

Shalom!

I am a native speaker of Hebrew – contemporary Israeli Hebrew, of course. And I have learned Biblical Hebrew by immersion: in my Israeli secular school, we started reading the Bible in the 2nd grade, and it continued to be one of the major subjects of study through the 12th grade, repeatedly exposing a bookworm like myself to the text. So when I first started teaching Biblical Hebrew to American students at the College of William and Mary 12 years ago, I knew the language – but I was not familiar with the methods of teaching it. I had studied other languages, though – English, French, Latin, and Greek; I had learned Hebrew grammar, like every Israeli school student; and I thought that with the help of a competent textbook, the task would not be too hard.

The textbook that I inherited for use at the classroom approached the language in the traditional academic manner: nouns with their permutations, paradigms of regular verbs in Affix (Qatal, Perfect) – first in Qal, followed by the other binyanim – or stems, as the textbook called them – and then the same with the participle. By the middle of the year, we started covering the Prefix (Yiktol, Imperfect) form, again with regular roots, in all stems; then, towards the end of the year, we began to study the irregular verbs – peh-gimel, ayin-gimel, lamed-gimel; and finally, the paradigms of the various weak roots: peh-yod, peh-nun, ayin-vav, lamed-heh, peh-nun-ayin-gimel, and so on. We finished covering the grammar in one year, and then came a year of reading in the Bible. My colleagues will not be surprised to learn that my students had a hard time with the simplest of texts: it is very difficult indeed to find any text in the Bible that does not abound with weak verbs, which were predictably the shakiest part of my students' knowledge of the language. Of course, like any native speaker who had studied Hebrew grammar, I knew that the best way to find the root of a weak verb was to transmute it to Affix (Qatal, Perfect) third-person masculine singular. But obviously, to do that, you needed to know the language – which, equally obviously, my students did not.

The textbook presented my students with the paradigms of all the weak root groups. But learning a paradigm by heart is one thing; figuring out which paradigm out of a fairly large selection to go for is quite another. Actually, I realized that the weak root paradigms were not arbitrary: they deviated from the basic regular paradigm in very predictable ways. What if, instead of treating each weak root paradigm as a whole entity to be memorized lock, stock, and barrel, I were to show my students how the nature of a particular weak consonant like Yod or an assimilating consonant like Nun interacted with the basic paradigm to create the weak paradigm? The next time I taught beginning students, we covered with this approach all the various *gzarot* – weak root groups – in Affix (Qatal, Perfect) before going on to the next grammatical form. By the time we did so, I wanted to reward my students by reading a small segment of Biblical text. Surely there was some text that could be within their reach, with the help of a lexicon? After all, my students took my classes to be able to read the Bible in Hebrew, not for love of memorizing paradigms.

It took some searching. In case anybody here is interested, Jeremiah 14:1-6, “*al habatzorot*,” contains 22 verbs in Affix, one infinitive, and no other verb forms. It is a beautiful description of drought in the land. But it was difficult to locate a passage that contained only Affix verbs, and I doubt I could find another one. Clearly, if I wanted to reward my students by actually reading Biblical texts, I had to go some other way.

The next time I taught Hebrew 101, I switched to the textbook of Kittel, Hoffer and Wright, published by Yale University Press. Here, at last, was an approach that made sense of the language as it is used. For those not familiar with the book, it teaches grammatical forms inductively, by learning to recognize them in a text. The first verb encountered was *va-yomer*, an irregular Prefix verb, and weak roots appeared within the first week. Moreover, the book employed what is now a key to my approach to teaching the Hebrew verb: each verb encountered was analyzed into root, stem, form, and its other relevant features. Using this textbook, I was able to start reading with my students short, unmodified Biblical stories about six or eight weeks into the first semester. Better yet, it

taught my students what to focus on when they encountered a verb, rather than memorize paradigms and only then find out that many of their variants are unimportant.

Kittel, Hoffer, and Wright have their students translate short verses and part-verses after each lesson, to practice what the lesson has just taught. I go one step further: I ask that my students recognize and analyze each verb that they encounter in these translation exercises. I try to create intellectually and consciously the process that every Hebrew speaker carries out instinctively: seeing each verb as a root/stem combination in a particular grammatical form. When the root was a weak one, as was often the case, my students had to supply the missing root letter at the right location; and they had to know how to identify the binyan, the stem.

