

# HEBREW OR JAPANESE?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is quite common that, for any two languages, there will be words that look or sound alike, but with different meanings. French words that look like English words but with different meanings in the two languages are called *faux amis* (“false friends”). In some cases they are from unrelated roots (e.g. French *pain* means “bread” and *rue* means “street”. In other cases, words that began the same evolved different meanings. From its Latin roots, *concurrency* basically means “running along side of”, which in English came to mean “agreement”, but in French it means “competition.”

Except for recent borrowings from English, there should be no cognates between such unrelated languages as Hebrew and Japanese. And since neither of these languages is normally written in the Roman alphabet, they won't have words spelled the same except in transliteration. However, there will be quite a few homophones, words that sound the same, but with very different meanings.

In Japanese, the word pronounced *tora* (as in the movie title “Tora Tora Tora,” the code name for the December, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor) means “tiger.” The same pronunciation in Hebrew, usually Romanized as *torah*, has the basic meaning of “Law”, and is often used to mean the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible (often referred to as “The Five Books of Moses”).

Another example is Hebrew *Shoah* (literally a “catastrophe”, the name given to the Holocaust), which sounds like Japanese *Showa*, the “reign name” of Emperor Hirohito (1926-1988) which included Japan's wars from 1933 to 1945.

But figuratively, this is only the “tip of the iceberg”. Here we will consider many more of these linguistic coincidences, where a Hebrew word sounds like an unrelated Japanese word.

## 2. SOME EXAMPLES

A Japanese restaurant called *SAKANA* recently opened in my neighborhood. In Japanese this means “fish”, but in Hebrew it means “danger”. Could sighting a shark elicit the same exclamation in both languages?

The words *ISHA* and *HA-ISHA* in Hebrew mean “woman” and “the woman”. These words are also related in Japanese, where they mean “doctor” and “dentist”.

The well-known Japanese brand *MATSU-SHITA* literally means “under the pine tree”. The same two-word phrase in Hebrew means “they found an acacia tree.” But don't think these two phrases involving trees have any relation. The word that means “pine tree” in Japanese (*MATSU*) means “they found” in Hebrew, and the word that means “acacia tree” in Hebrew (*SHITA*) means “under” in Japanese.

Hebrew has three pronouns, pronounced *MI*, *HU*, and *HI* (or *me*, *who*, and *he*, if you prefer), where, from Hebrew to English, *me* means “who”, and *who* means “he”, and *he* means “she”! (Confusing?) These three words are also closely related in Japanese, where (in the native Japanese names for the numbers) *MI* means “three”, *HU* means “two”, and *HI* means “one”. For good measure, in Japanese (from their adaptation of the Chinese number system) *SHI* means “four”.

In both Israel and Japan, you can find men named *AKIBA*, *YANNAI*, and *ZAKAI* (from completely different roots).

In Hebrew, *SHISHI* means “sixth”, but in Japanese it means “lion” (or more narrowly, the lion-looking dogs in Chinese–style statues).

In Japanese, *KAZE* means “the wind” (as in *KAMIKAZE*, literally the “divine wind” credited with a major Japanese naval victory over the Chinese, off the coast of what is now Indonesia, during the reign of Chinese Emperor Kublai Khan). In Hebrew, *KAZE* (or *ka-zeh*) means “like this”.

In Japanese, *IMA* means “now”. In Hebrew, *IMA* is the informal word for *mother* that everyone in Israel uses.

*NISAN*, the first Spring month in the Hebrew calendar, is pronounced like the Japanese car maker *NISSAN*.

*URU*, the verb “to sell” in Japanese, is the command “shine” in Hebrew.

*ISHI*, “my man” in Hebrew, is “a stone” in Japanese.

*YATSU*, “they went out” in Hebrew, is the (native) Japanese word for the number *eight*.

*SHIRO*, “his song” in Hebrew, means *white* in Japanese.

*KANA*, the Japanese name for syllabic writing, means “he acquired” in Hebrew.

*KARA*, in Japanese means “empty” (as in *KARATE*, “empty hand,” and *KARAOKE*, “empty orchestra”). As a preposition, *KARA* in Japanese means “from”. One meaning of *KARA* in Hebrew is “happened.” With a Qoph instead of a Kaph for the K-sound, *KARA* in Hebrew means “(he) called” or “(he) read”. Most Israelis don’t distinguish these two K-sounds; so *MAH KARA* means “what happened?” while *MI KARA* means “who called?”

*ATARASHI*, “new” in Japanese, means “You are Rashi” in Hebrew. (From the acronym name *RASHI* of the most famous medieval Jewish commentator; this is now a common boy’s name in Israel.)

In Japanese, *UTSUKUSHI* means “beautiful”. In Hebrew, *UTSU KUSHI* means “they counseled an Ethiopian.”

In Japanese, *ASA* means “morning”. In Hebrew, *ASA* means “(he) made” or “(he) did”.

Finally, in Japanese *DAI* is “big”, but in Hebrew, it’s “enough”.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Many more examples could be given. There are literally dozens of one-syllable words that mean one thing in Hebrew and another (or several others, since Japanese has many one-syllable homophones) in Japanese. Each language has a number of sounds that the other lacks, which limits the number of potential homophones between the two. Even so, it is impressive that a list like the one presented here should exist.