

## The Legs of the 5 Legged Table "Discussed into Hebrew"

*(One way to understand the different legs of the 5-legged table, and especially their deep interconnectedness, is to explore the Hebrew words connected to them, especially in the context of Israel. I've prepared the following material, which is still a little raw: I'd be happy to work on it more if you think it is relevant for this or other projects.*

*Three of the five "work well" – i.e., I already have, or it is easy to compose essays with a good amount of content. They are: 1) עברית – Hebrew; 2) ישראל – Israel; and 3) זכרון – memory, here in the context of zikaron in Israel. Just this essay alone - Israel From A to Z: Atzma'ut (Independence) and Zikaron (Memory) – could be relevant for the Masorti project. There I mention the idea of memory vs history, quoting Yerushalmi, but obviously it can be developed more if we want to focus on its message as one of the legs.*

*The fourth הר סיני – משפחה – har Sinai – Mt Sinai, I've expanded below in three other terms which I feel captures the essence: תיקון / מצווה / ברית – covenant, commandment, repair.*

*The fifth משפחה – family – doesn't lend itself as well to a linguistic analysis or discussion of the name – but if desired, I can work on it and expand it with a comparison to דת – religion, and/or other terms such as: תרבות, מסורת, etc)*

### 1. Hebrew – עברית

#### Hebrew in Hebrew

When it comes to proper nouns, we English speakers don't usually think of them as having meanings at all – they're just names. Likewise, the majority of language names are simply taken from the place in which they are spoken: French, English, German, Spanish, etc.

"Hebrew" though, is not derived from a place name: there's no 'Hebrewland' or 'Hebrewstan.' Moreover, like all Hebrew words, עברית 'ivrit has a root of its own – ע-ב-ר – 'ayin-v-r - that sheds light on its history and meaning.

#### First Hebrew(s)

Though the vast majority of the Bible is written in Hebrew (some is in Aramaic), the word "Hebrew" is never mentioned there as the name of the language. The few times that the Hebrew language is referred to (2nd Kings 18, Isaiah 36) it is called יהודית "Yehudit," that is, "Judaean." (In modern Hebrew, *yehudit* would mean "Jewish.")

The English word "Hebrew" actually refers to two different things: the language and the people. The ethnic group, עברי 'ivri, does appear in the Bible (e.g., Genesis 14, Exodus 1 and 2, Jonah).

There are several theories as to the origin of the name. One is based on the genealogies of Genesis. Noah's son was Shem, father of Semitic peoples and languages. In chapter 10, he is described as "the father of all the children of Eber." That name is spelled עבר 'ayin-v-r ("b" and "v" being the same consonantal letter) – which is the same root as עברי 'ivri.



While the similarity is suggestive, nothing specifically links Eber with Hebrew or Hebrews.

Another tradition has it that Abraham is called "the Hebrew" (העברי *ha-ivri*) because he came from "across the river" (the Euphrates). "Across" is מעבר *me'ever*, again using the same root. This idea is continued metaphorically in that Abraham and his family stood against the rest of the ancient world in terms of monotheism and ethics.

These senses connect to the general meaning of the root עבר *'ayin-v-r* "pass, cross, traverse, undergo."

Those meanings also crop up in the third theory, that the Hebrews are connected to a semi-nomadic people named "*habiru*" mentioned in the Tel el-Amarna letters from the 13th centuries BCE.

These otherwise unknown Semitic "*habiru*" also may have come from across some great divide or other, hence the origin of that name. But while assuming a connection with this group was popular for a while, it has more recently been brought into doubt.

### A passing grade

All those historical speculations are about the past, עבר *'avar* – what has "passed." That is only one of the many uses of this root, in the sense of "pass" or "get through." For instance, one who takes a test and gets a good grade – עובר *'over*, "passes."

In the past, new immigrants to Israel were initially settled in transit camps, מעברות *ma'abarot*. But don't confuse that with a more futuristic image of the space shuttle – מעבורת *ma'aboret* (which also means "ferry").

