

Bonus: More than a soul

The film, word for word, about 11 min. Hebrew words said aloud are given in Hebrew script, then as they sound.

0:00 A living soul, and a fish

In the King James Bible, God breathes into the man, and the man becomes a living soul. One chapter earlier, the fish in the sea get the very same two Hebrew words. Nobody told you, because the translation changed them. Today I keep a promise; and you will read those two words yourself.

0:24 A promise kept

שָׁלוֹם Shalom, and welcome to another bonus. I am Moreh Ezra. In the film of the seventy words, I said that one of them would get a lesson of its own. The word was **נֶפֶשׁ nefesh**. Usually: soul.

I keep my promises. Today. And in Lesson six I wrote that word on this board, and under it: a soul. Today I take that back. Most of it.

The word stands in the Hebrew Bible seven hundred and fifty-four times. The King James Bible says soul for it about six times in ten. For the rest, it needs dozens of other words: life, person, heart, mind, creature, body, desire. Five times: dead. And once, in Isaiah: fish.

One Hebrew word; and English keeps changing its mind. No new rules today; you have had enough of those. You know the patterns, the little words on the front, and how one noun leans on the next. Today they all go to work on one word. And I warn you: by the end, you will never see the word soul in your Bible in quite the same way again.

In a good way. I promise.

1:35 Genesis 2:7, word by word

Genesis two, verse seven. God forms the man from the dust, and breathes into his nostrils **נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים nishmat chayyim**: the breath of life. Two nouns, the first one leaning on the second: Lesson six. And then: **וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה vayhi ha-adam le-nefesh chayyah**. Take it apart with me.

The first word, וַיְהִי **vayhi**: and it was. You have known it since Lesson three: and there was light. Then הָאָדָם **ha-adam**: the man, with the article; you met him in the first bonus. Then one small letter on the front, le-: to. In Hebrew, you do not become something.

You are to it. And the man was to a living נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh**: the man became a living נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh**. Now the word itself. It is shaped like מֶלֶךְ **melekh**, a king: Lesson four. And it is a she, though it has no feminine ending: Lesson six.

How do we know? Look at the word after it: חַיָּה **chayyah**, living. It has the feminine ending. An adjective agrees with its noun, like the well-brought-up child of Lesson six; so the noun is a she. Now notice the shape of the sentence.

God breathes in; and the man becomes a נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh**. He does not receive one. He does not get one installed. He is one.

3:00 The same words for a fish

Now go back one chapter. Day five: יִשְׁרְצוּ הַמַּיִם שֶׁרֶץ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה **yishretsu ha-mayim sherets nefesh chayyah**. Let the waters swarm with swarms of living נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh**. Fish. Day six: תּוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה **totse ha-arets nefesh chayyah**.

Let the earth bring out living נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh**. Cattle, creeping things, wild animals. The same two words as the man. And again in chapter two, for every animal that the man names. Six times in the first two chapters of the Bible; and five of the six are animals.

Here is what the King James Bible does with them. For the fish: the moving creature that hath life. For the cattle: the living creature. For the animals the man names: every living creature. And for the man himself: a living soul.

So an English reader meets a soul only in the man's verse, and thinks: there it is; that is what makes us different. A Hebrew reader hears the same two words, six times. Does that make the man just another animal? Not in Genesis. The text sets him apart in other ways.

Only of him does it say that God breathed into his nostrils. Only humankind is made in the image of God. And it is the man who gives the animals their names; nobody asks the fish. How much each of these means, people have discussed for a very long time. But the two words are not one of the differences.

Most modern Bibles now say: a living being; which is closer to the other five.

4:31 A throat before a soul

Where does the word come from? The older neighbours of Hebrew help. In Akkadian, and in Ugaritic, the same word means the throat. And from the throat: breath, appetite, life. Hebrew still uses it that way.

Psalm sixty-nine: **הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי אֱלֹהִים כִּי בָאוּ מַיִם עַד נָפֶשׁ hoshi'eni Elohim, ki va'u mayim ad nafesh**. Save me, God; for the waters have come up to the **נָפֶשׁ nefesh**. The King James says: unto my soul. Newer Bibles say: up to my neck. Picture the water rising.

The neck is where it gets serious. Look at the first vowel of our word on the board: it has changed. At a pause, Hebrew likes to stretch a vowel. It is the same word. Jonah, inside the fish, says the same: the waters closed around me, up to the **נָפֶשׁ nefesh**.

