

EDITOR'S CORNER

PSALM 24:3-4: *NAFSHI* OR *NAFSHO*: HIS SOUL OR MY NAME?

Some verses in the Bible have variant readings of particular words, called *keri* (the way it is read or pronounced) and *ketiv* (the way it is spelled).

In Psalm 24, the psalmist asks: *Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place?* (Ps. 24:3). He is answered: *He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken a false oath by nafsho* [literally "his soul"] *or sworn deceitfully* (Ps. 24:4). The biblical text has two variants: *nafsho* (the *ketiv*) and *nafshi* [literally "my soul"] (the *keri*). *Nafsho* (his soul) was adopted by the Authorized Version. Thus, the Scofield Bible translates this verse as *He who has not lifted up his soul unto vanity*. This fits in with the rest of the psalm which is in the third person. However, the traditional rabbinic commentators follow the *keri* of the Masoretic Text, *nafshi*. Rashi interprets the verse as "He who has not sworn by My Name". Both the old JPS and the Jerusalem Bible follow this approach, translating the verse as *He who has not taken My Name in vain*. The NJPS deviates slightly in its translation: *He who has not taken a false oath by My life*.

What lies at the heart of these two approaches to translating the verse? It depends upon who is seen as the addressee of the psalmist's query. The Authorized Version asserts that the psalmist's question is merely rhetorical, and it is the psalmist himself who responds. The masoretes maintain that the psalmist raises his question to the Lord, who then responds.

What prompted Rashi to translate *nafshi* [literally "my soul"] as *My Name*? Following the approach of Rashi, Radak explains that God's response was a slightly different version of the Third Commandment: *You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God* (Ex. 20:7). Radak also notes that the term *nefesh* is sometimes used to refer to the Name of God, as in Amos 6:8. Thus, by a tour de force, *nafshi* is now turned into *My Name*.

But why *My life* in the NJPS? While still following the masoretic reading of *nafshi* (first person) but not accepting Rashi's *My name* and unable to impugn a "soul" to God, the NJPS compromised with a clumsy *My life*.