And if one passes or crosses over other sorts of boundaries, such as legal or moral ones, that might constitute an עבירה *'aveirah*, "a transgression," or sin. Repeated offenses of this sort are liable to brand one an עבריין *'avaryan*, a "criminal."

On the other hand, to be עובר מסך *'over masach* (literally "passes the screen"), is to be telegenic, "go over well" in the media.

If the word 'over looks like English "over"- well, there's no connection, but there is a story. In any army, there's a special language that is used on walkie-talkies. In English, when you want to confirm you have heard what has just been said and end your transmission, you'll say: "Roger – over!" This has been Hebraicized in the IDF as עובר - רות "Rut – 'avor!," "rut" (the Hebrew name Ruth, pronounced "root") simply being the "r" word in Hebrew, like "roger" in English, and *'avor* – because it sounds like "over."

That may be מעל ומעבר *me'al ume'ever*, "above and beyond" what you expected to read in a short essay on Hebrew.

## 2. זכרון – Memory (also with connection to the State of Israel)



## Israel From A to Z:

### Atzma'ut (Independence) and Zikaron (Memory)

While fall in Israel has its intense period of "the chagim" (Jewish religious holidays), springtime in Israel has a parallel, civic season. Between the end of Pesach and Shavuot – a mere month and a half – there are no less than five days of religio-national commemoration and observance: Holocaust Remembrance Day, Memorial and Independence Day, Lag Ba'omer, Jerusalem Day.

Merely a week after the commemoration of victims of the Holocaust, and acts of bravery and resistance, there arrives another somber commemoration. Called simply **יום הזיכרון** *Yom Hazikaron*, "Memorial Day," its full name is "Day of Remembrance for Israeli Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Terrorism," memorializing all those going back to 1860 who have died for Israel's struggle for existence.

This solemn day is immediately followed by the raucous celebrations of Independence Day itself, **יום העצמאות** *Yom Ha'atzmaut*. While the instant transition from mourning to merriment can seem jarring, the connections between independence (**עצמאות** *'atzmaut*), and memory (**זיכרון** *zikaron*), are key to understanding Israeliness, as it were, from A to Z, or at least from **ע** *'ayin* to **ז** *zayin*.

#### Indie holiday

The root of **עצמאות** *'atzmaut*, "independence," is **ע-צ-מ** *'ayin-tz-m*. The simplest noun form of this root is **עצם** *'etzem*, which means both "bone" and "object." Very different words – but their meanings come together in the idea of independence.

The hardness of bone leads us to **עוצמה** *'otzmah* - "strength" or "power". This root also gives us terms like **העצמה** *ha'atzmah*, "empowerment," and **מעצמה** *ma'atzamah*, "superpower."

The more general meaning of **עצם** *'etzem* is "object". In Hebrew grammar, a noun is **שם עצם**, *shem 'etzem*, "the name of an object." But for a certain type of mysterious object that is unidentifiable, we get: **עב"מ** *'abam*, an acronym which stands for **בלתי-מזוהה** *'eztem bilti-mezuheh*, "an object, non-identified," in short, a UFO.

More specifically, an object is a separate entity, a "self." A famous example of this use is Hillel's classic dictum: **מה אני – מי לי? וכשאני לעצמי – מה אני?** *Im ein ani li, mi li?, Uchsheani le'atzmi, mah ani?* "If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself, what am I?" Note the formulation of the second question – "what am i?" – dedication to self can lead to objectification.

"Self" is an important word in contemporary life, whether in **שרות עצמי**, *sherut atzmi*, "self-service" (as at a gas station), or **בטחון עצמי**, *bitachon atzmi*, "self-confidence," or **הגנה עצמית**, *haganah atzmit*, "self defense." And while Hebrew has no official word for the ubiquitous "selfie" – one cute suggestion is **תצמי**, *tatzmi*, a conflation of **תצלום**, *tatzlum*, "photo" + **עצמי**, *atzmi*, "self."



