



# Unlocking the Layers of Laughter

The term *schok*, laughter, appears several times across various books in Tanach. In some contexts, it might be construed as an act of frivolity, mockery, or ridicule. Alternatively, it may have connotations of joy and exuberance. Undoubtedly, *schok* is quite multifaceted, its definition varied based on the settings in which it arises. This article will explore the manner in which Kohelet illustrates the complexities behind *schok*, an understanding that will be applied to other occurrences of this word throughout Tanach in order to appreciate the true depth and nuance behind the term.

Kohelet's first mention of *schok* states "I said of laughter, it is foolishness, and of happiness, what does it accomplish?" (Kohelet 2:2). This excerpt maintains a harsh perspective of *schok*, equating it to folly and uselessness. Why the severe

condemnation of laughter and joy? Commentators on this verse provide explanations for the distinct form of laughter to which Kohelet refers here. Shadal, Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto on Kohelet 2:2, writes, "Happiness like this, that is without reason, but rather a human's compelling himself to be happy, is not complete happiness which is enjoyed by the soul." Shadal says that the *schok* Kohelet denounces is laughter devoid of meaning, laughter for the sake of itself. Similarly, R. Ovadiah Seforno, on the same verse, defines this type of laughter as, "Without intention for a proper purpose." Once again, there is an emphasis on the lack of substance behind this laughter. Evidently, Kohelet's statement criticizes the act of empty laughter, as it does not achieve true, substantive joy.

Accordingly, the next two mentions of *schok* in Kohelet capture a similar

## Ms. Rena Cantor

Fellow, Graduate Program for  
Advanced Talmudic and Tanach  
Studies, Stern College for Women

theme. The text states in one instance, "Sorrow is better than laughter; for by the sadness of the face the heart is made good" (Kohelet 7:3). Kohelet contrasts foolish laughter with sorrow, a valuable emotion. While anguish stimulates the empathy of others, laughter without meaning accomplishes little. Additionally, Kohelet states, "For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool" (Kohelet 7:6). The imagery used here evokes the sound of cackling, implying the vacuous manner of this laughter. By equating

foolish laughter to the noise of crackling thorns, Kohelet reiterates the hollow and ineffective nature of this *schok*.

However, the word *schok* next arises in a different context in Kohelet, seeming to contradict the previously formed precedent of negativity associated with the term. Here, Kohelet asserts that there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh” (Kohelet 3:4), implying that laughter in certain scenarios is appropriate. Further, Kohelet’s final mention of *schok* states, “Bread is made for laughter, and wine makes the life glad, and money is the answer for all things” (Kohelet 10:9). In this verse, Kohelet provides a recipe for laughter, implying that such laughter is encouraged. It is odd that Kohelet, after all his harsh excoriations of laughter, would now promote it.

Commentators view this statement as a promotion of true laughter. Rashi on Kohelet 10:9 writes, “Without money, there is no feast, therefore, a person should not shy away from work, so that he will have what to produce.” Rashi explains that this type of *schok* is a result of productivity. Exertion and recognition of actualized efforts leads to a feeling of contentment and joy, a satisfaction with one’s notable contribution. The laughter that is achieved following accomplishment is true, fulfilling *schok*.

The *Lekach Tov* on Kohelet 10:9 states, “One who has a field that he sows and produces bread to eat, behold he laughs, for he will not die by famine, and one who has a vineyard and harvests it and produces wine will also be happy with his lot.” The *Lekach Tov*’s interpretation indicates that this *schok* is facilitated through the process and success of labor, the sense of security that is gained through achievement. Similar to Rashi, he views true laughter as a product of productivity.

When observing the differing contexts of the word *schok* throughout Kohelet and its resulting connotations, Kohelet’s appreciation for the multifaceted nature of this term becomes clear. He first demonstrates the worthlessness of empty laughter, perhaps referring to sarcasm, or derisiveness at the expense of others. This type of *schok* is the vice of fools, who, throughout Kohelet, are notoriously indolent. In contrast, Kohelet encourages the laughter that results from exertion and achievement, laughter that can only be attained by one who has labored and felt the sense of security that accompanies successful accomplishment. Kohelet’s understanding of *schok* supports its inherent connection to productivity or lack thereof.

This interpretation of *schok* can be applied more broadly to its appearances throughout Tanach. One such example arises in Yirmeyahu, when he complains in 20:7, “Hashem, you have persuaded me, and I was persuaded. You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I have become a laughing-stock all the day, everyone mocks me.” Yirmeyahu’s statement exemplifies the negative form of *schok*, the hollow laughter that comes at the expense of others. In this instance, the Jews, who have foolishly disregarded Yirmeyahu’s desperate calls for religious improvement, laugh while he works to follow G-d’s commands. The Jews of the time, paradigms of idleness, are prone to this form of derisive *schok*.

This theme of *schok* as ridicule continues in Iyov, which states, “But now they that are younger than I have me in derision, whose fathers I disdained to set with the dogs of my flock” (Job 30:1). Here, Iyov expresses the irony of his wretched predicament; he has become the object of scorn, mocked by those individuals whom he

holds in contempt. Like Yirmeyahu, Iyov, who has withstood and weathered many disappointments, is disparaged by ignorant fools. This verse portrays the type of *schok* that Kohelet deems the worthless sport of unproductive individuals.

In contrast, a valuable form of *schok* appears in Tehillim, which states, “Then our mouth filled with laughter, our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, ‘Hashem has done great things with these’” (Tehillim 126:2).

This poetic account illustrates a joyful recognition of G-d’s success, a moment marked by a bout of exuberant laughter. In a related verse that appears within the same chapter, Tehillim reads, “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy” (Tehillim 126:5). This offers another poignant portrayal of the bond between productivity and happiness, an account that indicates that true joy results from hard-earned accomplishment. It points to a bliss felt only by those who have watched their progress and seen it come to fruition, a sense of self-worth resulting from the realization of an actualized vision.

As noted in *Brown-Driver-Briggs* (pg. 2060), the root *schok* is interchangeable with *tzchok*, a perhaps more familiar term that is similarly translated as laugh. This word famously appears in Bereshit, after G-d informs Avraham that he and Sarah will give birth to a son in their old age. The text reads, “And Avraham fell on his face, and he laughed” (Bereshit 17:17). Additionally, when Sarah hears this information, she laughs: “And Sarah laughed to herself” (Bereshit 18:12). These peculiar instances of laughter can be explained through applying Kohelet’s interpretation of the word *schok*.

**Continued on Page 27**

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.