

What is Hevel?

There are many words and phrases throughout the book of Kohelet that repeat themselves. These repetitive words and phrases are meant to draw out themes and major ideas that the author wants the reader to hone in on. One of these words in particular, though, leaves us with an ambiguous understanding. The word *hevel* appears 38 times throughout the sefer. In fact, the word bookends the sefer, when it is used five times in the very first pasuk and then in a similar pattern at the end of the last chapter. Many of the major themes throughout Kohelet are easier to understand. There are words like *simcha* (happiness), *ruach* (spirit), and *chaim* (life), all of which are familiar to us. However, the word *hevel* is a vaguer concept and is not as familiar to us. Yet it is clear from its frequent use in the sefer that Kohelet wants us to learn something here. Our job is to dig deeper and try to uncover the meaning and definition of this term.

The first time that a term is used in Tanach will usually provide lens to its meaning. The first time the word *hevel* appears in Tanach is in Bereishit perek 4 in the story of Kayin and Hevel. Here, Hevel is a person, a character that can shed light on the meaning of this word. This usage we will get back to later. However, after this usage of the word, *hevel* next appears in Devarim 32:21. There, in Parshat Ha'Azinu, Moshe gives his final speech to Bnei Yisrael. Hashem tells Moshe to use this speech as a witness to the commandments that were given to the nation. Moshe says:

הם קנאוני בלא אל כעסוני בהבליהם ואני
אקניאם בלא עם בגוי נבל אכעיסם.
They have moved Me to jealousy with that which is not God. They have provoked Me to anger with vanities (b'havleihem). I will move them to jealousy with those who are not a people. I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.

Devarim 32:21

Here, Moshe is rebuking Bnei Yisrael for their future rebellions and for

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leaving Hashem to serve other gods. Here *b'havleihem* means “with false gods.”

Ibn Ezra comments on this word and says “*v'lo b'dvar emet*,” that these things have no truth to them. Ramban here also comments that these are “*ha-sheidim*.” Again, something that is nothingness. It is silly and has no value. This word appears many times throughout the book of Nevi'im as well. One context that sums up the way it appears in many other places is in Melachim I, 16:13. There it says:

אֶל כָּל חַטָּאוֹת בַּעֲשָׂא וְחַטָּאוֹת אֵלֶּה בָּנוּ אֲשֶׁר
חָטְאוּ וְאֲשֶׁר הִחַטִּיאוּ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַכְעִיס אֶת
ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהַבְלִיהֶם.

For all the sins of Baasa and the sins of Elah his son, that they sinned, and

that they caused Israel to sin, to provoke Hashem, the God of Israel, with their vanities.

In this chapter, Yehu receives a prophecy that Baasha was just as bad as his father, therefore he will die. This pasuk points out that one of the sins that he committed was causing Bnei Yisrael to leave Hashem and serve false gods. This pasuk is very similar to the one mentioned in Devarim as well as many other pesukim in Nevi'im, as they both use the word *hevel* to mean false gods. It connotes something that is silly, worthless, and meaningless.

Taking this meaning back to Sefer Kohelet will help us put this word into context and understand its meaning there and perhaps shed light on what Kohelet was trying to ultimately convey.

The term appears in the second chapter of Kohelet more than anywhere else in the sefer, thus it is reasonable to start there as we try to understand this term. In this chapter, Kohelet explores wisdom and struggles to understand it. Eventually he concludes that purpose, meaning and joy can only exist when we believe in Hashem. In this chapter, Kohelet speaks of his own personal experiences and explains that it is all *hevel*. In 2:1 Kohelet says that all the pleasures of life are *hevel*. He continues like this throughout the chapter, stating that all his life experiences are *hevel*. Kohelet concludes in pesukim 24-26 that he should enjoy life and affirms there is a benefit to his toil because this is what Hashem wants from him. Rashi on 2:26 says:

נתן חכמה ודעת ושמחה – לב לעסוק בתורה
ובמצות.

[God] gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy — A heart to engage in Torah and mitzvot.

Here, Kohelet gives meaning to the word *hevel*, saying that the work that

one toils in and does not get rewarded for is *hevel*. We can infer that here this term can mean worthless, meaningless and a waste of time. Kohelet continues and says your toil will not be *hevel* if it has purpose, such as work in Torah and mitzvot and serving Hashem.

We can correlate this meaning back to the pesukim in Devarim and Melachim I. There, the word *hevel* was used to mean false gods. Here, in chapter 2 of Kohelet, it is used to mean work that does not serve the purpose of Torah or Hashem, the true God. Both uses of the term imply something that people work at, but in the end is pointless as it has no real meaning. Kohelet is trying to teach us that all is *hevel* unless it is for the purpose of serving Hashem. There it is meant “no-gods,” here it means not for God, which is a fascinating contrast.