The idea of "independence" seems much older, but it wasn't until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Hebrew got a word for it. It was none other than the son of the great Eliezer Ben Yehudah, journalist Itamar Ben Avi (בן אבי – son of יהודה בן אליעזר – was the family name he took for himself) who gave us the felicitous coinage עצמאות *atzmout* which conveys well both the selfhood and empowerment of sovereign liberty.

### Roots of memory and death

Preceding the empowerment of independence is the power of memory. The root of the Hebrew word for "memory" is ז-כ-ר *z-ch-r* (where the softer "ch" sound becomes a hard "k" at the beginning of a syllable).

Words based on this root fall into two groups: those related to death, and everything else.

For instance, a memorial service held at graveside is an אזכרה *azkarah*. The name of the prayers said several times a year in memory of the departed is יזכור *yizkor* – which means "He will remember," referring to divine consideration.

Referring to a person who is deceased, one can add the acronym ז"ל *"zal"*, זכרונו/ה לברכה *zichrono/a livrachah*, "may his/her memory be for a blessing". And the rabbinic sages of Talmudic times are collectively known as חז"ל *Chazal*, short for חכמים זכרונם לברכה *chachamim* ("wise ones"), *zichronam* (memories, pl., their) *livrachah* (for a blessing) – sages of blessed memory.

The general noun זיכרון *zikaron* unites the different nuances of the English terms "memorial," "remembrance," and also "memory" - what one remembers, and how. I live in a town in Israel named in memory of James Rothschild by his son the "generous benefactor," Baron Edmond de Rothschild, and so is called יעקב זכרון, Zichorn Ya'akov, using the father's Hebrew name.

If you had a פנומינלי זיכרון *zikaron fenominali*, Hebrew for "phenomenal memory," you'd probably have a vast store of זכרונות *zichronot*, "memories." You may still buy a מזכרת *mazkeret* or two ("souvenir") when traveling, but in general you wouldn't need any תזכורת *tizkoret*, "reminder" or anyone להזכיר *lehazkir*, "to remind" you of anything.

"Memory" is the very subjective and collectively transmitted narrative of identity, according to historian Yosef Yerushalmi in his 1982 classic, *Zachor* (imperative: "Remember!"). It is even more important than history in Jewish culture, Yerushalmi avers.

We remember, many things over the holidays this season. Some are remembered, some passively forgotten, and some actively censored or censured. What we choose to include or exclude shapes our "selves" and our culture.

Thus arose the organization זוכרות *Zochrot* ("those who remember", using the feminine form of the verb). It memorializes and publicizes Palestinian towns and villages no longer on Israeli maps, that have been forgotten or removed from the official Israeli consciousness.

And thus Independence Day follows Memorial Day, which is a week after Holocaust Remembrance Day: sacrifice and loss, memory and strength come together in the space of a single week, shaping our uniquely Israeli collective identity.



### 3. ישראל - Israel

## *Becoming Israel*

If you've never read the Bible – the stories of the fathers and mothers in Genesis to be specific – you could be forgiven for not realizing that the name "Israel" did not start out as the name of a country. **ישראל**, *Yisrael*, Israel, was the name of the third patriarch, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham. He was the patriarch formerly known as Jacob. To understand this name we have to understand its bearer's original name, **יעקב**, *Ya'akov*, Jacob, and the transformation he underwent. A close look at the two Hebrew roots of these names, with some unexpected examples from throughout the Bible, provides a fascinating look at the age-old question of "what's in a name?" As opposed to Juliet Capulet and her Montague rose in Shakespeare's literary imagination, Biblical names capture an essence and a destiny that echo throughout the ages.

