

‘THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH PROJECT

The Noahide Laws – The Soul



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The Soul

The Material Body & the Immaterial Soul

God formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils a breath of life. Man then became a living being.¹

This famous verse describes man as a being created of two natures: the physical (the dust of the ground) and the spiritual (the soul – the breath of life). A subtle nuance of this verse is that man was animated with God’s breath – an exhalation from the innermost being of God. This is in contrast to the rest of creation, which was created by G-d’s speech – with sound waves created by God – which is a lower level of divine intimacy, one that is distanced from God’s essence.²

Of course,

God does not actually have breath. This is a merely a descriptive metaphor enabling us to discuss the concepts involved. It is an extremely apt one, however, and is elaborated upon greatly by our Sages.

The Glassblower³

The parable used by many sages to describe the nature of the soul is that of a glassblower creating a vessel. The glassblower dips one end of his tube into molten glass and places the other end against his lips. The breath originates at the lips, flows down the tube, and comes to rest in the molten glass below, forming it and shaping it into its final form as the glass blower rotates and turns the whole apparatus. Now, where is the soul in this analogy? Is it upon the lips of the glass blower, in the tube, or in the burgeoning glass bulb at the end? The answer is all three.

¹ Genesis 2:7

² See *Likutey Amazim*, *Sefer Shel Beinonim II*; *Nefesh HaChaim 11:15*.

³ See the *Derech HaShem* of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707 – 1746).

The Three Expressions of the Soul

The soul is constantly being “blown” into the being by God. As such, the soul exists in a constant dynamic relationship with its creator. This ongoing emanation of the soul means that the soul constantly exists in three expressions. Many writers have described these three expressions as levels, or components of the soul. However, such descriptions are misleading. I prefer to call it three “expressions” of the soul:

- 1) **Neshamah**, meaning “soul,” and derived from the word *Neshima*, meaning “breath.” In our parable, this is the exit of the breath from the lips of the divine glassblower. This is the essence of the soul and its highest and most intimate connection to God.
- 2) **Ruach**, meaning “spirit,” and derived from the word for wind. This is the moving, blowing of the soul into the world, representing the raging conduit and connection between man’s soul and God.
- 3) **Nefesh**, often translated as “soul,” yet better translated as “life-force,” is from the word *Nafash*, meaning “to rest.” It alludes to the divine breath coming to rest in the vessel of the body of man.

These three expressions exist simultaneously and in constant interaction with each other. While the *Neshama* is the closest to God and the place at which the soul’s truest essence resides, it is bound to the *Nefesh*, the component that enlivens the body and interacts with the rest of creation, via *Ruach*, the conduit of divine breath.

These soul-elements form a chain binding man’s soul to G-d:

The Nefesh is bound to the Ruach, the Ruach is bound to the Neshama, and the Neshama to the Holy One, Blessed is He.⁵

The Five Expressions of the Soul

The Midrash,⁶ however, adds two more levels to the soul:

⁴ Based upon the *Nefesh HaChaim* of Rabbi Chaim Vital.

⁵ Zohar 3:25a.

- 1) *Chayah*, “living essence,” and,
- 2) *Yechidah*, “unique essence.”

Our scholars understand these as two higher, almost completely imperceptible levels of the soul. They are, like God Himself, both immanent and transcendent in relationship to the lower levels of the soul.

If the *Neshama* is the breath of God, the glassblower, then *Chayah* is the body of the glassblower, the vehicle which gives motion to and exhales the divine breath. Note, though, that the breath exhaled by the glassblower is not intrinsic to His being.

Therefore,

The lower levels of the soul originate from His “body,” so to speak, yet are not “of” his body; they are a separate, created entity independent of, yet intimately originating from, the creator.

Yechidah, however, is something totally transcendent. It represents the true, inexpressible aspect of the creator. It is the innermost part of the creator which desires to create and knows its own purposes. In our parable, *Yechidah* is the soul of the glassblower, the innermost essence of God.

