

LESSON TRANSCRIPT

All About S1 #1

The Top Five Reasons to Learn Hebrew

#1

Shira: All About Hebrew Lesson Number 1 – An Introduction To The Hebrew Language. [שלום] (Sha'lom)
I'm Shira, your friendly non-Israeli guide to everything Hebrew.

Amir: I'm Amir and in this lesson I get to share a part of my Israeli soul with you.

Shira: That's right. This lesson is all about your homeland, Amir.

Amir: And yours too, Shira.

Shira: Yeah, I guess Israel has become my home now. I'm kind of like Ruth in the Bible.

Amir: Or like [moabitess] who married [בוֹעַז] (Bo'az) and became an Israelite.

Shira: Yeah, that's the one. It's one of my favorite Bible stories. She then went on to be the grandmother of King David.

Amir: That's cool. Maybe you'll get to be the mother or grandmother of one of our future prime ministers in Israel.

Shira: Yeah, we'll see.

Amir: Well, Shira, you can speak Hebrew pretty well so you can easily fit in in Israel.

Shira: I try my best. Hebrew is an interesting language with an ancient history and intriguing culture to match.

Amir: Intriguing, yes. Bible stories are just the beginning of that history. Stick with us and we'll introduce you to a side of Israel that only an insider gets to see.

Shira: Speaking of history, Hebrew has really survived through the ages and approximately 7 million people speak it today.

Amir: If you listen for it, you can hear Hebrew everywhere.

Shira: Tell me, Amir, where have you spoken Hebrew in your life besides Israel?

Amir: Everywhere I've traveled. I've even spoken Hebrew in Montana.

Shira: In Montana? Really? I love to listen for Hebrew outside of Israel. I get to eavesdrop on conversations all the time.

Amir: Shira, shame on you. But you're right. Israeli immigrants are all over the world. It's a language you can hear in every country.

Shira: Yeah. So why are there so many Israelis outside of Israel?

Amir: Well, first of all, Israelis love to travel. Most young adults plan a big trip after the army. They go to many different places, South-East Asia or South America are really popular.

Shira: Yeah, that post-army trip is really important. I love to see the pictures of all the adventures they've been on.

Amir: The other reason is that there are about 750,000 Israelis outside of Israel, so your chances of hearing Hebrew are pretty good.

Shira: Wow, that many?

Amir: Yes. Israel's had a rough history. Many Israelis feel they can make a better living outside of Israel. Others just don't want to live in a place with so much tension.

Shira: Yeah, I guess it's a bit tense sometimes. But I find it so exciting to live in Israel. So let's get back to the topic of the Hebrew language. I know that Hebrew is ancient, but where exactly did it come from?

Amir: Well, it's difficult to pinpoint, but experts believed it developed from a dialect of the Kinana language.

Shira: That's another name I remember hearing in the Bible.

Amir: You can actually see a lot of Hebrew's history in the Bible. If you know the stories of the Israelites, you'll be able to follow the history of the Hebrew language pretty easily.

Shira: I know though that Hebrew in the Bible is much more difficult than Hebrew spoken today.

Amir: It is. Hebrew used in the [תנ"ך] (Tanakh), meaning the Old Testament, is called Classical Hebrew. And Hebrew spoken today is called Modern Hebrew.

Shira: Why are they so different?

Amir: If you remember, in the Bible, the Israelites were exiled to Babylon, and while they were there spoken Hebrew really declined.

Shira: But the Jews came back from Babylon in the end, didn't they?

Amir: Eventually, they returned. But while they were there, they began to use more and more Aramaic, which was the regional language for trade in the Middle East. Hebrew was still used in religious texts and ceremonies, but it was spoken less and less.

Shira: I heard that Hebrew was at one point a dead language. Is that true?

Amir: Not exactly. After the Bar Kokhba revolt against the Romans in the year 132 A.D., Hebrew was basically not spoken anymore. But when the Romans suppressed the revolt, they scattered the Jews all over the world.

Shira: That's what they call the diaspora.

Amir: Correct. Despite not being spoken anymore, written Hebrew survived in poetry, religious literature and documentation within the scattered Jewish communities.

Shira: If the Jewish people didn't speak Hebrew anymore, what did they speak?

Amir: They usually spoke the language of the area where they were living. Sometimes to separate themselves, they would develop a local dialect of the local language.

Shira: Is that what Yiddish is?

Amir: Exactly. Yiddish is one of those languages that came out of the diaspora. It's a fusion of German, Hebrew, Aramaic, and even some Slavic languages. And it came from a Jewish community in the Rhine region, in Germany. It really caught on throughout the Jewish society and it spread all over the world.

Shira: There is so much history in what you just told us. So when did Hebrew become a spoken language again?

Amir: Well, at the end of the 19th century, there were a couple of social movements that tried to revive Hebrew as a day to day language. It was successful on a small scale, but it wasn't until some things happened that it really caught on.

Shira: Ok, now you have me on the edge of my seat. What happened?

Amir: Around the same time, the concept of nationalism became a major thing. Many groups of people were fighting for their homeland and they were getting it.

Shira: Do you mean countries like Bulgaria? But what does that have to do with Hebrew?

