

NEPHESH HACHAIM 1:5

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

1.

Whatever gives us the ability to do such momentous things, though? At bottom, it comes down to the very high source of our soul, which is the animating spirit behind everything, as we'll see.

But to understand that we'd first have to see what drives things in general.

R' Chaim begins with a discussion of the heavenly worlds ¹. We're to know that they're intertwined, that they descend from the uppermost reaches all the way down to the material world ², that each world is controlled by the one above it much the way that a body is controlled by a soul ³, and that -- of course -- G-d is the ultimate "soul" and controller of everything ⁴.

2.

Now, there are four heavenly worlds ⁵. In ascending order they're the world of the *Ophanim*, of the *Chayot*, of the Throne of Glory, and of Divine Emanation ⁶. And each one functions as the soul of the one below it.

As such it's said that, "When the *Chayot* were lifted ..., the *Ophanim* were lifted in correspondence to them, for the *Ruach* ⁷ of the *Chayot* was in the *Ophanim* as well. And when they (the *Chayot*) would go, they (the *Ophanim*) would go (too), and when they (the *Chayot*) would stand still, they (the *Ophanim*) would stand still..." (Ezekiel 1:19-21) ⁸. And we know that the *Chayot* were also controlled by the Throne of Glory above them, since we're taught that "the Throne of Glory carried whatever carried it" ⁹ and that "the *Chayot* carried whatever carried them... and the Throne carried the *Chayot*" (*Zohar Chadash* 66b) ¹⁰.

After portraying the interdependence of the worlds and the fact that the upper ones control the lower ones R' Chaim then makes his main point, which is that it's our soul's high root and stature that sets us apart and enables us to do the world-altering things that we can do. As he puts it, "And the Throne's living ¹¹ soul is the root of the soul of the Jewish Nation ¹², which is far loftier and higher up even than the Throne of Glory, as it's the 'man' ¹³ atop it"; as it's written, "On the likeness of the Throne

was a likeness of a 'man'" (Ezekiel 1:26) ¹⁴.

3.

R' Chaim then adds that we're ironically the first and last things to have been created ¹⁵: *first* in the heavens, given our soul's stature in the upper realms and given that our souls are rooted in G-d's own breath which was blown into us ¹⁶. And we're *last* because Adam and Eve were the last beings created on earth ¹⁷. Nevertheless, essentially the idea is that we're most able to animate things because our souls are from the very innermost of worlds ¹⁸ thus we function as the "soul" to the world's own "body".

Footnotes:

¹ A "world" as used here isn't a planet or the like but rather a complex mix of phenomena that are united in a specific way (much the way we'd speak of "the Torah world", "the music world", "the business world", etc.). But the worlds under discussion here are utterly non-material and are directly related to creation and G-d's interactions with the physical universe.

And as the Kabbalists teach us, each world is comprised of a number of esoteric non-material components termed *Sephirot* (which are the basic non-material elements of creation and Divine interaction), *Partzufim* (complex mixtures of *Sephirot*), and more.

² That is, the Divine worlds descended downward in the course of creation – from G-d's own Will down to the created world. (Divine beneficence continues to flow down through them.)

³ Of course a soul isn't above a body so much as *within* it. The point is that superior phenomena (like upper-worlds and souls) control inferior ones (like lower-worlds and bodies). Let this serve as just one example of the need to "translate" and explain Kabbalistic ideas.

⁴ R' Chaim cites various sources to corroborate these ideas. He offers Zohar 1:19b that speaks of the worlds *enclosing* and *encompassing* each other, which bolsters the idea of their being intertwined.

Then *Idrah Zuta* 291b that speaks of lights (i.e., worlds) enclosing other lights and shining upon them, which also reiterates their interconnectedness and subtly alludes to the idea of one controlling (i.e., shining upon) the other. The Zohar there also indicates that while the "revealed" (i.e., the outermost) light is termed "the King's garment", the "innermost" light (which drives it) is hidden. And that alludes to G-d's hidden, soul-like qualities here.

