

“Dead Souls” and “Open Vessel.” Is There a Need for a “New” Meaning of the Hebrew Word *nefeš*?

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Abstract: The noun *nefeš* is ascribed the sense of “corpse” in several instances of the Hebrew Bible. All of them are analysed to trace the possible development of the semantic field of this word. It leads to the conclusion that this implied sense arose from the shortening of longer phrases (*nefeš ʾādām*; *nefeš mēt*). The noun *nefeš* used in them, however, retains its basic meaning of “person,” and its reference to a corpse is only apparent from the context. In a similar sense, the author also reads the use of the abbreviated version, which represents a person and not just a corpse (synecdoche) – a person who dies and gradually passes into the hereafter.

Keywords: *nefeš*, corpse, deceased, ritual impurity, open vessel

The word “soul” is not quite right in translating the Hebrew noun *nefeš*. If it is already used in translation, then it is noted that it is not the soul in the Greek (Platonic) sense that is at issue here.¹ Nevertheless, the phrase “dead souls” cited in the title is a symbolic reference to the title of Nikolai Gogol’s novel, in which the names of the dead were used as if they were still alive. In the following article we essentially aim to look at a curious use of the Hebrew noun *nefeš* in the sense of “corpse” presumed by many scholars and translators, found mainly in the Book of Numbers and in a few other utterances outside of it (Lev 19:28; 21:11; 22:4; Hag 2:13).

The feminine noun *nefeš* has a rather broad semantic field that includes both very concrete senses such as throat, throat, neck (Lev 11:6; 21:5; Isa 5:14; Jer 31:12; Ps 105:18; 119:25; 124:7; Jonah 2:6), breath (Job 41:13), last breath (Gen 35:18), and more abstract ones: desire or thirst (Exod 15:9; Ps 17:9). *Nefeš* also means life force; something that makes a creature a living being (Gen 1:20–21.24; 2:7.19; 9:10.12.15–16; Lev 11:10; 1 Kgs 17:20–21). This life-giving element is often located in the blood (Gen 9:4–5; Lev 17:11; Deut 12:23). His annihilation means death (Josh 10:28.30.32.35.37; cf. Akkadian *napištu tabālu* – “to pour out someone’s soul”; then also Gen 35:18; Ps 141:18; Isa 53:12; Jer 15:9; Lam 2:12). The noun *nefeš* is also understood as a carrier and expression of feelings, affects, moods; something that allows us to reflect the inner state of man, a reflection of

¹ Cf. Rösel, “Die Geburt der Seele,” 151–170; Lemański, “O właściwe rozumienie,” 11–64. Later also van Oorschot, “Lost in Translation,” 117–131.

the soul (*animus* in the sense of its inner experiences and thoughts) (Gen 34:3; Song 1:7; 3:1–4), expresses longing (Isa 26:9; Ps 42:3; 63:2), appetite, hunger, thirst (Exod 15:9; Jer 50:19; Ps 63:6), and even the means of sustaining life – food, sustenance (Isa 58:10; Prov 21:23) and perfume (Prov 27:9).² *Nefeš* – especially in the context of counting or giving numbers – can represent a whole human being, a person (Gen 46:15.22.25.27; Exod 1:5), an individual (Lev 24:17; Num 9:6; 19:11.18; 31:35; Ezek 13:19), or a collective (Gen 46:26–27; Exod 1:5; Isa 49:7); any living creature (Gen 1:20–21; 9:12; Lev 11:46; Ezek 47:9). Finally, the word also serves as a reflexive pronoun (Exod 30:12; Lev 30:14; Deut 4:9; Eccl 7:21; 10:23; 34:2; Ps 35:13; Job 9:21; 1 Sam 18:3; Isa 46:2; 53:10; 58:10). It just as often means one’s own “self” (Gen 12:13; 19:20; 27:4.25; Lev 23:10; Judg 16:30). It is also a constitutive element in formulas containing supplications (Judg 5:21; Isa 61:10).³ In this wide range of meanings, it is not difficult to find the effects of a certain evolution in the meaning of the noun *nefeš*, from the concrete meaning (throat, neck) through the derivative connotations (breathing, life or what constitutes it, the [living] person), and so on to the more abstract uses. Nevertheless, there are several peculiar meanings of this noun that appear mainly in the Book of Numbers and in rather late dated texts. The peculiarity arises from the fact that a word generally associated with the realm of life and spirit clearly refers here to dead persons or their bodies.⁴ It is these statements that we want to look at more closely in the present article and evaluate the validity and legitimacy of the proposed latter meanings for the word *nefeš*.

