

# The *Piel* in Hebrew

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The following notes are based on: E. Jenni, *Das hebräische Pi'el: Syntaktisch-semasiologische Untersuchung einer Verbalform im Alten Testament* (Zürich, EVZ, 1968).

So how does one summarise some 300 pages of tightly-argued German into a few pages of English? Here is my attempt.

## Summary

Of old the *Piel* had been interpreted as an intensive verbal form, sometimes weakened by use. Jenni has shown that this interpretation is untenable and that a quite different approach is suggested by Akkadian grammar (Akkadian being an older cognate language to Hebrew).

This takes the *Piel* as essentially a factitive verbal form based on a stative, that is, intransitive verbal stem, the verbal equivalent of an adjective: 'to make x (*subject*) to be y (*adjective*). The *Piel* says nothing about the process leading to the result described. There is also no necessary substantive relationship between the object (the adjective of an equivalent nominal sentence) and the verb. The *Piel* can sometimes be used in a declarative or estimative way. This comes about through the nature of the adjective (general or with a particular view to the subject).

When the verbal stem is transitive the *Piel* form is not factitive but resultative. It points to the application of the adjectival result without regard to the actual process. Because of the focus on the result, this kind of *Piel* is often used metaphorically, or of indirect actions, or of a summary of successive actions on a plurality of objects. This is because it stands in contrast to other verbal forms which focus on the actual process / action (and cannot therefore summarily describe an action performed at multiple times on multiple objects).

## *Piel* of stative (intransitive) verbal stems

Jenni argues for distinguishing the use of a stative verb<sup>1</sup> over against the simple adjective in the following way: The use of the verb brings subject and verbal adjective into close association in the sense that the two naturally belong together. The use of the adjective introduces something new which is said to be characteristic of the subject.

:הָכֵם שְׁלֹמֹה      Solomon is wise (verbal) – *implies that wisdom naturally belongs to Solomon*

:הָכֵם יְהוּדָה      Judah is wise (adjectival) – *suggests that Judah, whom you might not necessarily think of as wise, is indeed wise.*

The *Piel* is essentially the *factitive* conjugation of the stative verb. It relates to the nominal sentence (adjective with verb 'to be'). The *Hiphil* is the *causative* conjugation and relates to the verbal sentence. Because the nominal sentence *adds* new meaning (Judah is actually 'wise') which does not necessarily belong to the subject, it can easily be negated. The verbal sentence, however, since it implies an inherent coupling of the subject and its predicate, can only be negated with a feeling of incongruity. When translated into factitive/causative this implies the same relationship with *Piel/Hiphil* and their objects.<sup>2</sup> Note that a *Hiphil* can therefore be used (deliberately) incongruously when it implies a substantive relationship between action and object, which is quite unexpected.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, such an incongruent relationship can be negated.<sup>4</sup>

1 A stative verb describes a state of being, in contrast to a dynamic verb, which describes an action. Stative verbs are static or unchanging throughout their entire duration, whereas dynamic verbs describe a process that changes over time.

2 It would be incongruous to say that God does *not* cause Solomon (whom we know to be a wise man) to be wise (*Hiphil*), but it would not necessarily be incongruous to say that God does *not* make Judah (whom we don't necessarily see as a wise man) to be wise (*Piel*).

3 E.g. Hos. 9:14 "Give them a miscarrying womb (שָׁכַל *Hiph.*) and dry breasts". They would not be expected to be caused to have a miscarrying womb, and yet the verb implies that this is a normal relationship.

4 E.g. Exod. 23:7 "You shall not justify (קִדַּח *Hiph.*) a wicked person".

Although both *Piel* and *Hiphil* are often quite close in meaning, they are thus to be distinguished.

*Factitive*: Taking a complement (the original adjective upon which the stative is based) that expresses a result along with a direct object, or inherently implying a complement. The factitive emphasises the result.

*Causative*: to make someone be something. The causative emphasises the process (verbal).

Given that the *Piel* is related to the adjective, it is the verbal form (and not *Hiphil*) which is used with מן to indicate comparison (as also the *Qal*).

