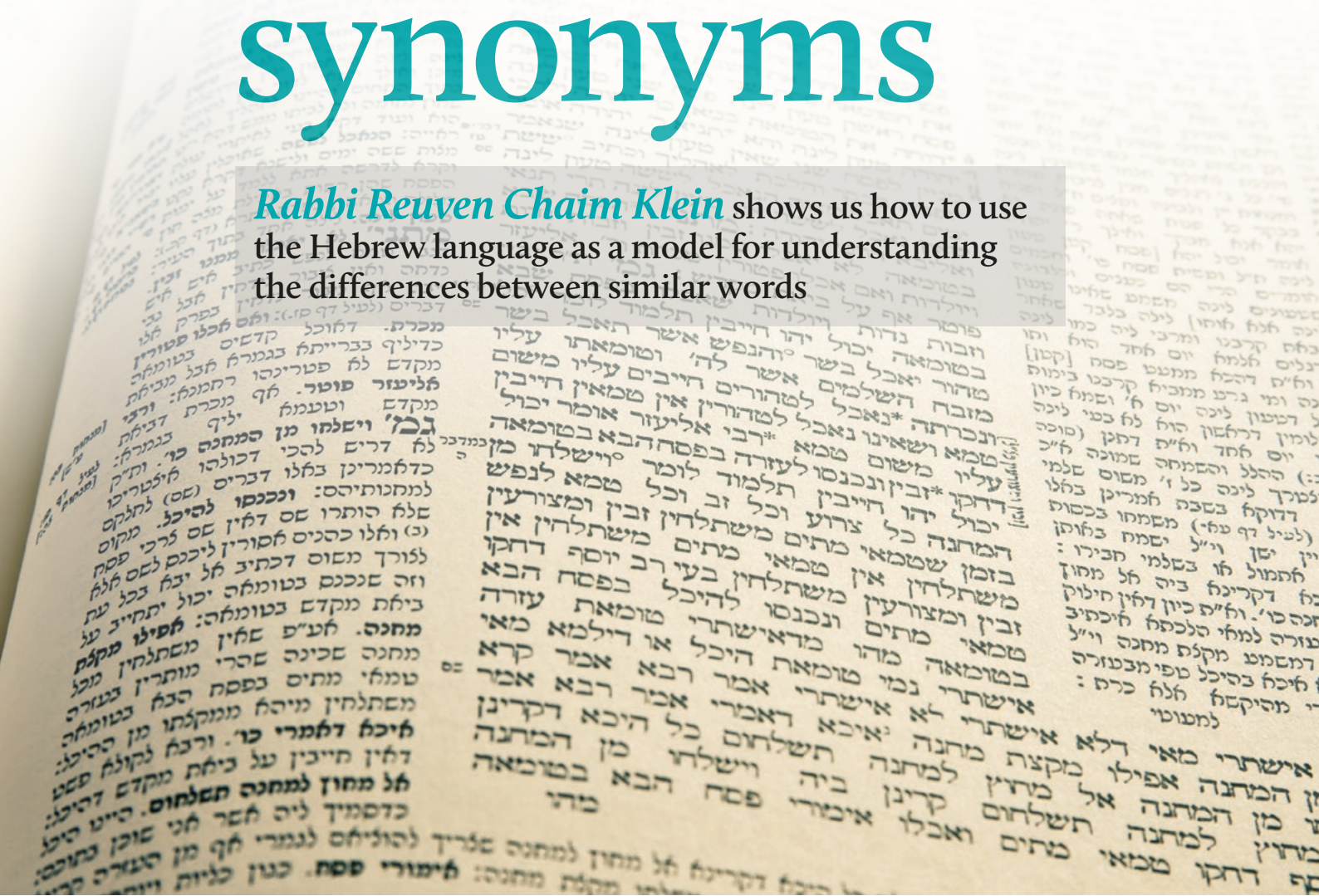# Learning to differentiate between apparent synonyms

Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein shows us how to use the Hebrew language as a model for understanding the differences between similar words

Jewish tradition looks at the Hebrew language as one whose very words are imbued with holiness and inherent meaning. Words are understood to always express the *essence* of what they describe. Kabbalists have long ago noted that the Hebrew words for 'word' and for 'thing' are the same – *davar*. This reflects the view that all elements of creation ('things') are simply divine words crystallised into material existence.

Nonetheless, this traditional view is seriously challenged by a grave difficulty: the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud and other writings within the rich corpus of Hebrew texts use many different Hebrew words that seem to hold the same meaning. If the meanings of words are intrinsic and holy, then why would multiple words be needed for conveying the exact same concept? Multiple words for the same idea are not only superfluous and redundant, but also extraneous!

Because of this, many Jewish scholars of the Hebrew language have assumed that each word in the Hebrew language has its own unique meaning, and so therefore the language cannot contain any synonyms. In attempting to uphold this view, rabbinic scholars have proffered various ways of dealing with apparent synonyms, explaining such sets of words in ways that do not leave their meanings exactly the same. If we understand some of the methods used by these rabbis, we can apply them to the study of language in general, and use these approaches to better understand ostensible synonyms in any language.