1. Can *nefeš* Be Translated as “corpse”?

There are only a few utterances in which the word of interest seems to take on the sense of “dead” or “corpse.” In the Book of Numbers we find two such usages in which, according to many scholars and interpreters, *nefeš* clearly takes on the sense of “corpse” (Num 5:2; 9:10).⁵

² The last two senses suggested, among others, in: *DCH* IV, 732, no. 10, 11.

³ Westermann, “*nepēš* Seele,” *THAT* II, 71–95; *KBL*, I, 668–670; *Ges*¹⁸, IV, 833–835.

⁴ *KBL*, I, 670 notes this meaning under no. 9: “soul of the dead, deceased person, corpse [...] properly: “body” and refers to no. 5 (people, also understood as individuals), where the statements of interest in the Book of Numbers are mentioned, among others, while at the same time ultimately suggesting the sense of “corpse.” *DCH* IV, 731, no. 8c also notes the sense „deceased person,” pointing additionally to the Qumran texts (4QD^d 8.24; 4QNidd 45; 4QT 16.4). Under no. 12 (733) + the sense „sepulchre (funerary) monument”), attested in another text from Qumran (3QTr 15).

⁵ This meaning – apart from those cited above – is noted by virtually all dictionaries.

In the first case, it involves removing from the camp any person who is in a state of ritual impurity enlisted for three different reasons:

Command the children of Israel to expel from the camp every leper, every one having leaks, and every one unclean because of contact with a corpse (*w^hkōl ṭāmē' lānnāfeš*) (Num 5:2).⁶

This is a statement placed in the context of the description of the priestly powers (Num 5:1–6:27) associated with keeping the camp surrounding the Tabernacle clean. In terms of content, however, the short pericope of Num 5:1–4 also fits well with the preceding chapters. The list of unclean persons contained therein, on the one hand, refers the reader back to the regulations already known from Lev 13–15 (the basic rules regarding the issue of *šāraʾat*), and at the same time allows us to look forward to the regulations regarding contamination related to contact with the realm of death (Num 19). It is noteworthy, however, that there is now no mention of any ritual of purification as described later in Num 19. There, moreover, everything is done “in camp” because there is no explicit mention of having to leave the camp.⁷ It is nevertheless difficult to determine conclusively whether the passage analyzed here is later than the ritual described in Num 19. The pericope of Num 19 in its present form is itself considered relatively recent, although it may contain more ancient elements.⁸ He further classifies the ritual and indications described there as a “perpetual law” (Num 19:10). The text of Num 5:1–4 could therefore be a later passage, or it could have originated independently at the same time that the pericope of Num 19 was forming.⁹ The utterance, however, also because of the presumed identical use of the word *nefeš* in the sense of “corpse,” may stand close to the regulations in Lev 22:4–7 that deal with the ritualistic purification of priests:

No descendant of Aaron, who would be a leper or suffering from leakage, shall be allowed to eat the holy objects until he has undergone purification. So shall it be with one who has touched someone unclean because of the dead (*w^hhannōgēa' b^hkōl-ṭāmē'-nefeš*), or one from whom semen has flowed (Lev 22:4).

The quoted passage is from the so-called Holiness Code, dated today at the earliest to the Second Temple period (usually the 5th century BCE).¹⁰ Nevertheless, the part of the statement that interests us (v. 4d[–5]) concerns the specific case

⁶ Biblical texts are translated by the author.

⁷ It is possible, however, that such “expulsion” is simply assumed here as self-evident; cf. Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, 185–186.

⁸ Seebass, *Numeri. Kapitel 10,11–22,1*, 253: dates it between 400–300 BCE.