This can be illustrated with the following verbs. Note that occasionally there is no real semantic distinction between *piel* and *hiphil*, but often the distinction is quite real.

	<i>qal</i> (stative)	<i>piel</i> (to give a result)	<i>hiphil</i> (to cause a process)
בער	to burn	to make x to burn = to set x on fire <i>also</i> to keep a fire going on x	to cause x to be burning = to burn x
קצר	to be short	to make x to be short = to shorten x	to cause x to be shortened = to let x be of short duration
שוה	to be equal / same	to make x to be equal = to level x out	to cause x to be equalised = to compare with x
כעס	to become vexed	to make x to be vexed (2x) = to irritate	to cause x to be vexed (46x) = to irritate <i>often used w. God as object, therefore of process, not result, for God is not a passive object, which explains its use also in past tense (see below).</i> <sup>5</sup>
קום	to rise	to make x to be standing <sup>6</sup> = to validate x	to cause x to stand (up)
חיה	to be alive	to make x alive <i>e.g. to restore a city (the object is generally thought to be not alive)</i> to keep x alive (as opposed to dying) <i>also: to nurture x (seen as an iterative series of actions leading to the result – alive as adult)</i>	to cause to be living / to once again be living <i>e.g. of resurrection (the object is generally supposed to be a living being)</i> to cause to keep living (as process)
יגע	to be tired	to make x tired	to cause x to be tired

Given verbs which in their basic meaning describe a process which culminates in a definite result (e.g. to complete, to perish), the verb-form is generally chosen which has the process or the result closest in time to the speaker. That is, in the future, the process leading to the result is closer (generally *Hiphil*), in the past the result of the action is closer in the time to the speaker (in the present), therefore *Piel*. This applies to the following verbs, for example:

<sup>5</sup> In other words, the causative involves the object indirectly in the process that is described.

<sup>6</sup> A late conjugation under the influence of Aramaic.

	<i>Piel</i>	<i>Hiphil</i>
שלם to be completed / ready	to make x complete	to cause to be completed = to carry out
אבד to go astray / to perish	to make x to be perished = to destroy x <i>objects can be anything</i>	to cause x to be perishing = to exterminate x <i>objects can only be living entities or related abstractions, only used in future sense</i>
חתת to be filled with terror	to make x to be filled with terror = (HAL) to dishearten / (Jenni) to frighten	to cause x to be filled with terror = (HAL) to shatter (physically)
נחת to travel down	to make x to go down = to press down (e.g. of a bowstring)	to cause x to go down (1x) = to deport <i>objects can only be living entities, only used in future sense</i>
הלה to succeed (follow) someone in his place	to make x to be followed up (succeeded) = e.g. to change / replace (e.g. clothes) <i>used in the past tense</i>	to cause x to be followed up = e.g. to change (clothes) <i>used as imperative</i>
קנא –	to be jealous/envious against (+ acc, ל, א) <i>also to make x to be jealous</i>	to cause x to be jealous

The reverse is true for (the few) verbs which describe a situation which is altered by a process which begins. Here more often the *Piel* is found for the future and the *Hiphil* for the past.

	<i>Piel</i>	<i>Hiphil</i>
רוה to drink one's fill	to make x to drink to his <u>filling</u> (only used for future)	to cause x by drinking to be filled (only used for past)
יגע to become weary	to make x to be weary (future or timeless)	to tire x out (past)
בהל –	to make x frightened (future or present)	to cause x to be frightened / to cause oneself to make haste (past)

The *Piel* in addition to its *factitive* meaning, is also able to have both a *declarative* and *estimative* meaning. To put it in Muraoka's words (Jouon §52d): 'This may be subsumed under factitive in the sense that, whilst the factitive denotes the generation of a state or quality actually and physically, the declarative-estimative does so mentally or verbally.'

