Transliteration System

Linguists use various transliteration systems to represent the sounds of the Hebrew language. Some are more technical than others, but all of them employ symbols unfamiliar to the non-specialist.

Admitting that no system can perfectly represent the sounds of the Hebrew language using only the letters of the English alphabet, JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE employs a system which hopefully elicits from English readers a pronunciation that comes close to Hebrew. We use special symbols only for three letters whose sounds are not normally made by English speakers — כ, ח, ע — and for one silent letter — א.

The one-symbol-for-one-sound system which scholars strive for is less necessary today than it was only a few years ago when it was time consuming and expensive to set type in more than one language. Today, in an age when typesetting is often done by computer, it is easy to print many languages on a page. Thus, the transliteration can serve mainly as a pronunciation aid for readers who do not know Hebrew.

Hebrew does not have upper and lower case letters, therefore we do not capitalize proper nouns in our system of transliteration. However, we do use capitalization to indicate the syllable which receives primary accent in words of more than one syllable. One-syllable words are treated as unaccented. Syllables of transliterated words are separated by dots, as in ye·ru·sha·LA·yim (Jerusalem).

Except for diphthongs, the vowels are represented by one letter each, similar to Spanish vowels. The vowel in "too" is represented by the letter "u," the vowel in "see" is represented by the letter "i," and the vowel in "day" is represented by "e."

In the Glossary boxes we use symbols such as "ə," and indicate accented syllables (primary accent only) by ´. These symbols are employed in standard English dictionaries and will be familiar to most readers.

Transliterations

א – ' (silent)
ב – b (like b in boy)
ב – v (like v in very)
ג – g (like g in gold, never like g in gem)
ד – d (like d in day)
ה – h (like h in horn; normally silent at end of a word)
ו – v (like v in very)
ז – z (like z in zeal)
ח – ḥ (no English equivalent — voiceless guttural produced by retracting the tongue root into the throat, but in modern Hebrew often is pronounced like ch in the Scottish loch or the German ach)
ט – t (like t in tip)
י – y (like y in yard; sometimes silent)
כ – k (like k in kite, never silent like k in knit)
כ ך* – ḵ (no English equivalent, like ch in the Scottish loch or the German ach)
ל – l (like l in let)
מ ם* – m (like m in met)
נ ן* – n (like n in net)
ס – s (like s in sit)
ע – ʿ (no English equivalent — voiced guttural produced by constricting the lower throat muscles and retracting the tongue root. It is related to ḥ like the voiced b is related to the unvoiced p.)
פ – p (like p in port)
פ ף* – f (like f in fit)
צ ץ* – ts (like ts in nets)
ק – k (like k in kite)
ר – r (a gargling r sound produced by vibrating the uvula against the back of the tongue, like in the French rire)
שׁ – sh (like sh in shell)
שׂ – s (like s in sit)
ת – t (like t in tip)

Vowel signs and dots occur mostly under the letter; sometimes to its left. They are pronounced after the letter that carries the sign. Our transliterations are in accord with modern Hebrew pronunciation and do not distinguish vowel duration.

– a (like a in father; rarely like the o in bone)
– a (like a in father)
– a (like a in father)
– i (like i in ski)
– i (like i in ski)
– e (sometimes like e in net, sometimes like e in hey, and sometimes somewhere in between)
– e (like e in net)
– e (like e in net)
– o (like o in oh)
– o (like o in oh)
– o (like o in oh)
– u (like u in flu)
– u (like u in flu)
– e (sometimes barely audible like e in happening, at other times as long as e in net. Also can be silent. When silent we transliterate with nothing.)

The addition of י to the vowels _, ו and ו creates in each case a diphthong.

ַי – ai (like ai in aisle)
וֹי – oi (like oy in boy)
וּי – ui (like uey in gluey)

*This is the form of the letter when it appears at the end of a word. **JP**