⁹ Both texts may belong to the youngest literary strata of the Book of Numbers; so Achenbach, *Die Vollen- dung*, 525–529, 615–622.

¹⁰ For a discussion of this issue, cf. Lemański, *Prawo Pana doskonałe*, 111–114.

of the enlistment of the so-called “secondary uncleanness,” which is less dangerous than direct contact with the body of the deceased. The latter case, according to Numbers 19, would require a seven-day separation (a type of quarantine) and ritual purification. As Thomas Hieke writes, “It becomes clear that this text here seems to presuppose the aforementioned provisions from Lev 11–15 and Num 19, and thus originated later than them.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the possibility of purification is assumed in this provision, whereas it is not in Num 5:2. Priests, with the exception of the high priest, may engage in ritual impurity because of contact with the deceased only when attending the funeral of immediate relatives (cf. Lev 21:1–3; cf. Ezek 44:25). In other cases, they were not allowed to take part in the funeral ceremonies. The purification ritual is not described in detail this time. In contrast, in Num 19 we find a detailed ritual situated, however, clearly outside of regular worship.¹² Perhaps, however, it is a remnant of an ancient apotropaic ritual containing elements of defense against the effects of the cult of the dead.¹³ Then it would be – as in the case of Lev 22:4–7 – a canonization of an ancient ritual.¹⁴ These points, however, cannot be proven conclusively, as Horst Seebass rightly points out.¹⁵ Num 19 in any case does not take into account the expulsion from the camp, but the cleansing done within it, which in turn is not permitted by the provision in Num 5:2. Thus, the passage in Num 5:1–4 could theoretically contain a fragment of an older tradition added earlier to the basic version of Num *1–4.¹⁶ Thus we have, on the one hand, the clearly younger (post-exilic) texts of Lev 22:4 and Num 19 and the potentially older passage of Num 5:2–4. It is therefore difficult, for the time being, to determine on this basis when the word *nefeš* could have been used to describe the body of the deceased.

The second example from the book of Numbers is related to the Passover celebration in the desert, from which some Israelites must be excluded. The context of the present utterance (Num 5–9) is provided by post-priestly additions and supplements, however, attached to the Book of Numbers before the canonical Pentateuch was formed.¹⁷ A portion of this pericope is derived from the Passover provisions of Exod 12 (cf. Num 9:2–5.11–12), and the rest of the verses could be a later addition (Num 9:6.9–10a), connecting the legislative passage (vv. 10b–12) to the desert tradition and treating the effects of contact with corpses as the basis for later remarks.¹⁸

11 Hieke, *Leviticus 16–27*, 851.

12 On this topic, cf. Lemański, “Woda oczyszczenia,” 221–260.

13 Thus translated by Seebass in *Numeri. Kapitel 10,11–22,1*, 243–245.

14 Thus translated by Seebass in *Numeri. Kapitel 1,1–10,10*, 110.

15 Seebass, *Numeri. Kapitel 1,1–10,10*, 110.

16 For arguments in favour of this thesis, cf. Seebass, *Numeri. Kapitel 1,1–10,10*, 110–111.

17 Cf. Seebass, *Numeri. Kapitel 1,1–10,10*, 222–226; Lemański, *Tora – Pięcioksiąg*, 554–556.

18 Thus Kellermann, *Die Priesterschrift*, 124–133. Diether Kellermann suggests a dating to the exile period, which is critically reviewed by Philip J. Budd (*Numbers*, 97) among others: “It seems just as likely that the reference to traveling reflects a relatively stable post-exilic situation than the circumstances of the exile itself.”

Nevertheless, the text may well be an attempt from beginning to end to describe what has already become the prevailing custom in dealing with cases of contact with cadavers. “This custom receives divine authentication, while a later unique example about merchants being on the move is added by the author.”¹⁹ The passage implies centralization of worship in any case and may represent a late accommodation of (post)priestly regulations based on Deuteronomistic Law.²⁰

[...] every man, if he be unclean because of (touching) a corpse (*kī- jihjeh – tāmē’ lānnāfeš*)
[...] (Lev 9:10).