*factitive*: to make x to be ... (*supply adjective*) = result  
*declarative*: to declare x to be ... (*supply adjective*)  
*estimative*: to hold x to be ... (*supply adjective*)

The following are the verbs with these senses (note that they all have to do with declaring/reckoning someone to have a quality which is not generally noticeable – if it were so, the sense would be factitive):

Root & Qal	Piel forms			
	<i>factitive</i>	<i>declarative</i>	<i>estimative</i>	<i>privative</i>
גדל to be great	to make x to be great = e.g. to rear x	to declare x to be great = to praise ( <i>seldom</i> )	to hold x to be great	
דמה to be like		to declare x to be like unto (ל) y = to compare x to y	to hold x to be appropriate	
דשן to become fat	to make x to be fat = to anoint	to declare/hold x to be fat; to accept ( <i>sacrifice</i> )		to cleanse from fat
טהר to be clean	to make x to be clean ( <i>rare</i> )	to declare x to be clean		
טמא to become unclean	to make x to be unclean	to declare x to be unclean ( <i>rare</i> )		
כבד to be heavy	to make x to be heavy ( <i>rare</i> )	to declare/hold x to be heavy = to honour		
נבל to be foolish			to hold x to be foolish	
נקא <i>attested 1x in Job</i>		to declare/hold x to be free of punishment <i>this leads to the meaning: to cause to be unpunished</i>		

צדק to be righteous	to make x appear righteous	to declare x to be righteous	to hold x to be righteous	
קדש to be holy	to make x to be holy = to sanctify	to declare x to be holy	to hold x to be holy	
קלל to be contemptible		to declare x to be contemptible = to curse		

Note that a Hiphil form is *never* declarative, despite the fact that in the past some have wanted to see declarative Hiphils in 3 verbs:

	<b>Hiphil</b>	<b>Piel</b>
צדק to be righteous	to cause x to be just = to declare him righteous ( <i>but not in the sense that others did not know that = declarative, but because he is of himself actually just</i> ) = to treat x as righteous / just	see above
רשע to be guilty	to cause x to be guilty = to declare him guilty ( <i>but not in the sense that others did not know that = declarative, but because he is of himself actually guilty</i> )	does not exist
קדש to be holy	to cause x to be holy = to treat x as holy = (of God) to declare holy ( <i>because he already belongs to God and is in fact holy</i> )	see above

Not infrequently a Hiphil can be intransitive, or better said, inwardly-transitive, although this use is always less common than the causative.<sup>7</sup> Transitive Hiphil forms can also be used with an implied object, which is commonly understood.<sup>8</sup> Take these examples:

	<b>Hiphil causative</b>	<b>Hiphil inwardly trans.</b>	<b>Hiphil w. object suppressed (most common meaning)</b>	<b>Piel</b>
חזק to be strong	to cause x to be strong	to cause oneself to be strong = to show oneself strong	to cause ( <i>sc. the hand</i> ) to be strong on x = to grasp (+ <i>נָזַר</i> + direct obj.)	to make x to be strong
גדל to be great	to cause x to be great to cause x to show himself great	to cause oneself to be great / to boast	to cause ( <i>sc. the deeds</i> ) to be great = to do great things	see above
קרב to draw near	to cause x to draw near <sup>9</sup> = to take / bring	to cause oneself to draw near = to approach		to make x to draw near

Such an inwardly transitive use is *not* found in the Piel, and an implied object is only occasionally found. These verbs follow:

	<b>Piel (seemingly used only intransitively)</b>
צמח to sprout	( <i>only used of hair</i> ; 4x) to make x to be sprouted (produce outgrowth) = to make ( <i>sc. the hairs</i> ) to grow = to grow ( <i>sc. hairs</i> ) ( <i>Factitive in the sense that hairs were expected to grow where the Piel and not Qal is used</i> )
סמר to tremble (1x)	to make x to tremble (1x) – see discussion p.51.
כהה to become inexpressive (5x) ( <i>only used of eyes</i> )	to make ( <i>sc. the appearance</i> ) inexpressive (3x) = to have become inexpressive
קהה to become blunt (2x) ( <i>only used of teeth</i> )	to make ( <i>sc. the sharpness</i> ) blunt (1x) = to have become blunt
פגר - <i>no Qal</i>	to make ( <i>sc. the strength</i> ) to be limp = to have be too tired (2x)
מעט to be few	to make ( <i>sc. the number</i> ) to be small = to have become few (1x)

