

## The Definite Article

### The Easy Case

The definite article in Hebrew has a similar meaning to “the” in English. It marks the difference between a generalized noun (e.g., “a king”) and a specific instance of a noun (e.g., “the king”).

Unless the noun begins with a guttural or **ר**, it can be made definite by adding **הַ** as a prefix and doubling the following letter with a dagesh hazak.

בַּיִת	>	הַבַּיִת	(the house)
נָעַר	>	הַנָּעַר	(the lad)
מֶלֶךְ	>	הַמֶּלֶךְ	(the king)

Note that in the case of **בַּיִת** the dagesh in the original word was a dagesh kal, but after the definite article prefix is added it has become a dagesh hazak.

### The Definite Article With Gutturals

We run into problems with gutturals and **ר** because the dagesh hazak cannot be added to them. This leads to the following cases:

#### Words beginning with **א** or **ר**

In these words, the vowel under the prefix is changed from a **ַ** to a **ָ**. This is referred to as compensatory lengthening.

אִישׁ	>	הָאִישׁ	(the man, the husband)
רָעָב	>	הָרָעָב	(the famine)

#### Words beginning with **ע** where the original first vowel is an unaccented **ַ**

In this case, a **ֵ** is used for the prefix vowel.

עָרִים > הָעָרִים (the cities)

עָפָר > הָעָפָר (the dust)

### Words beginning with ע where the original first vowel is not an unaccented ׀

In these words, the prefix vowel is a ׀ as in the previous case.

עִיר > הָעִיר (the city)

### Words beginning with ה

If the original first vowel is an unaccented ׀ then a prefix vowel of ׀ is used, with no doubling. The lost doubling is referred to as virtual doubling.

הָרִים > הָהָרִים (the mountains)

If the original first vowel is anything but an unaccented ׀ then the usual prefix vowel ׀ is used, with no doubling.

הַיְכָל > הַהַיְכָל (the palace, the temple)

### Words beginning with ח

If the original vowel is ׀ (accented or not), then the prefix vowel is ׀, and there is no doubling.

חָכָם > חָחָכָם (the wise man)

Otherwise, the usual prefix vowel of ׀ is used and there is no doubling.

חָרֵב > הַחָרֵב (the sword)

### Words beginning with י or מ

The definite article is usually added by prefixing ה with no doubling.

יְלָדִים > הַיְלָדִים (the boys)

מְרַגְּלִים > הַמְרַגְּלִים (the spies)

The exception is when the original **second** original consonant is either ע or ה. In these cases, doubling is used.

יְהוּדִים > הַיְהוּדִים (the Jews)

### Irregular Forms of the Definite Article

What would life be without irregular forms? The following are the most common.

אֶרֶץ > הָאֶרֶץ (the land)

הַר > הַהָר (the mountain)

עַם > הָעַם (the people, the nation)

גֶּן > הַגֶּן (the garden)

פֶּרֶךְ > הַפֶּרֶךְ (the steer, the ox)

חַג > הַחַג (the festival)

אָרוֹן > הָאָרוֹן (the box, the ark)

## Vowel Changes and the Prepositions לְ בִּי בְּ

As we have learned, when the prepositions לְ בִּי and בְּ are added to a definite noun, the הַ is replaced with the preposition.

הַמֶּלֶךְ + לְ > לְמֶלֶךְ (to the king)

When the vowel used by the definite article is changed due to any of the cases listed above, the changed vowel is retained when a preposition is attached.

הָאִישׁ + לְ > לְאִישׁ (to the man)

הַהָרִים + בְּ > בְּהָרִים (in the mountains)