This time, therefore, we can define the time of the text’s composition as late post-exilic and place the “new” meaning of the word *nefeš* in that period. In this case, however, it is also worth noting the earlier use of a longer phrase in the same context:

However, there were certain people who, who were unclean because of (touching) the corpse of a man (*šmē’im l’nefeš ’ādām*) [...] (Num 9:6).

This may suggest that the use of the noun *nefeš* itself in the presumed sense of “corpse/body of the deceased” may be a kind of abbreviated form derived from the fuller phrase.

However, in Lev 19:28, where we also find the use of the word *nefeš* alone in reference to the dead, we read the following:

And an incision because of a dead person (*lānefeš*) you shall not make on your body [...] (Lev 19:28a).

Lev 19 is a text clearly inspired by the Decalogue and other Torah regulations and an example of late, intra-biblical exegesis.²¹ In the statement of interest to us, the matter concerns mourning rituals (Deut 14:1; Jer 16:6; 41:5; 47:5; 48:37), later forbidden, for example, to priests (Lev 21:5)²² because of the association of these practices with the realm of death. In the quoted formulation, however, it is clearer than before that *nefeš* itself here refers to the person of the deceased rather than merely to his corpse or body. Therefore, one can think that in the two previous cases this interpretation (the deceased person and not their corpse) is also possible²³ and there is no need to

¹⁹ Thus Budd, *Numbers*, 97.

²⁰ Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, 293.

²¹ On this subject, cf. Hieke, *Leviticus 16–27*, 706–709.

²² On this subject more fully cf. Lemański, “Czy w Biblii istnieje,” 29–44.

²³ This is, in fact, how Hans W. Wolff (*Anthropology*, 34) understood it: “she (*nefeš* is of the feminine gender) does not indicate a dead soul or a slain life, but precisely a dead person, a dead individual, a corpse...” Nevertheless, the same Wolff immediately afterwards adds: “It is worth noting that in some texts, *nefeš*,

give this noun a “new” sense. As we will see below, this may be about the process of dying, and *nefeš* – despite physical death – describes someone who has not yet fully departed this world to Sheol. The process of passing away will only be completed when they are buried.

We find similar usage later still in the text of the post-exilic prophet Haggai:

And Haggai said, ‘If anyone unclean [because ²⁴of] a dead person (*l^emē²-nepeš*) touches any of these [things], will he be unclean?’ (Hag 2:13).

In the latter case, the Syriac version translates, “someone whose soul is impure,” but this concept of an “impure soul” comes from later rabbinic law.²⁵ Staying with the Masoretic version, it should be noted that exegetes in this case are divided as to whether to translate *nefeš* here as we did above: “a dead person,”²⁶ or, suggesting the context, to take the more likely sense of “corpse” (cf. Num 22:4).²⁷ It is undoubtedly about the case of enlisting ritual impurity through contact with a corpse. Nevertheless, *l^emē²-nefeš* may here be an abbreviation for *l^emē²-nefeš mēt*, a fuller formula that will be discussed below.²⁸ Thus, in the present case, the translation that gives *nefeš* the sense of “person” requires adding that it is “a deceased person.” It does not change the fact, however, that the *nefeš* itself retains its fundamental meaning at the same time, and only because of the use of the “abbreviated form” of speech does it also represent the body of the deceased.

2. Are *nefeš 'ādām* and *nefeš mēt* Phrases Meaning Human Corpse?

The aforementioned phrase *l^enefeš 'ādām* (cf. Num 9:6) later recurs once again in the regulations of Num 19:

Whoever touches a dead person (*b^emēt*) because of any human corpse (*l^ekōl-nefeš 'ādām*) shall be unclean (*w^etāmē²*) for seven days (Num 19:11).

without being accompanied by the word *met* (dead) nevertheless indicates the corpse of a human person (Num 5:2; 6:11; cf. Num 19:11,13)."

²⁴ The complement form here has a causative sense; thus Joüon – Muraoka, *A Grammar*, §129i.

²⁵ Weitzman, *The Syriac Version*, 220.

²⁶ Thus translated by Bernhard Duhm (“Anmerkungen,” 110).

²⁷ Koopmans, *Haggai*, 226.

