

SECTION L



ALPHABET LORE

SECOND EDITION

[Do not] forget your God, whom your father Abraham chose when the families of the earth were divided in the days of Peleg. The Lord descended with seventy angels, at their head Michael, and he commanded them to teach the seventy languages unto the seventy families of Noah. The angels did according to the behest of God, and the holy Hebrew language remained only in the house of Shem and Eber, and in the house of their descendant Abraham. On this day of teaching languages, Michael came to each nation separately, and told it the message with which God had charged him, saying: 'I know the rebellion and the confusion ye have enacted against God. Now, make choice of him whom you will serve, and whom will you have as your mediator in heaven?' Then spake Nimrod the wicked, 'In my eyes there is none greater than he that taught me the language of Cush.' The other nations p 447 also answered in words like these, each one designated its angel. But Abraham said: 'I choose none other than Him that spake and the world was. In Him I will have faith, and my seed forever and ever.' Thenceforth God put every nation in the care of its angel, but Abraham and his seed He kept for Himself.

Naphtali's Charge To His Children

Ginzberg, Louis, Henrietta Szold, and Paul Radin, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003)

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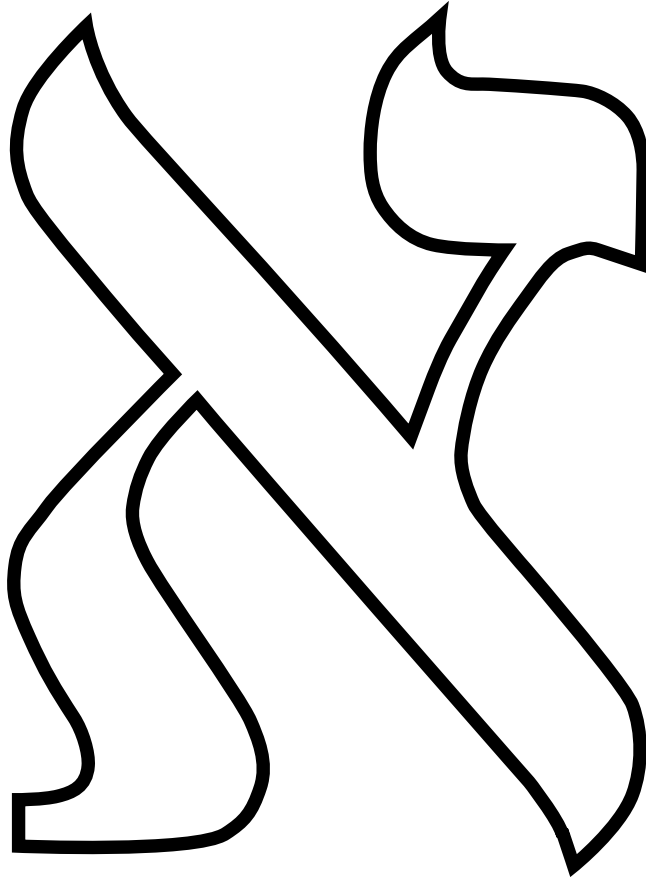
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HEBREW ALPHABET LORE



schneider





Aleph

Drawing steps:



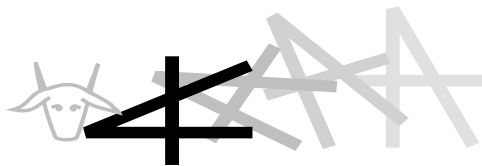
As the first letter of the alphabet, the aleph became the symbol for the number one, and, with the dieresis (¨), the number 1,000. (It is also the symbol for a famous Greek Bible manuscript, the Codex Sinaiticus.)

As the initial letter of the alphabet *and* as the letter having derived from the pictogram for an ox, the *letter* itself sometimes connotes *first, oneness, unity, uniqueness* or *strength*. Thus, it appears in such words as:

Position	Printed Form	Sound
1		Silent. Serves as place-holder for attached vowel.

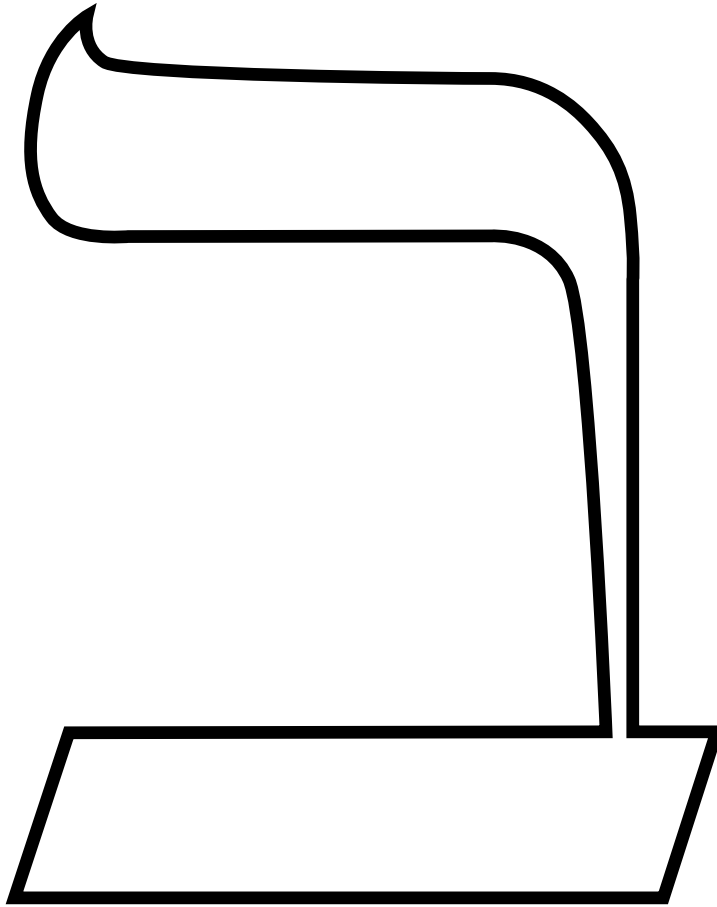
אל	God
אלהים	God
אדם	Adam
אדון	Lord
אחד	One

Lore



Aleph is the old word for ox, and the aleph in paleo-Hebrew was a pictogram of an ox head with horns. Rotate the ancient pictogram to get our Greek α and Roman A both of which descended from it.

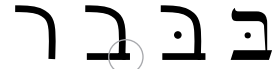
Though rarely heard now in spoken Hebrew, the aleph once indicated a glottal stop. If you've ever heard a child say *kitten* without the T's, you've heard a glottal stop where the T sounds should occur: *ki'en*.



Bet

(Also Beit, Beth)

Drawing steps:



Bottom horizontal stroke protrudes to the right

As the second letter of the Alphabet *Bet* became the symbol for the number two, and, with the dieresis (״), the number 2,000.