And in Jeremiah, a sword reaches the same place. Water twice, a sword once. You want neither of them up to there. The throat is also where hunger lives. Proverbs twenty-seven: **נֶפֶשׁ שְׂבֵעָה תָּבוּס נֹפֶת nefesh sve'ah tavus nofet**.

A full **נֶפֶשׁ nefesh** tramples on honey; but to a hungry **נֶפֶשׁ nefesh**, every bitter thing is sweet. Any parent of a teenager knows that proverb. Appetite fits better than soul. Isaiah even gives the underworld an appetite: Sheol has opened wide its **נֶפֶשׁ nefesh**, and opened its mouth. A throat, wide open.

And the ladies of Jerusalem, two chapters earlier, carry houses of the **נֶפֶשׁ nefesh**. The King James Bible says: tablets. Newer Bibles say: perfume boxes. A little house for a breath. That is a guess; but it is a good one.

And there is a verb from the same root. It stands only three times in the whole Bible, and it means: to catch your breath. A servant's son does it, on the seventh day. King David does it, worn out, on the run from his own son. And the third is God himself, after the six days of creation: he rested, **וַיִּנָּפַשׁ va-yinnafash**.

And he caught his breath. Most translations say, very politely: and was refreshed. The Hebrew is bolder. I like it.

6:45 Life, persons, and "me"

From throat and breath, it is one short step to life itself. Leviticus seventeen: **כִּי נֶפֶשׁ הַבָּשָׂר בַּדָּם ki nefesh ha-basar ba-dam**. For the **נֶפֶשׁ nefesh** of the flesh is in the blood. One noun leaning on the next: Lesson six. And the last word, in the blood, hides its article in a vowel: Lesson five.

Here even the King James Bible says: life. A **נֶפֶשׁ nefesh** can also be counted. Genesis forty-six: **כָּל הַנֶּפֶשׁ לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב הַבָּאָה מִצְרַיְמָה שִׁבְעִים kol ha-nefesh le-vet Ya'aqov ha-ba'ah Mitsraymah, shiv'im**. All the **נֶפֶשׁ nefesh** of the house of Jacob, that came to Egypt: seventy. Seventy persons; and the word stays in the singular, like a head count.

In the film of the seventy words I told you: seventy went down into Egypt. Here they are. And now, the commonest form of this word in the whole Bible. It is not the bare word. It has a small ending, -i, for my: **נַפְשִׁי nafshi**.

My נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh**. A hundred and ninety-two times somebody says it; more than half of them in the Psalms. And very often it simply means: me. Psalm one hundred and three: בָּרֲכִי נַפְשִׁי **barakhi nafshi**. Bless the LORD, my נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh**.

Look at the verb. It is a command; and by its ending, a command to a woman. The psalmist talks to his נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh** as she, because the word is a she. He is talking to himself; all of himself. I do that every morning; usually about coffee.

Come on, me, says the psalmist. Bless the LORD. One last surprise. In the book of Numbers, a Nazirite must not go near a נֶפֶשׁ מֵת **nefesh met**: word for word, a dead נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh**. Translations rightly say: a dead body.

In English, a dead soul sounds very strange. In Hebrew, it shows how bodily this word is. Does that mean the Hebrew Bible knows nothing after death? That is a different question, and a much bigger one; Jewish and Christian traditions, and scholars, answer it in different ways. One word cannot settle it.

What the word does show is this. A נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh** is not a small part hidden inside a person. It is the whole living, breathing, hungry person.

9:04 What you just did

Look at what you just did. You read Genesis two, verse seven, word by word. You found the same two words for a fish, and for the man. And you followed one word from the throat, to the appetite, to the life, to the person; and to me. The translators are still on that road.

The King James Bible wrote soul for this word four hundred and seventy-five times. A word-for-word English made in Cambridge, in our own day, writes it twenty-seven times. So when you meet the word soul in your English Bible now, you will stop for half a second, and ask: which נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh** is this? The throat? The life?

The whole person? That half second is reading Hebrew.

9:49 One thing to do

One thing to do before next time. This one needs Biblion: Biblion app dot com. Go to Psalm sixty-nine. In Options, switch to the Study Bible, and tap the small number after the word soul, in verse one. Biblion shows you נֶפֶשׁ **nefesh**; and under it, a way to see every verse where it stands.

Pick five of them. For each one, decide: throat, appetite, life, person, or me. Then look at what your own Bible says. You will be surprised how often you agree with the translators; and how often you do not. Next time, we are back to work.

But keep this word close. You will meet it seven hundred and fifty-four times.

Until next time: **לֵךְ לְשָׁלוֹם lekh leshalom.** Go in peace.