²⁸ This is suggested by many scholars including Marti, *Das Dodekapropheton*, 388; Peter, “Księga Aggeusza,” 228–229; Verhoef, *The Book of Haggai*, 118: “defilement of a person of a dead body”; Taylor – Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, 176, n. 27.

Anyone who touches a dead person (*b^emēt*), the corpse of a man (*b^enefeš hāādām*) who has died (*’āšer-jāmūt*) and does not purify themselves, makes unclean the Tabernacle of YHWH and such a person should be excluded (*krt*) from the community (*hanefeš hahiw*) [...] (Num 19:13a).

Here we have again the same language as in the passage already quoted from Lev 22:4. The pericope of Num 19 itself – as we have already noted – is post-exilic in its present form. However, a precise critical-literary analysis of the above verses (vv. 10/11–13) is not easy. They may be a later addition to some earlier passage,²⁹ but they could just as well belong to the original version of the text (general case: vv. 10b–13), later supplemented by specific instances of contamination taking place in a tent (vv. 14–15), and in the field (v. 16). As a whole, however, it is the unanimous opinion of scholars that, if not the entire pericope (there are no explicit references to vv. 1–10 in the latter part of the pericope), at least the latter part of the pericope is clearly post-exilic.³⁰

The preposition *l^e* in the first example indicates the cause or effect of some action. In this case, it is the touching of the deceased that causes ritual contamination. This touching of the dead, referred to here first as *mēt*, is parallel to the enlistment of uncleanness caused by contact (“because of any”) with “the body of the deceased” (*nefeš ’ādām*). This is even more pronounced in the second example, where the phrase *b^enefeš hāādām* is an adjunct to the phrase *b^emēt* and is further specified with the words “who died” (*’āšer-jāmūt*). So how do we translate the entire phrase? Baruch A. Levine proposes the sense of “(contact) with a body belonging to any human being who has died.”³¹ He later notes, however, that *nefeš* here need not necessarily mean “a dead person,” since the final addition suggests that *nefeš ’ādām* here refers to a still-existing person who, it is added, has died.³² We can add to this translation the words “but they did not fully pass into Sheol.” Horst Seebass translates similarly: “the human individual/the human entity/that has died.”³³ So in this case, the phrase “(deceased) a human person who has (physically) died” would be the best way to convey the meaning of the whole phrase. Physical death does not mean in the Old Testament the complete annihilation of the deceased. It continues to exist after death in Sheol, though descriptions of this post-mortem state are not

²⁹ Thus translated by Ludwig Schmidt in *Das 4. Buch Mose*, 84–85. Levine (*Numbers 1–20*, 465) notes the syntax in the sentence, which he judges to be typical of a later phase in the development of biblical language and post-biblical Hebrew. However, he himself later notes that the *relative force* that the definite genitive acquires in this syntax is also typical of earlier and later legal formulas (cf. Exod 21:12; Num 35:12); cf. also the argument in: Lemański, “Woda oczyszczenia,” 231.

³⁰ On the critical-literary discussion of this text, cf. Lemański, “Woda oczyszczenia,” 228–234.

³¹ Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, 185.

³² Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, 465.

³³ Seebass, *Numeri. Kapitel 10,11–22,1*, 240.

precise. In the same sentence (v. 13a), the repeated use of the word *nefeš* at the end of the statement means a living person to be removed from the community because of ritual contamination. If we accept these arguments, then we have here a potential trace of the path of development of the “new” meaning of the word *nefeš*, which only with time and in specific contexts became synecdoche – a word that also means the body of a dead person.

Similar formulas, though with a slight change (*nefeš mēt*),³⁴ appear in connection with uncleanness contracted through contact with the body of the deceased in the regulations relating to the nazirite and the high priest. The first of these texts is classified rather as a later (in relation to the so-called *Grundschrift-P*), priestly addition.³⁵ The second belongs to the Holiness Code already discussed and is also post-exilic and later than the early Pentateuchal priestly texts.

All the days that he is consecrated to YHWH he shall not approach (*lō' jābō*) the body of a dead person (*'al-nefeš mēt*) (Num 6:6).

And he shall not enter (*lō' jābō*) where there is any dead body (*w^eal kōl-nefeš mēt*); because of his father and because of his mother he shall not be made unclean (*lō' jittammā*) (Lev 21:11).

