

Soul Searching: Zero Hits in Hebrew

Description

וּם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי-אוֹר: וַיֵּן
הַיָּם אֶת הָאוֹר כִּי טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ: וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְ
זֶשֶׁךְ קָרָא לְיָלָה וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד: פ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי רָקִיעַ בֵּ
יָם וַיְהִי מַבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לַמַּיִם: וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַרְקִיעַ וַיַּבְדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֶל
הַחֹשֶׁךְ לְרָקִיעַ 0 hits

וַיֵּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים יְקוּוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל מַ
יְ-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי: פ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל מַ
וּד וַתֵּרָאֶה הַיַּבְשָׁה וַיְהִי-כֵן: וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיַּבְשָׁה אֶרֶץ וּלְמַקְוֵה הַמַּיִם קָרָא
אֱלֹהִים כִּי טוֹב: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תִּדְשֵׂא הָאָרֶץ דֶּשֶׂא עֵשֶׂב מְזֹרִיעַ וְרַע עֵץ בֵּ
י לְמִינוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִרְעוּ-בוֹ עַל הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי-כֵן: וַתּוּצֵא הָאָרֶץ דֶּשֶׂא עֵשֶׂב מְזֹרִיעַ וּ

Soul Searching

Zero Hits in Hebrew

by [Trent Wilde](#)

When reading the Bible in English, you come across the word “soul” hundreds of times, and this gives the impression that the ancient authors believed in something like the modern concept of the soul. But, as we’re about to see, the Hebrew word often translated “soul” simply doesn’t mean what “soul” means.

To start, let’s be precise regarding the common meaning of “soul” in English. Dictionary.com’s first definition describes it as:

the principle of life, feeling, thought, and action in humans, regarded as a distinct entity separate from the body, and commonly held to be separable in existence from the body; the spiritual part of humans as distinct from the physical part.¹ Retrieved Nov. 3, 2024, from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/soul>

Similar definitions can be found in other dictionaries. The idea is that humans are made of two basic types of stuff, one physical, the other non-physical. And it is this non-physical aspect that is referred to by the term “soul.”

Okay, now for the Hebrew. The Hebrew word that’s typically translated as “soul” in English Bibles is *néfesh* (????????). By looking up how this term is used in the Bible, it’s pretty easy to see that its meaning just doesn’t match the meaning of “soul.” In Hebrew, a *néfesh* isn’t a non-physical part of humans, it isn’t unique to humans, and the word actually doesn’t carry any connotations of non-physicality. You can verify this yourself by reading through the passages in which the term occurs, which can be found using bible software, a concordance, or bible study websites like blueletterbible.org (for your convenience, [here are the passages](#)). You’ll find that the first verse in which *néfesh* occurs is Genesis 1:20. The relevant line reads:

Let the waters swarm with a swarm of animate *néfesh*...

– Genesis 1:20²All texts quoted in this article are from the Reflective English Translation, which is one of my translations.

This is the fifth day of creation and quite clearly refers to the animals of the sea, which is why most translations use a word like “creatures” to translate *néfesh* in this instance. Obviously, the idea of a “soul” just doesn’t work here. A few verses later, we have another instance of the word:

Let the land have animate *néfesh* proceed according to their kind: mammal, and locomotor, and animal of the land according to their kind...

– Genesis 1:24

Again, the text is quite explicit that the *néfesh* being spoken of are animals, this time land animals. And take note again that this is inconsistent with the idea that this word refers to a supposed non-physical part of humans. Even when *néfesh* does refer to humans, its meaning is clearly physical.

And Yahwéh of deities formed the groundkin, dirt from the ground, and he blew into his nostrils
respiration of animacy, and the groundkin did his thing as an animate *néfesh*.
– Genesis 2:7

Let's make sure we get the picture here. Yahwéh takes dirt from the ground (Hebrew *adamáh*) and forms it into a human (Hebrew *adám*, groundkin). This is one text among many that shows ancient Israelites understood that humans are literally composed of dirt (see also Genesis 3:19; 18:27; Psalm 103:14). This would have been obvious to them based on the fact that when humans die, we decompose back into dirt. So, the passage says God organized dirt from the ground into a fully formed human, with nostrils and all, then breathed into his nostrils, and he became an animate *néfesh*. Importantly, the *néfesh* isn't something that was put into the human; it *is* the human, and the human *is* organized dirt—a creature of the ground. So, far from *néfesh* referring to something non-physical, it refers to the material body. And this text doesn't treat the body as being only a *part* of the human; it treats the body itself as being the human. The human isn't part physical, part non-physical. The human is composed of only one substance: dirt from the ground. The only thing put into the human is air—the respiration of animacy—the same air that all animals take in through their nostrils and by which they have animacy (life). You can know it's referring to ordinary air, the same air animals breathe, from the fact that the text uses the exact same terms when talking about animal respiration (see Genesis 7:22). Everything involved is purely physical.

