

The Meanings of the Words חורף (=the Season) and נחרפת (Lev. 19:20)¹

By: MITCHELL FIRST

The Biblical root חרף seems to have two branches. One branch is the name of a season. The other is a verb with meanings like “reproach, taunt, scoff” and the related noun חרפה (disgrace, shame). First, we are going to explain the meaning that underlies the “season” branch.² Then we are going to shed light on that difficult Biblical word נחרפת at Leviticus 19:20.

I. The Meaning of the Word חורף

I live in the northeastern U.S.A. When I hear the word *horef*, I think: cold.³ But our impressions from the U.S.A. about the meaning of חורף in Biblical Israel are, of course, irrelevant.

As to the underlying meaning of the word, the *Brown-Driver-Briggs* lexicon (1906) had pointed to an Arabic cognate and stated that it had the meaning “gather fruit, pluck.” In this view, חורף would mean the season of gathering and plucking.

¹ I would like to thank Michael Chalk for reading and improving the draft.

² At Isa. 18:6, we have the season-related meaning used as a verb: תחרף (=spend the חורף season). This verb must have arisen **after** the noun with its “season” meaning. It cannot be used to determine the underlying meaning of the noun. I also must point out that at Gen. 8:22, Psa. 74:17, Amos 3:15, and Zech. 14:8, חורף is mentioned in the same verse as קיץ. The use of the two together sometimes implies the entire year. This does not mean, however, that we have to find a meaning that spans half the year or anything close to that.

³ In case you are wondering, the word “winter” derives from the meaning “wet.”

Mitchell First, an attorney, has an M.A. from Bernard Revel Graduate School. He has authored *Jewish History in Conflict* (1997), *Esther Unmasked: Solving Eleven Mysteries of the Jewish Holidays and Liturgy* (2015), *Roots and Rituals* (2018), *Links to Our Legacy* (2021), *Words for the Wise* (2022), and *From Eden to Exodus: A Journey into Hebrew Words in Bereshit and Shemot* (2024) as well as articles for *Hakirah*, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, and *AJS Review*. His writing focuses on ancient history, liturgy, and etymology. He can be reached at MFirstAtty@aol.com.

Some of the other etymological sources that I have seen give the Arabic cognate only the “pluck” meaning.⁴ In this scenario, we might have to limit the fundamental meaning to activities involving “plucking.” But “plucking” is broad enough to imply “gathering” and “harvesting,” as it is the first step in these other activities. So again, based on the Arabic cognate, we could interpret *horef* as the “season of gathering and harvesting.”⁵

There is, however, a better approach to the “season” meaning. In Akkadian and in Aramaic, חרף has the meaning “early.”⁶ In *Tanakh*, it likely has this meaning at Job 29:4: “As I was in the days of חרפי, when God’s counsel was upon my tent.”⁷ From this verse and the surrounding verses, it is clear that the reference is to a period when God took care of Job. Thus, the reproach-related meanings do not fit. Therefore, most modern scholars interpret the word as meaning “early” here: my early time, my youth.⁸ Rashi, Metzudat Tziyon, Malbim and many other traditional commentaries had given these interpretations centuries before. They did not know Akkadian but they knew the “early” meaning from Aramaic.

Now that we know that this “early” meaning of the root חרף exists in *Tanakh*, we can interpret the “season” meaning in this light.⁹ Accordingly, the essay on the “season” meaning of the root חרף in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* concludes that it means “the early season of the year

⁴ See, e.g., the concordance of S. Mandelkern (1896), and the essay in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (hereinafter “TDOT”), vol. 5 (1986), p. 206.

⁵ See, e.g., E. Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (1987), p. 233: “the time of fruit gathering.”

In his concordance, Mandelkern mentions a suggestion that focuses only on “plucking”: the season in which leaves are plucked off the trees due to the strong winds.

⁶ For Akkadian, see, e.g., H. Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew* (2009), p. 120. For Aramaic, see, e.g., the dictionary of M. Jastrow (1903), p. 505.

⁷ It is well-known that the book of Job includes many Aramaic words and usages.

⁸ See, e.g., the essay in TDOT, vol. 5, p. 206, and *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, eds. L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner (1995), p. 356 (hereinafter “HALOT”).

An earlier interpretation by many scholars was “in the days of my autumn,” with “autumn” implying “prime.” See *Brown-Driver-Briggs*. As the Soncino commentary had explained here: *Horef*’s “ordinary meaning is ‘harvest-time, autumn,’ in Arabic ‘freshly gathered fruit.’ It denotes maturity rather than youth.”

