

CHAPTER 8, LAW 3 - THE THREE SOULS OF MAN

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Whenever the 'soul' is referenced in this discussion, it does not [refer to] the soul which requires a body, but the 'form of the soul' ("tzuras ha'nefesh"). This is the wisdom the person has acquired of the Creator, according to his ability, as well as his understanding of abstract matters (lit., 'unconnected knowledge') and other matters. This is the 'form' we described in the fourth chapter of the Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah (Laws 8-9). This is what is called the soul in our context.

This life [of the World to Come], since it has no death -- as death is merely a phenomenon of the body and there will be no body there -- is called the 'binding' of life ("tzror ha'chaim" -- since we will be eternally bound to life). This is as it is stated, 'and my master's soul will be bound in the binding of life with the L-rd, your G-d, and the souls of your enemies He shall cast away' (I Samuel 25:29). This is the reward regarding which there is no greater reward, and the good which is not followed by any further good. And it is what all the prophets desired.

This week's law is far more esoteric than the Rambam usually reads, but is a clear continuation of the Rambam's earlier discussion. As we have seen, this chapter discusses the World to Come, which according to the Rambam is an entirely spiritual experience. The righteous will be pure souls, basking in the presence of their Creator, enjoying an understanding of "the truth of the Holy One." We have no idea what that means, but we know it is the highest pleasure possible -- a direct connection with G-d Himself. It is so heavenly and blissful that in our current physical state we cannot possibly comprehend what it will be like.

This week the Rambam adds that the soul we are speaking of is our inner soul, the one which is unrelated to our bodies. It is not the life-force which animates and controls our bodies -- the "soul" we share with the animal kingdom. It is what we would consider our consciousness. It is the sum total of all our thoughts and emotions, everything that constitutes who we are -- save our thoughts and drives which concern our bodies and physical wants. It is the true "us" -- not the part of our brains which has a favorite flavor ice cream, controls our breathing, or guides our limbs when we ride a bike, but who we **really** are within. And after our 120 years on this earth, that is all that will be left of us.

Likewise, in his Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah (4:8-9, which the Rambam referenced above), the Rambam states that this is the soul G-d had in mind when He said to the angels, "Let us make man in our image and in our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). This is the part of man which resembles G-d and the spiritual beings. It is the eternal and indestructible part of him, not composed of any

physical elements, and capable of man's loftiest thoughts and emotions.

Jewish thinkers discuss the components of the human soul at great length. Their terminology is not always consistent, but they generally break up man's soul into 3 (and sometimes 4-5) primary parts. Below I will summarize the writings of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (18th-19th century Lithuanian Talmudist and philosopher, considered the primary student of the Gaon of Vilna), in his seminal work Nefesh HaChaim ("The Spirit of Life").

In Gate I Ch. 15 R. Chaim uses the analogy of a glassblower fashioning a utensil to illustrate the three divisions of man's soul. The glassblower's basic act is to take the breath within him, blow it through a tube, and force the air into the glass receptacle he is forming. There are thus three stages to the blower's breath: (a) when it is within him, (b) while it travels through the blowing tube, and (c) after it enters the glass utensil. When the breath is within the glassblower, it is referred to as his "neshima" (breath). When it travels through the tube, it is "ruach" -- wind. When it reaches its destination, it comes to rest, and relates to the word "nefesh" -- soul, which also means to rest or remain stationary.

Likewise, a man's soul consists of three parts. The lowest part is the breath which has come to rest in the person, known as his nefesh. It is basically the life-force which man shares with the entire animal kingdom. The human nefesh is understandably smarter and more competent, but it is a force not qualitatively different from that of any of G-d's creations. It controls the body's conscious and subconscious behavior and it responds to the physical stimuli it receives from the body.