As the symbol for “house,” the *Bet* connotes *shelter, interior space*. In fact, ב, standing alone is the preposition *in*. It also appears in such words as:

בֶּבֶה	Pupil of eye
בּוֹר	Cistern
בְּאֵר	Well
בֶּטֶן	Womb

Position



Sound

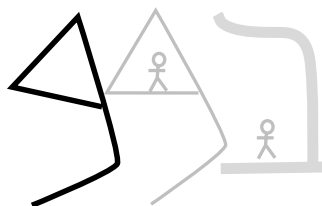


B as in *boy*,
V as in *vine*.



A BeGeD KeFeT letter. SEE p. 7! To indicate the B (stop) sound rather than the V (fricative) sound requires adding a dot (בּ) inside the *Bet*.

Lore



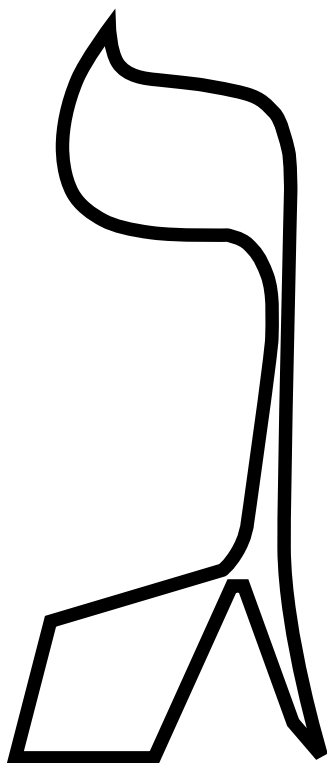
Bet (בֵּית) is the word for *house, tent, place*, as in *Bethlehem = house of bread*. In paleo-Hebrew, *bet* looks like a tent and the living space in front of it.

Interestingly, combining Aleph with Bet gives us “the man (אָדָם) of the house (בֵּית)”:

אָב Father

Adding the preposition *to* (ל) to a doubled *Bet* points to the innermost part:

לֵב Mind, heart



Gímel

(Also Gimmel)

Drawing steps:

ג ג ג

The *Gimel* became the symbol for the number three, and, with the dieresis (¨), the number 3,000.

The letter *Gimel* is a guttural and is associated with the throat, and by extension with pipes, channels, conduits, and agency. Thus,

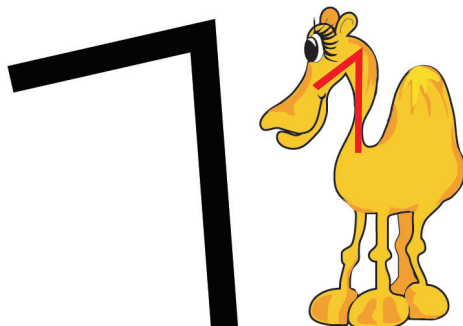
גְּבִים Trenches, ditches

גֵּן Watered garden

גֹּאֵל Agent of redemption

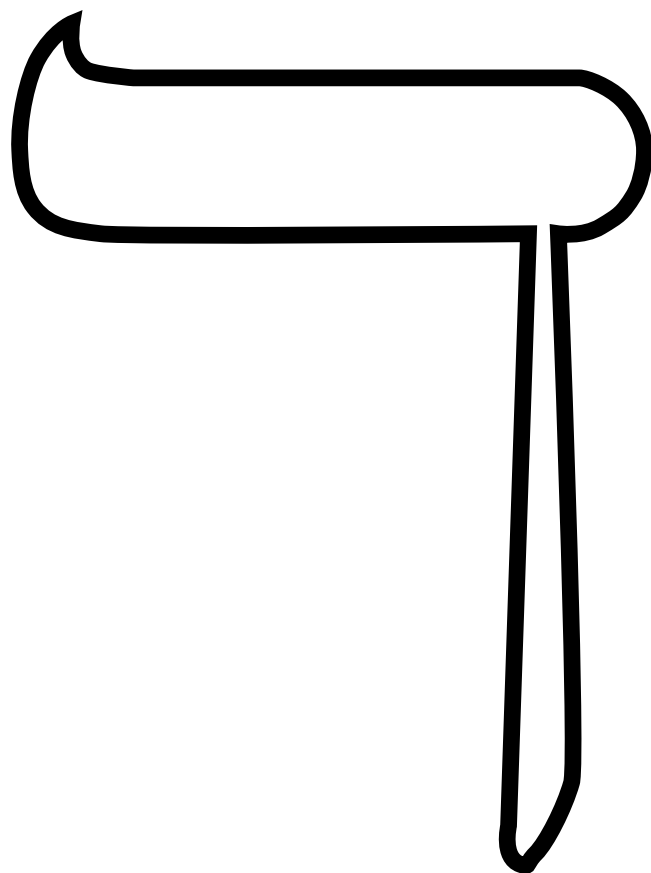
Position	Printed Form	Sound
3	ג	G as in <i>garden</i>

Lore



Gimel means *camel* (גִּמְלָה). In paleo-Hebrew, the letter *gimmel* looks like the neck/throat of a camel. (It also reminds me of the camel's hump!)

The letter *gimel* is a BeGeD KeFeT letter, though it no longer has a fricative pronunciation in spoken Hebrew. See p. 7!



Dalet

Drawing steps:



Top horizontal stroke protrudes to the right to distinguish *Dalet* from *Resh*.

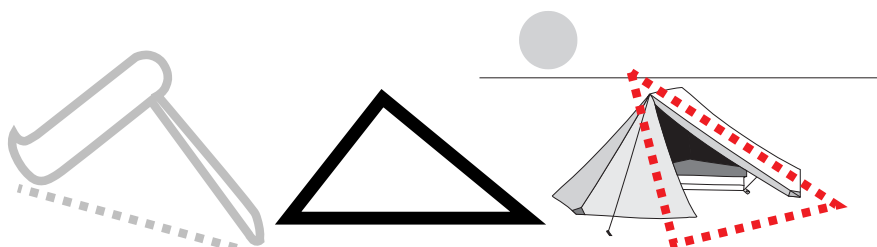
The *Dalet* became the symbol for the number four, and, with the dieresis (¨), the number 4,000.

