

# 🌀 Biblical Hebrew Grammar for Beginners

## Hebrew Verbs

In introducing the Hebrew verb system, we discuss here the prefix and suffix conjugations, the seven patterns of the Hebrew verb, the imperative and infinitive, and the grouping of verbs according to their root consonants.

### Prefix and Suffix Conjugations

The Hebrew verb system has two major conjugations: The prefix conjugation, representing the [imperfective](#), and the suffix conjugation, representing the [perfective](#). The term “prefix conjugation” is used in reference to a set of prefixes, and “suffix conjugation” in reference to a set of suffixes, figuring in the conjugation as identifiers of person, number, and gender.

Examples of the full prefix and suffix conjugations of the verb “wear” (root: ל.ב.ש) are listed below.

Prefix Conjugation	Suffix Conjugation	Person
אֲלַבֵּשׁ	לְבַשְׁתִּי	1 <sup>st</sup> person singular (I)
תִּלְבַּשׁ	לְבַשְׁתָּ	2 <sup>nd</sup> person masculine singular (you)
תִּלְבְּשִׁי	לְבַשְׁתְּ	2 <sup>nd</sup> person feminine singular (you)
יִלְבֵּשׁ	לְבַשׁ	3 <sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular (he)
תִּלְבֹּשׁ	לְבַשְׁהָ	3 <sup>rd</sup> person feminine singular (she)
נִלְבֵּשׁ	לְבַשְׁנוּ	1 <sup>st</sup> person plural (we)
תִּלְבְּשׁוּ	לְבַשְׁתֶּם	2 <sup>nd</sup> person masculine plural (you)
תִּלְבְּשֶׁנָּה	לְבַשְׁתֶּןּוּ	2 <sup>nd</sup> person feminine plural (you)
יִלְבְּשׁוּ	לְבַשׁוּ	3 <sup>rd</sup> person masculine plural (they) (feminine as well in suffix conjugation)
תִּלְבְּשֶׁנָּה	לְבַשׁוּ	3 <sup>rd</sup> person feminine plural (they) (masculine as well in suffix conjugation)

The 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular (he) perfective form is considered the basic form of the verb, in that it involves neither prefixes nor suffixes. In modern Hebrew dictionaries, this is the form that is typically listed for a verb.

Some forms in the prefix conjugation have typical suffixes as well as prefixes. The 2<sup>nd</sup> masculine singular (you) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> feminine singular (she) are identical.

The imperfective has a number of moods (variations indicating a perspective on the action), among them the imperative (command). The imperative forms for “wear” are listed below:

לְבֹשׁ	2 <sup>nd</sup> masculine singular
לְבֹשִׁי	2 <sup>nd</sup> feminine singular
לְבֹשׁוּ	2 <sup>nd</sup> masculine plural
לְבֹשְׁנָה	2 <sup>nd</sup> feminine plural

### The Hebrew Verb Patterns

Hebrew verbs are conjugated in one or more of seven patterns, and relics of other patterns are evident in the Biblical text.

A pattern is a set of vowels and affixes that interact with a root in a particular manner. To illustrate the idea of a pattern with English words, we could offer the following examples: if we plug consonants into the pattern CCiCe, with “C” standing for any consonant, we will get words like spike, smite, and pride; if our pattern is CCCiCe, we will get words like strike and splice.

A Hebrew verb pattern may have one or more intrinsic meanings. The Pa’al or Qal pattern, for example, usually conveys the basic or simple meaning of the root, and the Hif’il pattern carries a causative meaning, that is, indicates that the agent is causing an action or a situation to take place. While in English “wear” and “dress up (someone else)” are two different verbs, in

Hebrew the root ש.ל.ב , conjugated in the two patterns Pa'al and Hif'il, respectively, is used to convey both meanings:

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מְלָכוֹת וַתַּעֲמֹד בְּחֶצֶר בַּיִת-הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּנִימִית נֹכַח בַּיִת הַמֶּלֶךְ ; וְהַמֶּלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב עַל-כִּסֵּא מְלָכוֹתוֹ בְּבַיִת הַמְּלָכוֹת נֹכַח פֶּתַח הַבַּיִת. (Esther 5:1)

*On the third day, Esther **put on** royal garments and stood in the inner court, facing the king's house. Now the king was sitting on his throne at the palace, facing the door.*

וַתִּקַּח רִבְקָה אֶת-בְּגָדֵי עֵשָׂו בְּנֵהּ הַגָּדֹל הַחֲמֹדֹת אֲשֶׁר אִתָּהּ בַּבַּיִת ; וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶת-יַעֲקֹב בְּנֵהּ הַקָּטָן. (Genesis 27:15)

*Rebecca took the festive clothes of Esau, her older son, which she had kept in the house, and **dressed up** Jacob, her younger son.*

The verbs in both examples are in the prefix conjugation, and in both situations the agent is a woman (grammatically, 3<sup>rd</sup> person feminine singular). The root ש.ל.ב is evident in both forms, as is the prefix ת, typical of 3<sup>rd</sup> person feminine singular in the prefix conjugation. The difference between the two forms is in their vowels, as each verb pattern has a particular set of vowels.

