**The Difference between ‘Spirit’ and ‘Soul’ in Hebrew**

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**Introduction**

The words ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ have no significant difference in usage in the Bible. It can be confusing to attempt to discern the precise differences between the two.[[1]](#footnote-1) Some argue that they are interchangeable. However, from a perspective of Hebrew language, it shows that both come from distinct primitive roots and they are essentially different in concept.

**About ‘Spirit’**

The Hebrew word ‘spirit’ (רוּחַ) first appears in Genesis,

"וְהָאָ֗רֶץ הָיְתָ֥ה תֹ֙הוּ֙ וָבֹ֔הוּ וְחֹ֖שֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵ֣י תְהֹ֑ום וְ**ר֣וּחַ** אֱלֹהִ֔ים מְרַחֶ֖פֶת עַל־פְּנֵ֥י הַמָּֽיִם׃ " (Gen1:2),

which can be divided into three sections (a, b and c):

" וְהָאָ֗רֶץ הָיְתָ֥ה תֹ֙הוּ֙ וָבֹ֔הוּ " (Gen1:2 a)

Now the earth was formless and empty

" וְחֹ֖שֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵ֣י תְהֹ֑ום " (Gen1:2 b)

darkness was over the surface of the deep

" וְר֣וּחַ אֱלֹהִ֔ים מְרַחֶ֖פֶת עַל־פְּנֵ֥י הַמָּֽיִם׃ " (Gen1:2 c)

and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

The First Appearance of Hebrew Words (yellow) in the Scripture.

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| **#** | **@** | **Hebrew** | **Sound** | **English** | **Type** | **Notes** |
| 1 | a | הָיָה | *haya* | be, become | v | also הָוָה |
| 2 | a | תֹּהוּ | *tohu* | vain, confusion, formless, waste, empty | adj | From an unused root meaning to lie waste |
| 3 | a | בֹּהוּ | *bohu* | emptiness, void, waste | adj | Unused root |
| 4 | b | חֹשֶׁךְ | *hosheh* | darkness, obscurity, secret place | n | From primitive root חָשַׁךְ darken |
| 5 | b | פָּנִים | *penim* | Face, upon | n | From פָּנָה turn, prepare |
| 6 | b | תְּהוֹם | *tehome* | deep places, abyss, the deep, sea. | n | From הוּם rang, make a noise, distract |
| 7 | c | רוּחַ | *ruah* | Spirit or spirit, wind, breath, side, mind, blast, vain, air, anger, cool, courage, miscellaneous. | n | From a primitive root רִיחַ smell (8x), touch (1x), quick understanding (1x), accept (1x). |
| 8 | c | רָחַף | *rahav* | move | v | A primitive root |
| 9 | c | מַיִם | *hayim* | water, waters | n | Dual of a primitive noun (but used in a singular sense) |

Analysis

1. In section (b) and (c), four elements are mutual comparative. The pair of ‘darkness’ with ‘deep/abyss’ is parallel to the pair of ‘spirit of God’ with ‘water.’ The ‘darkness’ is opposite to ‘spirit of God;’ the ‘deep/sea/abyss’ is opposite to ‘water.’
2. The noun ‘spirit’ has an attributive adjectives ‘*Elohim*,’ which means ‘spirit’ can be of God or others. There is a tendency that the spirit of God is written as ‘Spirit’ (or the holy spirit) and the spirit of others is translated as ‘ghost.’ The spirit of God that is opposite to ‘darkness’ can also be literally represented as the ‘light of the world’ who is Jesus Christ.
3. The spirit of God hovering over water (Gen1:2c) and ‘darkness’ over the ‘deep’ (Gen1:2b) refers to Jesus walking over water at night between 1-3am, the darkest period in a day (Mat14:25, Mark6:48). Gen1:2(b, c) shows that the ‘spirit’ initially refers to the triune spirit.
4. Two types of spirits can also refer to two types of ‘heavens’ (in plural form) that has day and night rather than layers. "God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘day,’ and the darkness he called ‘night.’ And there was evening, and there was morning - the first day." (Gen1:4-5 NIV)

**About ‘Soul’**

The Hebrew word ‘soul (נֶפֶשׁ) first appears in Genesis,

"וַיִּיצֶר֩ יְהוָ֨ה אֱלֹהִ֜ים אֶת־הָֽאָדָ֗ם עָפָר֙ מִן־הָ֣אֲדָמָ֔ה וַיִּפַּ֥ח בְּאַפָּ֖יו נִשְׁמַ֣ת חַיִּ֑ים וַֽיְהִ֥י הָֽאָדָ֖ם לְ**נֶ֥פֶשׁ** חַיָּֽה׃ " (Gen2:7)

which can be divided into three sections (a, b and c):

" וַיִּיצֶר֩ יְהוָ֨ה אֱלֹהִ֜ים אֶת־הָֽאָדָ֗ם עָפָר֙ מִן־הָ֣אֲדָמָ֔ה " (Gen2:7a)

the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground

" וַיִּפַּ֥ח בְּאַפָּ֖יו נִשְׁמַ֣ת חַיִּ֑ים " (Gen2:7b)

breathed into his nostrils the breath of life

" וַֽיְהִ֥י הָֽאָדָ֖ם לְנֶ֥פֶשׁ חַיָּֽה׃ " (Gen2:7c)

and the man became a living being.