As a letter signifying a door, *Dalet* appears in words having to do with home, family, and procreation. Thus,

- דָּם Blood
- דוּר Loved one, uncle
- דָּבַק Keep close
- דוּר Dwell
- דָּבַר Speak
- דָּן Judge

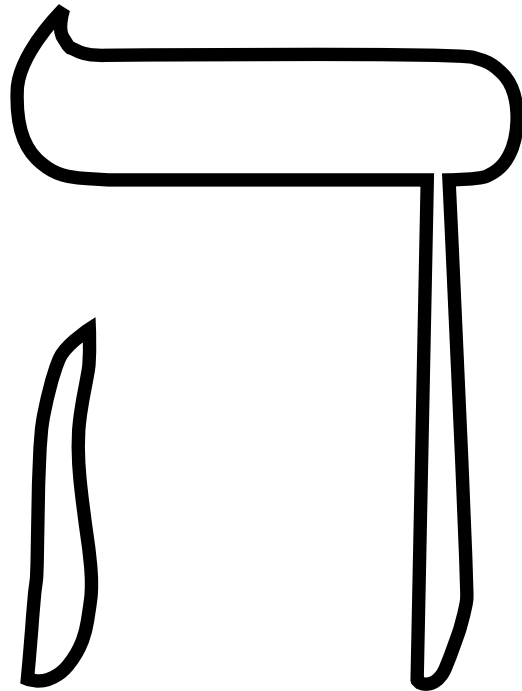
Position	Printed Form	Sound
4		D as in Door

Lore



Dalet means *door* (דָּלֶת). In paleo-Hebrew, *dalet* looks like a tent door. It is a triangle from which evolved the Greek *delta* and our *D*.

The letter *dalet* is a BeGeD KeFeT letter, though it no longer has a fricative pronunciation in spoken Hebrew. See p. 7!



Hey

Drawing steps:



The left leg of the *Hey* does not connect to the horizontal top stroke. This distinguishes the *Hey* from the *Chet*.

In post-biblical times, *hey* came to stand for the numeral 5.

There are competing theories as to the significance of the Paleo-Hebrew pictogram for the letter *Hey*. On the theory that it evolved from the Egyptian hieroglyphic and subsequent Hieratic symbol for *hall, habitation*, it would make sense that *Hey* would appear in words having to do with buildings, like,

הֵיכָל Temple (house for all?).

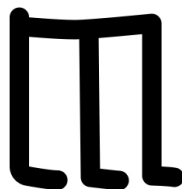
To have any confidence that *hey* still evokes ideas from its ancient pictograph, however, will require further research.

Position	Printed Form	Sound
5	ה	H as in House

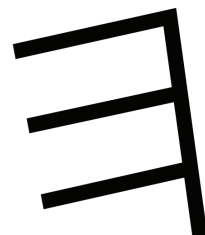
Lore



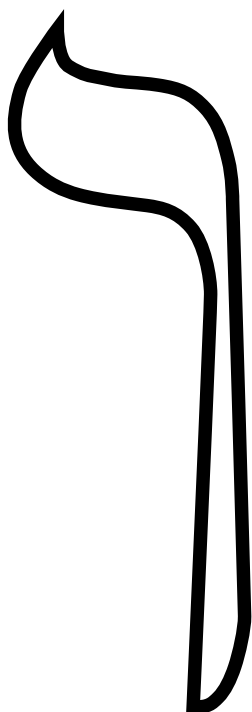
Hieroglyphic H,
sign for *hall, habitation*



Hieratic H,
sign for *hall, habitation*



Paleo-Hebrew Hey,
from which evolved
the Greek *epsilon*
and our letter E.



Vav

(Used to be called
Waw or Wow.)

Drawing steps:



In post-biblical times, *vav* came to stand for the numeral 6.

As the letter that represents a hook, peg or nail, *vav* appears in Hebrew most often as the conjunction *and* (ו). This one-letter word not only joins substantives like “male *and* female” (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, Gen 1.27), but also (redundantly to the American mind) narratives: “*And* (ו) God created man in His own image...” (Gen 1.27).

Position

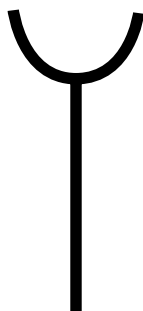


Pronunciation

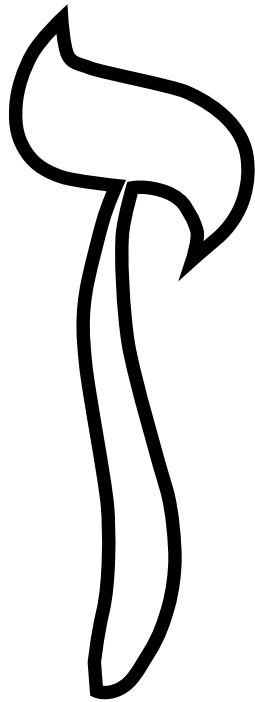


V as in Vine

Lore



The word *vav* (ו) means *hook*, *pin*, *peg* or *nail*. The modern Aramaic letter used in the Hebrew alphabet is just a simplified version of the paleo-Hebrew pictogram of a nail.



Zayin

Drawing steps:



In post-biblical times, *zayin* came to stand for the numeral 7.

The Hebrews made use of *zayin*'s ZZZ sound to form onomatopoeic words for things that buzzed or swished. Therefore, a *high* percentage of Hebrew words beginning with *zayin* have to do with motion or moving things. A few examples:

- זרב Move to and fro
- זרבב Fly (insect)
- זרב Flow, Gush
- זיז Moving things (beasts)
- זוע Tremble, Quake
- זחלת Crawling thing, Serpent
- זלג Glide (as an arrow)
- זלל Shake
- זרע Sow, Scatter seed
- זרע Seed, Offspring

	Printed Form	Pronunciation
7	ז	Z as in Zebra

Lore



MNEMONICS: *Zayin* is the seventh consonant, and looks a bit like a 7. A 7 looks like a Z without its bottom stroke.

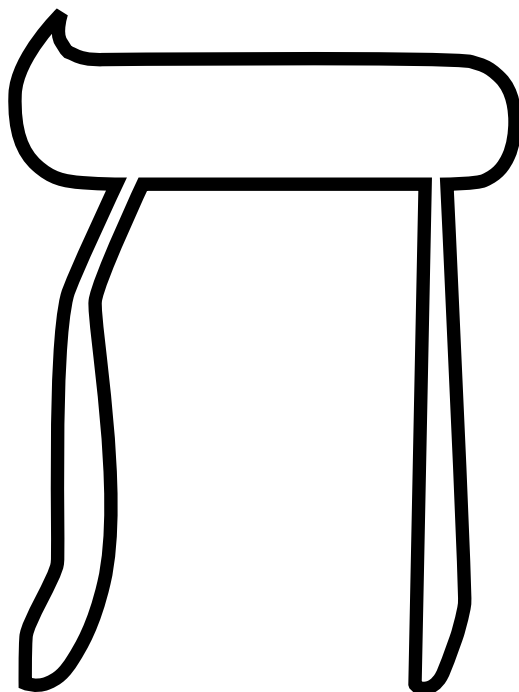
The pictograph for *zayin* is believed to have represented a weapon, perhaps of the kind indicated by the word *azen* (זֶן) which means *spade*, *paddle* or *weapon*. In the paleo-Hebrew form we see the prototype of our letter Z. It is interesting to note that the ancients weren't overly concerned about the orientation of their drawn letters. Even in modern Yemen, Jewish children were adept at reading Hebrew upside down because many would gather in a circle to simultaneously read a single rare Torah scroll.

