

15. Prepositions With Nouns

In comparison with other languages, Hebrew has relatively few prepositions. Some Hebrew prepositions are inseparable and are prefixed to nouns, somewhat like the definite article. Others are independent and function more like English prepositions.

15.1 Hebrew has three inseparable prepositions:

- בְּ in, by, with (plus other meanings)
- כְּ as, like, according to (plus other meanings)
- לְ to, for, at (plus other meanings)

These are prefixed to nouns according to the following rules:

(1) *They are written with a simple sheva before consonants that have full vowels, except in some of the instances where they stand before the tone syllable of a word (cf. [5] below).*

Examples:

בְּשֵׁם	in a name	כְּדָבָר	according to a word	בְּרוּחַ	by a spirit
לְשָׁלוֹם	for peace	בְּאָב	with a father	בְּבֵן	with a son

(2) *They are written with a hireq* before consonants that have simple (vocal) shevas. This is because two vocal shevas cannot stand together. The sheva of the preposition, being the first of two vocal shevas in this instance, is changed to hireq.*

Examples:

כְּבְרִית	according to a covenant	לְפְרִי	for fruit
בְּדְבָרִים	with words	בְּשָׂאוֹל	in Sheol

Note, however, that if the preposition is prefixed to a noun whose initial consonant is yod supported by a simple sheva (יְ), other changes also become necessary. First, the sheva of the preposition changes to hireq, as in the examples above. This hireq then combines with the yod to form a hireq-yod. This in turn causes the yod to lose its consonantal value, and the sheva beneath it drops out.

*In the following lessons, for simplicity's sake, most of the diacritical marks on transliterated words will be omitted. Only marks necessary for correct pronunciation will be retained.

Examples:

יְרוּשָׁלַיִם plus בְּ = בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם in Jerusalem
יְהוּדָה plus בְּ = בִּיהוּדָה in Judah

(3) *When an inseparable preposition is prefixed to a noun whose initial consonant is supported by a compound sheva, the preposition will take the short vowel that corresponds to that of the compound sheva. Before ḥaṭef-pataḥ, it will take pataḥ; before ḥaṭef-sēgol, it will take sēgol; before ḥaṭef-qameṣ, it will take qameṣ-ḥaṭuf. The vowel before the compound sheva will ordinarily be written with a meteg.*

Examples:

כַּאֲשֶׁר according to which, בְּאֵמֶת in truth, לְחֻלִּי for sickness

Note, however, that occasionally before an א that has a ḥaṭef-sēgol (אֲ), the preposition receives a šere and the ḥaṭef-sēgol of the א drops out.

Examples:

לְ(אֱ)לֹהִים = לְאֱלֹהִים for God
לְ(אֲ)מַר = לְאִמַר to say, saying

(4) *When an inseparable preposition is prefixed to a noun that has the definite article, the ה of the article drops out and is replaced by the consonant of the preposition.*

Examples:

(a)	אִישׁ	a man	לְאִישׁ	for a man
	הָאִישׁ	the man	לְאִישׁ	for the man
(b)	בְּרִית	a covenant	כַּבְּרִית	according to a covenant
	הַבְּרִית	the covenant	כַּבְּרִית	according to the covenant
(c)	הֵיכָל	a temple	בְּהֵיכָל	in a temple
	הַהֵיכָל	the temple	בְּהֵיכָל	in the temple

(5) *When the inseparable preposition is prefixed to the tone syllable (accented syllable) of a noun, the vowel of the preposition will often be qameṣ. This rule applies especially to one-syllable words with “a” class vowels.*

Examples:

לְעֶד to eternity, לְמַיִם to water

15.2 *There are other prepositions, which are referred to as unattached or independent. They function much like prepositions in English. Some of the more common among these are:*

אֶל to, into, toward לְפָנַי before, in front of

עַל	upon, above, about	מִן	from, out of
עִם	with	תַּחַת	under, instead of
בֵּין	between	אַחֲרַי	behind, after
עַד	until, unto	אַצֵּל	beside, near

15.3 The preposition מִן, “from, out of,” requires further explanation. The rules for writing it are different from the rules for the other independent prepositions.

(1) Before nouns with the definite article, in the majority of cases the preposition מִן appears in its full form and is normally joined to the following word by a maqqef.

Examples:

מִן־הָאָרֶץ	from the earth	מִן־הַיּוֹם	from the day
מִן־הַבַּיִת	from the house	מִן־הָעֵץ	from the tree

(2) Before indefinite nouns (nouns without the article) that have a non-guttural as their initial consonant, the preposition מִן is written mem, plus hireq, plus dagesh forte in the following consonant.

Examples:

מִן	before	בַּיִת	becomes	מִבַּיִת	, from a house
מִן	before	מֶלֶךְ	becomes	מִמֶּלֶךְ	, from a king
מִן	before	יוֹם	becomes	מִיוֹם	, from a day

Note, however, that מִן before a yod pointed with a simple sheva contracts to מִי, as in מִיהוּדָה, “from Judah,” and מִירוּשָׁלַיִם, “from Jerusalem.”

(3) Before indefinite nouns whose initial consonant is a guttural, the preposition מִן is written as mem plus šere. In this case, hireq is lengthened to šere to compensate for the guttural’s refusal to be doubled.

Examples:

מִן	before	אִישׁ	becomes	מִאִישׁ	, from a man
מִן	before	הַר	becomes	מִהַר	, from a mountain
מִן	before	חֶרֶב	becomes	מִחֶרֶב	, from a sword
מִן	before	עִיר	becomes	מִעִיר	, from a city
מִן	before	רֹאשׁ	becomes	מִרֹאשׁ	, from a head

(4) The preposition מִן may also be used to express the comparative.

Examples:

טוֹב	הָאוֹר	מִן־הַחֹשֶׁךְ	better (is) the light than the darkness
טוֹב	הַבֶּקֶר	מִן־הָעֶרֶב	better (is) the morning than the evening