Biblical Hebrew, like any language, is not a set of inflexible rules; it has variants, remnants, duplications and exceptions. But overall, it is impressively true to its own logic. Words do not as a rule undergo unexplained changes – and verbs even less so. When a root letter is missing, there is only a very limited range of possibilities: first Yod, first Nun, middle Yod or Vav, final Heh, or geminates. Each of these possibilities leaves behind its typical telltale mark, which Kittel, Hoffer and Wright teach as rules. There is some overlap, and a very small number of one-of-a-kind exceptions like *halach*, *lakach*, *natan*, or *hishtachabva*. But overall, I have found it very useful to concentrate on memorizing a very small number of indispensable paradigms, and show the rules and ranges of possibilities that modify them. People who like learning paradigms by heart can always learn them – I can't learn the paradigms for them in any case. But people who prefer to go by logic get from me all the help I can give them.

The person/number/gender markings of Affix (Qatal, Perfect) and Prefix (Yiktol, Imperfect) are the same in all stems – binyanim – and all root groups – *gzarot*, as are the number and gender markings of participles. Rather than study each binyan, let alone its *gzarot*, as a separate paradigm, I suggest to my students that they should separate the

person, number, and gender markings from the markings of the stem – the binyan. Then I insist that they study the person, number and gender markings very thoroughly indeed.

Incidentally, I have found it very useful to have a computerized quiz that presents my students with person/number/gender markings in random order and can be taken repeatedly. This gets rid of one of my pet peeves: the order in which to write the paradigm. It is bad enough that persons are identified in English by numbers: the Hebrew system of medaber “speaker” for 1st person, nocheach “present” for 2nd person and nistar “absent” for 3rd person at least provides actual information rather than just a label. But to label the persons by number, and then insist on writing the paradigm so that the 3rd person comes first! In any case, my students need to recognize the markings when they encounter them in the text, not in the context of the written paradigm. Thus the self-administered random quiz is a most useful tool for me.

Almost all markings of binyanim – stems – don’t change with different persons, numbers, and genders. If you know how to identify a stem in 3ms, you can also identify it with any other person, number, and gender, especially if you are aware of a couple of simple phonetic rules that come into effect (Qamatz changing to a Sheva when the stressed syllable is too distant, or Aleph not taking a vocal sheva). You can see the resulting summary tables in one of my handouts--the verb summary tables (on the web site).

Recognizing the root in a regular pattern is very easy, and recognizing the stem (the binyan) is straightforward. In roots with guttural letters, the root is still easy to recognize, though the nikud undergoes predictable modifications and the signs of the stems (the binyanim) sometimes need to be modified somewhat. But what about the weak root groups – the ones where a root letter disappears?

Kittel, Hoffer, and Wright give rules for finding the missing root letter; but these are scattered throughout the book. I found it helpful to gather them and add my own experience on a one-page “missing letter guide” that you’ll also find on the web site. It

tries to offer a step-by-step guideline to figuring out which root letter is missing. It is supposed to be used together with a lexicon, since the rules are not absolute. But I believe my students have found them helpful. In class, from as early as eight weeks into the first semester, we spend a good bit of time reading unmodified Biblical texts – and my students are used to having me ask them constantly to recognize verbs as such and to identify the root and stem of verbs, then tell me how they figured it out. I don't care whether they memorize the guidelines, or keep looking at them – either way, they internalize them and end up with a good grasp of the language. The number of jarring mistakes, like people who guess a missing Ayin, has gone down precipitously.

This handout helps with the technical part of identifying correctly the root and the stem (binyan) of a verb. But what about understanding the verb? How should we teach our students to understand verbs in Biblical Hebrew?

The real question is – how are we to teach our students to translate Hebrew verb forms? When it comes to Wa-Yiktol (Prefix+vav conversive), participles, infinitives, and imperatives, there is no issue. Wa-Yiktol is a past event, participles are verbal adjectives where the only problem is the English confusion of participles and infinitives, and imperatives are instructions or commands. But Prefix (Yiktol, Imperfect) and Affix (Qatal, Perfect) present a problem.