Het

Drawing steps:



No gap here, to distinguish *Chet* from *Hey*.



In post-biblical times, *chet* came to stand for the numeral 8.

Deriving from a pictogram of a fence, *chet* is readily used in words about dividing, connecting, joining, protecting, and hiding. A few examples:

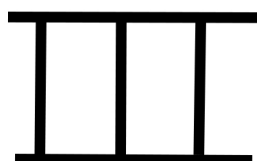
- חָבַר Unite, be joined
- חַג Festival gathering
- חָגַר Hinder, restrain
- חָדַר Surround, enclose
- חָגַע Make circle
- חֹמֶה Wall
- חָטַם Hold in, restrain
- חָצַץ Divide
- חֲצֵר Enclosure, court

Position Printed Form Pronunciation

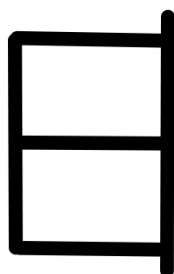
8

Guttural CH
as in Bach

Lore

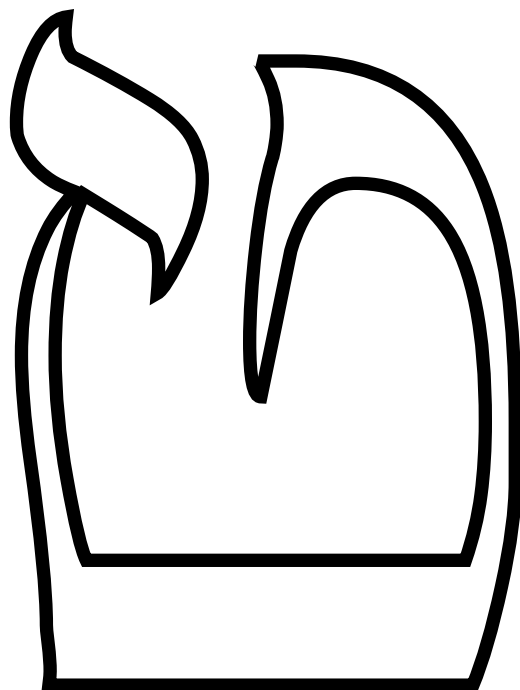


Proto-Sinaitic



Paleo-Hebrew

The paleo-Hebrew *chet* was derived from the paleo-Hebrew *hey* by adding a vertical stroke (see bottom of page 12). We can see in this paleo-Hebrew form of *chet* the beginnings of our letter H. The original pictogram for *chet* apparently represented a fence, more clearly seen in the orientation of the earlier proto-Sinaitic form.



Tet

Drawing steps:



In post-biblical times, *tet* came to stand for the numeral 9.

The paleo-Hebrew *tet* is thought to have been derived from the Egyptian hieroglyphic for *city* or *town*. *Tet* does not appear in the Hebrew word for city, though. It does appear in a number of words that have to do with covering or things that cover (like an encampment covers the ground and becomes a city?). Here are some examples:

Position	Printed Form	Pronunciation
9		T as in Tall

טָבַל Dip (cover in water)

טְבוּל Turban (head cover)

טָבַע Sink down

טוּחַ Over-spread, coat

טִיט Mud, mire, clay

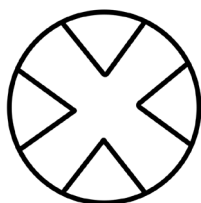
טִיָּה Encampment

טָהַח Be besmeared

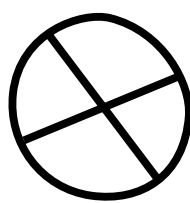
טָל Dew

טָמַן Hide, conceal

Lore

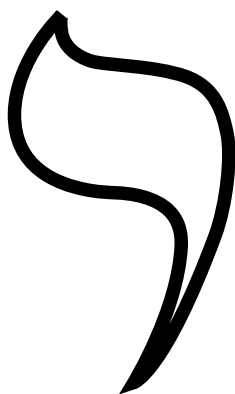


Hieroglyphic
for *city* or *town*



Paleo-Hebrew *tet*

The relationship between *tet* and *tav* is seen in paleo-Hebrew: *Tet* is a *tav* enclosed. (The paleo-Hebrew *tet* reminds me of a ball of potter's clay (טיט) with a *mark*, i.e., a *tav* inscribed on it.) You can also see how the paleo-Hebrew *tet* evolved into the Greek *theta*.



Yod

Drawing steps:



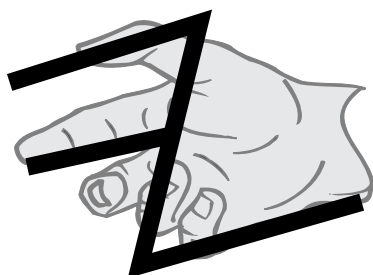
In post-biblical times, *Yod* came to stand for the numeral 10, such that י"א = 11, י"ב = 12, etc.

As connected to the idea of *hand*, יד, it does not surprise us to see *yod* in words relating to manual actions. Here are some examples:

- יָבֵל Carry away, be led
- יָגַב Till (the ground)
- יָגַע Toil
- יָזָה Throw, cast
- יָהַב Give
- יָמַש Touch
- יָסַר Discipline, chasten
- יָצַר Form, fashion
- יָרָה Throw, shoot

Position	Printed Form	Pronunciation
10	י	Y as in Yum!

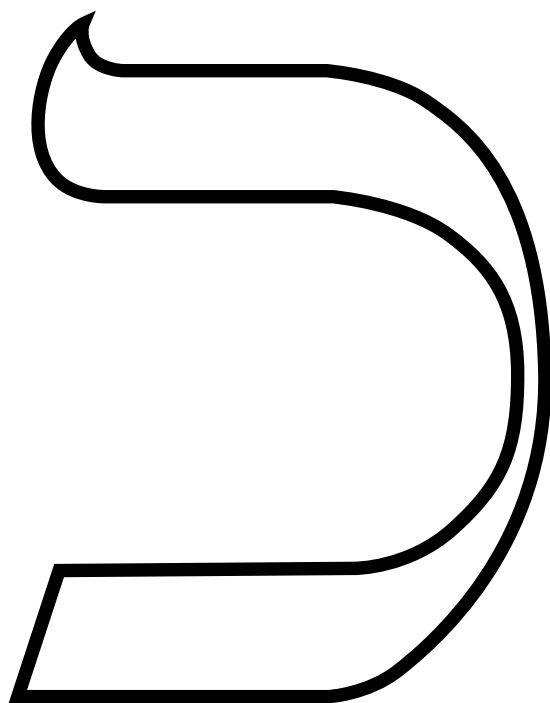
Lore



The paleo-Hebrew *Yod* developed from a pictogram representing a *hand* (יָד). The letter name *yod* evolved into the Greek letter name, *iota*. The letter name *iota* became our noun *jot* signifying a tiny bit or tiny mark.

