

Biblical Poetry in Qohelet 1:2—

Vanity of Vanities? Futility of Futilities? Emptiness upon emptiness? Merest breath is the superlative way of indicating that all of reality is fleeting of form, empty of permanence. The word emptiness is often misunderstood as meaning worthless, valueless, meaningless, useless and unreal. Reflecting this misunderstanding, many translations propose **Vanity of Vanities? Futility of Futilities?** If we follow this line of interpretation as the basis of such translation, we would be led to believe then that Qohelet's view of life is depressive, nihilistic, and not worth studying or living for that matter! ...Far from being the nihilistic rantings of a depressed sage, Qohelet is a brilliant paring away of our illusions about life in order to free our energies and focus our attention on those thing that will bring tranquility and hope into our lives. Qohelet is not despairing of life. On the contrary, Qohelet is celebrating life, and Qohelet knows exactly how to live it well. What concerns Qohelet is our failure to understand life clearly...So what is this clear understanding of life? Life is *havel havalim*—not vain and futile, as most translators put it, but empty of separate and permanent selves and open to constant change and surprise. In Hebrew, the phrase, *havel havalim* literally means “breath of breaths.” In other words, life is no more substantial than a breath. It is fleeting, ephemeral, impermanent. The world is in a state of constant flux: everything changes; nothing stays the same.

(Rami Shapiro, *The Way of Solomon*, 95-96).

The breath is something that is utterly insubstantial and transient. Eternity utters a breath, existence is blown into the nostrils of first Adam, and life ends with a final exhalation. Every breathing being endowed with a soul has a limited number of breaths under the sun. And when that limit is reached, earthly existence ends. Such ephemerality that suggests the absurdity of existence—where then meaning then be found? When you try to hold on to what is ephemeral, you suffer. Letting go is then a taking hold of what cannot be grasped.¹ Earthly existence is a race for life, being filled with the feeling that the one who dies with the most toys wins. Ultimately, one cannot put stock in any aspect of earthly existence beneath the sun, given it is all fleeting. One can however hold fast to the ethereal beyond the sun, the macrocosm. That is the conviction which builds real Wisdom.

¹ Zohar I: 146b