



January 2026 newsletter

“בְּרֵאשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ”

Genesis 1:1

What are the vowels in Hebrew?

אַהֲבָה שְׁלוֹם פִּרְפֹּר כְּלָב חֲתוּל

In Hebrew, vowels are represented by a system called **niqqud** (נִקּוּד), a set of dots and dashes placed around consonants. Because Hebrew is primarily an **abjad** (a consonant-based writing system), these marks clarify pronunciation.

The Five Main Vowel Sounds

Modern Hebrew pronunciation generally recognizes five basic vowel sounds:

- A

- E
- I
- O
- U

Traditional Classification (Biblical/Historical Hebrew)

Historically, vowels were grouped by **length** and organized into three broad classes:

1. A-Class Vowels

- **Pataḥ** (◌ַ) – short “a”
- **Qamats** (◌ָ) – traditionally long “a” (though sometimes pronounced “o” in specific cases)

2. I-Class Vowels

- **Hiriq** (◌ִ) – “i”
- **Tsere** (◌ֵ) – long “e”
- **Segol** (◌ֶ) – short “e”

3. U-Class Vowels

- **Holam** (◌ֹ) – “o”
- **Qubuts** (◌ֻ) – short “u”
- **Shuruk** (◌ֹ) – long “u”

There are also **ultra-short (reduced) vowels**, called **ḥataf** vowels:

- **Ḥataf Pataḥ** (◌ְַ)

- **Ḥataf Segol** (◌ֿֿֿ)
- **Ḥataf Qamats** (◌ֿֿֿֿ)

Modern Hebrew Simplification

In **Modern Hebrew**, vowel length distinctions (long vs. short) are generally **not pronounced differently**. For example:

- **Pataḥ** and **Qamats** usually both sound like “a.”
- **Tsere** and **Segol** both sound like “e.”
- **Hiriq** consistently sounds like “ee.”
- **Holam** sounds like “o.”
- **Qubuts** and **Shuruk** both sound like “u.”

Thus, modern pronunciation reduces the system to five consistent vowel sounds: **a, e, i, o, u**, regardless of their historical classification.

Hebrew Niqqud Table

Class	Name	Mark	Example	Placement	Modern Sound
A	Pataḥ	◌ֿֿֿ	כֿֿֿ	Under (short line)	a
A	Qamats	◌ֿֿֿֿ	כֿֿֿֿ	Under (T- shape)	a

Class	Name	Mark	Example	Placement	Modern Sound
—	Sheva (Shva)	◌ְ	כֵּן	Under (2 vertical dots)	silent or very short e