Kaf

Kaf is the first letter with both a medial and a final form.



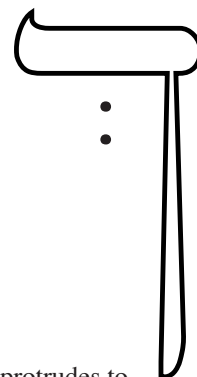
Drawing steps:



Drawing steps:



Top horizontal stroke protrudes to the right, helping to distinguish the final *kaf* from a *resh*.



Position	Printed Form	Pronunciation
11	כ	K as in Kaaren, CH as in Bach

Lore



A BeGeD KeFeT letter. SEE p. 7! To indicate the K (stop) sound rather than the CH (fricative) sound requires adding a dot (כּ) inside the *kaf*.

The paleo-Hebrew *kaf* developed from a pictogram representing the *palm of a hand* (כפּ). The later Aramaic block letter above (used in Hebrew printed texts today) seems to have a closer graphic connection than the paleo-Hebrew pictogram (at left) to the Egyptian hieroglyphic signs for K (a bowl) and for palm:



The letter *kaf* has an elongated final form (that normally carries a raised silent *sheva*) when it appears at the end of a word. The lengthened vertical stroke (and raised *sheva*) distinguishes the final *kaf* from a *dalet*.

In post-biblical times, *Kaf* came to stand for the numeral 20.

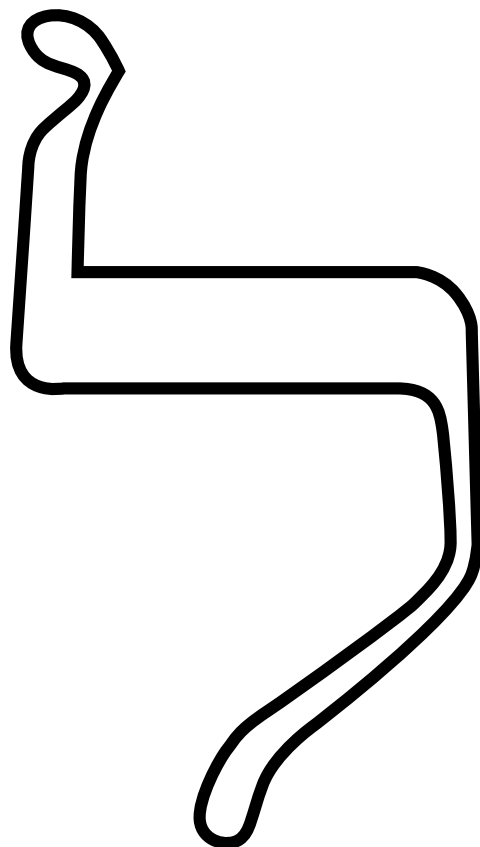
See a faint allusion to the palm of a hand in words like:

כַּר Basket-saddle

כִּיר Pot, basin

כַּפּוֹר Bowl

כָּתַב Write



Lamed

Drawing steps:



In post-biblical times, *Lamed* came to stand for the numeral 30.

The paleo-Hebrew *lamed* is thought to be a pictogram of an *ox-goad* (מִלְמָד), or a shepherd's crook, but may have developed from the Hieratic (simplified Egyptian hieroglyphic) for *lion*. Whether *lamed* carries any particular allusions into words that employ it is not readily apparent.

The letter *lamed* is used for the Hebrew preposition that means *to* or *for*. It is called an inseparable preposition because it is always attached to the beginning of other words. Thus,

מֶלֶךְ King
לְמֶלֶךְ For the king

Position

Printed Form

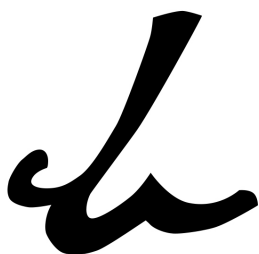
Pronunciation

12



L as in Look

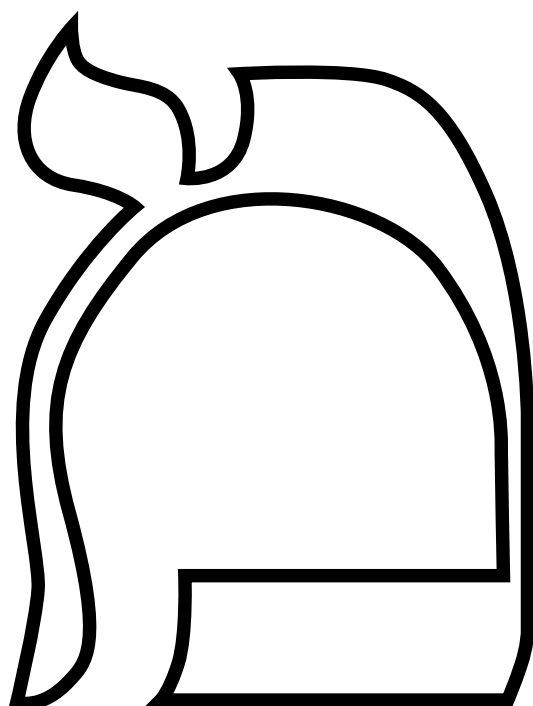
Lore



Hieratic
for *lion*



Paleo-Hebrew *lamed*

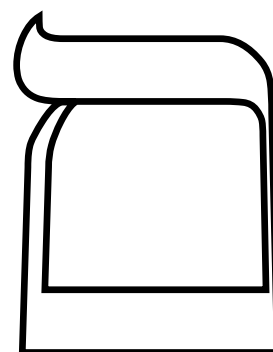


Mem

Drawing steps:

ו ר ח מ מ מ

Mem has a squared-off final form when it appears at the end of a word. Top horizontal stroke protrudes to the left and each corner is square



Drawing steps:

— ר ח מ מ מ

Position

Printed Form

Pronunciation

13



M as in Mother

In post-biblical times, *mem* came to stand for the numeral 40.

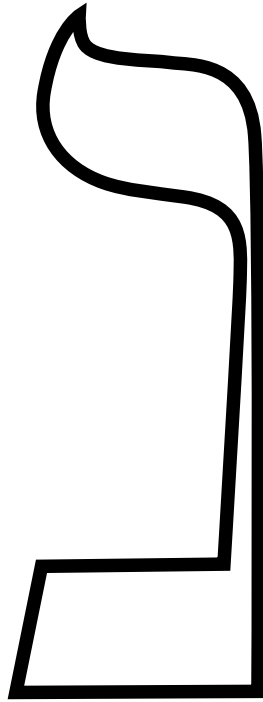
As derived from the pictogram for water, it does not surprise us to find *mem* in words having to do with liquid and flowing. Here are some examples:

Lore



The paleo-Hebrew *Mem* is a pictogram showing waves of water (מים). The wave pattern provides the basis for our English M, and survives in the ripples at the top of the modern *Mem*.

