



**HOW TO  
MASTER  
HEBREW VERBS**

**Stop Your Pain Now!**

**A guidebook by Rut Avni**

# HEBREW VERBS *with Rut Avni*

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# HEBREW VERBS *with Rut Awni*

Welcome

**Shalom, my name is Rut.**

Thank you for taking the time to read this little ebook.

I composed this ebook out of pure love to help you escape the pain that I all too well know. On the second last page of this ebook, I will tell you how I came to be a dedicated Hebrew language teacher, an expert in a niche area of instruction that is rarely covered even in Israel.

With much *ahavá* ♥♥,  
**Rut**



Instagram & YouTube @hebrewverbs

# HEBREW VERBS *with Rut Awni*

## 1. Feeling Overwhelmed? (Welcome to the Club!)

Students of Modern Hebrew may have concerns and reservations about learning the verb system, especially the *binyanim*. Some of the most frequent complaints I have received from students over the past decade are as follows:

### Initial Discouragement

A learner's first experiences with the binyanim system may be disappointing. They may be discouraged from delving deeper into the complexities of the verb system if they encounter this problem early on.

### Structure

Teachers whose first language is a Semitic one (such as Hebrew or Arabic) may not be familiar with the way that learners in the United States and Europe approach language. Hebrew classes frequently operate under the assumption that their students already have a firm grasp of the logical structure of Semitic languages. Students from the United States and Europe have a hard time relating to this method and often give up, thinking that the language would always remain a mysterious puzzle beyond their reach.

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## Complexity

Because of their seeming complexity and the sheer number of binyanim and rules, many students are put off from making the effort to learn them. It can feel like a mountain to climb to get a handle on the many conjugation patterns and rules for each binyan. Learning all the different conjugations and patterns for each binyan can be overwhelming for students, discouraging them from studying the verb system in further depth.

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## 2. The Solution: Treat learning Hebrew like learning Spanish or any other European language

If you're taking language classes to learn a European language, you probably know that conjugation rules are crucial to your success. Several factors have contributed to this realization:

### Natural Communication

Learning the laws of conjugation in Hebrew will help you communicate more freely and fluently. When you can conjugate verbs accurately and naturally, your speech will flow more like that of a native speaker.

### Expanded Vocabulary

Knowledge of verb roots is often necessary for mastering conjugation rules. Learning to conjugate verbs well requires you to have a solid grasp of vocabulary and opens the door to learning new words as you work with different verb tenses.

### Competence in Conversing

You need to be able to conjugate verbs fast and correctly in conversation. Verb conjugation mistakes can be embarrassing, and they can also prevent you from communicating effectively.

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## Grammatical Accuracy

Correct grammar is achieved through the use of correct conjugation, which results in grammatically correct phrases. Verb conjugation in Hebrew follows a strict set of rules that vary depending on the tense, person, number, and gender of the speaker. Sentences that make sense and convey your intended meaning effectively can be constructed with the help of these guidelines, which can be understood and applied correctly.

## Reading and Writing Proficiency

The ability to understand and correctly express oneself in written form requires a firm grasp of the principles governing verb conjugation. Correct conjugation is essential for both receiving and giving information in written forms, including as books, essays, and communications.

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## 3. How might learning Ivrit the “European way” help me?

The European method of instruction has much to offer, but before we try to "hack" the Hebrew verb system by adopting it, a quick review of current practices is necessary.

### Start with the Fundamental Idea

Tense, mood, voice, aspect, and conjugation are some of the first grammatical concepts and rules that students learn in school.

### Breakdown of the Verb System

In order to equip students with a firm grasp of the verb system, teachers break it down into digestible sections and explain how various verbs are conjugated in light of these characteristics.

### Progressive Approach

Verb tenses are typically taught in a progressive fashion, with the present, past, and future tenses being introduced first and the more complex tenses being taught later. This method of instruction allows pupils to establish a firm groundwork before moving on to more complex verb tenses.

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## Verb charts

They show the various tenses, moods, and persons that can be used with a given verb. To better grasp the regularities and peculiarities of the verb system, students can use these charts to visualize and compare different verb forms.