⁹ There is a name חרף in the list at Neh. 7:24. I have seen the suggestion that it means “one who was born early.”

(that is, of the agricultural year, which begins in the fall).¹⁰ I.e., it is the season when the seeding/planting takes place. See similarly *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*: “time for seed and early growth.”¹¹

In disagreeing with the “harvesting” approach, the above essay in *TDOT* cites several verses that suggest that “harvesting” is a theme of קיץ, not חורף. In each of the following verses, קיץ is parallel to קציר: Proverbs 6:8 and 10:5 and Jeremiah 8:20.¹²

An argument can also be made from Proverbs 20:4 that חרף is a season for plowing, not harvesting. A reasonable interpretation of this verse is that it criticizes the lazy one for not plowing in the *horef*: “When *horef* sets in, the lazy one does not plow; he will seek at harvest time and have nothing.”¹³

Over the centuries, many other etymologies have been offered for the “season” meaning of the root חרף. Because they are creative, I will mention some of them:¹⁴

- The season when sharp tools are used. (In the Aramaic of the Talmud and of the Targumim, and in Arabic, there is a word חריף, which means “sharp.” This word does not appear in *Tanakh*, except as a name. A widespread view, however, is that the Biblical “reproach” meaning is an expansion from an original “sharp” meaning: “to say sharp things.”¹⁵)
- The season when the *אור*¹⁶ is *וקשה*¹⁷
- The season when the rain is *חרף*.

¹⁰ Ramban, in his commentary on Lev. 19:20, had long ago intuited that חורף was the beginning of the year in an agricultural sense. However, he does not suggest that this is what the word meant.

¹¹ P. 356. This is of course a marked contrast to what is probably the common assumption today. The common assumption today is probably what is found in the *Even-Shoshan* concordance. This source, at p. 402, describes the Biblical חורף with the following three words: *tekufat ha-kor ve-ba-geshamim*.

¹² For evidence of “gathering” as a theme of *kayitz*, see Jer. 40:10 and 40:12.

¹³ The verse is a bit ambiguous and subject to other interpretations. The first word “*mei-horef*” can be understood as “*ba-horef*.” See *Da’at Mikra*.

¹⁴ My mentioning them does not mean that I take them seriously.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Klein, p. 233.

¹⁶ This word of course derives from the Greek *aer* (=air).

¹⁷ This is one of the views cited by Mandelkern.

- “On Gen. VIII, 22 we took the underlying meaning of חרף to be abandonment, to be abandoned, from which then חורף would be the time of the year when the earth is completely passive...” This is from Rav S.R. Hirsch’s commentary to Lev. 19:20.

See similarly, Matityahu Clark, *Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew Based on the Commentaries of Samson Raphael Hirsch*: “winter, period of vulnerability.”¹⁸

- The time of sowing barley and legumes. These are quick (חריפין) to ripen in a short time. See Rashi on Gen. 8:22.
- The “season” meaning derives from the root ערף which has a meaning “flow” or “flow like rain.” See, e.g., one of the suggestions in the concordance of Mandelkern, and see Rav Hirsch on Deut. 32:2: חרף perhaps means “the time of the year when the earth is subject to the loosening influences of the elements.” (It is accepted that ע and ח sometimes interchange.¹⁹)

I have seen many attempts to connect the reproach-related meanings of the root חרף with the “season” meaning. For example, 1) the “season” meaning is the time of year where sharp tools are used, 2) חרף fundamentally means “make vulnerable, taunt” and winter is the “period of vulnerability,” and 3) in the חרף, we collect fruits from the field and this is similar to collecting things about someone to hold against them. More such suggestions are mentioned in the essay in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 5, p. 204.²⁰ All the connections, however, are farfetched. Moreover, if “early” is the fundamental meaning of the “season” root, it is hard to see a connection to the reproach-related meanings.²¹

¹⁸ P. 89.

¹⁹ For example, both the roots עמר and חמר seem to have the meaning “heap.”

²⁰ See also the approach of Rashi mentioned above.

²¹ Our Hebrew letter ח is a merger of two different earlier ח letters, so it is not surprising when Hebrew has roots with ח that have two different meanings. (Arabic preserves the two different ח letters.) See my *From Eden to Exodus* (2024), pp. 166-69. The hypothesized original Proto-Semitic language had more than the 22 letters that Hebrew preserves today (probably 27 or 29). *TDOT* (p. 210) provides some evidence to support the idea that the “season” meaning and the reproach-related meanings originated with two different ח letters.