מָאָס	Flow, run
מָדוּ	Cloth garment
מָטַר	Rain (verb)
מַיִם	Waters
מָלַט	Slip away, escape
מָלַץ	Be slippery
מָסָה	Melt, liquefy
מָצַץ	Drain out



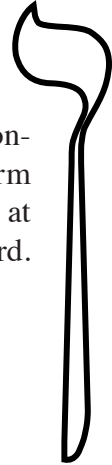
Drawing steps:



This horizontal stroke distinguishes *nun* from *vav*.

Nun

Nun has an elongated final form when it appears at the end of a word.
Drawing steps:



Position	Printed Form	Pronunciation
14		N as in Noon

Lore

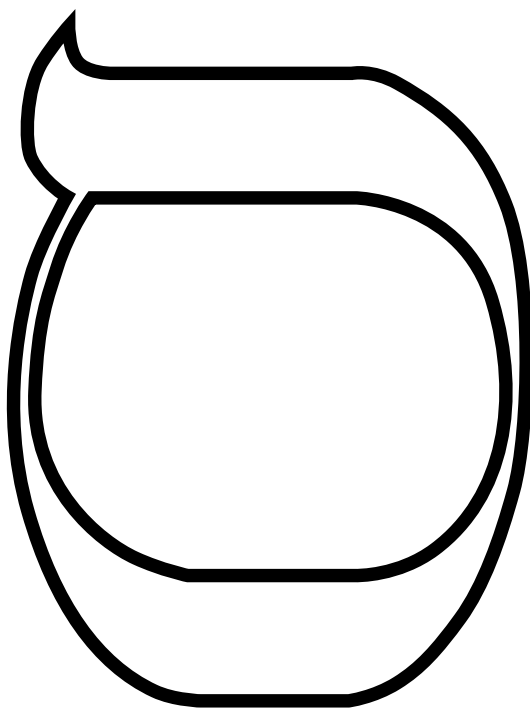


The paleo-Hebrew pictograph for *nun* has been thought to represent a fish, because *nun* means “fish” in Aramaic. Some, however, have interpreted the pictogram as representing a serpent, נחש.

In post-biblical times, *Nun* came to stand for the numeral 50.

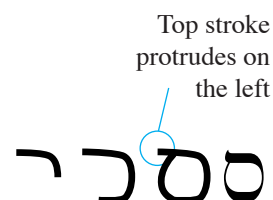
Because the ancient significance of the letter *nun* is uncertain, any attempts to trace the carrying of its meaning into words using *nun* are highly speculative. Therefore, I provide below some important *nun* words that have no particular connection to one another:

נֶאֱמַר	Declaration
נָבִיא	Prophet
נָבֵל	Foolish, fool
נֶגֶב	South-country
נִין	Propagate, increase
נָפַל	Fall, lie down
נָשָׂא	Lift, carry, take
נָתַן	Give, put, set



Samech

Drawing steps:



In post-biblical times, *Samech* came to stand for the numeral 60.

Uncertainty about the meaning of the original hieroglyphics and pictograms for *samech* make it highly speculative to trace any allusions of the letter in the words that employ it. Here are some random *samech* words:

סוס	Horse
סָחַר	Travel about
סָעַד	Support (verb)
סָפַן	Cover (verb)
סָתַר	Hide, conceal

Position

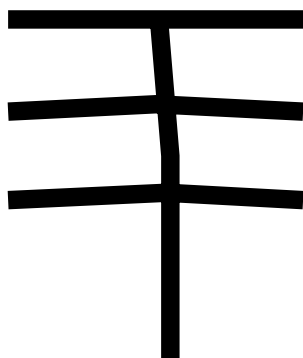
15

Pronunciation



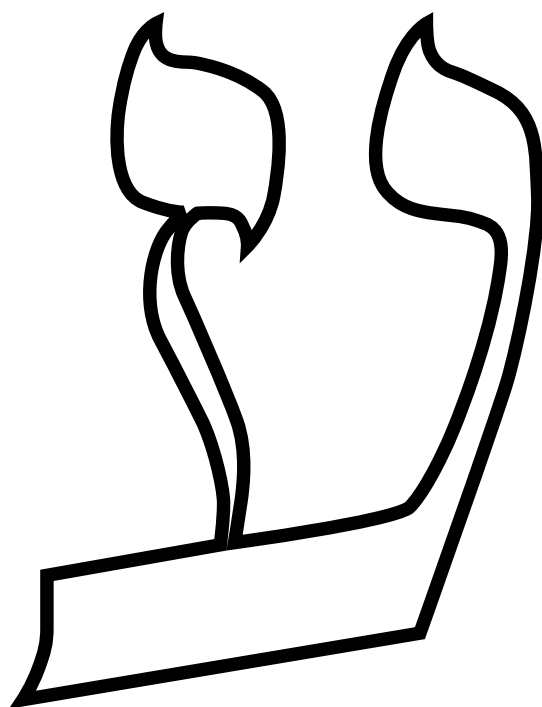
S as in Sun

Lore



The paleo-Hebrew *samech* may represent a *support* of some kind (a spine with ribs, perhaps?).

The verb סָעַד means *to support, sustain*.



Ayin

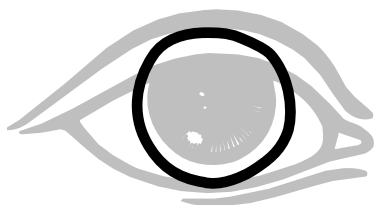
Drawing steps:



In post-biblical times, *ayin* came to stand for the numeral 70. Many *ayin* words have to do with flowing water, something passing *through* (as light or water), or with circularity or roundness:

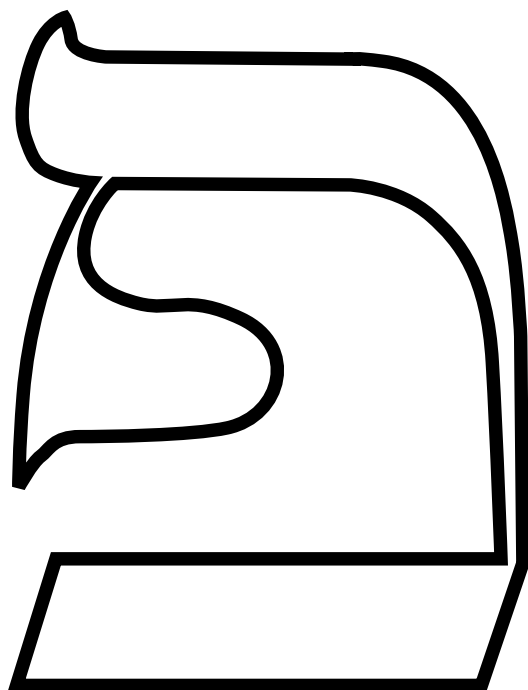
Position	Printed Form	Pronunciation
16		A glottal stop; for westerners a silent letter

Lore



The paleo-Hebrew *Ayin* represents an eye (עין). The word עין not only means *eye*, but also an “eye” in the ground from which water flows, i.e. a *spring*.

