

# Braille

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Louis Braille debuted his eponymous tactile writing system in 1829. Originally designed for French, it was quickly adapted to other languages. By the 1920s, independent Hebrew Braille codes existed in the United States, England, Austria, Germany, and Palestine and were used in schools in Vienna and Jerusalem. In 1931, the Jewish Braille Institute of New York (JBI) and the Synagogue Council of America commissioned an international committee chaired by JBI's Leopold Dubov to forge a replacement for these regional codes. The result was the International Hebrew Braille Code (IHBC), based on a personal code developed by Harry J. Brevis in rabbinical school.

The first version of IHBC was adopted in 1935. The same year, JBI and the Library of Congress published Brevis' *A Hebrew Braille Chrestomathy*, containing selections of biblical, Mishnaic, and modern Hebrew literature. In 1946, JBI released a Braille edition of the Pentateuch in five volumes; the entire Tanakh followed in 1950. The text was prepared by notable rabbis and scholars, and transcribed entirely by Belle Cole of Cleveland, OH. The first run of 20 copies was embossed by the American Printing House for the Blind and distributed to the Library of Congress and several organizations serving the blind.

Originally, IHBC included consonants, vowels, and three punctuation marks: *atnakh*, *zaqef qaton*, and *sof pasuq*. Means of representing cantillation and critical notes were created in 2016 by Sarah Blake LaRose, Dr. Raymond McAllister, and Matthew Yeater. All consonants, vowels, and cantillation appear on the same line, since Braille formatting forbids supra- and infra-linear markings. Braille production also requires that Hebrew be read left-to-right, and the raised dots increase page size and thickness – a Braille Tanakh fills twenty volumes and over two meters of shelf space.

Braille Bibles and prayer books have expanded religious participation. Blind Reform Jews may now perform all aspects of ritual and liturgy, but the distinct materiality of Braille has made its suitability for *keriat haTorah* unclear in Conservative and Orthodox communities. The *Shulchan Aruch* forbade blind Jews to receive an *aliya*, but the *Rema* permitted it by the practice of *shomea ke'onah* (reciting a blessing after another reads from the *Sefer Torah*). Neither ruling anticipated blind people reading independently, and the issue must now be reassessed.

In a 2003 CJLS responsum, Conservative rabbi Daniel Nevins concluded that blind Jews may perform every part of the Torah service except for *keriat haTorah*. It violates no commandment on the blind reader's part, but cannot fulfill the congregation's obligation to hear Torah read.

In January 2019, Batya Sperling-Millner became the first Bat Mitzvah to read Torah from a Braille *chumash* in an Orthodox synagogue. Her mother, Aliza Sperling, argues for the

permissibility of Braille Torah reading in a forthcoming responsum, and the debate will certainly continue.

Braille availability and usage continually evolve as technology improves. Electronic Braille displays condense large volumes onto small devices, on-the-fly Braille transcription software increases access to digital texts, and tactile graphics displays promise access to digitized manuscripts and artwork.

## Bibliography

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