In all the above cases, the reason for preferring a *Piel* form over the *Qal* is that the *Qal* speaks of a process, while the *Piel* of a resulting situation. This resulting situation is also the reason that spatial verbs ('to draw near' / 'to be far off', רחק / קרב) in *Piel* denote reaching an absolute point in space, whereas in *Hiphil*

7 Certain transitive verbs in Greek are also used in this way, e.g. ἄγω, cf. Jn 11:15-16; πρόαγω, cf. Lk. 18:39.

8 This also happens to certain transitive verbs in Greek, e.g. διάγω (*sc. βίον*), 'to pass life' (i.e. to live).

9 Also with an infinitive as object: 'to cause "to come" to draw near' = to come close.

(process) can be used in a relative sense.

	<i>Piel</i>	<i>Hiphil</i>
רחק to be far	to make x to be far (i.e. wholly) distant (i.e. unfindable)	to cause to be removed (to another place) (the distance is often mentioned)
קרב to draw near	to make x to draw near (i.e. <u>to bring very close</u> )	to cause x to draw near <sup>10</sup> (i.e. <u>more or less nearer</u> ) = to take / bring

Note, by the way, that when a *Hiphil* derives from a transitive *Qal* there are two ways it can be used. The ‘normal’ way is that it would take two objects, the subject which is being ‘caused’, and the object which the verbal implies. (‘I hit the dog’; ‘I cause John to hit the dog’). Sometimes a second object is left out as self-explanatory, e.g.

	<i>Hiphil</i>
נק to suck x	<i>lit.</i> to cause x to suck y, <i>but used as</i> to suckle x (infant) – mother’s milk is understood
ילד to beget x	<i>lit.</i> to cause x to beget y; <i>also</i> to beget x (i.e. to cause a woman to beget x)

However, arguably even more common than the ‘normal’ way is that the *Hiphil* seems to be hardly causative at all. It just takes the same object as the *Qal*. For example, שחת ‘to ruin x’. Such a verb is analogous to the inwardly-transitive *Hiphil* in the sense ‘to cause oneself to ruin x’. This readily achieves a nuance of being able and/or willing to do something (mostly in the imperfect). We see this, for example, in a verb such as יסף *Qal* ‘to add’ (mostly in Perf.); *Hiphil* ‘to be able / willing to add’ (mostly in Imperf.). A *Hiphil* in this way can have a modal sense (‘want to’ / ‘able to’ / ‘deliberately do’) as opposed to other verbal forms. It is interesting to note that a *Piel* infin. never follows a verb of wishing / wanting, but only a verb of movement, whereas a *Hiphil* infin. can follow either (262).

## Participles

Jenni also argues that the *Piel* and *Hiphil* can exhibit differences with respect to their subject, particularly in participial forms. The *Piel* represents habitual action (e.g. that of a professional), whereas the *Hiphil* represents occasional action. The following examples illustrate:

Jer. 23:1 “Woe to the shepherds who destroy (אברד pi.) and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD.

Deut. 8:20 Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish (אברד hiph.) before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

The shepherds are professionally out to destroy the sheep. God is making only those nations “before you” perish. He is not habitually busy destroying nations.

The distinction is pretty generally present, but of course there are a few exceptions, e.g. where a *Piel* participle replaces a finite verb it is not necessarily habitual (e.g. future present participle with אֲנִי, הִנְנִי or negation), or *Hiphil* when used with elliptical object, is *not* occasional.

## The *Piel* in transitive verbal stems

We have seen that the origin of the *Piel* is with stative verbs. However, a large proportion of *Piel* forms are used in verbs which have a transitive *Qal*. The *Piel* in these cases remains *factitive*. In the case of a transitive verb, the adjectival form is the past passive participle in English. Take for example:

שבר *Qal* ‘to break x’

*Piel* ‘to make x having-been-broken’

As such we can more easily speak of the *Piel* in transitive verbal stems to be *resultative*. The *Qal* speaks of the *action*, while the *Piel* speaks of the *result*.

<sup>10</sup> Also with an infinitive as object: ‘to cause “to come” to draw near’ = to come close.