Ya'akov/Jacob name means something like "heel-holder", after his grabbing onto his older brother's heel (**עקב**, *'aKeV*) at birth (Gen. 25:26). The root is **ב-ע-ק-ב**, *'ayin-k-v*. Later Esau riffs on this name in his lament after having Isaac's blessing stolen from him: "Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me (or more literally – "trip me up" - **יעקב ויעקבני** - *ya'aKoV vava'aKVen*) these two times?" (Gen. 27:36). The two times are of course the earlier sale of the birthright for a mess of pottage, and the theft here of the blessing, which creates a nice word play, for birthright is **בכורה**, *bechorah*, while blessing is **ברכה**, *berachah*.

Later, in the famous scene of Jacob wrestling with an unknown figure at the ford of the Jabbok River (Gen. 32: 23-33), Jacob holds his opponent fast until he receives a blessing, which comes in the form of a new name, **ישראל**, *Yisrael*, Israel, together with the explanation: "for you have *striven* (**שרית** *SaRita*) with beings divine and human [or: "God and men"], and have prevailed." The root **ש-ר-ה**, *s-r-h*, here "strive," (in the form **שרית** *sarita*, "you have striven") also has the sense of "rule," as in the name **שרה** *SaRah* ("princess," see Gen. 17:15), and the noun **שר**, *SaR*, "ruler" or "prince" (as in **שר שלום**, *sar shalom*, "the prince of peace, Isaiah 9:5). The medieval commentator Rashi explains that this means that Jacob/Israel shall no longer gain his blessings **בעקבה** *b'oKVah uveremiyah*, "through deceit and trickery" (the "Jacob" root), but **בשררה** *beSeRaraH uevigilui panim*, through mastery (or lordliness, **שררה** *serara* being the noun form here related to that root), and openness.

This connects with a completely different possible interpretation of the name Israel, hinted at in various sources. The first three letters of the name *Yisrael* are **י-ש-ר**, *y-sh-r*, which is a root of its own, meaning "straight, honest." Since the root of Jacob's name, **ב-ע-ק-ב**, *'ayin-k-b/v*, is linked to deceit, it's not a far stretch to see his new "corrective" name as connected to "straightness," or "honesty."

The explicit link between these two roots is made in several places. One is in Micah 3:9, where Israel is addressed as **בית ישראל**, *beit YiSrael*, "the house of Israel," who pervert **הישרה**, *haYeShaRah*, "equity." Another is the famous phrase in Isaiah 40:4: **והיה העקב למישור**, *vehaya*





*ha'aKoV lemIShoR*, 'the crooked shall be made straight' (lit. "let the rugged ground be made level."). Likewise there is the additional name *ישורון*, *YeShuRun*, *Jeshurun* (cf. Deut. 32:15, 33:5, 26), a sort of synonym for Israel, that even more clearly signifies this root sense of *י-ש-ר y-sh-r*, "straight." This could (also) mean *yashar-el*, "straight in God's eyes" (see Isaiah 40:4).

So Jacob the trickster underdog becomes Israel, the striver who prevails; from crooked 'supplanter' to the 'true one' of God. And we go from being *בני יעקב*, *bnei Ya'akov*, the children of Jacob, a clan, to *בני ישראל*, *bnei Yisrael*, the children of Israel, a nation in the making.

#### 4. Mt. Sinai – מצווה, תיקון, ברית

### *The Meaning of Sinai:*

## *Brit / Mitzvah / Tikkun – Covenant / Commandment / Repair*

#### ברית – *Brit* – Covenant

People who think that the word *ברית*, *brit* (or in common Ashkenazi parlance, *bris*) means "circumcision" can be forgiven. It's an honest mistake. When you attend the ceremony known as a "brit" ("bris"), what you see, if you're standing close enough, is indeed a circumcision. The full name of the ceremony is *ברית מילה*, *brit milah*, which literally means "the covenant of the circumcision." The *ברית*, *brit*, part, then, means "covenant." The name of the organization B'nai Brith means "the children of the covenant."

