



Nephesh: "Soul"

STUDY NOTES



SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BAGGAGE

00:00 – 00:56

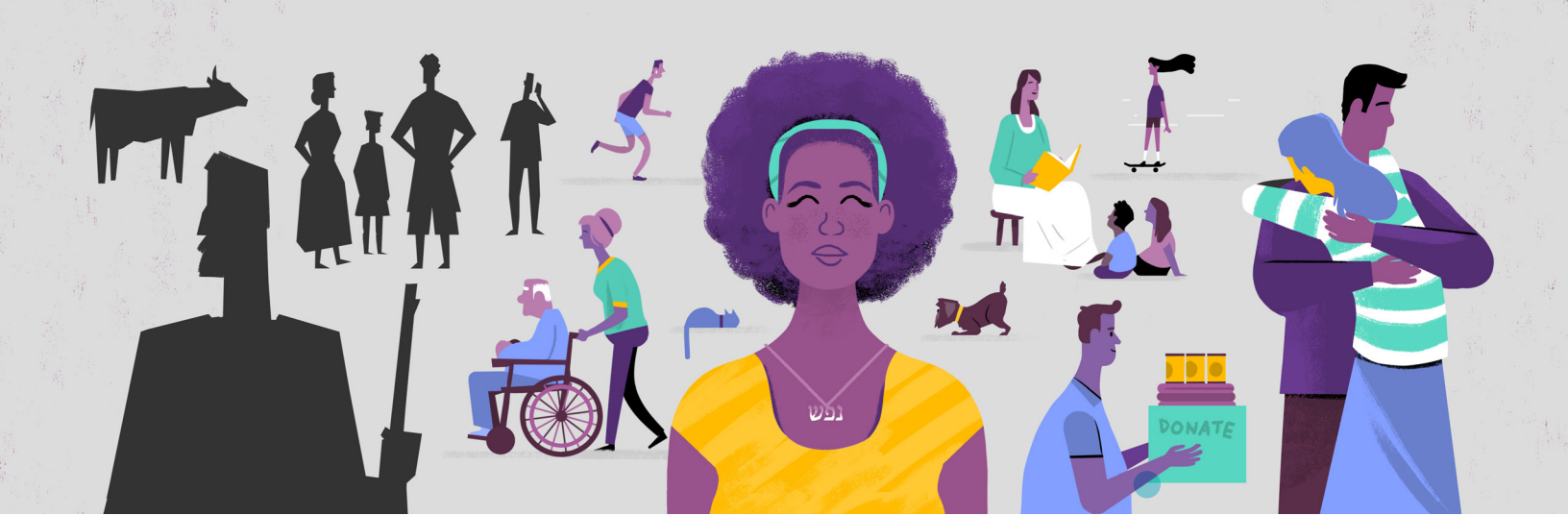
For thousands of years, every morning and evening, Jewish people have prayed these well-known words as a way of expressing their devotion to God. They're called the Shema.

Hear O Israel the LORD is our God the LORD is one, and as for you, you shall love the LORD your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your strength.¹

We're going to look at the word "soul."² The Hebrew word is *nephesh*; it occurs over 700 times in the Old Testament.³ The common English translation of this word is "soul," and that's kind of unfortunate. Here's why:

1. This is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5.
2. Our Shema series covers six keywords:
shema: "to hear"
YHWH: "the divine name"
ahavah: "love"
lev: "heart"
nephesh: "soul"
me'od: "strength"
3. Written in Hebrew: נֶפֶשׁ Besides "soul," *nephesh* is commonly translated as "life, lives, living, me, and I" among others.

