

LESSON NOTES

All About S1 #1

The Top Five Reasons to Learn Hebrew

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Grammar

#1

GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson Is the History of the Modern Hebrew Language.

Linguistics

Hebrew is a Semitic language of the Afro-Asiatic language family. It belongs to the Canaanite group of languages, which are a branch of the Northwest Semitic family of languages. Scholars believe that it developed from a dialect of the Canaanite language, but no one has been able to pinpoint its exact origin.

Modern Hebrew has its roots in Classical Hebrew, which Jewish communities around the world have used for prayer and study for centuries. As a spoken language, Classical Hebrew was most widely used in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah during the tenth to seventh centuries BCE. Spoken Hebrew declined in ancient times following the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people, and it became practically extinct as a spoken language by late antiquity (the second to the eighth century CE). It was replaced by Aramaic, which was the regional language used for trade, and temporarily by Greek as well, which was the language of the ruling class at the time.

After the Bar Kokhba revolt against the Romans in 132 to 136 AD, most of the Jewish population was exiled, and they adapted to the societies they were in, speaking the local language and adapting that language into a dialect of their own. Yiddish and Ladino are good examples of this. Jewish people continued to use Classical Hebrew in the written form for many things, such as letters, documentation, poetry, and the written laws.

Around 200 CE, the Jewish people realized that vowels needed to be added to the Hebrew alphabet to make it more accessible and to keep it consistent for further generations. Several different groups of Jews came up with systems for this, but the one that remained came from the Masoretes. Not wanting to hinder the sacred texts, they decided to develop vowels consisting of marks in and around the letters.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the Zionist movement began, and this led to dispersed Jews returning to the ancient land of Israel, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. A few things contributed to the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language. First of all, there were several groups of Jewish people who were attempting to revive the language in different ways, some using Hebrew language newspapers as a vehicle and others publishing non-religious texts in Hebrew. Most notably and famously known was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who worked very hard to revive Hebrew as a spoken language. Ben-Yehuda had seen other nationalities, such as Bulgarians, receive a state of their own, so he began working toward a state and a unified language for the Jewish people. Ben-Yehuda began to speak Hebrew in his home and with all the Jewish people he came in contact with. He filled in the need for modern words, such as ice cream, by coining them himself. The next step was to bring Hebrew to the schools, where young people from different language backgrounds would be able to speak together with the common language of Hebrew. These two experiments were successful, but Hebrew was still not spoken on a large scale.

To get people familiar with Hebrew in an everyday context, Ben-Yehuda needed a vehicle, so he looked to publishing articles in Hebrew in a local paper. This had been a vehicle for other attempts to revive Hebrew throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, and it was successful. By the end of the 1800s, almost every male Jew living in Palestine could read and understand the Hebrew in the newspaper without too much difficulty. To aid those learning Hebrew, he began to compile a dictionary and published new words in the newspaper, so people would be able to fill in the gaps of what Modern Hebrew was still lacking.

The last contributing factor and the key to the success of Ben-Yehuda's mission was that at the time, Jews from all over the world were returning to Israel, and they spoke many different languages. Many of those that returned were Zionists, like Ben-Yehuda himself, and they were eager to use Hebrew as a common language. They needed one common language in which to converse, so Hebrew became that language. In spite of these successes, there were some who were opposed to this idea. The extremely religious Jews did not think that Hebrew should be used to discuss everyday things because it is a holy language. To this day, there are ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel who speak Yiddish instead of Hebrew for everyday matters.

Hebrew became an official language of British-ruled Palestine in 1922, along with English and Arabic. In 1948, it became the official language of the newly declared State of Israel. It is the most widely spoken language in Israel today. Modern Hebrew is constructed from the Semitic vocabulary of Classical Hebrew and has the same written appearance, but it is often European in phonology and borrows many words from English and other languages.

Today there are two different dialects of Hebrew: Sephardic and Ashkenazi Hebrew. Sephardic Hebrew originated with the Jews who were dispersed to Spain. It is now spoken by Jews who were most recently located in the Middle East and Africa. Ashkenazi Hebrew is spoken by Jews in most of Europe and North America. Pronunciation of Modern Hebrew in Israel is based on Sephardic Hebrew.

About the Country of Origin

Although Hebrew originated in the Middle East, in the area that is now Israel, there were several times throughout history that Hebrew was not spoken there. The Jews spent many years in exile and later in the Diaspora before returning to their homeland and declaring the State of Israel. For that reason, Hebrew went through many changes.

Where Is It Spoken?

Culturally, Hebrew is considered to be the language of the Jewish people. Modern Hebrew is one of the official languages of Israel; therefore, it is spoken by the seven million people living in Israel, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and by the approximately 750,000 Israelis living abroad.

Why It Is Important

The top five reasons to learn this language are...

- Hebrew is one of the oldest languages in the world.
- Modern Hebrew comes from Classical Hebrew, which is the language that the *Tanach* and Old Testament are written in.
- By learning Hebrew, you can get new insight into Jewish history and culture.
- Knowing Hebrew will help you travel more easily in Israel and interact with Israelis abroad.
- Learn Hebrew and you will gain an understanding and an appreciation for Israeli history and its culture—a modern nation built on historical roots that has gone through so much to survive until today.
- Hebrew is fun!