Amir: Well, many Jewish people in Europe thought they too deserved a homeland. These people were called Zionists and one of their leaders was [אליעזר בן יהודה] (E'li'ezer ben ye'hu'da).

Shira: I've heard that name before. He has a street named after him in just about every city in Israel. They say he singlehandedly revived Hebrew as a spoken language.

Amir: Well, he had a big role in it, of course. But it wasn't all his doing. Because of Zionism, many of the Jews were returning to Palestine, which was then a part of the Ottoman Empire, to make a homeland for themselves.

Shira: Right. They call these the first [עליות] (A'li'iyot) or going up.

Amir: This is where [בן יהודה] (Ben ye'hu'da) comes in. he also made his way to Palestine, where he continued working on his big project.

Shira: You mean his project to revive Hebrew?

Amir: Yes. He had a strategy. He wanted to use Hebrew exclusively in his own home, and once that succeeded, he would get Hebrew into the schools, and from there it would naturally spread to the rest of society.

Shira: I'm guessing he was successful because today Modern Hebrew is still spoken.

Amir: He was. His son was considered the first native speaker of Modern Hebrew. He was also successful in getting teachers to teach in Hebrew in the schools. It was tough, but there were many teachers with the same vision as [בן יהודה] (Ben ye'hu'da), and together they fought through those first difficult years.

Shira: What did he do about words that didn't exist in the Bible or in the religious texts? I'm guessing modern language, in general, was different at that time. Then they had already come through the industrial revolution.

Amir: He coined those words himself and he kept track of them. Eventually, he collected them into a dictionary that combined classical and Modern Hebrew.

Shira: So how did he get Hebrew to the rest of Jewish society?

Amir: He knew that most men were familiar with Hebrew because they were able to read it in the [תנ"ך] (Tanakh) or in the commentaries on the [תנ"ך] (Tanakh). So his strategy was to use Hebrew in the local newspapers. He also used newspapers to share his new words with the rest of the Hebrew speakers.

Shira: I guess newspapers were pretty popular during that time. But it seems to me that not everyone could learn Hebrew from a newspaper.

Amir: True. Part of the reason that Hebrew caught on so well during that time was because of the immigrants who were coming to Palestine. They were coming from countries all over Europe and they needed a common language.

Shira: Right. They spoke Yiddish and Russian, Ladino and many, many other languages.

Amir: As Hebrew gained speakers, it became that common language. Most of them had some sort of a knowledge of it, so it wasn't so difficult to start speaking it.

Shira: That way they didn't have to learn an entirely new language. That's brilliant.

Amir: Well, if there hadn't been such a need for a common language at the time, Hebrew might not have caught on so quickly.

Shira: Wow. Hebrew has such an amazing history. So now I understand the answer to my question. Because Hebrew had mostly been a written language for so many years, it had to go through a lot of sudden changes to catch up to modern times. That's why there's such a big difference between Classical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew.

Amir: Yeah, Hebrew's a very special language. It's in its own class altogether.

Shira: Yeah. Technically speaking, Hebrew is a Semitic language from the Afro-Asiatic language family. It belongs to the Kinana group of languages and it has two main dialects.

Amir: The two main dialects are [אַשכּנזי] (Ash'ke'na'zi) Hebrew and [ספּראדי] (Sfara'di) Hebrew. These two dialects are related to where different groups of Jews came from in the diaspora.

Shira: We'll get into how these two dialects have affected the Hebrew language in some of our other All About lessons.

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Amir: Let's talk about Israel for a bit.

Shira: Ok, it sounds like we're in for another history lesson.

Amir: We'll try to keep it short.

Shira: Ok. How about we start at the part where the Zionists had come to Palestine, which was a part of the Ottoman Empire, but was then taken over by the British.

Amir: Yes. When Hebrew was becoming the main language of Jewish society, the British mandate was in place. And in 1922, Hebrew actually became one of the official languages of Palestine.

Shira: Hey, that's amazing. Hebrew went from not being spoken to an official language of Palestine in 50 years.

Amir: What's even more amazing is that Zionists continued to come to Palestine, where they were later joined by holocaust survivors, and together they declared the state of Israel.

Shira: So two dreams came to be; the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, and a homeland for the Jewish people.

Amir: Today, we don't even think about the fact that 100 years ago, modern Hebrew was still in its infancy. And Jews were still scattered all over the world, longing for a homeland of their own.

Shira: Israeli history gives a lot of insight into the reason for the nationalism of Israelis, as well as their strong cultural identity.

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Shira: Ok. It's time for our top five list.

Amir: The top five reasons to learn this amazing language.

Shira: Number five.

Amir: Hebrew is one of the oldest languages in the world. By learning Hebrew, you'll gain access to thousands of years of poetic, historical and philosophical texts.

Shira: Number four.

Amir: Modern Hebrew comes from the classical Hebrew, which is the language that most of the Bible was written in. So now you can find out what those passages are really about.

Shira: Number three.

Amir: By learning Hebrew, you can get new insight into Jewish history, and you can also have a better understanding of Israel's culture and its history. It's practically a two for one deal.

Shira: Number two.

Amir: Knowing Hebrew will help you travel more easily in Israel and interact with Israelis abroad. Soon you'll be speaking Hebrew just as well as Shira. And the number one reason to learn Hebrew is...

Shira: Hebrew is Fun!