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## 4. Applying the “European way” to Hebrew Verbs

Let's take learning Spanish as an example. As you begin your Spanish learning journey, you'll come across a crucial concept: the classification of verbs into three primary conjugation groups. In Spanish, an infinitive verb usually concludes with either "ar," "er," or "ir." Each of these groups represents a distinct conjugation model, and within each model, you'll find further subgroups and, naturally, exceptions.

In contrast, Hebrew presents a more complex system with seven conjugation groups, known as "binyanim," a term meaning "buildings" or simply "structures." Behind these binyanim lies a fundamental logic. They categorize verbs **based on a shared characteristic**, reflecting how individuals interact with each other. Disregarding exceptions, the list below categorizes the types of verbs typically associated with each binyan:

- **Paal:** Most basic form, where one person acts independently.
- **Piel:** Similar to paal but often portrays a heightened or intensified action (e.g., from jumping to bouncing).
- **Hifil:** Actions where you make someone else do something you can do independently in paal (e.g., from writing to dictating).
- **Hitpael:** Actions involving two people doing the same thing to or with each other (e.g., correspond), or actions that are in process (e.g., to get dry).
- **Hufal:** Passive voice of hifil
- **Pual:** Passive voice of piel
- **Nifal:** Passive voice of paal, and also includes many active verbs that are intransitive.

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## Manageable parts

Each verb group can now be broken down into manageable parts: the tenses:

- Infinitive
- Present tense
- Past tense
- Future tense
- Imperative
- Past participle

This break down into verb group and tenses, equips the students with a solid understanding of the verb system.

## a) Infinitives vs Roots

The European method of instruction has much to offer, but before we try to "hack" the Hebrew verb system by adopting it, a quick review of current practices is necessary.

The **infinitive** form of a verb, often referred to as the verb's base, holds significant importance for American and European students learning a language. Conversely, for speakers of Semitic languages, like Hebrew, this emphasis on the infinitive is less prominent.

Consequently, there's a notable lack of awareness among native Hebrew speakers regarding this vital link, which seems to be consistently overlooked.

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## The difference in perspective

The difference in perspective on the language between native Hebrew speakers and their students is fundamental. Students may not perceive what native speakers readily do: the inherent connection between the verb groups, known as *binyanim*.

## Example with "to write"

- To write (paal)
- To dictate (hifil -> make somebody write)
- To correspond (hitpael -> we do the same to each other, we write)

To native Hebrew speakers, it's apparent that all these verbs stem from the same root, as found in the verb "to write," **כתב**. However, for students, recognizing the connection between these verbs and spotting the root requires practice.

Let's see the same example in Hebrew:

- To write (paal) **לְכַתּוֹב**
- To dictate (hifil) **לְהַכְתִּיב**
- To correspond (hitpael) **לְהִתְכַתֵּב**

Nevertheless, American and European students typically grasp concepts more effectively when introduced to the infinitive as the foundational form. They view the potential root that this verb and verbs in other *binyanim* share more as a helpful association than an imperative one.

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## b) Beneficial outcome: reading without nikkud

Each binyan is characterized by a unique **vowel pattern**. Students who are introduced to these patterns early on can easily read text without vowel markings (nikkud). The primary reason students face difficulty with text lacking nikkud is due to not being familiar with the vowel pattern of each binyan, making it challenging for them to identify any pattern when reading such text.

When we apply the vowel patterns for regular verbs to the verbs used in the previous example, it appears as follows:

- To write (paal) / **לְכַתּוֹב** vowel pattern: ee-o
- To dictate (hifil) / **לְהַכְתִּיב** vowel pattern: e-a-ee
- To correspond (hitpael) / **לְהִתְכַּתֵּב** vowel pattern: e-ee-a-e

With a grasp of these patterns, reading **without vowel markings** (nikkud) becomes straightforward. Understanding which vowels to anticipate makes it effortless:

- To write (paal) / **לְכַתּוֹב** vowel pattern: ee-o
- To dictate (hifil) / **לְהַכְתִּיב** vowel pattern: e-a-ee
- To correspond (hitpael) / **לְהִתְכַּתֵּב** vowel pattern: e-ee-a-e

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## 5. How to get started

Before delving into a deep study of the Hebrew verb system, it's beneficial for a student to have a foundational understanding of the Hebrew language. Here are some suggested levels of proficiency and knowledge that can serve as a guideline:

### a) Suggested levels of proficiency

#### **Absolutely necessary: Basic Language Proficiency**

- Understanding and mastery of the Hebrew alphabet and basic pronunciation.
- Familiarity with common vocabulary and basic sentence structures.
- Ability to engage in simple conversations and understand common expressions and greetings.