Both texts refer to “dead persons,” which this time is described by the phrase *nefeš mēt*. Also, in both again the meaning is more like “person” or “(still existing in some way after death) a being who has died.” *Nefeš* itself would therefore still make traditional sense here. It represents someone who has lived, breathed, but is now dead, which, as we have already noted, does not mean that it does not exist. The antonym of this phrase (*nepeš hajjâ*), apart from Gen 2:7b.19b, appears essentially only in contexts connected with priestly texts, and most often denotes living creatures in general: animals (aquatic Gen 1:20.21; Lev 11:10.46; Ezek 47:9; terrestrial: Gen 1:24; 9:10; 12:15) or that which makes them living creatures (Gen 1:30). Gen 9:16 refers to all living creatures, so it includes humans. The *nefeš* itself, therefore, in the time immediately following the Babylonian exile does not yet determine whether someone is alive or dead. In order to specify their existential situation, an addendum is needed to concretize this condition.

³⁴ Seligson, *The Meaning of “nefes met.”*

³⁵ Seebass, *Numeri. Kapitel 1, 1–10, 10*, 158. For an earlier discussion of the gradual growth of this pericope, cf. *ibidem*, 157–158 and Budd, *Numbers*, 69–71.

3. *Nefeš* as a “spirit/soul”?

In the context of the discussion so far about the application of the word *nefeš* to the corpse of a deceased person, what seems particularly interesting in the Book of Numbers is the passage of addition contained in the already cited post-exilic regulations concerning the water of purification (Num 19). It reads as follows:

And here is the law concerning a man who died (*'ādām kî-jāmût*) in a tent. Everyone who enters the tent and everyone who stays in it shall be unclean seven days (v. 14)

Also, every open vessel (*wkōl k'li pātūah*) that does not have a lid attached to it (with string) (*'āšer 'ēn-šāmîd pātîl 'ālājw*) will be unclean (*tāmē' hū'*) (v. 15) (Num 19:14–15).

In the latter case there is no mention of *nefeš* itself, nor of *nefeš 'ādām* or *nefeš mēt*. The deceased is defined here by the phrase “the man who died” (*'ādām kî-jāmût*). However, it is still a question of regulations clarifying (cf. Num 19:11.14–15.16) possible situations of danger of uncleanness resulting from contact with the realm of death. As we noted earlier, it cannot be decided definitively whether these additions (vv. 14–15.16) are later than the general rule (vv. 11.13). However, they make it clear that it is not only contact with the corpse of the deceased that can contaminate the living. This time it says that the entire inner space of the tent may be contaminated because of the deceased. In this spatial structure, only the well-enclosed vessel located there does not succumb to it. It is legitimate, then, to ask what such – if we exclude direct contact with the corpse, which is not now in question, and situations occurring in the open (v. 16: touching the fallen, the bones, or the grave) – makes the enclosed space (the tent) and the open vessel within it unclean?

Old Testament anthropology does not know the concept of the soul, understood as an ontologically distinct part of human being. Man is a psychophysical unity in the Hebrew Bible, although it often distinguishes between that which belongs to the realm of the body (*bāšār*) and that which belongs to the realm of the spirit (*nefeš*; *rūḥ*).³⁶ Nevertheless, when the body died, the whole man died and descended, as was believed, to Sheol. On the other hand, however, this dead (*mēt*) man “descending” to Sheol did not quite die, as evidenced by such practices as necromancy,³⁷ instances of raising the dead known from the traditions of Elijah and Elisha,³⁸ and finally the probable cult of dead ancestors practiced in Israel of the time of the monarchy.³⁹ The biblical authors of Old Testament times do not tell us exactly what was actually left of a person after crossing the line of physical death, and the dead, were referred

³⁶ Janowski, *Anthropologie*, 137–182.

³⁷ Johnston, *Cienie Szeolu*, 184–205.

³⁸ Lemański, *Sprawisz, abym ożył!*, 97–122.

