








HEBREW

Most Jewish prayers are written and said in Hebrew. Hebrew is one of the oldest written languages. In Bible times the Jewish people spoke Hebrew. In modern day Israel they speak a language called Ivrit. Ivrit is another name for Hebrew.

The Hebrew alphabet is very different from ours. It has 22 letters. Some of the letters have slightly different shapes depending on whether they are in the middle of a word or at the end of a word. Here are a few of the letters. Underneath each one is its name in English and the sound it makes.

Letter							
Name	Tzade	Resh	Mem	Lamed	Gimel	Chet	Bet
Sound	ts	r	m	l	g	ch (as in the scots word <i>loch</i>)	b or v

All the letters are CAPITALS. There are no lower case letters in Hebrew. (There is a different set of letter shapes for handwriting - but that's another story!)

Hebrew writing starts at the RIGHT hand end of the line and reads along towards the LEFT.

All the letters in the Hebrew alphabet are consonants. Originally, there were no vowels in Hebrew writing (of course there were vowels in Hebrew speaking - you can't talk without vowel sounds). This can make Hebrew difficult to read. Here is some writing in English but using only the consonants. Can you read it?

CHLDRN MST G T SCHL VRY DY XCPT WHN T S HLDY.

Write down what you think it says. Can you work out which word is missing completely?

Try writing a message with the vowels missed out. Can your friends read it easily?

Here are two versions of the same Hebrew words. Can you see the difference?



וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

In Hebrew, the vowel sounds are shown by putting little dots or other signs above or below the letters. These vowel signs are called **nikkudim**. Here are some examples:

••• •• Either of these signs underneath a letter add an *e* (like the *e* in red) after the sound of the letter.

— T Either of these signs underneath a letter add an *u* (like the *u* in butter) after the sound of the letter.

Hebrew text with the nikkudim is called **pointed** text. Without the nikkudim, the text is **unpointed**.

Look carefully at the sample of pointed text. Can you spot three other nikkudim?

The Hebrew alphabet is usually called the **ALEPH BET**. Look at a chart showing all the Hebrew letters. Why do you think it has this name?

There are quite a few words in English that come from Hebrew and so do many names. Amen, camel, cinnamon, Sabbath and bedlam are words that have been "borrowed" from Hebrew. Michael, Rachel, Susan, John, Jack, Rebecca and Simon are just a few of the Hebrew names that we use today.

Many Jewish children go to cheder on a Sunday morning. Cheder is a school where they learn about their religion. (The word cheder means room). One of the things that children learn at cheder is how to read Hebrew. (They do not always learn how to speak it!)

Teachers' Notes

Hebrew characters are not written on lines, rather the text hangs from a line above the letters. There are few ascenders (only 1) or descenders (2). The lack of a) different heights and b) white space actually makes Hebrew quite difficult to read quickly.

Hebrew words are usually stressed on the final syllable.

The ch sound, used in the English word chair is not used in Hebrew. When transliterating Hebrew into English characters ch is used to denote the sound at the end of the Scots word loch. (This sound is technically known as an unvoiced palatal fricative). Hebrew also has no use for the sounds of j or w.

Hebrew also uses the letters of the alphabet as numerals. The first 10 letters having the values 1 - 10 and other letters having higher values such as 50 and 100. It works rather like the Roman system. This means that every Hebrew word has a numerical value - a fact that has been put to use in the system known as Gematria, which tries to elicit meaning by comparing the numerical values of words in a text. The assumption is that, since language is God's gift, any numerical links between words are not coincidental.

Hebrew plurals

These are generally formed in one of two ways:

- Masculine words (which generally end in a consonant) form their plurals by adding -im; eg devar / devarim (word/s).
- Feminine words (which usually end in -ah or -t) form their plurals by changing the -ah to -ot or by adding -ot after the -t. eg sukkah / Sukkot (temporary shelter/s), tallit / tallitot (prayer shawl/s).

Some Jewish prayers are written not in Hebrew, but in Aramaic, a related language, which was the dominant language in the Near East for about a millenium, between the 4th century BCE and the 6th century CE. (BCE and CE are used in preference to BC and AD. They mean Before the Common Era and Common Era). Dialects of Aramaic are still spoken in some places today. Prayers in Aramaic are written in Hebrew script. One notable prayer that is written in Aramaic is Kaddish, which is used as the memorial prayer for the dead.