Discerning differences between similar words

The solutions that the rabbis have offered generally follow certain predetermined formulae. If you are familiar with examples of these exercises, you can build templates based on these formulae and apply them to the study of other languages.

In many cases, words that are apparently synonymous only seemingly mean the same thing, while a more sophisticated analysis will show nuanced differences between them. In other instances, a given set of words may actually refer to the exact same concept, but focus on or recall different aspects or characteristics of it. This may be true both of nouns and of verbs. When it comes to verbs, the Hebrew language sometimes uses multiple words to denote the same action, but those different words can connote the performance of that action in varied ways, e.g. with different intentions or to different degrees.

Sometimes, disparate words that seem to have the same meaning may actually complement each other in a taxonomical way: one word in a set might be a more vague, general way of referring to another word in the set (hypernym) or, conversely, one word in a set might be a more specific term (hyponym), collapsible into the category represented by another word in that set.

Historical changes sometimes lead to one word being displaced or rendered obsolete in favour of another word that means the same thing. In such cases, the earlier word might make rare appearances alongside, or in tandem with, the newer neologism. The Hebrew language sometimes borrows words from other languages in order to illustrate a point or for poetic embellishment. These words often originate in other Semitic languages, in which they might bear the exact same meaning as a word in Hebrew. In later Hebrew

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Kabbalists are mystical scholars who delve into metaphysical, esoteric Jewish traditions (Kabbalah in Hebrew literally means 'receiving' and 'tradition').

Synonyms are a set of words whose meanings are the same.

Taxonomical refers to the classification of things and how they bracket with one another.

A **hypernym** is a word with a broader meaning that more specific words fall under.

A **hyponym** is a word with a specific meaning that can be included in other, more general words.

A **neologism** is a newly coined word or phrase.

The **Semitic languages** are a family of languages whose place of origin centers on the Levant and Southern Arabia. They include Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Akkadian, Geez and Ugaritic.

Loanwords are words adopted from another language verbatim.

Antonyms are sets of words whose meanings are diametric opposites.

Yeshiva is a religious institute for the study of traditional Jewish texts.

writings, these loanwords might come from such languages as Greek, Latin, German and even English. In such cases, words that bear the same meaning may appear side by side as though they are synonyms, but — in truth — their origins show that they are not 100% synonymous.

Examples of differentiating between synonyms in Hebrew
As a young boy in Los Angeles, I knew about all of the famous streets in my hometown: Hollywood Boulevard, Avenue of the Stars, Melrose Place, Rodeo Drive, Valley Circle and the ubiquitous Third Street (where my Yeshiva was located). But there was one thing that always bothered me: why was this street called an 'avenue' and that street called a 'boulevard', a third street called a 'way' and a fourth called a 'street'? Who decided the appellation to be applied to each of these thoroughfares?

In Hebrew, we have no less than eight different words that mean 'street' or 'path': *derekh, orah, rehov, netiv, mesilah, maagal, mishol* and *shvill.* The plethora of words for this one concept in Hebrew is reminiscent of Franz Boas' alleged claim that the Inuits native to the Arctic North America have hundreds of words for 'ice'. But are they all synonyms?

In various contexts, rabbinic grammarians have explained exactly how these terms differ from one another, thus demonstrating that they are not perfect synonyms. For example, some explain that a *derekh* refers specifically to an intercity road, while a *rehov* refers specifically to an intracity road. Others explain that *derekh* differs from *netiv* in that the former denotes a longer and/or wider road, the latter a shorter and/or narrower road. Another approach – actually

found in the Zohar – argues that while a *derekh* is open to the public, a *netiv* is for private use and is only open to select individuals.

A *mesilah* is said to refer specifically to a 'paved path', while the word *mishol* refers to a pedestrian 'footpath'. *Maagal* is explained as referring to a 'circular path' and is derived from the Hebrew word *igul* ('circle'). Finally, the word *shvill* is explained as related to the Hebrew word *shafel* ('low'), and denotes a path that has a steep incline (so it goes 'downwards').

Destructive words
In one of the more frightening passages of Leviticus, God warns that if the Israelites succumb to sin, then "I will give your cities over to destruction and I will destroy your Temples" (Lev. 26:31). While this verse appears fairly straightforward in English, in the original Hebrew it employs two separate terms to mean 'destruction': *hurban* and *shemamah*. Commentators assume that these two words cannot mean the exact same thing. So how can they be explained in a way that does not leave them as mere synonyms?

Some explain that the term *shememah* is a hypernym that refers to 'destruction' in a general sense, while *hurban* refers to a more specific type of 'destruction' – namely, the destruction of an urban locale. Others explain that the word *shememah* connotes a more severe form of destruction than *hurban*, such that the nuances conveyed in these two words cause them to differ. A third view submits that *hurban* is related to the act of destruction (and is, thus, a sort of cognate to the Hebrew word *herev* – 'sword'), while *shememah* denotes the desolation and emptiness as the

results of destruction.