WATCH THE NEPESH: "SOUL" VIDEO AND
LEARN MORE AT THEBIBLEPROJECT.COM



The English word “soul” comes with lots of baggage from ancient Greek philosophy. It’s the idea that the “soul” is a non-physical, immortal essence of a person that’s contained or trapped in their body to be released at death. It’s a “ghost in the machine,” kind of idea. This notion is totally foreign to the Bible. It’s not at all what *nephesh* means in biblical Hebrew.⁴

SECTION 2: THROAT REPRESENTING THE WHOLE PERSON

00:56 – 02:14

The most basic meaning of *nephesh* is “throat.” Like when the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness, they’re hungry and thirsty, and they say to God, “we miss the cucumbers and melons we had in Egypt, and now our *nephesh* has dried up!”⁵ Or when Joseph was hauled off into slavery in Egypt, his *nephesh* was put into iron shackles.⁶

But *nephesh* doesn’t only mean “throat.” Since your whole life and body depend on what comes in and out of your throat, *nephesh* could also be used to refer to the whole person. Like in Genesis, there were thirty-three *nephesh* in Jacob’s family,⁷

4. The Greek word used in the New Testament for this Hebrew idea is *psuche*. It’s often used to describe a person as an embodied, living organism or their animated life-energy (similar to *pneuma/ruakh*). E.g. “Whoever tries to save their *psuche* will lose it, and whoever loses their *psuche* will preserve it.” – LUKE 17:33

5. See Numbers 11:6.

6. This is found in Psalm 105:18. See also Psalm 69:1.

7. See Genesis 46:15.

that is thirty-three people. In the Torah, a murderer is called a “*nephesh* slayer,”⁸ and a kidnapper is called a “*nephesh* thief.”⁹ On the first pages of the Bible, both humans and animals are called “a living *nephesh*,” and if the life-breath has left a human or animal, the *nephesh* remains. It’s just called a “dead *nephesh*,”¹⁰ that is, a corpse.

So in the Bible, people don’t have a *nephesh*; rather, they are a *nephesh*: a living, breathing, physical being. Now that might surprise you because most people assume the Bible says the “soul” is what survives apart from the body after death. And while the biblical authors do have a concept of people existing after death waiting for their resurrection, they rarely talk about it, and when they do, they don’t use the word “*nephesh*.”

So even though *nephesh* is often translated as “soul,” the Hebrew word really refers to the whole human as a living, physical organism. In fact, this is why biblical people can often use this word to refer to themselves, and it gets translated “me” or “I.” Like in Psalm 119, most translations read, “let *me* live, that *I* may praise you.” In Hebrew, the poet literally says, “let *my nephesh* live, that *it* may praise you.” By using *nephesh*, the poet emphasizes that their entire being, their life and their body, offer thanks to God.

8. This is found in Numbers 31:19. When someone’s trying to kill you, they are “seeking your *nephesh*,” like Saul hunting David in 1 Samuel 20:1.

9. See Deuteronomy 24:7.

10. See Leviticus 21:11. In the sacrificial system, blood is a symbol of *nephesh* and even identified with life itself. See also Leviticus 17:11, 14.

In the Song of Songs, the young woman constantly refers to her lover as “the one my *nephesh* loves.”¹¹ And of course, “love” isn’t just an intellectual experience; it’s an emotion that activates your whole body, your entire *nephesh*.

This helps us understand the brilliance of other biblical poets who could combine multiple meanings of *nephesh* in one place. Like in Psalm 42, we read, “as the deer pants for the water, so my *nephesh* pants after you, my *nephesh* thirsts for the living God.” So on a physical level, your throat can be thirsty like a deer’s, but then that physical thirst can become a metaphor for how your physical being longs to know and be known by your creator.¹²

Which brings us all the way back to the Shema. To love God with all your *nephesh* means to devote your whole physical existence to your creator, the one who granted us these amazing bodies in the first place. It’s about offering your entire being with all of its capabilities and limitations in the effort to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

And that’s the Hebrew word for soul.

11. See Song of Songs 3:1. When used as a synecdoche like this, it’s employed like a pronoun and helps with emphasis.

12. **DIG DEEPER:** Read Psalm 35 and identify where and how the poet uses the diverse meaning of *nephesh*. Grab an interlinear Bible (or use one online) and see how you did!