Now that it's plain that *néfesh* in these passages clearly doesn't mean “soul,” you might be wondering what it does mean. Determining this requires a thorough evaluation of all the evidence. We won't look at every occurrence of the word (you can do that on your own), but we'll look at enough to illustrate its range of meanings. We'll see that the English words with the closest meaning are *breath* and *breather* (something that breathes, whether a throat or an animal that lives by breathing).

Néfesh meaning *Breath*

Here are four examples of passages in which the meaning “breath” is evident. After each quote, I'll briefly comment. As should be obvious, when you read the word *breath* here, it is translating the Hebrew word *néfesh*.

At the faltering of my *breath* from in me,
I done remembered Yahwéh,
– Jonah 2:8

In the context, Jonah is referring to the point when he was at the brink of death, but God rescued him. Clearly, his breath faltering from in him refers to the fact that his breath was growing faint and inconsistent since he was about to die. The verb translated “faltering” here is used to describe breath faltering in several other passages (Isaiah 57:16; Psalm 77:4; 107:5), sometimes being paired with the word *néfesh* and sometimes with the word *ruach* (the word typically translated *spirit*, though it is better translated *gust*; see [Spirit Demystified](#)).

And he [Sha'ul] said to me, “Please stand over me and kill me, since the convulsing has taken hold of me while my *breath* is all still in me!”
– 2 Samuel 1:9

Here, King Saul has been wounded in the battlefield, he has begun to convulse, but his breath is still strong. To relieve his suffering, he asks a man (who, in this passage, is reporting the incident to David) to take his life. Clearly, *breath* is the most contextually appropriate understanding of *néfesh* here.

And he [Eliyáhu] stretched himself over the progenino three times, and he called to Yahwéh and said, “Yahwéh, my deities, please let the *breath* of this progenino return to his innards.” And Yahwéh hearkened at the voice of Eliyáhu, and the *breath* of the progenino returned to his innards and he had animacy.

– 1 Kings 17:21-22

This is the well-known story of the resurrection of the boy by the hand of Elijah. While the boy was dead, he had no breath and thus no animacy. Elijah asks God to have his breath return, and when it does, the boy regains animacy. The plain meaning of *néfesh* in this case is *breath*, and the passage shows the same understanding of the connection between breath and animacy that is present in other passages, such as Genesis 2:7 and 7:22.

The progenitress of seven done languished; she done blew her *breath*.

– Jeremiah 15:9

The idea here is that a woman who bears (progenerates) seven children is thus worn out and she blows her breath. Incidentally, the verb translated “blew” here is the same as in Genesis 2:7. It is tangible evidence that *néfesh* here really does mean *breath*.

Néfesh meaning *Breather* (*Throat*)

If it seems odd that a single word can mean both *breath* and *a thing that breathes*, it may be helpful to realize that there are other examples of this sort of dual meaning, even in English. Take the word *stamp*; it can refer to an instrument that marks a pattern onto something, but it can also refer to the mark itself. Similarly, *néfesh* can refer to something that breathes, or it can refer to the breath itself.

The throat, being an anatomical breathing apparatus, was sometimes referred to by the term *néfesh* with the meaning *breather*. This is sort of like calling your nose a “sniffer” since it’s a name based on one of its functions rather than being an arbitrary label for the part. And just like you can call a nose a “sniffer” even when smelling isn’t the focus, ancient Israelites called the throat a *néfesh* (a *breather*) even when the focus wasn’t on breathing but was instead on other functions of the throat like eating or talking. Now, on to some examples:

And work for me tasties like what I done love, and get them to me and let me eat so that my *breather* may bless you before I die.

– Genesis 27:4

Here Isaac tells his son Esau that, before he dies, he intends to bless him, and the channel through which this linguistic unit (the blessing) is to come is his breather—his throat.

Waters done encompassed me up to my *breather*;
the deep would surround me;
seaweed was done wrapped around my head.
– Jonah 2:5

Whatever *néfesh* refers to here, it has to be a body part, and one close to the parts that should be kept above water if one wants to avoid death (see the next verse). Obviously, the concern is with the breathing, and it's clear that the water was just below the openings of the breathing passage (the mouth and nostrils). In other words, the water was up to the throat, or neck.

They done afflicted his feet in fetters;
his *breather* done got in iron.
– Psalm 105:18

In English, we would probably say something like, “his neck was put in irons.” Either way, you get the picture: the guy is a prisoner with iron bands around his feet and neck (his throat—his *breather*). Can one capture a non-physical soul in iron bands?

All the toil of the groundkin is for their mouth;
And yet the *breather* will not be filled.
– Ecclesiastes 6:7

Humans work to eat, but their throats never cease needing more. Once again, the *néfesh* in this passage is clearly a body part, and one involved in eating.