Maybe yes, maybe no
Another set of Hebrew synonyms can actually be looked at as antonyms in some ways. In the English language, we are familiar with the word 'maybe' – a very neutral word, which on its own conveys neither an optimistic nor pessimistic outlook. However, in the Hebrew language, there are two words for 'maybe': *ulai* and *pen*. Both of these words are commonly translated into English as 'maybe', but commentators explain that they are not quite synonyms, and the English word 'maybe' does not quite do justice to their meaning.

As early as the 15th century, Hebrew grammarians in the mold of Rabbi Elias Levita (1469–1549) asserted that there is no neutral word for 'maybe' in Hebrew. Rather, they maintain that the Hebrew word *ulai* implies the speaker's acceptance of a possible outcome, while the Hebrew word *pen* implies the speaker's rejection of a possible outcome.

To better illustrate the usage of these two types of 'maybe', I would like to use two everyday analogies. When somebody says 'I will enter the raffle because maybe I will win', the entrant *wants* to win and *hopes* that they will. In such a case, the Hebrew word *ulai* is most appropriate. On the other hand, if one says, 'I will buy medical insurance because *maybe* I will fall ill', the word 'maybe' denotes something that the speaker hopes *will not* happen while still acknowledging the possibility that it could. In such a context, the Hebrew word *pen* is more appropriate. Thus, the Hebrew words *ulai* and *pen* might both be translated as 'maybe', but they can hardly be called synonyms if the connotations they imply are

actually the exact opposites of one another.

Rocky words

One does not have to be a geologist to realise that the English words 'stone', 'rock' and 'boulder' basically mean the same thing. In Hebrew, too, there is a litany of words that refer to those hard bits and pieces that you encounter out in nature. Those words include *even, sela, tzur* and *halamish*.

Some explain that *even* and *sela* might both mean 'rock', but they refer to two different types of rocks: *even* refers to a rock detached from the ground, while *sela* refers to a rock that is still attached to the ground.

Others maintain that *even* is a general word – an umbrella term, or hypernym – for all types of rocks, while the other words in question refer to more specific forms of rocks. These grammarians rank the other words in terms of their degrees of hardness. In this model, *sela* ranks lower on Moh's Scale of Mineral Hardness than *tzur* does, while *halamish*'s exact place on the scale is subject to controversy.

Words for 'tree'

For our final example, let's take a look at the Hebrew word for 'tree'. In most places, the Bible uses the word *eitz* when referring to a 'tree'. However, sometimes it uses the word *ilan* or its cognate *ilana*. So, does this mean that *eitz* and *ilan* are synonyms?

If you look closely at all instances in which *ilan(a)* appears in the Bible, you will notice a common thread that unites them: they are all in the Aramaic sections of the Book of Daniel (to be precise, all six times are in Dan. 4:7–23). This indicates that the word *ilan* is not really Hebrew; it is Aramaic. Thus,

because the words *eitz* and *ilan* are actually in two different languages, they are not truly synonyms. Granted, they both mean the same thing, but one word is Hebrew, while the other is Aramaic.

In post-Biblical times, Aramaic had so much influence on Hebrew that the standard word for 'tree' in Rabbinic Hebrew became *ilan*, while the word *eitz* was reserved for a different meaning ('wood').

Rabbinic linguists who wrote about synonyms

Linguistic insights into the differences between ostensible synonyms are scattered throughout rabbinic writings, beginning with the Talmud (completed circa. 500 CE) and continuing through contemporary times. That said, select rabbis have devoted entire works to the subject of synonyms in which they explain the differences between seemingly identical words.

Taking the opposite approach from J. I. Rodale's The Synonym Finder (and other thesauruses), these rabbis wrote lexicons that highlight the differences between words. Said rabbis include Rabbi Avraham Bedersi HaPenini (1230–1300), Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1714–1814), Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer of Vilna (1720–1797), Rabbi Yehuda Leib Edel (1760–1828), Rabbi Meir Leibush Weiser (1809–1879), Rabbi Shimon Dovber Analak of Siedlce (1848–1907) and Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866–1935). They cite from the corpus of Hebrew writings to adduce their explanations, and ultimately present us with more nuanced ways of looking at words that appear, on the surface, to be synonymous. ¶

The cover page for Rabbi Avraham Bedersi's work Hotam Tokhnit (first published in Amsterdam, 1865)

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Find out more

Online

Visit the archives of Rabbi Klein's syndicated column 'What's in a word?', weekly essays that explore the roots of different Hebrew words and explain the differences between apparent synonyms, at ohr.edu/this_week/whats_in_a_word

The Veromemanu Foundation is a rabbinic think-tank that supports the publication of etymological and linguistic insights into the Hebrew language. Their website contains numerous articles as well as a forum for discussion, at biblicalhebrewetymology.com

For a Christian take on the topic of synonyms in the Hebrew Language, check out Robert Baker Girdlestone's *Synonyms of the Old Testament: Their Bearing on Christian Faith and Practice* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1871). Available for free at books.google.com/books?id=D3YcA72rnqQC