrew, respectively. This suggests that they are distinct languages, like Greek and ancient Greek – which is puzzling to a modern Israeli, as this simply isn't the case. Native Hebrew speakers make no such distinction, just as English speakers do not employ a different word to distinguish the English of Shakespeare from that of today. The innovations of modern Hebrew are merely extensions to the same edifice – not replacements. Israeli schoolchildren generally have little difficulty understanding the Old Testament as is; its constructions are the final arbiter in deciding correct modern usage; and when reading the books of Exodus, Samuel, or Kings, one is repeatedly struck by how little the nation's speech has changed, in word or in manner, in over three thousand years.

session of a wealth of examples with which to try out your Hebrew-writing skills as you go along (in addition to those in the text and in the appendix). Another reason for giving them prominence here is that their spelling follows simple and consistent phonetic rules that are easily mastered and set out in the Three Steps – unlike native Hebrew words, whose correct spelling often requires knowledge of their grammatical root, which is beyond the scope of this book.

As I said, this book is for all levels and types of interest. If you are a serious student of the language, you will need to supplement it with standard HFL textbooks on grammar and the like, but it should nevertheless give you a useful leg-up and some handy insights and, above all, dispel much of the intimidating mystique surrounding the subject. If your interest is more casual, and even if you never practice the exercises, you will at least have learned some interesting pointers about the evolution of a fairly critical aspect of Western civilization (the debate of the People's Front of Judea in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* as to the mutual benefits of the relationship between Rome and Judea will never be quite the same again).

Last but not least, you'll have some good dinner party material and be able to strike awe and wonder in friends and family alike with your ability to jot down their names in the language of the Old Testament.

Good luck, and above all – enjoy!

