

IN SECOND GEAR: HEBREW FROM BEGINNERS TO INTERMEDIATE LEVEL (Trial Edition) by Goni Tishler. 2018. Jerusalem: Academon Publishing House. 124 pp.

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The recent Israeli television sketch comedy *Shkufim* features a recurring skit between two office-building security guards playing the popular Israeli trivia game *Eretz-Ir*. In the game's standard version, one player starts silently reciting the Hebrew alphabet until another player says "stop." Using the letter they have landed on, the players need to write down words in a series of predetermined categories such as country, city, plant, object, animal, profession, personal name, etc. In *Shkufim*, the two security guards, played by actors Guri Alfi and Yuval Semo, employ much quirkier and more extravagant categories for each game round. No matter for how long one of them recites the alphabet in his mind, however, he invariably lands on the letter *alef*, and the characters find themselves in an endless loop of games with the first letter of the alphabet. This existential deadlock is finally broken at the end of the last episode, when one of the players is able to reach the letter *bet*. Realizing the epiphanous nature of the moment, in the show's closing scene the guards step out from behind the confines of their reception desk, walk up directly to the camera, and smile contentedly into it.

Goni Tishler's *In Second Gear* embraces the premise of *Eretz-Ir* in a very different but equally original way. The nine chapters of this exercise workbook are organized thematically around the game's nine standard categories. As each chapter focuses on different grammatical concepts, the reading passages do so through the thematic prism of each chapter heading. The workbook is intended for students working with Tishler and Ateret Yarden-Barak's textbook *First and Foremost* who have mastered the material of the second level, as defined by Ron Kuzar's six-level morphological and syntactical approach.¹ The chapters follow a clear and logical structure: they open with a passage and reading comprehension questions, followed by a variety of exercises on syntax, verb conjugation, prepositional and pronomial usage, etc. Each of these topics is first introduced through a table for the respective grammatical item, accompanied by succinct explanations and apt

1. כוזר, רון. 1991. רשימת פריטי מורפולוגיה ותחביר להוראת עברית בשש רמות. ירושלים: אקדמון.

examples. Passages and some exercises are supplemented by excellent vocabulary sidebars, allowing students to glance quickly to the left to look up an unfamiliar term and then continue reading. New vocabulary items are more often explained in Hebrew and sometimes translated into English. In a particularly resourceful strategy, some vocabulary items – such as *ship*, *camel*, *dove*, *cave*, *mosquito* and *sheep* – are clarified through a visual image.

One of Tishler's greatest accomplishments is the extremely rich and authentic cultural content that *In Second Gear* provides. Throughout the book's pages, students will encounter texts on artists Menashe Kadishman and Ran Morin, including photographs of the latter's unique living-tree sculptures. They will also learn about the history of letter writing; Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*; screenwriter and director Shira Geffen and her film *Jellyfish*; the Israeli documentary *Five Love Stories*; and love letters written by Nathan Alterman and Hemda Ben-Yehuda. Additional texts by Yehonatan Geffen, Shalom Hanoach, Meir Shalev, and Arik Eistein are carefully chosen to fit different themes. This abundance of cultural material demonstrates that the workbook was conceived with careful attention to best modern pedagogical practices in language education.

I assigned selections of *In Second Gear* exercises to students in my intermediate and upper-intermediate classes and asked them to reflect on their work. Responses were largely positive. Students noted that the exercises were "straightforward," "natural and intuitive," "smart and thoughtful," "concise and helpful," and "well designed." Quite a few students wrote that the exercises were similar in their formatting, content, and methodology to the ones they were familiar with from our course materials. One of the exercises I assigned to my upper-intermediate class tested two different grammatical concepts simultaneously: conjugations in the *נפעל* verb pattern and prepositions in the inflected form. Students performed very well and praised the combined approach. One student felt that "it allowed [him] to practice both skills in an integrated manner."

The font used in the workbook was an obstacle for two students at the intermediate level, who reported initial difficulty over the typeface of the letters *ן* and *נ*. Another source of confusion for a number of students was the inconsistent manner in which examples are provided. In some exercises, the example is given in a separate subtitle heading. Elsewhere, the example is incorporated in the first numbered sentence. And in yet other cases, no example is provided, even though students are instructed to follow the

example. As one student put it, “there should be a standard way of presenting the example.”

In the introduction to *In Second Gear*, Tishler states clearly that the book is in its trial edition and has not undergone final proofreading or editing. This fact explains the existence of a number of small typographical errors such as *החברה הטבה שלי* and *מאאתיים*. Other mistakes are more substantive. In a section on the preposition *אצל*, the example reads: *הוא גר אל ההורים שלו*. The future conjugation of *פעל ע"ו* lists *לגור* as the example, but the conjugated verb used is *לקום*. Similarly, for *פעל ע"י* the infinitive provided is *לשיר*, but the table offers the conjugation of *לשים*.

If the above examples are relatively minor, other mistakes and inconsistencies seem more significant. I include below a few items that may be worth addressing during the final editing stage:

- The workbook states that the verb *להיות* can only be used in the past and present tense.
- In a section on causal sentences, readers are informed that the subordinators *כי* and *מפני ש* can only be used in the middle of a sentence.
- In the section on the determiners *אותו/אותה/אותם/אותן* preceding a noun to express the notion “the same _____,” the pattern is taught only with indefinite nouns. The alternative usage of definite nouns should be added.
- In the verb pattern *פעל ע"י/ע"ו*, the conjugation for the imperative is provided. In other groups – such as *התפעל*, *הפעיל*, and *פעל שלמים* – the grammatical imperative is not given, presumably because the colloquial usage of the future to express the imperative is the norm. The point needs to be clarified, however, especially since exercises on these verb patterns include sentences in the imperative mood.

The book’s final chapter on professions opens with a particularly moving story about a math teacher whose devoted students still remember him fondly many years later and attend his funeral. Reading through the pages of *In Second Gear*, it is abundantly clear that this is the work of a dedicated pedagogue and a consummate professional. I am confident that the workbook will constitute an invaluable contribution to the field and will benefit generations of Hebrew students.