Aside from the abundance of times we find the word *Hevel* in Perek 2 of

*In life, we may think
we are so great and
indestructible, but in
the end we all take a
shallow breath and die.
Mortality exists.*

Kohelet, we find this word many other times throughout other perakim of the sefer. While the word may have slightly different definitions throughout the sefer, it always connotes something negative, just as it did in Devarim, Nevi'im and Perek 2 of Kohelet as it related it false gods, something worthless. In Perek 1, Kohelet uses this word to say everything under the sun is *hevel*. In Pasuk 14, he connects the word *hevel* with the word *r'ut*. *Metzudat*

David says here that everything is *hevel* and therefore no one will ever achieve their desires and will always be disappointed. In Perek 3, *hevel* is used to compare man and beast showing that they are the same since they both amount to *hevel* — to nothingness. In Perakim 4 and 5, *hevel* is used in context of physical labor, wealth and money, and Kohelet says it is all *hevel*. Rashi on 5:9 sums it up by explaining that we toil in physical labor to gain wealth. But it is all *hevel* since it will disappear, and we cannot benefit from it forever. Only from toil in Torah and mitzvot can we forever benefit. Throughout the rest of the sefer, Kohelet used *hevel* to denote similar things. It always has a negative connotation, defined as something worthless, meaningless, futile, vain, or empty. All the synonyms are used in different contexts, but all truly define what *hevel* is. The definition we find in Perek 2 of “not for God” also relates and is a synonym for these definitions. Clearly, across the sefer, *hevel* implies something negative.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks gives us beautiful insight into another possible meaning of the term *hevel* and uses the character Hevel, the first time the word appears in Tanach, to support his understanding. Rabbi Sacks, in his shiur “Why We Read Kohelet on Sukkot,” asks why Sukkot is called “*Zman Simchateinu*” (a time of our joy). Next, he asks why do we read Sefer Kohelet on this holiday? He asks this question because he points out that Kohelet is a depressing sefer. Why would we read this on a holiday that is “*Zman Simchateinu*”? Rabbi Sacks recognizes that a key word in the sefer is *hevel*. While previously we defined this term as vain, futile and worthless, Rabbi Sacks introduces a new definition. He says *hevel* is a

shallow breath. In life, we may think we are so great and indestructible, but in the end we all take a shallow breath and die. Mortality exists. Everything we build and accumulate is nothingness because we are just a breath and can die at any moment. We will not be around to see what we have accumulated. This is the theme of Sefer Kohelet and what troubles Kohelet throughout the Sefer. Rabbi Sacks then brings up the character Hevel, the first time *hevel* is used in Tanach and the first human to ever die. Kayin (who killed Hevel) means “to acquire.” The story of Kain and Hevel is symbolic of death and defeating death by acquisition. Kohelet, too, tries to defeat death by acquiring things, but realizes it is all *hevel*, that acquisition is all temporary. Rabbi Sacks continues and says that true *simcha* is about living in the moment, which is

why you can feel *simcha* even when bad things are happening around you. Kohelet realizes that you cannot defeat death by acquisition. But you can defeat death by *simcha*, by enjoying today, by enjoying the now.

In Rabbi Sacks’ conclusion, he states that a sukkah is a temporary dwelling. Kohelet is obsessed with the notion that human life is temporary, that it is *hevel*. What allows us to overcome the fear of the temporary is *simcha*, is living in the moment. And that is why Sukkot is called “*Zman Simchateinu*.” It is the means necessary to not fear the *hevel*.

Rabbi Sacks provides us with a less intense definition of *hevel*, meaning temporary or a fleeting life. He reassures us that it is not that scary and shows us how Kohelet teaches us to overcome the fears of *hevel*. While Rabbi Sacks’

definition may be less dramatic than the previous definitions given, it is not too far off and is still synonymous with meanings such as worthless, futile, meaningless and pointless. When trying to understand this term, we need to look at the context of how it is presented. However, whatever the context, *hevel* always teaches us the same lesson over and over, which is truly how we can define the word. *Hevel* always teaches us what is important in life. Do not waste your time with things that are *hevel*, you must serve God and follow the Torah in order to live a non-*hevel* life. Do not worry about physical accumulations, they are *hevel*. Focus on *simcha*, Hashem and the now. *Hevel* may be the ultimate lesson that Kohelet wants us to learn from his sefer. But we must pay attention to its context and usage to truly understand the message.

Unlocking the Layers of Laughter: Continued from Page 24

Avraham and Sarah had spent much of their lives committing themselves to G-d and His commands, making efforts to facilitate His promise that they be the matriarch and patriarch of a proliferating nation. The challenge of Sarah’s barrenness had led to her selfless bestowal of Hagar to Avraham. This pairing had resulted in Yishmael, the presumed beneficiary to Avraham’s and Sarah’s mission. In yet another test of dedication, G-d made it clear that Yishmael was not meant to take on this role. At this point, Avraham and Sarah had become weary from a seemingly endless struggle to produce the proper heir. When G-d finally informs Avraham of the impending birth of the chosen son, he cannot help

but laugh; after many years of trials and failed attempts, Avraham now has confirmation of imminent success. This laughter is a reaction of exuberant joy at the recognition of forthcoming accomplishment. However, when this news reaches Sarah’s ears, she responds with laughter of a different nature, an act that she tellingly attempts to deny. In contrast to Avraham’s laughter, Sarah’s evokes the *schok* that Kohelet spurns; that of sarcasm and disbelief, indicative of a lack of faith in G-d. Even within this microcosmic narrative, *tzchok* is marked as a profoundly impactful theme, so expressively expansive in meaning, ultimately culminating in the naming of Avraham and Sarah’s son, Yitzchak.

Through studying the depth of the

word *schok* and its connotations within Kohelet, it becomes evident that the term is inherently connected to the concept of uselessness, and alternatively, productivity. The type of laughter that connotes the former is the frivolous sport of fools, mockery; an act which throughout Tanach is often performed by idle individuals who dismiss the legitimate efforts of others. The second form of laughter results from a recognition of the accomplishments achieved through exertion. This emotional response presupposes a certain level of labor, a struggle to attain something, and eventual success. Only a life of overcoming challenges will warrant the euphoric joy of true laughter.