#### **Desirable: Elementary Grammar and Vocabulary**

- Understanding of noun-adjective agreement, verb conjugations in the present tense, and basic prepositions.
- Expanded vocabulary for everyday topics such as family, food, time, and activities.
- Proficiency in forming simple sentences and asking and answering questions.

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## b) One binyan at a time

Studying one binyan (verb conjugation template) at a time can be beneficial for several reasons, especially for learners who are relatively new to the Hebrew language or to the complexities of Hebrew verbs:

### Focus and Clarity

By concentrating on one binyan at a time, learners can fully immerse themselves in understanding the rules, patterns, and conjugation structures associated with that particular binyan. This focused approach helps in maintaining clarity and reducing confusion.

### Mastering Patterns

Each binyan has its own set of conjugation patterns and rules. Mastering one binyan at a time allows learners to internalize and apply these patterns effectively before moving on to the complexities of other binyanim. Patterns form the fundamental structure of the Hebrew language, and their recognition empowers learners to read without nikkud.

### Gradual Progression

Learning one binyan at a time provides a structured and gradual progression, making the learning process less overwhelming. As learners gain confidence and competence with one binyan, they can move on to the next with a solid foundation.

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## Practice and Reinforcement

Focusing on a single binyan enables learners to practice extensively, reinforcing their understanding through repetition and application. This practice builds a strong foundation for more advanced learning.

## Error Minimization

When learners focus on one binyan at a time, it reduces the likelihood of mixing up conjugation patterns and making errors. The focused approach enhances accuracy in applying the correct patterns.

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## 6. Which binyan should I use first, and why?

The most commonly recommended binyan to start with when studying Hebrew verbs is paal. Starting with the paal binyan provides a structured and logical beginning point for learning Hebrew verb conjugation. It offers a smoother learning curve and a strong base upon which learners can build their understanding of the Hebrew verb system. This is why:

### Foundational Binyan

The paal binyan is the most basic and foundational verb conjugation template. It serves as the standard form and provides the essential structure for understanding other binyanim.

### Builds Understanding

The paal binyan is the most common binyan in contemporary Hebrew. Many common verbs fall into this category, making it highly practical and useful for everyday conversation.

### Wide Usage

Learning paal verbs first helps learners build a solid foundation in understanding Hebrew verb conjugation principles, including root letters, vowel patterns, and various tenses.

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## Transition to Other Binyanim

Once learners have a good grasp of paal verbs, they can more easily transition to studying other binyanim, understanding how they differ from and relate to the paal pattern.

## Note: Paal & the Irregular Verbs

The binyan with the greatest number of exceptions is Paal. Students may become extremely frustrated as a result and feel overburdened once more. This raises the question of when and in what order to begin using irregular verbs, a topic that will be covered in the upcoming chapter. It is safe to state, though, that not every anomaly in paal will manifest itself fully in other binyanim. Not every binyan exhibits all of these unique regulations.

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## 7. Optimal Strategy for Mastering Irregular Verbs

Various methods exist for learning irregular verbs. The choice between these methods depends on the learner's learning style, prior language learning experience, and preference for structuring their learning process. Method 1 provides a structured and progressive approach, while Method 2 offers a more comprehensive understanding but might present higher initial complexity. An effective strategy may involve a combination of these methods, tailored to the learner's abilities and preferences.

### What means “irregular” in Hebrew? An example

Irregular doesn't mean "not according to the rules"; rather, it signifies "deviation from standard rules." Let's consider a paal example using the root **גור** to form a standard (= “regular”) infinitive:

- Begin with the three-letter root.
- Add a lamed before the root (all Hebrew infinitives start with lamed).
- Insert a vav between the second and third root letters.

Infinitive: **לְגוּר** (to close)

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## Alteration of the process

Certain Hebrew letters within the root can alter the process of forming an infinitive. Commonly, these letters include hey, yud, or vav. Let's explore the adjustments to this process when a vav appears in the second root position, as seen in the root **גור**.