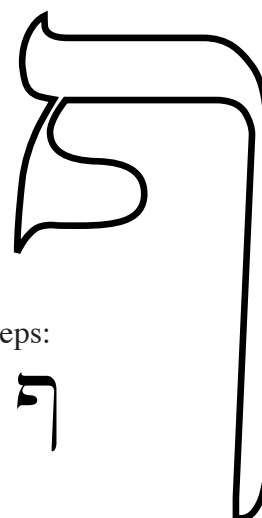
עָבַר	Pass over, through
עֵדֶן	Eden
עָב	Rain cloud
עִגָּה	Disc
עוּד	Return, do again
עָוַר	Make blind
עָזַק	Dig about, surround
עָטַר	Surround
עֵין	Look at
עִיר	City, town
עָבַד	Bind around
עָפַל	Swell
עָפַל	Mound, hill



Pe

Also *peh* or *pey*.

Drawing steps:



Drawing steps:



Position

17

Pronunciation



P as in Pop,
F as in Food

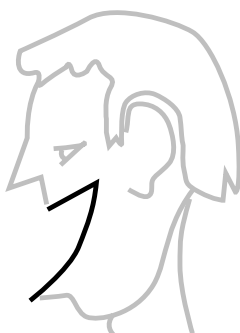
Pe has an elongated final form when it appears at the end of a word.

In post-biblical times, *pe* came to stand for the numeral 80.

Many *pe* words make faint allusions to the mouth, its appearance or its workings:

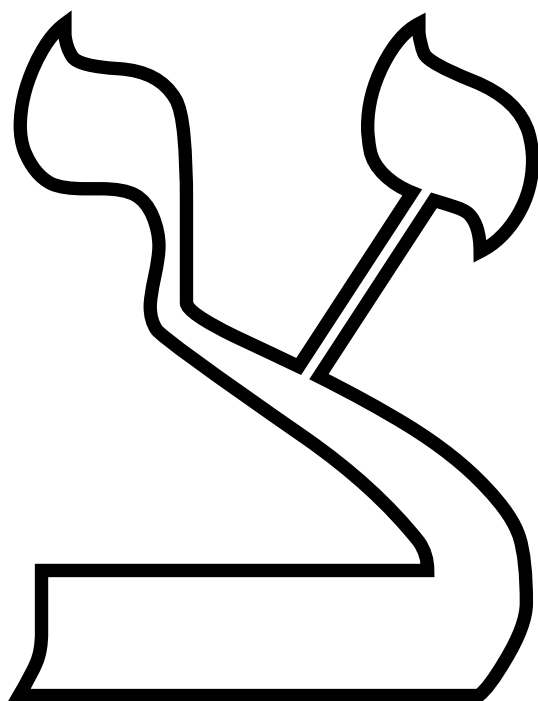
Lore

The letter *pe* is a BeGeD KeFeT letter. SEE p. 7!



The paleo-Hebrew pictogram for *pe* represents a mouth (פה). The modern *Pey* has a tongue in it!

- פּוּחַ Breathe, blow
- פִּתּוּחַ Pit
- פָּלַג Split, divide
- פָּעַר Open wide
- פָּצַח Part, open (verbs)
- פָּקַח Open eyes (verb)
- פָּרַר Divide, separate
- פָּתַח Open (verb)



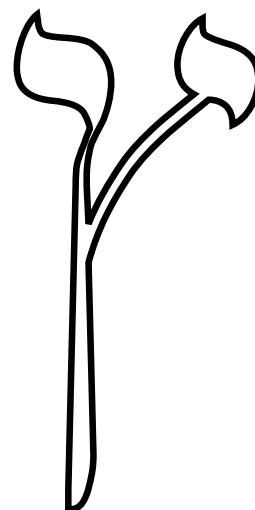
Tsade

(Also, Tsadi, Tsadik)

Drawing steps:



Drawing steps:



Position

Printed Form

Pronunciation

18



TS as in Tsar.

The letter *tsade* has an elongated final form when it appears at the end of a word.

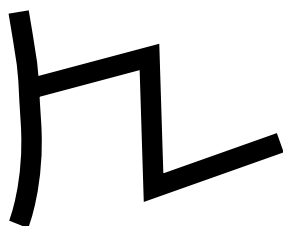
In post-biblical times, *tsade* came to stand for the numeral 90. Many *tsade* words have to do with hunting, fishing and warfare.

Lore

The Phoenician and paleo-Hebrew *tsades* are thought to represent a fishhook.

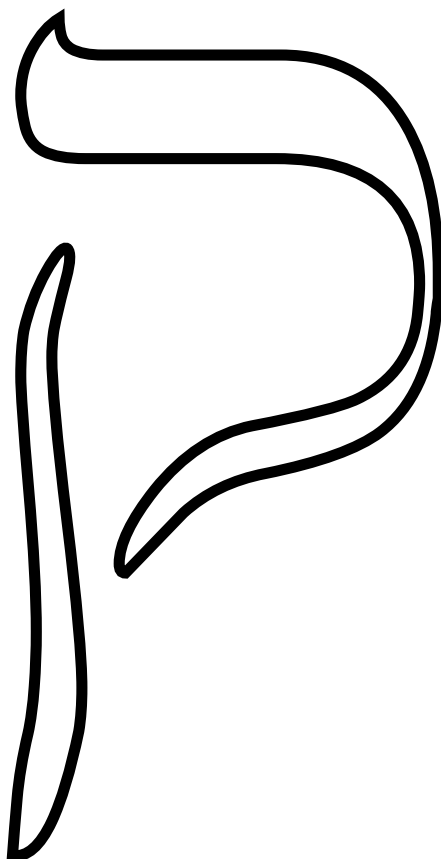


Phoenician



Paleo-Hebrew

צָבָא	Wage war
צְבָאוֹת	Army, host
צָדָה	Lie in wait
צָדָה	Lay waste
צוּד	Hunt (verb)
צוּר	Bind, besiege
צָלַח	Rush
צֶלְצֵל	Spear, harpoon



Qof

(Also Koph, Kof)

Drawing steps:



In post-biblical times, *qof* came to stand for the numeral 100.

There are a number of *qoph* words that remind me of the antics of an an *ape* (קוף), but to say that such words carry over allusions from the ancient pictogram would be speculative. Here is a sample of *qoph* words.

