

## What About the Vowels?

It has already been pointed out that the Hebrew alphabet is made up of only consonants. The vowel sounds are represented in two ways.

### ***Mothers of Reading***

Three Hebrew letters have the ability to function in a dual capacity; i.e. as consonants or ‘vowel letters’. The Three letters that have this ability are: ך ם & ן. Because of their unique dual ability, they have been termed – *Matres Lectionis*, a Latin term meaning Mothers of Reading. The English letter ‘Y’ has a similar ability. It can be a consonant as in the word ‘yes’ or a vowel as in ‘holy’. These three letters can represent all the variations of the basic vowel sounds of; a, e, and o. The ך is used to represent the ‘ah’ sound. ך represents the ‘ee’ and ‘ay’ sounds. And ן represents the ‘oh’ and ‘oo’ sounds. While it is important to note that these are not exactly comparable to English vowels, the following chart will serve to illustrate the functionary value of the *matres lectionis* letters. When a word is spelled with a *mater*, it is said to be ‘full’ or *plene*. Without the *mater*, it is considered defective.

<b>Matres Lectionis (Mater-singular)</b>	<b>English Approximate</b>
ך	A
ך	E
ך	I
ן	O
ן	U

### ***Masoretic Vowel Signs***

The Masoretes were the Jewish scholars who are responsible for producing and preserving the ‘received’ text of the Old Testament in the Hebrew. They were bodies of scribes who meticulously gathered and edited all known manuscripts of various Biblical books, finally producing an eclectic text for posterity. The Hebrew word for ‘scribe’ has a meaning of ‘counter’, indicating their duty of counting the letters to insure that the copy was identical to the master. One of their contributions to Hebrew study was a system of marks that facilitated and preserved the traditional pronunciation of the words. This rather simple system, composed of ‘dots and dashes’ was devised around the 7<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era. This system of marks was developed so that the vowel sounds could be added without lengthening the text.

In the chart below, the Hebrew letter **ס** is used as a placeholder to show you where the vowel appears.

Vowel Sign	Name	English Approximation	Long or short	Vowel Class
<b>ס</b>	kamets	ah	Long	A
<b>ס</b>	patach	ah	Short	A
<b>ס</b>	tsere yode	'ei' as in weigh	Long	E
<b>ס</b>	tsere	'ei' as in weigh	Long	E
<b>ס</b>	segohl	'e' as in bed	Short	E
<b>ס</b>	chireq yode	'i' as in machine	Long	I
<b>ס</b>	chireq	'i' as in sit	Short	I
<b>ס</b>	cholem waw	'o' as in home	Long	O
<b>ס</b>	cholem	'o' as in home	Long	O
<b>ס</b>	kamets chatufe	'o' as in top	Short	O
<b>ס</b>	shureq	'u' as in blue	Long	U
<b>ס</b>	qibbuts	'u' as in blue	Short	U

You will notice that tsere yode, chireq yode, cholem waw, and shureq employ the matres lectionis letter.