

The Derived Stems of the Hebrew Verbal System

Causative	Intensive (Doubled)	Base	
Hif'il הִפְעִיל	Pi'el פִּעַל	Qal / Pa'al פָּעַל	Active
_____	Hitpa'el הִתְפַּעֵל	_____	Reflexive
Hof'al/Huf'al הוֹפְעֵל	Pu'al פּוּעַל	Nif'al נִפְעַל	Passive

Notes:

In the resurgence of the Hebrew Language among early grammarians, the Hebrew word meaning “to do” (פָּעַל) was chosen as the model verb for the paradigm of the Derived Stems. Unfortunately, however, פָּעַל is a middle-guttural verb (meaning it has a guttural in the middle position) meaning it cannot be doubled (as is required in the Pi'el, Hitpa'el, and Pu'al). Furthermore, being a guttural, it attracts “A-class” vowels. So actually, it was not very suited as a model verb for the paradigm. Nonetheless, it has been so used for so long a time, that the names of the Derived stems are still called after the pattern of the פָּעַל verb.

Only one reflexive form remains, i.e., the Hitpa'el. Sometimes, however, the Nif'al functions as a reflexive, and moreover, the Hitpa'el sometimes functions as a passive. By “reflexive” is meant that the subject acts upon himself, or acts with some measure of self-interest.

The Qal (meaning “light”) is the base form, the form under which Lexical entries are therefore to be found. So if one is to find a given verb in a dictionary or lexicon, it will be listed under the Qal or Pa'al form. The Nif'al most often functions as the passive form of the Qal or Pa'al.

The Pi'el, Hitpa'el, and Pu'al are sometimes “intensive,” but not always. These are also known as the Doubled stems or “D-stems” since one of the characteristics of these is that the middle consonant takes a *dagesh* (unless, of course, the middle consonant is a guttural). The Hif'al and Hof'al (also called the Huf'al in some grammars) are also called the “H-stem” since they are characterized by a prefixed ה in the perfect conjugation.

Most Hebrew verbs are not found in all of the stems. Those verbs that do not occur in the Qal or Pa'al stem usually have their base form in either the Pi'el or Hif'al, but in such cases the so-called “Intensive” or “Causative” aspect does not function.

In many older grammars, the verb קָטַל, “to kill,” was also used as the verb to model the Derived Stems, since it is a strong verb (meaning it has no weak or guttural letters), and the general sense of the various Stems may be illustrated by this verb as well:

Causative	Intensive (Doubled)	Base	
He caused to kill	He slaughtered	He killed	Active
_____	He slaughtered himself	_____	Reflexive
He was caused to be killed	He was slaughtered	He was killed	Passive

Modern Hebrew studies have shown, however, that this simplistic view of the Derived Stems does not explain the multifaceted aspects of the Hebrew verbal system. While the above charts are a good place for students to begin in understanding the Derived Stems, one should be cautioned against thinking that the Hebrew verbal system could be so neatly packaged. In reality, the Hebrew verbal system is far more subtle and nuanced by numbers of factors. However, the above charts give a basic presentation of the Derived Stems, and offer a good starting place for beginning students.

We should also note that the verb פָּעַל is used by some grammars to speak of the three-consonant roots that most often make up Hebrew verbs, and particularly the position of the consonants in the trilateral root. Thus, the first position is called the “Peh” position, and verbs that begin with a *yod* or *aleph* are therefore referred to as “Peh-Yod” or “Peh-Aleph” verbs (abbreviated פ/י and פ/א). The “Ayin” is the second position, and hollow verbs are therefore referred to by some grammars as “Ayin-Yod” or “Ayin-Vav” verbs. Accordingly, the “Lamed” denotes the third position, and so verbs ending in ל are called “Lamed-Hey” verbs. In the same way, “Peh-guttural” verbs would be those having their first consonant as a guttural, and so forth.

It can be seen that in the Hebrew language, the use of Derived Stems (which constitute vowel changes and the addition of prefixed or infix consonants) allows for a single root to have many meanings. In this way, a wide vocabulary of verbal ideas may be derived from a relatively few lexical entries.