A covenant is a pact or a treaty, entered into willingly by two bodies, creating a relationship based on trust and loyalty, with attending rights and responsibilities. The act of circumcision is a Biblically mandated sign or symbol of the covenant between Abram and Sarai with God. The first result of that covenantal act was the change of their names to Abraham and Sarah, signifying a change in destiny. See Genesis 17:1-14 for details; the word *ברית*, *brit*, covenant, appears there 10 times. It should be noted though that this is *not* the first Biblical covenant. That honor is reserved for the covenant with Noah and all the survivors of the Ark (Gen. 9:9-17). Indeed it is framed as an everlasting pact between God and humanity, and strikingly, between God and every living thing, the entire natural world, and it too has a sign (this one a lot less painful): the rainbow.

The idea of *ברית*, *brit*, is central to Jewish existence. The fact that Biblical religion is a *covenantal* religion, a reciprocal relationship, is fundamental to understanding the nature of Judaism, the Jewish people and our struggle with our own sources and identity over the millennia. In his book by the same name, Rabbi Arthur Waskow famously termed this ongoing grappling "Godwrestling" (Schocken, 1987). The covenant is what binds us one to the other, and all of us together to a common fate, destiny or mission.

The Bible itself is the story of that covenantal relationship, played out over time, and is a testament to it. Indeed, the way to translate the Christian term New Testament is with this





word: הברית החדשה, *habrit hachdashah*, using a term from Jeremiah 31:31, referring to a new covenant that will replace the old. Jews obviously don't endorse that idea, known as "supersessionism," and there are a number of possible Jewish ways to refer to the fact that there is another Bible out there in addition to ours: Jewish and Christian Bible, or Hebrew and Greek Scripture are the two leading candidates.

Finally there's another important modern use of the word, and idea, of ברית, *brit*. Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (that is, before the revival of spoken Hebrew, but as part of the literary revival of Hebrew journalism) the United States has been referred to in Hebrew as ארצות הברית, *artzot ha-brit*, literally "the lands of the covenant." It's not known why this somewhat poetic turn of phrase was chosen, rather than, say, המדינות המאוחדות, *ha-medinot ha-meuchadot*, which would be closer to the literal "United States." But it does give an almost Biblical flavor to the name of the nation whose Constitution, a sort of ברית, *brit*, and constitutionally protected rights are central to its identity and character.

### מצווה – *Mitzvah* – "Mitzvah," Commandment

One of the supreme Jewish value concepts – and well-known Hebrew words – is the idea of מצווה, *mitzvah*. While many associate this with the general idea of "good deed" ("Your *bubbie* hasn't heard from you in ages – do a mitzvah and give her a call!), it comes from the root צ-ו-ה, *tz-v-h*, and literally means "commandment."

For instance, when we say that something like giving צדקה, *tzedakah*, "charity" (but better a form of justice, from its root צדק, *zedek*, "justice") is a מצווה *mitzvah*, that doesn't mean it's a voluntary "good deed" but that it is a commandment, an obligatory action, incumbent upon you by virtue of you having been blessed with resources that by rights are to be shared.

Indeed, if the plurality of words for a concept, or family of concepts, can be said to reflect the importance of that concept, and therefore capture breadth and nuance (a la snow in Inuit culture), then Hebrew has no less than eight different vocabulary items for law or instruction or commandment. In addition to מצווה, *mitzvah*: משפט, *mishpat*, דין, *din*, חוק, *chok*, "law;" דת, *dat*, Persian loan word for edict, (now means "religion,"), מוסר, *mussar*, "instruction" (now means morality), תורה, *torah*, and הלכה, *halachah*.

So, yes, "commandment," but no: that does not mean that a 13-year old male is commanded to go to a pub. The "bar" in בר מצווה, *bar mitzvah*, is actually the Aramaic word for Hebrew בן, *ben*, "son" and so upon reaching 13 years a boy becomes a בר מצווה, *bar mitzvah*, literally, "a son of the commandment." So technically you don't have a bar mitzvah – you are one, meaning that you become subject to the commandments, obligated to fulfill them, and legally liable for their infraction.

