

# “But Not in Number”: One and Many in Hebrew Grammar

Posted on [May 13, 2015](#) by [Adam Zagoria-Moffet](#)



Hebrew contains a feature which, to my knowledge, is unique among both Semitic and non-Semitic languages. That is, there is a small but significant class of nouns which are plural in form but singular in concept. The nature of this handful of Hebrew words is telling not only about the beauty of *lashon haqodesh* (the language of holiness) but also about the way we understand God.

There are four commonly cited examples of this grammatical phenomena:

מים – *mayim* – ‘water’

שמים – *shamayim* – ‘sky, Heaven’

פנים – *panim* – ‘face’

חיים – *chayyim* – ‘life’

Notably, the English translations for each of these are firmly singular (water, sky, face, life), yet the Hebrew form possesses a plural ending (*-im*) and is treated as plural when put into agreement with an adjective (for example, ‘good life’ is *chayyim tovim*, both of which are plural). Why do we use plural words for these concepts which are singular? ‘Face’ is just a face, right? ‘Waters’ sounds more King James than King David. Why these things in particular? What connects them?

Although speculations abound online, most erroneously argue that the reason these particular nouns are conceived of as plural is because they are so massive as to be given ‘honorary plural’ status. The argument, according to some, is that life, sky, water – all these are things whose immensity is incapturable except through a linguistic form that conveys plurality.

Yet it is not *plurality* which these words express at all – it is *multiplicity*.

That is, these words do not describe a *group* of things – they describe one thing *which is many*. How can something be both one and many at the same time? It can only be so if it is something which is constantly changing.

That is the meaning behind these strange Hebrew nouns – they are things which are never bound to one form. Constantly changing, appearing in a multiplicity of images, a variety of perceptions. Think about it. Water is never still – always moving, flowing, changing. Similarly, the sky is constantly changing – clouds moving, shapes forming, patterns developing. The human face too, is something which never retains exactly the same form. Not only is every face different – but any one given face is constantly changing, the ticks of tiny muscles, the movement of eyes, the breath in the nostrils. Lastly, it should be no surprise that *life* is something constantly changing. That lesson is one we all learn sooner or later.

These things are moving targets for semantic expression. We cannot capture their multifaceted essence with any word other than one that, in form at least, is strictly plural.

There's one more noun which we use in this form – *elohim*, God.

God, in the Hebrew conception of it, is a thing which is never bound to one particular form. God *appears* to us as constantly changing – inhabiting a variety of roles, powers, and emotions. We can understand a lot about the Biblical (and Rabbinic) view of God if we realize that even the word we use conveys the complexity of Divinity.

Although contemporary Jews love to talk about how Judaism engendered 'pure monotheism' and advocates absolute iconoclasm – the reality is far more nuanced and subtle. For Chazal (our Sages), God, as experienced by humans, is a multiform reality.

Just like water, the sky, a face, or our life – God is something which cannot be captured strictly in the singular. Like these other concepts, Hebrew conveys to us that God is not stagnant and not stable, but is a fluid, intangible reality. In truth, there is no better word to express the Jewish vision of the Divine than *elohim*.

There is a famous section of the *Tikkunei haZohar* called *Patach Eliyahu* (Elijah Began) which resonates strongly with the concept behind these nouns. The text attempts to provide a *credo* of sorts for Kabbalistic faith and the first line of the passage reads:

פְּתַח אֵלֵיהֶוּ וְאָמַר  
רְבוֹן עֲלֵמִין  
אֶנְתָּ הוּא הֶדָּ  
וְלֹא בְּחֻשְׁבָּן

Elijah began and said:

Master of the Worlds

You are One

But not in number.

*The image is a **wordle** of all the text of the Tanakh.*

## 8 thoughts on ““But Not in Number”: One and Many in Hebrew Grammar”

**Chaya**

May 13, 2015

Do you think the text is saying that Ribbon Olamim is beyond human understanding? Do you see any meaning in the use of the irregular plural in the Hebrew words for such dual human body parts such as eyes, ears, feet, hands, while hidden dual body parts such as lungs and kidneys use the regular plural? What about the idea, that you alluded to, that physical concepts with this mysterious plural carry metaphysical implications, sort of like applying the PARDES system not just to passages, but to words, letters and infinitesimal fragments – which seems to permeate Kabbalah. I think it might be like the way one can examine the universe with a telescope or a microscope, and both provide accurate information, but on a different scale?

**Adam Zagoria-Moffet**

May 13, 2015

Hi Chaya,

Thanks for your comment!

Certainly the perspective of the Kabbala as exemplified by Patach Eliyahu is that God-qua-God is totally unknowable. In other terms, the Ein Sof remains a completely inaccessible entity – it is both everything and nothing at the same time. Thus the centrality of the sefirot – they serve to activate and animate the Ein Sof in a way that can access us and we can access them.

The inconsistency in the use of the dual is interesting! I never thought about the fact that we use the dual ending for external pairs but not internal ones. Certainly I'm sure there's a good kabbalistic explanation, though I can't say I have it at my disposal at the moment.

Your last observation is spot on! The kabbalists understand the sefirot to be the basic structure of existence on all scales. That is, both the cosmos and the cellular mitochondria both are bound by the essential structure of the ten numerals and twenty-two letters. In a sense, there's an echo between the way that the kabbalists view the sefirot and contemporary atomic theory (all things being reduce-able, regardless of scale, to atoms, protons/electrons/quarks/strings, etc.)

Adam

**Chaya**

May 14, 2015

Thank you for your reply. Israeli scientist and mathematician Haim Shore also compared Kabbalah teaching to scientific theory, but the math is well beyond my pay grade 😊

**Chaya**

May 15, 2015

Another thought coming up upon Jerusalem Day, is that Yerushalayim also employs this irregular plural. Do you think this points to a metaphysical counterpart, in the same way as heavens, waters, eyes, etc.?

**Adam Zagoria-Moffet**

May 15, 2015

Yerushalayim (ירושלים) is like *einayim* (eyes/עינים) or *oznaim* (ears/אוזניים) is in the **dual**. Whats unusual about *mayim*, *chayyim* and the like is that they are proper plural forms, but used for a singular, constantly-changing subject.

The fact that Jerusalem is itself in the dual form is fascinating though. Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai picked up on this in his poem *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Why Jerusalem?* in his last published collection, *Open Closed Open*:

“Why is Jerusalem always two, of above and of below  
and I want to live in Jerusalem of in between  
without hitting my head above without injuring my foot below  
and why is Jerusalem a pair like hands and legs,  
I want to live in one Jerusalem  
Because I am only one I and not many ‘I’s”

**Chaya**

May 15, 2015

Thank you Adam. I feel like I have a private tutor. 😊

**Aaron Zerah**

June 3, 2015

Dear Adam: Thank you... a beautiful understanding that resonates with the one of most indigenous people – that there is unity amidst the apparent changes.

It’s fascinating that a place like Yerushalayim is a dualistic one; it’s the much easier place of right and wrong, and us and them, to inhabit.

May we all dwell in Ehad!

In great kindness,

Aaron

**Shai**

June 3, 2015

Nice. Also re: Oneness, check this out...

<http://imahd.ca/2009/11/16/why-jews-excel-at-math/>

Comments are closed.