For sure the grave done widened her *breather*;
she done gaped her mouth without prescript.
– Isaiah 5:4

This is clearly metaphorical, but the meaning of *néfesh* is no less clear. The grave is pictured as having a mouth and a throat (her *breather*), both opened wide.

Néfesh meaning Breather (a Being that Breathes)

We quoted a few passages that use *néfesh* with this meaning at the beginning of the article, but at the time we were only focused on showing that *néfesh* doesn't mean the same thing as the English word *soul*. Let's look at them again, but with *néfesh* translated.

Let the waters swarm with a swarm of animate *breathers*...
– Genesis 1:20

If Israelites knew of whales, they could easily know that they breathe. They would certainly know that fish breathe as well since it's clear that this is what they attempt to do out of water.

Let the land have animate *breathers* proceed according to their kind: mammal, and locomotor, and animal of the land according to their kind...

– Genesis 1:24

It should be clear from all the previous examples that *néfesh* really does mean *breath* and *a thing that breathes*. In light of this, it should come as no surprise that animals would be called *breathers*; that is, after all, one of their most distinctive characteristics that ancient Israelites would have observed and which they evidently recognized as distinguishing them from other things in the world.

And Yahwéh of deities formed the groundkin, dirt from the ground, and he blew into his nostrils respiration of animacy, and the groundkin did his thing as an animate *breather*.

– Genesis 2:7

This verse should hopefully now be more comprehensible than ever. The human had just been organized from the dirt of the ground. God next blows air into his nostrils. The next clause is simply a description of the result: “and the groundkin did his thing as an animate *breather*.” It doesn’t make sense to say he became a *soul* if, by *soul*, we mean what most people mean. A soul is supposed to be non-physical, but this is a material body organized from the dirt of the ground.

There’s another slightly nuanced point that’s worth taking a moment to consider. Doing so will prepare us for the next (and last) passage. When describing the result of God blowing into the nostrils of the human, the text doesn’t say he “did his thing as a *breather*.” It says he “did his thing as an animate *breather*.” In one sense, it’s fair to say the human didn’t become a *breather* until he started breathing. But a mixer is a mixer even before someone uses it to mix something. The same is true for sanders, blowers, grinders, shredders, and the list goes on. They merit their name by their design and their capacity. This may be why the text says the result of God blowing into the human’s nostrils was that he became an “animate *breather*” rather than just a “*breather*.” Before receiving air into his lungs, he was already a *breather* by design and capacity, just an inanimate one.

People sometimes imagine that the human was simply dirt in the shape of a human until God blew into his nostrils, at which point, the dirt magically transformed into an actual human being. But this isn’t what the text says. Again, it doesn’t say that God formed the shape of a human, but that he formed a human. The word translated “groundkin” above is the standard term for “human” in ancient Hebrew, and it very straightforwardly refers to actual humans. If the text specifies at all when the dirt became an actual human; it isn’t when God blew into the nostrils, it is when God formed the human. Once formed, the human actually had nostrils, as the text specifies, and evidently, lungs to receive air since, well... they did. This is the most natural reading of the text for the reasons just mentioned, but also because it would be rather odd for the text to omit any reference to a magical transformation at the moment of God blowing into his nostrils if that is what we’re supposed to understand. All this should lead us to the conclusion that the great change that happened when God blew into his nostrils wasn’t that he became a human, and it wasn’t that he became a *breather*; he was already both of these. The big change is that he became animate. This is important because, to ancient Israelites, being a *néfesh* (a *breather*) didn’t inherently imply being animate, or alive. Indeed, they even had the idea of a dead *néfesh*—a dead *breather*.

All the days of his abstaining for Yahwéh, he must not get near a dead *breather*.

– Numbers 6:6

This is the prohibition against a Nazarite becoming ritually contaminated with a corpse. Referring to a dead body as a *breather* (a *néfesh*) even though it's not breathing is no more odd than calling a dead grasshopper a "grasshopper" even though it's not hopping.

Now, it's worth taking a moment to appreciate the stark contrast between the meaning of the English word *soul* and the meaning of the Hebrew word so frequently (mis)translated as *soul*. *Soul* refers to a supposed non-physical aspect of humans. *Néfesh*, on the other hand, means something like *breath* and *breather* and is used to refer to purely material beings, human and non-human, alive and dead. Consequently, the word *soul* in our English Bibles often leaves people with an impression directly contrary to the meaning of *néfesh*. This isn't just about the meaning of a couple words. It is about different views of human nature. The ancient authors of Scripture didn't believe that humans are dualistic beings (part physical, part non-physical). They regarded humans as entirely material.

For more on this topic, see our article [Dirt You Are \(Israelite Anthropology\)](#) and enjoy the video below!

- 1
Retrieved Nov. 3, 2024, from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/soul>
- 2
All texts quoted in this article are from the Reflective English Translation, which is one of my translations.