While there are uncounted thousands of הלכות, *halachot*, Jewish legal precepts, there is a very set, almost mythical number of מצוות, *mitzvot*. That number is 613, represented in *gematria* (the letter-number equivalency system) as תרי"ג, pronounced Taryag. The actual origin of the number is obscure, and there is even no consensus as to which injunctions in the Torah make the cut, and how to structure the list, but the number is universally acknowledged. This total is



further broken down into 365 negative commandments and 248 positive ones, which are also "symbolic" numbers: according to the Talmud (Makot, 23b) "Moshe received 613 *mitzvot*. They are 365 prohibitions, corresponding to the days of the (solar) year, and 248 positive commandments, corresponding to the limbs in a person."

A more pragmatic division suggests two other categories. There are *מצוות בין אדם לחברו*, *mitzvot bein adam lechavero*, lit. "commandments between people and their fellows," which refer to interpersonal, ethical or social *mitzvot* (such as treatment of the poor, standards of justice and loving kindness) and *מצוות בין אדם למקום*, *mitzvot bein adam lamakom*, lit. "commandments between people and 'the Place,'" 'the Place' being an epithet for God, thus including cultic, ritual or more spiritual practices.

### תיקון – *Tikkun* – Repair

The word *תיקון* – *tikkun* – "repair" is a good example of a Hebrew word that means vastly different things in the US and in Israel. In Israel, the word simply means "repair" or "correction" – something you would do to your bicycle if it broke down, or your spelling mistakes in your writing. In the United States, however, *Tikkun* is the name of a magazine, which comes from a deeper concept, the idea that just about everything is in need of repair. This is part of the phrase *תיקון עולם*, *tikkun 'olam*, which means "repair of the world." The traditional phrase (as it appears for instance in the *Aleinu* prayer which concludes every service) is *לתקן עולם שדי במלכות* *letaken 'olam bema'chut shadai*, "to repair or perfect the world in acknowledgment of the Kingdom of God." Later it acquired a kabbalistic layer of meaning that had to do with the "mending" of the 'broken vessels,' as described in the Lurianic account of creation, which describes shards of holiness or divinity spread throughout the world, that can be redeemed or repaired through the conscious performance of *מצוות*, *mitzvot*, divine commandments.

Now, however, this idea is mostly associated with social justice work to improve society. While not inherently designating a particular side of the political spectrum, uses of the term such as in the Reform movement, and as the title of the magazine, founded by Rabbi Michael Lerner, have created an identification of *תיקון עולם*, *tikkun 'olam* with primarily progressive causes, especially as rooted in Jewish traditional values of protecting the weak and the oppressed.

Leading activist Rabbi Jill Jacobs writes of the use, misuse and abuse of *תיקון עולם*, *tikkun 'olam* to mean all sorts of things, some of them very far from the original rabbinical or kabbalistic use of the term:

"Some have suggested imposing a ban or hiatus on the term *tikkun olam*, given the general confusion about the meaning of this phrase. It is hard to ignore, though, the tremendous staying power of this word as shorthand for any social change or service work. Enough people – both inside and outside of the Jewish community – find the term *tikkun olam* extraordinarily compelling, even more so than other Hebrew terms such as *tzedek* or *g'milut chasadim*, which have not gained the same traction in the general discourse. The popularity of the term *tikkun olam*... may indicate a desire to place one's own work in a larger context of influencing the greater world. In an individual's search for the meaning of his or her own life, it may be more compelling to think of one's every action as contributing to the repair of the cosmos, than to think of the same actions as simply accomplishing a small fix to a much larger problem."





## ***Educational Web Kit – Israel's 70th Year of Independence***

(see "The History of 'Tikkun Olam,'" Rabbi Jill Jacobs, *Zeek* magazine, 2006:  
<http://www.zeek.net/706tohu>).