II. The Meaning of נחרפת at Lev. 19:20

At Leviticus 19:20, we have the case of a female slave who is נחרפת to one man but has relations with a different man. The precise details of the case are subject to dispute.²² In any event, in this case involving a female slave, the female and the male who had relations with her do not receive the death penalty. Rather, verse 20 states that בקרת תהיה, a very unclear phrase, and verses 21-22 refer to a sacrifice that the male must bring for his sin.²³

Based on the context, Rashi gives the word the meaning “designated” (מיוחדת and מיוחדת). He adds: “I do not know a דמיון to this in Scripture.”²⁴ Ibn Ezra suggests a connection to the word חרפה.²⁵ Ramban suggests the meaning is נערה, based on Job 29:4. R. Hirsch suggests a meaning related to חרב.²⁶ *Brown-Driver-Briggs* suggests the meaning “acquired” based on a cognate in Arabic. Another scholar suggests “plucked” (with an implication of betrothed!).

A better approach, however, can be suggested. As mentioned above, our root means “to be early” in Aramaic and Akkadian, and in *Tanakh* at Job. 29:4, and probably in connection with the “season” meaning of חרף. Based on this, the meaning “assigned in advance” (of redemption or emancipation) has been suggested by some scholars,²⁷ and the implication would be a form of “betrothal.”²⁸

²² See the *Da'at Mikra* commentary for a good summary.

²³ Death to both is ordinarily the punishment for post-betrothal relations with a different man. The punishment to each in this case is unclear from the verses and depends in part on the meaning of בקרת תהיה, a very unclear phrase.

²⁴ He probably means that he cannot find another instance of this root in *Tanakh* with such a meaning.

²⁵ Malbim also connects it to a חרפה meaning, citing Isa. 4:1. He writes, however, that when she enters into a legal relationship with a man, the “reproach” is removed. Therefore, he suggests that this is one of those roots that can also mean its opposite!

²⁶ As stated earlier, prior to this he suggested an underlying meaning of the root חרף. When he tried to apply this meaning here, however, it did not fit the context. He thus redefined his underlying meaning of the root חרף in light of the root חרב.

²⁷ See Tawil, p. 120. See similarly *TDOT*, vol. 5, p. 207: “‘given *early* (to a man)’ or better: ‘given an early status.’”

²⁸ *HALOT* (p. 356), published in 1995, writes that there is an Akkadian cognate, *harpu*, that means “betrothed” and cites to the particular text. Tawil’s work, published in 2009, however, did not mention this. Perhaps he disagreed with the translation of the Akkadian word. (Earlier, *TDOT*, published in 1986, did not mention any such Akkadian cognate.)

Earlier, among our traditional sources, at the ALHATORAH.ORG (“AlHaTorah”) site on Lev. 19:20, I found a Tosafist commentary that mentions the view that the word means מוקדמת and cites a passage in the Talmud where the root has this meaning and cites Job. 29:4 as well. On the site, this commentary is called *Kitzur Paneah Razā*.

There is much discussion of our word and the case of the נחרפה in both Talmuds. See, e.g., *Kiddushin* 6a, *Gittin* 43a, *Keritot* 9a and 11a, and JT *Kiddushin* 1:1. I am not going to summarize these discussions. I will state that nowhere in either Talmud is an interpretation based on the “early” meaning suggested. I have not checked the numerous commentaries on the Talmud by *geonim*, *rishonim*, and *aḥaronim* to see if any offer their own interpretation based on the “early” meaning. I did, however, check the alHaTorah site on Lev. 19:20 for all the commentaries that they included and that is how I found the Tosafist commentary I just mentioned.

Also noteworthy is the *Gur Aryeh* commentary on Lev. 19:20. It cites Job 29:4 for the idea that our root means “beginning” and writes that being an ארוסה is *hathalat ha-ishut*. I also found this from the alHaTorah site on Lev. 19:20.

Finally, a widely quoted statement in the Talmud (*Kidd.* 6a) is that, in the region of Judea, an ארוסה is called חרופה.