³⁹ Johnston, *Cienie Szeolu*, 206–242; Janowski, *Anthropologie*, 83–92.

to in several different ways in the Hebrew Bible. In addition to the already mentioned noun *mēt*, the words 'ôv or *rēfā'im* are also used. The latter two – leaving aside their actual etymology – are often rendered in modern translations with the word “spirits” or “shadows” (of the dead).⁴⁰ The situation of the dead in Sheol was the opposite of the situation of the living on earth. It was characterized by a lack of life and consequently any activity.⁴¹ Nevertheless, descriptions of Sheol and its inhabitants suggest that something of the dead remained on the other side and, it was believed, it was possible not only to contact them but also to obtain from them some knowledge of the future.

Intriguing to exegetes, the combination of *nefeš*, i.e. a concept associated with life, with the realm of death, and then even its identification with the corpse of the deceased may be, according to some scholars, the result of specific ideas about the transition from life to death.⁴² In the previous statements (Lev 18:28; 21:1; 22:4; Num 5:2; 6:11; 9:6.7.10; Hag 2:13) it could be seen that the term *nefeš*, even if the context indicated that it meant a dead person, could still mean a person who had died and the translation “body/cadaver” was only a certain mental shortcut. In vv. 14–15 however, there is no explicit mention of either *nefeš* or direct contact with the corpse. Contamination occurs indirectly, by being in a closed room where someone has died (v. 14), and by contact with an open vessel (*k'li pātūah*), i.e., one that was not covered by a lid attached to it with a cord (*'ên-šāmīd pātīl*) (v. 15). So what contaminates in this case? Diethelm Michel, referring to the situation described in the texts quoted above, states the following: “One could imagine that after the death the *næpæš* [*nepeš*] is looking for a new body and is trying to slip into it – even if it is ,only an open vessel.”⁴³ In this concept, as the same author will note, *nefeš* could resemble something similar to the Akkadian *eṭemmu* – the spirit of a dead person.⁴⁴ Mesopotamian texts, however, were more concerned with the posthumous well-being of the dead than with avoiding ritual contamination in connection with this idea.⁴⁵ The latter was enlisted there more often in relationships with living people.⁴⁶ The source of the belief in contamination caused by contact with the dead in Israel may also be found not so much in the circle of the dead, but in concern for the need to protect the sacred from forces that threaten death.⁴⁷ For the realm of death was understood as something “alien” to the God of Israel. He was defined as the living God and as the God of the living and not of the dead (cf. Deut 5:26; 1 Sam 17:26.36; Jer 10:10; 23:36).

⁴⁰ Lemański, *Sprawisz, abym ożył!*, 87–94.

⁴¹ On this subject more fully, cf. Lemański, “Hebrajski Szeol,” 67–97.

⁴² Michel, “Nepeš als Leichnam,” 81–84.

⁴³ Michel, “Nepeš als Leichnam,” 83.

⁴⁴ Black – Green, *Słownik mitologii Mezopotamii*, 74, s.v. “gidim.”

⁴⁵ Achenbach, “Verunreinigung,” 347.

⁴⁶ van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*.

⁴⁷ Thus Achenbach, “Verunreinigung,” 348.

On the other hand, although Michel’s proposal is purely speculative, the very idea that man does not quite die with the death of the body and that not immediately does his animating breath (*rû^{ah}; n^šāmâ*) return to the Creator (cf. Ps 104:29–30; 146:3–4; Job 34:14–15; Eccl 12:7) is a good clue here. A fundamental reason not to take this proposition lightly is the “open vessel” mentioned in the biblical text quoted above. While the general principle (v. 4) points to the danger of contamination arising from the very proximity of the body of the deceased (the closed space of the tent/house is contaminated), the addition (v. 15) points to some “specific” contaminating agent found in such a space. Otherwise, the enclosed vessel within it would also be unclean. However, the question is clearly about the possibility of “nesting” (source/cause) of uncleanness only in an open vessel. As Dithelm Michel describes it again, “it could result from idea of something movable detaching itself from the corpse and attempting to slip into a vessel [...]”⁴⁸ This shows that giving the feminine word *nefeš* the “new” sense of “corpse,” while helpful in translating the statements discussed earlier, does not fully reflect the actual meaning of the word. All the passages of the biblical text examined above – as we have noted – are equally well understood when *nefeš* is interpreted in its fundamental sense, as a person who, as is clear from the present context in turn, leaves a dying body and, before finally ending up in Sheol, wishes to find, for the time being, a new “place to stay.”⁴⁹ It is not without significance here that mourning for the deceased usually lasted seven days and that customs were practiced during it that allowed the living to symbolically sympathize and identify with the deceased, accompanying him in a kind of rite of passage from this world to Sheol.⁵⁰ It was the time to “escort” the deceased (their *nefeš*) to Sheol. After the mourning was over, the living would return to their lives, removing the signs of it.⁵¹