A parallel difference can be observed in the suffix conjugation:

וּבְצֵאתָם אֶל-הַחֶצֶר הַחִיצוֹנָה אֶל-הַחֶצֶר הַחִיצוֹנָה אֶל-הָעַם יִפְשְׁטוּ אֶת-בְּגָדֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר-הֵמָּה מְשָׁרְתִים בָּם וְהִנִּיחוּ אוֹתָם בְּלִשְׁכַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ ; וְלִבְשׁוּ בְּגָדִים אֲחֵרִים וְלֹא-יִקְדְּשׁוּ אֶת-הָעַם בְּבְגָדֵיהֶם. (Ezekiel 44:19)

*When they go out into the outer court, to the people, they will take off their garments, in which they minister, and place them in the holy chambers. They **will put on** different garments so that they do not consecrate the people with their garments.*

וְנָתַן הַלְבוּשׁ וְהַסּוּס עַל-יַד-אִישׁ מִשָּׂרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּרָתְמִים וְהַלְבִּישׁוּ אֶת-הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ ; וְהִרְכִּיבֵהוּ עַל-הַסּוּס בְּרְחוֹב הָעִיר וְקָרְאוּ לְפָנָיו כָּכָה יַעֲשֶׂה לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ. (Esther 6:9)

*The garments and the horse should be given to one of the king's noble princes, who **will dress up** the man whom the king wishes to honor. They will lead him on the horse, through the city streets, and proclaim before him: 'This is what is done for the man whom the king wishes to honor!'*

In both examples, the agent is a group of men (3<sup>rd</sup> masculine plural). The root ש.ל.ב and the suffix ו, typical of 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural in the suffix conjugation, are evident in both forms. Because they are

conjugated in two different patterns, the forms differ not only in their vowels but also in the prefix הַ which is typical of the Hif'il pattern in the prefix conjugation.

3<sup>rd</sup> masculine singular forms in the suffix and prefix conjugations in all seven verb patterns are given below for the root ל.ט.ק, which is traditionally used to represent the Hebrew verb. Other than the root consonants, and the prefix י in the prefix conjugation, all other consonants (highlighted in red) are typical of the respective patterns in which the verb is conjugated. These additional consonants are evident in the pattern names.

Pattern	Suffix Conjugation	Prefix Conjugation
Pa'al	קַטַל	יִקְטַל
Nif'al	יִקְטַל	יִקְטַל
Pi'el	קַטַל	יִקְטַל
Pu'al	קַטַל	יִקְטַל
Hif'il	הִקְטִיל	יִקְטִיל
Huf'al	הִקְטַל	יִקְטַל
Hitpa'el	הִתְקַטַל	יִתְקַטַל

Note that the pattern names are identical to the 3<sup>rd</sup> masculine forms in the respective patterns and in the root ל.ע.ל which carries the meaning “do, act”.

The root ל.ע.ל is also used for the purpose of grouping those roots that have one or more weak consonants (those that tend to drop or change into vowels), and, as a result, produce forms that are different in a very typical way from those produced by roots in which all consonants are “strong”. With *pe* standing for the first consonant, *ayin* for the second, and *lamed* for the third, roots like ל.מ.א *say* and ל.כ.א *eat* are from the *pe-alef* group (that is, the group of roots in which the first root consonant is an *alef*); roots like י.א.ר *see* and י.ת.ש *drink* are from the *lamed-yod* group (that is, the group of roots in which the last root consonant is a *yod*), etc. Verbs from the *lamd-yod* group, for example, will often have the vowel “i” before the suffix in the suffix conjugation, a behavior not observed in the strong verb

(e.g., the forms לְבַשְׁתִּי/דִבְרַנּוּ from strong roots vs. שְׁתִּיתִי/נָסִינוּ from *lamed-yod* roots, in the pa'al and pi'el patterns, respectively).

In the [participle](#), we typically find four forms: masculine singular and plural, and feminine singular and plural. The feminine singular form ends either with –ah or with –et. Some examples are:

	Pa'al	Nif'al	Hif'il	Hitpa'el
Masculine singular	לּוֹבֵשׁ	נִלְחֵם	מִלְבִּישׁ	מִתְפַּלֵּל
Feminine singular	לּוֹבֶשֶׁת	נִלְחָמָה	מִלְבִּיֶשֶׁה	מִתְפַּלְּלָה
Masculine plural	לּוֹבְשִׁים	נִלְחָמִים	מִלְבִּיִּשִׁים	מִתְפַּלְּלִים
Feminine plural	לּוֹבְשׁוֹת	נִלְחָמוֹת	מִלְבִּיִּשׁוֹת	מִתְפַּלְּלוֹת

[Infinitives](#) are verbal forms that convey the abstract idea of the verb without reference to the agent.

They have a number of functions, among them indicating purpose or intent, like the infinitives in English (as in the creation of the great lights to separate between the day and the night). Accordingly, the infinitives are often augmented with the preposition “to”.

Some examples are:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי מְאֹרֶת בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַיּוֹם וּבֵין הַלַּיְלָה  
(Genesis 1:14) [...]

*God said: Let there be lights in the vault of the heavens, to separate between the day and the night...*

וַהֲיוּ לְמְאוֹרֹת בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהַאֲרִי עַל-הָאָרֶץ ; וַיְהִי-כֵן . (Genesis 1:15)

*They should serve as lights in the vault of the heavens, to shine light upon the earth. And it was so.*

וְכָל שִׂיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם יִהְיֶה בְּאָרֶץ וְכָל-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם יִצְמָח ; כִּי לֹא  
הָמְטִיר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל-הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אֵין לְעַבֵּד אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה . (Genesis 2:5)

*Now, no brush of the field was yet on the earth, and the greenery of the field did not yet sprout, for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no man to till the soil.*

The infinitives in the first two examples are from the verb pattern Hif'il, and the third is from the pattern Pa'al.

[Exercise: Prefix and Suffix Conjugations](#)