	<i>Qal (action)</i>	<i>Piel (result)</i> (w. implication of maintaining that result)
חלק	to divide / apportion	to make to be divided / apportioned
בתר	to cut in half (1x)	to make to be cut in half (1x)
חפש	to search out	to make to be (having-been) searched out
פרש	to spread out	to make to be (having-been) spread out
זרה	to scatter (w. hand or shovel)	to make to be (seen to be) scattered <i>here there is a metaphorical result, e.g. with people (who cannot be literally scattered with the hand or shovel) as object.</i>
נער	to shake off	to make to be (seen to be) shaken off <i>also used of metaphorical result</i>
אזר	to gird up	to make to be girded up <i>only w. YHWH as subject</i>

The fact that the *Piel* is resultative naturally implies that the actual action does not need to be accomplished by the subject. In the *Qal* however, it is always the subject doing the action. Take שבר as an example:

שבר      *Qal* He breaks something  
*Piel* He makes something to be broken (possibly by means of something else)

A few verbs use the *Qal* for singular objects and the *Piel* for plural objects, probably with the idea that a single action on a multiplicity of objects is more easily perceived as the *result* of several actions following each other, than one single action. But this concept, as stated, only applies to a few verbs.

	<i>Qal</i>	<i>Piel</i>
נשך	to bite ( <i>a single object</i> )	to make to have been bitten ( <i>multiple objects</i> )
נשק	to kiss ( <i>a single or dual object</i> )	to kiss ( <i>mostly multiple objects</i> )
גדע	to cut off ( <i>a single object</i> )	to cut off ( <i>multiple objects</i> )
קבר	to bury ( <i>a single object</i> )	to bury ( <i>multiple objects</i> )

There are also certain verbs which look intransitive, but occasionally do have objects. When the objects are omitted, they are present in thought, e.g. הלך 'to walk' (a path, דֶּרֶךְ). The verb in the *Qal* never refers to walking around aimlessly, but always walking a particular path. However that is not the case for the *Piel*.

	<i>Qal</i>	<i>Piel</i>
הלך	to walk ( <i>a particular path</i> )	to make to be walking about ( <i>without a particular purpose</i> )
דלג	to leap ( <i>over a particular hobble</i> )	to make to be leaping about
נתר	to leap up ( <i>a particular instance</i> )	to make to be leaping up (= <i>hopping about</i> )
צעק	to cry out ( <i>a particular instance or a general crying out</i> )	to make to be crying out ( <i>successively</i> )
רנן	to exult ( <i>a particular instance or a general exulting</i> )	to make to be exulting ( <i>successively</i> )
שחק/צחק	to laugh ( <i>a particular instance or a general exulting</i> )	to make to be laughing ( <i>successively</i> )

In the same way the difference between the *Qal* participle of אהב ('friend') and the *Piel* participle ('paramour') is to be seen in the difference between one object of love (friend) and multiple objects of love successively (paramour).

The difference between the emphasis on the action (*Qal*) and the emphasis on the result (*Piel*) can also be seen in another way. When the emphasis is on the action the object can be undetermined, when on the result, the object is determined and defined. This explains, for example, the following verbs:

	<b><i>Qal (action)</i></b>	<b><i>Piel (result)</i></b>
דבר	to make words ( <i>undetermined content</i> ) – <i>the content of the words is not the focus</i> – <i>or the content is totally new and undetermined for the hearer</i> – <i>used with abstract objects, e.g. 'to speak lies'</i>	to make (certain particular) words – <i>much more common</i> – <i>used with objects indicating multiple definite statements, e.g. 'to speak proud statements'</i>
מלל	to speak ( <i>undetermined content</i> ) (1x)	to speak ( <i>certain particular words</i> ) (4x)
כזב	to lie ( <i>in general</i> )	to speak ( <i>certain particular</i> ) lies
חכה	to wait upon ( <i>someone for something undefined</i> ) (1x)	to make to be waiting for ( <i>something in particular</i> )
קוה	to await / hope ( <i>on someone for something undefined</i> )	to await / hope ( <i>on something in particular</i> )