Conclusions

The noun *nefeš*, in several instances occurring alone (Lev 19:28; 22:4; Num 5:2; 9:10; Hag 2:13), is clearly used in a context related to ritual contamination caused by contact with someone dead. Consequently, many translations render it with the word “corpse” or the phrase “because of a corpse.” In a few instances the longer phrase *l^enefeš ’ādām* (Num 9:6; 19:11.13) or *nefeš mēt* (Num 6:6; Lev 21:11) is used in a similar context. Some researchers today believe that we are in fact dealing with a certain semantic evolution of the word *nefeš*, which took place through a process of

⁴⁸ Achenbach, “Verunreinigung,” 348.

⁴⁹ Achenbach, “Verunreinigung,” 348: “[...] aspires to find a new dwelling place before descending into Sheol.” Cf. also Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 197–198.

⁵⁰ Johnston, *Cienie Szeolu*, 57–59.

⁵¹ On this topic, cf. Lemański, “Czy w Biblii istnieje,” 29–43.

reduction of the longer formula in which this noun still meant “person” and only as a result of the use of the shortened form did it acquire a new meaning: “corpse”; “body of the dead.” Three observations may support the validity of these assumptions. The first concerns the use of the word *nefeš* itself in Num 9:10, which precedes the use of a longer formula earlier in the same context (cf. Num 9:6: *l'nefeš 'ādām*). The second observation is related to the statement in Lev 19:13a, in which the phrase *b^cnefeš hāādām* (“[touch] the corpse of a man”) is synonymous with the phrase *b^cmēt* “[touch] the dead,” but at the same time requires the clarifying addition *'āšer-jāmût* (“who died”). The third and finally observation concerns the phrase *nefeš mēt*, which has its antonym in the phrase *nefeš hajjâ*, used most often in priestly texts (cf., however, Gen 2:7). In this case, the clarification of which *nefeš* is referred to, the dead or the living person, suggests that the noun itself did not mean the body of the deceased, his corpse, but precisely the person in the process of departing from this world to Sheol. Although it is possible to assume that by way of semantic development the noun *nefeš* may have come to mean the dead or their corpse as a form of semantic abbreviation, it is just as likely that in the utterances of the biblical authors it continued to refer to the person in question still existing in a new dimension (without the body, which is dead), and only through the use of an abbreviated form of utterance did it become a synecdoche meaning in certain contexts someone who had died. The process of this semantic transformation, given the dating of the individual texts, occurred in the late period of the so-called Second Temple times. The validity of the latter interpretation may be evidenced by the statement in Num 19:14–15, which refers explicitly to “secondary” contamination, which occurs not through contact with a corpse, but by being in a closed room in which someone has died or by contact with an open vessel in the room. This last motif, in particular, makes one think that at the moment of death there is some elements present in the room, independent of the body, which may still try to “nest” in this world for some time, if only in an open vessel. Although there is no explicit mention of *nefeš*, some element of the deceased’s personality apparently remains active in the world of the living for some time after death and can ritually contaminate them. The passage thus shows that the presence of the animating element in the realm of death does not end immediately with the dying person’s last breath. Thus, when *nefeš* is mentioned in the context of contamination caused by contact with the body of the deceased, the word can mean a still “existing” person who has not yet fully departed from the world of the living. Although the authors of Old Testament times, at least until the Hellenistic period, were not yet familiar with the term “soul,” it is reasonable to believe that the concept of a “spirit of the dead” (like the Akkadian *etemmu*) still existing was close to them.

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