

## *Hebrew Letters for Numbers*

Hebrew traditionally (before the modern era) didn't have a separate set of numerals. Instead, each letter of the alphabet was assigned a value, starting with 1 – 10 (*alef* to *yod*), then 10 – 100 (*yod* to *qof*), then 100 – 400 (*qof* to *tav*). Letters were then added together to create values. This also became the principle behind standard *gematria*.

א' 1	ל' 30
ב' 2	מ' 40
ג' 3	נ' 50
ד' 4	ס' 60
ה' 5	ע' 70
ו' 6	פ' 80
ז' 7	צ' 90
ח' 8	ק' 100
ט' 9	ר' 200
י' 10	ש' 300
כ' 20	ת' 400

It's standard practice to mark numbers with *geresh* (when one letter is used) and *gershayim* (before the final letter when two or more letters are used). Thus, א' means 1, ב' means 2, and יח" (10 + 8) means 18. Because י"ה (as in אֱלִיָּהּ *Elijah*) and י"ו (as in יוֹאָב *Joab* = יְהוֹאָב) are short for the Tetragrammaton, it was avoided by using ט"ו (9 + 6 = 15) and ט"ז (9 + 7 = 16). Observe the following number combinations.

י"א 10 + 1 = 11	כ"א 20 + 1 = 21
י"ב 10 + 2 = 12	כ"ה 20 + 5 = 25
י"ג 10 + 3 = 13	ל"ב 30 + 2 = 32
י"ד 10 + 4 = 14	מ"ד 40 + 4 = 44
ט"ו 9 + 6 = 15	נ"ג 50 + 3 = 53
ט"ז 9 + 7 = 16	צ"ט 90 + 5 = 95
י"ז 10 + 7 = 17	ק"כ 100 + 20 = 120
י"ח 10 + 8 = 18	קכ"ה 100 + 20 + 5 = 125
י"ט 10 + 9 = 19	שס"ה 300 + 60 + 5 = 365
כ' 20	תר"ג 400 + 200 + 10 + 3 = 613

This is most useful when navigating the text of the Bible (see below) or when reading the *Masorah Magna* (מסורה גדולה) in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) or *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ). Numbers in the *Masorah Magna* are marked with a small dot above them (ב̇ = ב' = 2). For 1, the *Masorah Magna* uses ל, shorthand for the late Aramaic word לית, which is a contraction of לא איתי “there are not (any other occurrences of this form).”

In the following passage, taken from Exodus 20, note the versification that is marked by letters and circled in red.

א וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה  
 לְאָמֹר: {ס} ב \* אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר  
 הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבְּיַת עַבְדִּים לֹא־יְהוָה  
 לָךְ אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרָיִם עַל־פְּנֵי: ג לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ  
 פֶּסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר  
 בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ: ד  
 לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה  
 אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא פֹקֵד עֹון אָבֹת עַל־בְּנֵי  
 עַל־שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל־רַבְעִים לְשָׁנָי: ה וְעָשֵׂה חֶסֶד  
 לְאֻלְפִיִּם לְאֹהֲבֵי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי: {ס} ו לֹא  
 תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוּא כִּי לֹא יִנְקָה

For our purposes, you can ignore any {פ} or {ס} that you find in the BHS/Q or in online texts. This marks breaks in the text that you don't need to deal with at this point. You should be able to tell that this snap contains verses 1–5 and half of verse 6 from the chapter.

Given that you will not be finding numbers in the thousands in the Hebrew Bible (at least, not in the versification system), you don't really need to know how to mark thousands. But, to complete the information, thousands are added by starting back at *alef* and attaching it to the front with a single *gereshb*. So, א'ת"נ is (1000 + 400 + 50 = 1450). The current year on the Hebrew calendar is א'תשפ"א (5000 + 400 + 300 + 80 + 1 = 5781), but it is common practice to leave the thousands off (since we know what millennium we live in!). Thus, the current year is popularly written as תשפ"א (781). To check any date on the Hebrew calendar, you can simply type the date into Google and add “on the Hebrew calendar.” Be aware that the date starts at sundown, not at midnight.

Hopefully, this has given you all the information you might need to read and understand the Hebrew numbering system. It is mostly used in religious contexts, since the Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, 4...) have been adopted for modern Hebrew.