Position

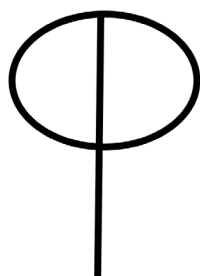
Printed Form

19



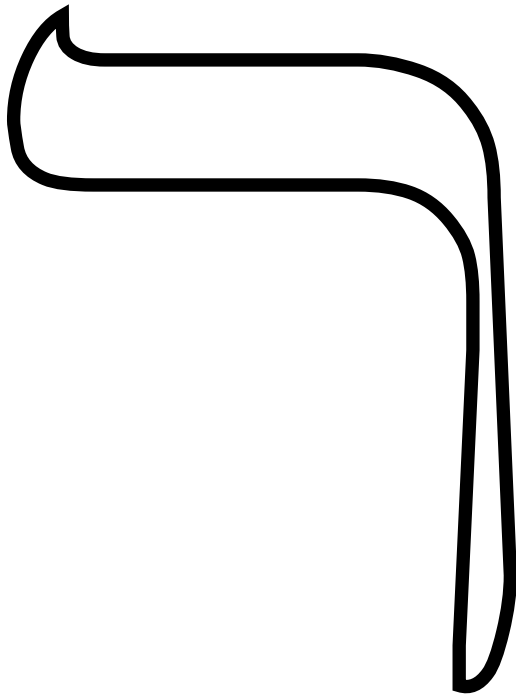
K as in Kook

Lore



The paleo-Hebrew pictogram for *qof* is thought to represent an *ape* (קוף).

קוש	Lay bait, lure
קטל	Slay
קיר	Wall (noun)
קלה	Roast
קל	Light, swift (adjs.)
קלס	Mock, scoff
קנה	Get acquire
קנין	Snare, net (nouns)
קצה	Cut off
קצר	Reap, harvest
קרא	Call, proclaim
קרן	Horn
קרן	Send out rays, shine
קרס	Stoop, crouch



Resh

Drawing steps:



In post-biblical times, *resh* came to stand for the numeral 200.

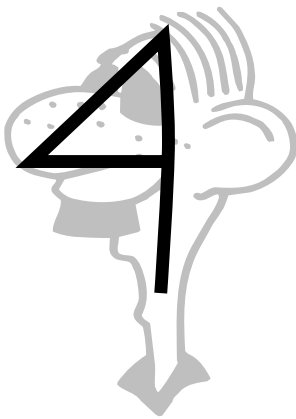
As employing the letter that alludes to a head, many *resh* words speak of functions associated with the human head, or of preeminence:

רָאָה	See
רֹאשׁ	Head, top, chief
רֵאשִׁי	Beginning-time
רֹאשׁ	Top
רִאשׁוֹן	Former, first
רֵאשִׁית	Beginning
רָדָה	Rule, dominate
רָקַב	Pride
רָוַה	Drink one's fill
רוּחַ	Breath, wind, spirit
רוּם	Be high, exalted
רוּן	Overcome
רָחַף	Hover, brood
רָכַב	Mount and ride
רָמַם	Be exalted
רָעָה	Shepherd (verb)
רָע	Bad, evil (adj.)
רָעַע	Be bad, evil (verbs)
רָפָא	Heal

Position Printed Form Pronunciation

20	ר	R as in Rug
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Lore



The paleo-Hebrew pictogram for *resh* represented a head (ראש).



Sin/Shin

Drawing steps:



Position

Printed Forms

21



S as in Sin,
SH as in SHade

Lore



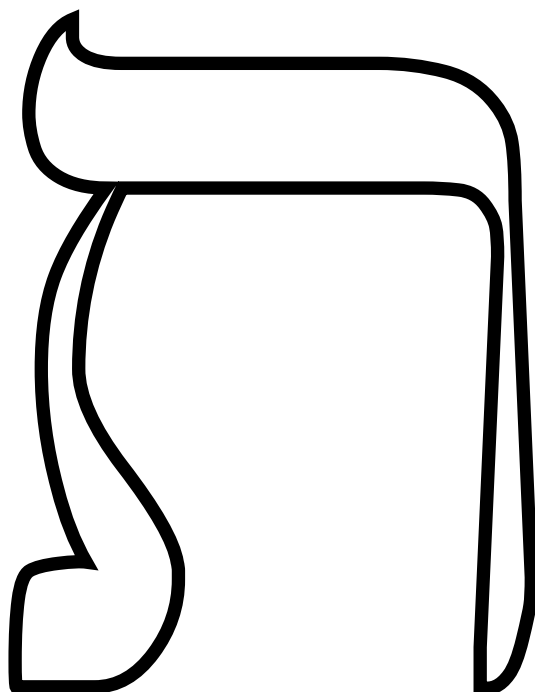
The paleo-Hebrew pictogram for *shin* clearly represents sharp teeth. The Hebrew word for tooth is שֵׁן. It comes from the word שָׁנָה, to *sharpen*.

Rotate the ancient pictogram clockwise 90° to get the Greek uppercase *sigma*, and the precursor of our Latin *S*.

The letter *shin* eventually became used for the number 300.

As employing the letter that once alluded to teeth or sharpness, some *sin/shin* words still allude to oral or other functions of the mouth, or to the [destructive] power of the teeth.

שָׁפָה	Lip, speech, edge
שֶׁר	Prince
שָׁרָה	Princess
מִשְׁרָה	Rule, dominion
שָׁרַט	Incise, scratch, write
שָׂרַף	Burn (verb), seraph
שָׂאֵל	Ask, inquire
שָׂדֵי	Almighty
שׁוּב	Return, repent
שָׁנָה	Cry out
שִׁיר	Sing
שְׁלוֹם	Completeness, peace



Tav

(Also *Tov, Tau, Taw*)

Drawing steps:

The horizontal stroke protrudes to the left



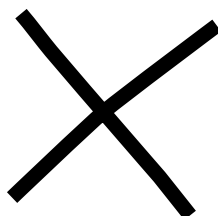
Don't forget this little foot to distinguish *tav* from *chet*.

In post-biblical times, *tav* came to stand for the numeral 400.

As employing the letter that once signified a mark, some *tav* words still allude to marking (whether a person or a landscape), and to having boundaries or the lack of boundaries:

Position	Printed Form	Pronunciation
22		T as in Torah

Lore



The word *tav* (תָּו) means *mark* or *signature* as in Job 31.35. Scholars were intrigued to find these cross shapes in the margins of the Dead Sea Scrolls, marking passages that had to do with the Messiah. Apparently scribes used the *tav* as a symbol of *salvation*, since in Ezekiel 9.3-6, God commands the slaughter of all in Jerusalem who do not have God's mark (תָּו).

תָּוָה	Mark, point out
תָּוֶה	Formlessness
תָּוָה	Boundary
תָּוָה	Wound (verb)
תָּל	Mound (noun)
תָּם	Complete, perfect
תָּעָה	Wander, err

The letter *tav* is a BeGeD KeFeT letter, though it no longer has a fricative pronunciation in spoken Hebrew. See p. 7!