

The Direct Object Particle - אַתְּ

A direct object is the thing in a sentence that the subject is doing the verb to. For example:

Sue and Lou guarded the house.

"Sue and Lou" comprise the subject of this sentence, the verb is "guarded" and the direct object is "the house."

In Hebrew, the sentence would read:

שׁוּ וְלוֹ שָׁמְרוּ אֶת הַבַּיִת:

The particle "אַתְּ" tells us that "הַבַּיִת" is the subject of the sentence.

This is necessary because Hebrew does not necessarily rely on word order to tell us what part of speech something is. Consider this sentence, which is more typical of Hebrew word order:

שָׁמַר הַנְּעָר הַבַּיִת:

Is the young man protected from the elements by the house? Or is the house protected from intruders by the young man? This sentence gives us no means of discerning the correct interpretation. This is why אַתְּ is so important. It removes the ambiguity:

שֹׁמֵר הַנְּעָר אֶת הַבַּיִת:

Now we know the house is being guarded by the young man.

Maqqef and אַת

Maqqef is a punctuation mark that joins two closely related words.

We mostly find it joining אַת to the word it is modifying:

בְּרִשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ:

Note that when אַת is joined to another word with the maqqef, its

tsere is shortened to a segol.

Fun Fact:

In the Zohar, אַת receives some strange treatment. Since it contains the first and last letters of the Alef-Bet it is said to encompass all of divine speech and is equated with the the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of the Divine. Thus when Adam departs Eden, Rabbi El'azar proposes that in the phrase וַיִּגְרֶשׁ אֶת־הָאָדָם "הָאָדָם" is the subject and "אַת", as Shekhina, is the direct object, and thus that it is the man, that drives out Shekhina, rather than God driving out man. You can learn more about this in Daniel Matt's Zohar: Pritzker Edition, on page 297.

את and the personal pronoun

Personal pronouns are very useful. We already know the personal pronouns that can serve as a subject in a sentence, but how do we get words like "him" or "her?"

Hebrew is a "Lego Language." You get different meanings by stacking things together. One of the things that can be stacked onto a word is something called a "pronomial suffix." It's kind of similar to how we conjugate verbs, but it works with things like nouns, prepositions and, significantly for us, את. Here's how it works:

me	את + י = אוֹתִי
you	את + ך = אוֹתְךָ
you (f)	את + ך = אוֹתְךָ
him	את + ו = אוֹתּוֹ
her	את + ה = אוֹתָהּ
us	את + נו = אוֹתֵנוּ
y'all	את + כם = אוֹתְכֶם
y'all (f)	את + כן = אוֹתְכֶן
them	את + ם = אוֹתָם
them (f)	את + ן = אוֹתָן

So שָׁמַר הַנְּעָר אֶת־הַבַּיִת, "the young man guarded the house," becomes הוּא שָׁמַר אוֹתּוֹ, "He guarded it."