And he offers The Ari's *Eitz Hachaim* (*Sha'ar Penimiyut v'Chitzoniyut* 2) and *Pri Eitz Chaim* (*Sha'ar*

HaShabbat 7-8, 24) that indicate that the outside of each world over-covers the one under it and becomes its inside (i.e., its controlling force) and soul, which underscores the idea of the more sublime aspects of each world controlling the less sublime ones.

See 3:10 for more on this as well as the beginning of *Ruach Chaim*.

⁵ There are actually an infinite number of them but they fall into four main categories.

⁶ Curiously enough, R' Chaim doesn't use the Kabbalistic terms here for the worlds as we'd expect (though he uses them in his footnote to 1:13). He's assumedly using the terms cited here from Ezekiel both to underscore the antiquity of the concepts and to make it easier for the reader to follow his points as he reads the verses.

⁷ I.e., Soul.

⁸ Thus we find that the worlds are indeed intertwined, and that each is animated by the one above it which functions as its soul.

⁹ That is, the Throne of Glory *eventually* carried or supported from up above whatever *initially* carried it from below.

This doesn't seem to be a direct quote from the sages as R' Chaim claims. But see Ricanti to Exodus 32:19 in reference to *Sotah* 35a. (Also see *Eitz Hachaim*, *Iburim* Ch. 4 which also cites it as a quote from the sages without attributing a source),

¹⁰ This once again indicates that each of the worlds is controlled and animated by the one above it. But where is the highest world, G-d's Emanation? That will be explained now.

¹¹ I.e., Animating.

¹² See *Ma'amar* 15.

¹³ Sitting...

¹⁴ I.e., the "man" sitting atop and controlling the Throne of Glory (as well as the worlds below it) is the source of our soul, which is why we have the abilities to animate and control this world.

Now, R' Chaim adds a relatively lengthy and curious footnote here. In short, it says that the soul (which is termed "a literal portion of G-d up above") passes through millions upon millions of worlds in its course downward to our world. And that only a small part of it occupies our body. (See 1:17 below for more of this.) That's meant to underscore the unfathomable loftiness of our soul, of course. In fact, later on in his note R' Chaim cites the *Idra Rabbah* (141b) which makes the point that

everything depends upon this so very high and exalted soul.

But R' Chaim also notes that of course we're also comprised of a body, and that we're in fact part "supernal being" and part "mundane being" (citing *Breishit Rabbah* 12 and *Vayikrah Rabbah* 9). And he indicates that the two are inexorably linked and function as two ends of a rope, so that when one "shakes" the rope by doing something physical down here, he then "shakes" and animates the rope up above. But doesn't that seem out of place here? See footnote 18 below.

¹⁵ He cites Zohar 2:70b here.

¹⁶ See Genesis 2:7. This will be discussed in more detail in 1:15 below.

¹⁷ He cites Zohar 2:70b here.

¹⁸ See R' Chaim Vital's *Sha'ar Hakedusha* 3:2.

Now, mentioning our having been created *last* seems to weaken R' Chaim's argument that we serve as the soul of all of creation because of our high station. Why then does he cite this? And why does he focus on our physicality in his own note to this chapter (see our footnote 14 above)?

He apparently means to accentuate the fact that while we're indeed heavenly in our core, we're also very earthy. But that -- like the heavenly worlds (cited at the beginning of the chapter) -- those elements of our being are intertwined. So, while we've indeed been granted the ability to affect monumental change in the universe thanks to our soul, we'd still have to "shake" the "rope" (see footnote 14) down here through our physical actions to activate the upper worlds (which would then "shake" the "rope" up above in order to benefit this lower world, though R' Chaim doesn't address this latter point here).

This also touches on an important theme presented later on in *Nephesh Hachaim* to the effect that while much can be done in our hearts and minds (i.e., our "souls") to draw close to G-d, we're still and all obliged to do things with our bodies to that end at bottom (see 1:22, "Chapters" 4-5, etc.) .