The First Appearance of Hebrew Words (yellow) in the Scripture.

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| **#** | **@** | **Hebrew** | **Sound** | **English** | **Type** | **Notes** |
| 1 | a | יָצַר | *yaza* | formed, made, created, | v | בָּרָא created (Gen1:1, 21, 27). עָשָׂה made (Gen1:7, 11,12,16,25,26,2:2). |
| 2 | a | יְהוָ֨ה | *yhwh* | the LORD. | n | אֱלֹהִ֑ים *Elohim* God |
| 3 | a | עָפָר | *afar* | dust | n | Fr primitive root עָפַר, gray dust |
| 4 | b | נָפַח | *nafar* | blow | v | A primitive root. |
| 5 | b | אַף | *af* | nostril, nose | n | Fr primitive root אָנַףּ (*anaf*, anger) |
| 6 | b | נְשָׁמָה | *nashama* | breath, spirit | n | Fr primitive root נָשַׁם, pant, of a woman in travail or labour. |
| 7 | c | נֶפֶשׁ | *nefesh* | soul | n | Fr primitive root נָפַשׁ breath. |

Analysis

1. Item (1) and (2) share common alphabet ר which shed the light on the difference between the יָצַר and עָשָׂה or בָּרָא in that, יָצַר is related to ‘dust’ whereas עָשָׂה is related to ‘image’ and בָּרָא is related to ‘blessing.’
2. Item (3), (4) and (5) share common alphabet פָ which shed the light on the connection among the dust, nose and breath. They also sound similar in pronunciation (*af*).
3. Item (6) come from the primitive root נָשַׁם, which means ‘pant’ and ‘of a woman in travail or labor.’ It is related to the delivery of woman, or a new life.
4. Item (6) and (7) share common letter נֶ and שׁ which sheds the light on the connection between the breath and soul. The Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ (*nefesh*, soul) can be considered as the combination of נְשָׁמָה (*nashama*, ‘of a woman in travail’) and the letter פָ that represents the ‘dust,’ ‘nostril’ and ‘blow.’

**Comparison between ‘Spirit’ and ‘Soul’**

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| **Items** | **Spirit** | **Soul** | **Notes** |
| Hebrew | רוּחַ | נֶפֶשׁ |  |
| Transliteral | *ruah* | *nefesh* | distinct pronunciation. |
| Order | Gen1:2 | Gen2:7 | ‘spirit’ firstly appears before ‘soul.’ |
| Count | 378x | 573x | in the OT |
|  | Spirit or spirit (232x),  wind (92x),  breath (27x),  side (6x),  **mind** (5x),  blast (4x),  vain (2x),  air (1x),  anger (1x),  cool (1x),  courage (1x),  miscellaneous (6x). | soul (475x),  life (117x),  person (29x),  heart (15x),  **mind** (15x),  creature (9x),  body (8x),  himself (8x), yourselves (6x),  dead (5x),  will (4x),  desire (4x),  man (3x),  themselves (3x),  any (3x),  appetite (2x), miscellaneous (47x). | common in mind, invisibility. |
| Primitive Root | רִיחַ  12x  smell (8x),  touch (1x),  quick understanding (1x),  accept (1x). | נָפַשׁ  3x  refreshed (3x). | distinct roots. |
| associated | water | dust | distinct materials. |
| form property | wind,  Heaven,  transparent, clear | gray ground,  Earth,  life (baby or elder) | distinct directions.  Ecc3:21 |
| existence | eternal existence.  omnipresent | being created,  reproduction. |  |
| types | Two,  good vs evil. | One. |  |
| connection | *Elohim* | *Elohim Yhwh* |  |
| usage | interchangeable | interchangeable | Ecc3:21 |

**Conclusion**

1. In Hebrew, רוּחַ(*ruah*, ‘spirit’) and נֶפֶשׁ (*nefesh*, ‘soul’) come from distinct primitive roots. The essential difference between them is that, ‘soul’ is created by God during the process of creation with dust through breath related to the travail of woman, whereas ‘spirit’ eternally exists in the beginning with the triune God (Gen1:2).
2. Spirit can be of two kinds: the spirit of God (the holy or triune spirit, Spirit) representing light or day, and the spirit of Satan that tends to be translated as evil spirit or ‘ghost’ in English, representing the darkness or night. To God, the darkness is as light (Psa139:12).
3. Although spirit belongs to God in heaven and soul belongs to its individual on earth, both are closely associated with life, related to mind, heart (emotion) or strength, and belong to the invisible spiritual world rather than the physical materials.
4. The Hebrew Scripture shows that when Adam was initially created, he had soul but without the holy spirit (Gen2:7). It could be a reason that God said that it is not good for Adam to live alone (Gen2:18). Although God gave Adam a woman companion later on, God did not give him the triune spirit until Jesus came into the world. Today, man can freely accept the holy spirit to satisfy his soul with the living water. It is because of His grace and mercy.

1. <https://www.gotquestions.org/soul-spirit.html>, visited in 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)