The next stage moving up is man's ruach, usually translated as spirit. It corresponds to the "wind" which passes through the glassblower's tube. It is the first part of man's soul which is unique to mankind. As the blowing tube, it spans the universe, the infinite layers of reality spanning from the highest heavens to the physical world. Although it does not dwell within the body, being that it dwells right above it, it influences our bodies, sanctifying and connecting our nefesh within to the higher planes of existence. It serves as a conduit, connecting man's earthiest parts to his loftiest, bridging the gap between two realities which cannot possibly mix.

The loftiest part of man's soul is his neshama, literally the breath which has not left G-d Himself (if that could be stated). Man's neshama resides in the highest heavens; it emanates from a world higher than almost any other part of creation. It is far too lofty and ethereal to have any direct connection with the physical world. It is man's pure soul, unsullied by any connection to physicality. Yet, since man's ruach connects it indirectly to man's body, one who is particularly worthy will have "sparks" of it emanate from above and influence him for the better. It is the part of us which gives us our deepest understanding of G-d and His Torah.

Beyond his analogy, the Nefesh HaChaim (Ch. 14) does not discuss in detail the differing roles of man's ruach and neshama. He does quote the following general distinction made by the Kabbalists. Man has three levels of behavior -- his action, his speech, and his thought. His nefesh (lowest) controls his actions, and is based in his liver. His ruach controls his speech (as speech likewise

consists of "wind" -- man's breath emitted as speech), and resides in his heart (to the extent it is connected to his body). And man's neshama controls his thoughts, and -- to the infinitesimal degree it connects to the body -- resides in his brain.

With the above introduction, several fascinating points become evident. On the one hand, our souls are enormously sublime. A part of us does not belong in this world at all -- and in fact, at best remotely interacts with it. It was very difficult, so to speak, for G-d to create a being which possesses such diverse parts. Human beings, housing such dichotomy, are a wonder in themselves. As R. Chaim describes it, we are creatures which span from the lowest depths to the highest heavens. And that goes a great way towards explaining man's predilection for both fantastically lofty as well as unspeakably vulgar behavior. We are great and terrible forces, rolled into one. It all depends which part of ourselves we identify with.

But it is even more significant. Because of our enormous span, we can exist on the earth below and our behavior affects the highest heavens -- because that is precisely where a part of us dwells. The acts our bodies do on this earth are not plain physical acts. They have enormous spiritual ramifications.

R. Chaim (Ch. 5) offers another apt illustration. He likens the human soul to a rope. Imagine a person tugging on an enormously long rope. The effects of the pressure he exerts will be felt all the way at the other end, no matter how distant. Likewise, how we act on this earth reverberates upwards. Perhaps the lowest part of us performed an action. Yet all of us is affected. And you can be quite certain that what occurs in the highest heavens will have tremendous repercussions throughout the entire universe.

On the other hand, as the Nefesh HaChaim explains, the parts of man's soul are not really connected to each other. They exist on different planes of reality. They interact very slightly but cannot truly mix. R. Chaim (Ch. 5) likewise quotes a Kabbalistic source which refers to the body as the "lock" of the soul. It holds down something which cannot really exist in this world.

And unfortunately, this makes it all too easy for man to ignore his higher self. We can view ourselves -- with some justification -- as merely homo sapiens, which -- as R. Abraham Twerski is fond of pointing out -- means smart apes. The only observable part of us -- if we do not look beyond this world -- is our animal souls, and more primarily our animal bodies. To sense anything higher, we must make a conscious effort.

But in truth, this is our mission in life. Perhaps on its most fundamental level, man's purpose in this world is not simply to behave correctly and to obey G-d's will. It is that he recognize himself for who he truly is. Does he basically see himself as an animal -- who achieves on the physical and at most intellectual level? Or is he perceptive enough to see his soul, the part of himself he cannot touch yet he knows resides just beyond himself? It is so easy to go through life seeing and reacting only to the immediate, to the observable world before us. But G-d placed us here to sense what we all know

within -- that in reality we are something so much more.

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