III. The Phrases נפשם חרפו and מחרפים נפשם in Our Prayers²⁹

Many memorial prayers in modern times refer to soldiers and others involved in security who “*herfu nafsham*” for the State of Israel.³⁰ Similarly, there is a more recent prayer composed for the Safety of the United States Armed Forces which praises the U.S. soldiers who are “*meharfim nafsham*” to protect the wellbeing of all of God’s creations.³¹

²⁹ I would like to thank Mike Alweis for asking me about these phrases in our prayers and getting me interested in this root in general. This is what led to this article.

³⁰ See the entry “*Yizkor’ le-Hallei Maarakbot Yisrael*” on the Hebrew Wikipedia site.

³¹ This prayer was composed by Milton Moshe Markovitz of Teaneck, N.J., at the request of Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld, shortly after the events of Sept. 11, 2001. Hundreds of synagogues in the U.S. have incorporated it into their Shabbat and holiday morning services. The text composed in 2001 is included in the volume *Contending with Catastrophe: Jewish Perspectives on September 11th*, ed. Michael J. Broyde (2011), p. 245. This work was published by K’hal Publishing in cooperation with

In Modern Hebrew, the above idiom means “risk one’s life.” Where did this idiom come from?

It is clear that it is based on Judges 5:18. Here, the tribe of Zevulun is being praised in the song of Devorah.³² They are described as “*am heref nafsbo la-mut*.”³³ This is the only time in *Tanakh* that the root חרף is used with any form of the word נפש.

Let us try to understand the phrase in the Biblical verse. It is best if we can understand the phrase with an already known meaning of the root חרף.³⁴ One can translate this phrase in the verse as a tribe that “taunts himself to die.” The implication can be “risks its life.”³⁵ Alternatively, when one risks one’s life, one can be said to be undervaluing it. In this way חרף can be related to the “reproach, shame” meaning.³⁶ Alternatively, in this same approach, one can learn the implication of the phrase as not just risking its life but sacrificing its life.³⁷

Now, however, we can suggest a new approach, based on the “early” meaning: A tribe that brings itself out early (=eagerly) to die [= being willing to risk or sacrifice its life].³⁸

Beth Din of America. A modified version of the prayer is included in *The Koren Siddur, American Edition* (2009), p. 521.

³² The verse seems to imply that this praise applies to the tribe of Naftali as well. This is how it is interpreted in the Soncino and *Da’at Mikra*.

³³ The last word is vocalized in our tradition as “*la-mut*,” (=to die), as opposed to “*la-mavet*” (=to death). Compare Isa. 53:12 (“*la-mavet nafsbo*”).

³⁴ This is in contrast to the suggestion of Rashbam. In his commentary on Lev. 19:20, Rashbam suggests that the meaning of the root at Judges 5:18 is *masar nafsbo*. (He then uses this meaning to support his interpretation of נחרפת as *me-surah u-meyuhedet*.) However, we have no other evidence for the root חרף with the meaning מסר. Thus, his interpretation of Judges 5:18 is an unlikely one.

³⁵ See *HALOT*, p. 355.

³⁶ See, e.g., *Metzudat David*. See similarly *Brown-Driver-Briggs* which relates it to a “despise, scorn” meaning.

³⁷ See *TDOT*, p. 212: “despised his life... the members of the tribe preferred to sacrifice their own lives rather than lose the battle.”

³⁸ See similarly Tawil, p. 120, citing an earlier scholar: “a tribe that precipitously exposed itself to death.”

Conclusions

Most likely, the underlying meaning of the “season” meaning is the early season of the agricultural year, when the seeding and planting takes place. Most likely, the meaning of נחרפת at Leviticus 19:20 is also based on the “early” meaning. The word likely means “assigned in advance of redemption or emancipation.” Finally, the import of *heref nafsbo la-mut* at Judges 5:18 remains unclear, but we have offered a new possibility.

P.S. The etymology of קיץ is another interesting issue. See, e.g., the concordance of Mandelkern and the post at balashon.com of June 5, 2006, for some preliminary discussion. If חורף means the “early” part of the agricultural year, we can speculate that perhaps קיץ merely means its “end.”³⁹ This topic, however, deserves much more research.⁴⁰ ❧

³⁹ See, in particular, Amos 8:2.

⁴⁰ Also noteworthy is that the word סתו only appears once in *Tanakh*, at *Shir HaShirim* 2:11. It is parallel to גשם here, so it seems to mean “rainy season.” Many believe that it originally was spelled שתו. It is probably related to an Akkadian word *shatu* that means “to be watered” and “drink.” See Klein, p. 460-61 and *TDOT*, p. 208.