Learning Hebrew: Sentence Syntax

SENTENCE STRUCTURE
In English, the normal verbal sentence structure would be subject-verb-object (Jacob honored Isaac). In Hebrew, the normal verbal sentence structure is verb-subject-object.

וַיַחֲלֹם יוֹסֵף חֲלוֹם
(And Joseph dreamed a dream – Genesis 37:5)

SYNTAX OF THE VERB
In the normal verbal sentence structure, the verb is at the beginning. However, there are certain circumstances that change this pattern.

1. The verb may be preceded by an adverb.

וַיִּהְיֶה הָיָה יְבַעְתָּה, כִּי פָּלַת חֲלֹלִית
(And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king – I Samuel 24:20)

2. The verb may be preceded by an expression that provides context, circumstantial information, or a connection with the preceding verse or clause.

עַל-כֵּן, יָעֵבָר-אָוֶּה, אָבִי-אָבָה, אָבָה-אָפְה
(Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother – Genesis 2:24)

3. The verb may be preceded by הָנָה.

וַיִּהְנָה בֶּנְלָבָה אֱוָה-נָה, בֶּנְלָבָה
(And behold, our fathers have fallen by the sword – II Chronicles 29:9)

4. The verb may be preceded by a temporal clause beginning with וַיִּהְיֶה אוֹ אוֹ אֲבֹֽרֵה

וַיִּהְיֶה בֶּנְבֶלָה מְתַלְּם, לִקְמַמָּה קִנְבַּי חֲלָפִי אָבָה, אָבָה-אָפְה
(When they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel his brother and he killed him – Genesis 4:8)

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(And it came to pass in that day, said the L-rd of hosts, that I will cut off the names of the idols out of the land, and they shall no more be remembered – Zechariah 13:2)
5. The verb may be preceded by a negative particle.

לֹא אִירָא רָע

(I will not fear evil – Psalm 23:4)

6. The verb may be preceded by an independent personal pronoun (for emphasis).

אַֽֽהְיָתָּם, אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

(You have seen what I did to Egypt – Exodus 19:4)

7. The verb may be preceded by many other modifiers or grammatical constructions.

כָּלָּם יְהֹוָה אִישָּׁה אֶמֶּרָה לָהֶם

(This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel – Jeremiah 31:32)

SYNTAX OF THE SUBJECT

Perfect, Imperfect, and Imperative verbs have an implied subject which means that you will not always need and explicit subject to complete a sentence in Hebrew.

1. The subject (if one is specified) will usually immediately follow the verb.

וַיֹאמֶר הַנָחָ, אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים

(And the serpent said to the woman – Genesis 3:4)

2. The subject may precede the verb to emphasize the subject.

יַעֲלָה מֹשֶׁה, אֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל

(And Moses went up to G-d – Exodus 19:3)

SYNTAX OF THE OBJECT

There are a number of differing types of objects in Hebrew but the most important ones for this topic are the indirect (dative) and the direct (accusative) objects.

1. The dative (indirect) object is the person or thing that is indirectly affected by the action of the verb.

וַיְקַוְרָא מֹשֶׁה, אֶל כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל

(And Moses called to all Israel – Deuteronomy 5:1)
2. The accusative (direct) object generally comes immediately after the verb or its subject.

בָרָא אֱלֹהִים, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים.
(G-d created the heavens and the earth – Genesis 1:1)

3. The object may precede the verb to emphasize the object.

אֶת-הָרָשָׁע, אֶת-הַצַּדִּיק, יִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים.
(The righteous and the wicked G-d will judge – Ecclesiastes 3:17)

CONDITIONAL SENTENCES
A conditional sentence consists of two clauses. The protasis (“if”) clause states the condition and the apodosis (“then”) clause states the consequence of the condition.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ בָרָק, אָּלָהּ-לְכוּ וַיֵּלֶכּוּ וַיָּלֶכּוּ (Barak said to her, If you will go with me, then I will go – Judges 4:8)

ADVERBS
Adverbs are words that are used to describe, modify, limit, or qualify a verb, adjective, or another adverb. Generally, adverbs are divided into four categories.

1. Adverbs of time

כִּי עָמַּלְתִּי, כִּי-עָמַל אֱלֹהִים אָּלָהּ (For now I know that you fear G-d – Genesis 22:12)

2. Adverbs of place

וַיֹּאמֶר שָבַּה-פֹה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ (And he said, “Sit here,” and they sat – Ruth 4:2)

3. Adverbs of degree

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֲלִיָּה, וַיְמַלֵּל בּ (And she conceived again and bore a son – Genesis 29:33)

4. Adverbs of manner

וַיָּבֹא אֲלֵיהֶם יוֹהָשְׁעַ (And Joshua came upon them suddenly – Joshua 10:9)
DISJUNCTIVE VAV
The Disjunctive Vav is prefixed to a non-verbal form and is non-sequential. There are four main uses for the Disjunctive Vav.

1. The Parenthetical use means that the disjunctive clause interrupts the narrative to offer some explanatory information.

וּוְ· וַיָּדוּעַ הָאֱלֹהִים, כִּי שָׁמַעְתָּ לְיָשָׁר וָעָלֵיהֶם, בֵּיןָם
(Now they did not know that Joseph was understanding them because there was an interpreter between them – Genesis 42:23)

2. The circumstantial use means that the disjunctive clause introduces or identifies circumstantial information related to the narrative.

וְהֵ֤ם לֹא יָדְעוּ֙, כִּיָּ֔שָּׁמֵעַ֖ יוֹסֵף֙, כִּיָּ֔הוּ הַמֵּלֶ֗יץ, בֵּיןָם—
(And one day, he went into the house to do his work and none of the household servants were there in the house – Genesis 39:11)

3. The contrastive use means that the Disjunctive Vav introduces a contrasting idea.

וַיָּתַ֤שֶׁר יְהוָה֙, אֵל-אֵ֔בֶל אֵ֖ל-מֶנָּ֔חַת אֵל֖וֹ כֶּ֑לֶּחֶת, אֵל֖וֹ אֵ֑שׁ נַֽעַרְשֶׁ֛ה—
(The L-rd looked favorably on Abel and his offering but on Cain and his offering he did not look favorably – Genesis 4:4-5)

4. The introductory use means that the Disjunctive Vav may begin a new narrative or introduce a new idea or theme to the narrative.

וְהָנַ֤עְשֶׁר אָֽדָם, הַנַּֽעַרְשֶׁ֥ה, אֵל֖וֹ כֶּ֑לֶּחֶת אֵל֖וֹ אֵ֑שׁ נַֽעַרְשֶׁ֛ה—
(Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the creatures that the L-rd G-d had made – Genesis 3:1)


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rachel-esther@becomingjewish.org