- Begin with the three-letter root.
- Add a lamed before the root (all Hebrew infinitives start with lamed).
- ~~Insert a vav between the second and third root letters.~~

Infinitive: **לגור** (to live, reside)

As observed, due to the presence of the vav at the second root position, this infinitive appears distinct from a typical infinitive. Step 3 of the process has been excluded.

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## a) Method 1: Learning Regular Verbs for Each Binyan First

One option is to focus exclusively on regular verbs, systematically studying all binyanim and disregarding the rules for irregular verbs. After covering all binyanim, the learner revisits and applies the same approach to irregular verbs. This approach presents the subsequent pros and con.

### The benefits and drawbacks of method 1

**Structured Approach:** Provides a structured and organized approach by focusing on regular verbs within each binyan before moving on to irregular verbs.

**Progressive Complexity:** Allows learners to gradually increase the complexity of conjugation rules, starting with regular verbs and then introducing the irregular ones.

**Clear Segmentation:** Divides the learning process into manageable segments, ensuring learners master regular verbs before tackling the irregular ones.

**Delayed Exposure to Irregular Verbs:** Students may put off learning irregular verbs until much later in the process, which could make it more difficult for them to understand them all at once.

**Learning Back and Forth:** Making students review past binyanim in order to identify irregular verbs might cause disruptions in the learning process and make continuity difficult.

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## b) Method 2: Study one binyan fully before moving on to the next

An alternative is to thoroughly grasp the rules for both regular and irregular verbs within one binyan before progressing to the next and repeating the process.

### The benefits and drawbacks of method 2

#### **Comprehensive Understanding:**

Enables a comprehensive understanding of both regular and irregular verbs for a specific binyan, providing a more holistic view of the conjugation rules.

#### **Early Exposure to Irregularities:**

Introduces irregularities early in the learning process, allowing learners to familiarize themselves with the exceptions and variations right from the start.

#### **Smooth Transition**

Between Binyanim: Offers a smoother transition from one binyan to another, as learners retain a consistent approach throughout the learning process.

#### **Increased Initial Complexity:**

Presenting both regular and irregular verbs simultaneously can be overwhelming, especially for beginners, potentially slowing down the learning pace.

#### **Difficulty in Mastery:**

Mastering the intricacies of both regular and irregular verbs within each binyan concurrently might be challenging, potentially affecting depth of understanding.

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## 8. About Rut Avni

I did not grow up in Israel. My first Hebrew teacher was a translator from my congregation. Even in the early years of the Internet, there were no online courses, and also books on Hebrew grammar were scarce (and still are). When I registered for Aliyah, I decided to do everything I could to speak like a sabra, so that I could easily find a job and start a new life in the homeland.

I had planned to make Aliya at some point in the coming 18 months, meaning there was still time. I bought a flight ticket and booked an Ulpan for one month, thinking that this will save me time (= money) later, when I arrive for good.

Do you know how much I paid? (And how little I learned?)

In the year 2007, I paid 3,700 USD, expecting all they had advertised:

- 1 month ulpan
- accommodation at site, and half board,
- 4 hours of Hebrew every day
- access to the library and study room

Sounded terrific. This is what I got:

- A class with 28 students
- 2-3 hours of Hebrew per day (45 min each)
- 1-2 hours of "other activities"
- A room from 1948 with hot water at certain hours
- A sloppy toast with Nescafé in the morning (yes, a decent dinner)
- A "library" aka storage room with piled-up old books on the floor
- Tons of frustration, lasting for years

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## And what did that do to my Hebrew?

My Hebrew grammar had improved as much as I would have expected it had I taken only 4 hours of private classes during the whole month in my hometown. Basically, close to zero.

I was already competent in five European languages at the time. I was proficient in language study. Hebrew was not going to be the exception for me. I had a mission from that point on. There was not a single grammar book or verb table collection that I hadn't explored.

Years later, I published several books on Hebrew verbs and finally created an online course to make sure students get ALL the information on the subject that nobody teaches: Hebrew verbs—they do not even teach it in Israel!

Teaching Hebrew verbs became my mission. I am living for it. My biggest joy is watching my students' breakthroughs. I am sincerely looking forward to your inevitable success!

With much *ahavá* ♥♥,  
**Rut**



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