Clearly, there is no direct correlation between either Affix (Qatal, Perfect) or Prefix (Yiktol, Imperfect) in the Bible and any tense in English. Or, I should say, in Latin or Greek or any other European language that I know of. What about verbal aspect? Should we understand Prefix form (Yiktol) as encoding incomplete action – “imperfect” - and Affix (Qatal) as encoding completed action, “perfect”?

Since I had learned Biblical Hebrew by immersion, I had not been aware of the “perfect”/“imperfect” distinction in Hebrew. And I must tell you that, to my mind, it does not ring true. Yes, there are examples where Affix form is clearly used for an action

that is completed, and there are examples of Prefix for action that is not completed.

There are also clearly examples for the contrary for each. And in the vast majority of cases, there is no way to tell. In other words, the connection between form (Affix or Prefix) and perfective or imperfective action is in my opinion random. Certainly, I didn't feel that the distinction helped my students understand the text better.

I would suggest that matters of tense and aspect, which in Indo-European languages are encoded by verbs, are simply not encoded by verbs in Hebrew. How, then, should one teach one's students to translate the Hebrew verb? Which tense should they use in English? Well, if it happened already, it is past tense. If it hasn't happened yet, it is future tense. Usually we can tell with a fairly large element of certainty. And if we don't know by content or context, or by adverbs and other elements of the sentence other than its verb form, it is not unusual for us not to have any way of knowing. There is a difference between the forms: you can't substitute one for the other without affecting the resulting sentence (which is the reason I insist on reading actual text from the Bible rather than any made-up or modified text). But the difference is neither a matter of tense, nor in my opinion of aspect.

I give my students a few very general guidelines, and suggest that they go by context. Obviously *wa-Yiktol* (Prefix+vav conversive) is a past event; for Prefix without vav conversive, one should first consider modal or future; for Affix (Qatal, Perfect) plus vav, try future tense. But if any of these doesn't fit the context, follow the context rather than the rule.

Can there be a language where verbs do not encode tense or aspect? Most definitely so. I am told there are languages where the only distinction is between the real and the unreal. The problem is that students who are accustomed to English with its elaborate system of tenses (or to Latin or most other European languages, for that matter), find it unusual not to have tense or aspect or both encoded by verb forms. But then, there is other crucial information encoded by Hebrew verbs that students miss, because the same information

is not encoded with any precision by English verbal forms, but rather depends in English on context.

First, the very distinction between verb and noun is in English a matter of context. Is “break” a noun or a verb? What about “jump”? Or “stand”? I can put a statue on a stand, I can stand a book on a table, or I can stand and do nothing. Each of these would be a different word in Hebrew – each from the same root, but recognized instantly for its specific function by morphology. Even when both languages use verbs, it is not enough for a student merely to know the English translation of a Hebrew verb, since the Hebrew one is almost always much more exact in the kind of action it refers to. In English, the same verb is regularly used for either transitive or intransitive action, depending on context. In Hebrew, a root/stem combination is nearly always either one or the other – never ambiguous. More than that: while Qal verbs may be either transitive or intransitive (but not both in the same root), Piel and Hifil verbs are almost invariably transitive, Nifal is never transitive even when it is active, and Pual and Hofal are strictly passive. Even the (English) terminology I need to use to describe this more specific verbal action – transitive, intransitive, causative, reflexive – is foreign to my students. I end up play-acting a lot.

I would like to close with another pet peeve: terminology. Even in beginners’ Biblical Hebrew textbooks, you will find statements such as “The vocative in Hebrew...” or “the Genitive,” or “the Accusative.” Has anybody here seen a vocative in Hebrew? Classical, Mishnaic, Modern, anything? Or perhaps in English in any texts other than translations from Greek or Latin? Some here may be surprised to learn that even students at the College of William and Mary do not as a rule know Latin. For a statement like “The vocative in Hebrew” to make sense, they would need to know the vocative in Latin, deduce its function, figure out the equivalent in English (a language that does not have a vocative case – or any case for that matter), and finally apply it to Hebrew (which does not have a vocative case either). Latin is an admirable language in its own right. But its

grammar does not match that of either Hebrew or English. Using Latin terms made sense when every educated person knew Latin. But such days are long past.

Thank you!

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