

Group Study of Rabbinic Hebrew

To those interested in engaging in the study of rabbinic Hebrew with us, we say בְּרוּכִים הַבָּאִים “welcome” [lit., “blessed [are] the ones who come”]!

The transition from biblical Hebrew into rabbinic Hebrew can be a bit jarring. After all, there were a few hundred years between the latest biblical texts (probably around 150BCE) and the composition of the earliest rabbinic texts (around 200CE). In this exposition, I want to say enough to set some expectations for our Mishnah Reading Group and to make the transition a bit more predictable.

This group was set up by Jordan Furutani with the initial purpose of reading through פְּרָקֵי אֲבוֹת “the Chapters of the Fathers,” a small tractate of the Mishnaic order נְזִיקִין “Damages.” The Mishnah serves as the largest collected body of rabbinic Hebrew documents. It is divided into six orders (סְדָרִים ← סֵדֶר), as follows: זְרָעִים “Seeds,” מוֹעֵד “Appointed Time,” נָשִׁים “Women,” נְזִיקִין “Damages,” קְדָשִׁים “Sacred Things,” and טְהוֹרוֹת “Impurities.” We are now at the point of finishing פְּרָקֵי אֲבוֹת in our reading group, and we decided that we will now cover an introductory grammar to the language before going into more sections of the Mishnah and other rabbinic literature.

Those who are joining us now should feel free to ask questions and participate as if you had been here since the beginning. This is a new beginning for the group as we begin reading the textbook’s introduction and getting into its exercises.

The textbook we are using is Miguel Pérez Fernández’s *An Introductory Grammar of Rabbinic Hebrew* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), a translation from the Spanish original *La Lengua de los Sabios* (1992). It bears a pretty hefty price tag, but you can find a PDF version of the text online if you cannot afford it straight away. We can help you locate it if you have any difficulty.

From the introduction, we are told that these are the chief distinctions of rabbinic Hebrew that set it apart from biblical Hebrew:

1. Merger of final *mem* and *nun*, with masculine plurals usually ending in *nun*.
2. Relative particle ׀ִשְׁ instead of אֲשֶׁר.
3. Genitive particle שֶׁ ‘of,’ partially replacing the construct chain of classical biblical Hebrew.
4. Very frequent use of הִיָּה with participle.
5. Complete disappearance of the *vayyiqtol* (‘vav-consecutive’ or ‘past narrative’).
6. Loss of the infinitive absolute and of special forms for the cohortative and jussive.

I would add to this a seventh and eighth distinction, namely:

7. Reduction in use of infinitive construct, which was replaced by relative clauses and gerunds.
8. Plene spelling, including the use of *matres lectionis* in closed, unaccented syllables due to the consonant-only nature of the text.

What these essentially mean is that we should expect to find *nun* where we would normally find *mem* in biblical Hebrew plurals. Thus, לְהֵן is often used for masculine plural in place of לְהֵם, as is מְלֻכִין for מְלֻכִים, etc. It happens all over the place. Similarly, the pausal לְךָ is used for 2ms instead of לְךָ, which carries over into other suffix endings, too. So, עֲבוֹדָתְךָ ‘your work’ in place of עֲבוֹדָתְךָ, for example.

The prefix ׀ִשְׁ (followed by *dāgēs*) is used nearly always as the relative pronoun. This was already present in the Tānāk, especially in later texts or texts from the northern kingdom (it has been argued). Biblical כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ “everything he has” [lit., *all that to him*] becomes כָּל מָה שֵׁיִשׁ לוֹ [lit., *all what that there is to him*]. As part of this idea of possession, an expression like הַכֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁר לַמֶּלֶךְ “the money that (belongs) to the king” would be shorted to הַכֶּסֶף שֶׁלַּמֶּלֶךְ. The prefix ׀ִשְׁ “that (belongs) to” [which we already find in the Bible] was separated off from the following word and became the independent form שֶׁל “of.” The final form (which is used very frequently in rabbinic Hebrew and has lasted down to the modern form of the language) would be שֶׁל הַמֶּלֶךְ. It is also common to double up on referents in such situations, writing בְּסֻפּוֹ שֶׁל הַמֶּלֶךְ, still “the king’s money.”

It is also very common in rabbinic Hebrew to find הִיָּה עוֹשֶׂה (that is, forms of לְהִיָּוֹת – especially in the perfect and the imperative – with participles). In the perfect, it generally means “used to do.” In conditions, the same form means “would do.” Imperatives are sometimes written as periphrastics (“be doing” instead of “do”), especially when the command is to make it a regular practice.

Our plan of attack is simply to assign the reading of a specific unit, do the exercises individually, and then meet up on Zoom to answer questions about the reading and to review the list of exercises together. If you do the reading and exercises on your own to the best of your ability, it will help us all move forward smoothly. Please, come to the session prepared to ask questions about what challenged you and to participate in reading and translating the exercises.

There are 32 units in the book. One unit per week comes out at eight months. Of course, two units per week will reduce that in half, bringing us to four months. Depending on how intensive the group wants to work, we can make these decisions together. Without meeting up, we cannot know how strong the group is in reading and translation ability. We might also feel our way through it, speeding up here and slowing down there, once we have our bearings.

If you have Microsoft Word, I will be putting together translation sheets for the units. About half of the exercises in each unit lack נִקּוּד (vocalization points). My goal will be to add נִקּוּד to these exercises to help you read them more easily, but it is a good exercise to practice reading without the נִקּוּד (the *plene* spelling of נִקּוּד) since most sources of rabbinic Hebrew will be unpointed (לֹא מְנַקֵּד). The translation sheets should be usable on Google Documents and other word processors, but there are macro buttons that make them most useful in Word.

I’m really looking forward to this study. It will be my first time working through this textbook. May we all have הַצְלָחָה and find our way as we go forward!