Perspectives on Pesky Prefixes Part 1: Prefixes to Nouns

Overview

Hebrew likes to use prefixes to modify words and their role in a phrase. This can be confusing at first because there are several grammatical functions that use prefixes, such as:

- The definite article
- The conjunction ("and")
- Single-letter prepositions
- Conjugating a verb in the imperfect ("future tense")
- A marker for the infinitive form of a verb

We'll review each in turn, starting with prefixes to nouns.

The Definite Article:

The definite article in Hebrew is הַ or sometimes הָ. Pay close attention to the vowel. This, and its

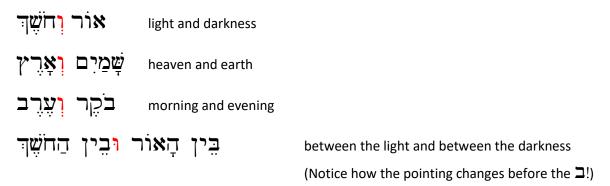position at or near the beginning of a noun is your tip-off that a הַ is an article.

Examples:

יוֹם   day   הַיוֹם   the day

אֶרֶץ   earth   הָאָרֶץ   the earth

שָׁמַיִם heavens   הַשָּׁמַיִם the heavens

מַיִם   waters   הַמַּיִם   the waters

Note: There is no indefinite article marker. If the article is missing, assume that the noun is indefinite.

The Conjunction ("and"):

This usually means "and", although it can also mean "but" or "or". The conjunction is וְ and always

comes at the beginning of the word it governs. When the conjunction comes before the letter מ, בּ,

פ, or any letter marked with a shwa (ְ), the conjunction changes to a וּ.

Examples:

אוֹר וְחֹשֶׁךְ light and darkness

שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ heaven and earth

בֹּקֶר וְעֶרֶב morning and evening

בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ between the light and between the darkness

           (Notice how the pointing changes before the בּ!)

The letter vav also shows up with verbs as the "vav-consecutive." We'll come to that later.

Note: When you have a conjunction and a definite article in the same word, the conjunction always comes first:

וְהָאָרֶץ …and the earth…
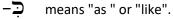
Single-Letter Prepositions

Also known as "inseparable prepositions", these are prepositions that are attached directly the words they govern. As you may recall, a preposition is a word or particle that places something in time or space. For example, "She sat on the bench", "He woke up in the morning", "They went to the restaurant", "The bicycle leaned against the wall", and so on.

There are three common inseparable prefixes in Hebrew that use a single letter:
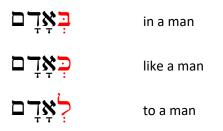
בְּ– means "in", "with", or "by".

כְּ– means "as " or "like".

לְ– means "to", "for", or "according to".

They are usually pointed with a shwa.

Examples:

אָדָם man (no preposition)

בְּאָדָם   in a man

כְּאָדָם   like a man

לְאָדָם   to a man

Inseparable Prepositions with the definite article

When you have a preposition attached to a definite noun, the הַ drops, but its vowel "remains" with the preposition.

Examples:

בְּמַיִם	In waters	vs.	בַּמַיִם	In *the* waters
לְחֹשֶׁךְ	in darkness	vs.	לַחֹשֶׁךְ	in *the* darkness