Man can only access the three lower levels of the soul: *Neshama*, *Ruach*, and *Nefesh*. The upper two levels belong to God Himself.

The Expressions of the Soul in This World

Each expression of the soul exerts its own influence over particular areas of human activity.

Nefesh, the lowest level, governs man’s physical interaction with the world. It transfers will into the animation of the body. It also binds the rest of the soul to the physical matter of the body.

Ruach, the motion of the divine spirit, is the source of the power of speech. It is responsible for the articulation and organization of inspiration into thought. This power, combined with *Ruach’s* duty as the conduit between the lower and higher

⁶ See Midrash Koheles Rabbah to Koheles 3:21 and Bereshis Rabbah 14:9.

expressions of the soul, also makes it the conduit for divine inspiration. Divine inspiration, in Hebrew, is called *Ruach ha-kodesh*, or holy *Ruach*. *Ruach* is also the realm of the emotions.

Neshama influences the higher realm of human faculties such as thought, intellect, and the spiritual sensibilities.

The Lower Soul

We tend to think of the soul as a purely spiritual entity, which it is. However, what about animals? Do they have souls? The answer is “yes.” However, their souls are not spiritual. Instead, they are the most ethereal of physical entities.⁷

What is more, all living beings possess this *nefes ha-behaimis* – this “animal soul.” This includes man as well.⁸ This animal soul is the most basic force needed to maintain life. It is the animating force that governs the “natural laws” of physiology and most basic needs for survival.

This soul is what the Torah refers to when it states:

*The soul of the flesh that is in the blood.*⁹

This animal soul is essential for guaranteeing the survival of the organism. Without it, the spiritual soul would never eat, engage in reproduction, or do anything other than pray and pursue connection to God. This physical soul is what is also known as the *yetzer bora*, the evil desire discussed in earlier lessons.¹⁰

⁷ See *Derech HaShem* on the soul.

⁸ Eitz Chaim 49:3; Derech HaShem III: 1:1; Zohar II: 94b; Ramban to Genesis 1:20, Leviticus 17:14, and many, many more sources.

⁹ Leviticus 17:11; Targum ad loc.

¹⁰ Brachos 5a, 54a, 60b, 61b; Sanhedrin 91b; Derech HaShem I: 3:1 and II: 2:2.

The Immortality of the Soul

All souls that will ever exist were created at the beginning of time. Since then they have been kept in a celestial repository until God deems them to be born.¹¹ Upon death, the soul ascends to a new place, the *olam ha-neshamos*, where it resides until the coming of the messiah. However, it doesn't always work out this way.

Gilgul HaNeshamos – Reincarnation¹²

Reincarnation, though subject to some debate in the past¹³, is an accepted part of Torah belief.¹⁴ However, reincarnation is a loaded term with lots of non-Torah connotations. We must, therefore, be cautious not to assume anything about the Torah's doctrine lest we color our understanding with the convoluted perversions of pop-culture.

In the Torah's view, reincarnation is neither an automatic nor a common event. It is also neither a punishment nor a reward. Instead, reincarnation is an act of divine compassion. God gives many *neshamos*, souls, a "second chance" to fulfill mitzvos that they may have missed in a previous life. This is sometimes needed to allow particular souls to accomplish unique *tikkunim*, repairs to the world, for which those souls are uniquely suited.

¹¹ Niddah 13b; Chagigah 12b; Eitz Chaim 26:2. There is some disagreement between the Kabbalists and rational philosophers over this detail. See *Emunos VeDeos* 6:3.

¹² This entire section is a summary of *Shaar Gilgul HaNeshamos* from the *Kisvei HaAri*.

¹³ Even though the concept predated them, reincarnation was rejected strongly by Rav Saadia Gaon, R' Yosef Albo, and Raavad I (not to be confused with Raavad II, the Rambam's famous disputant). However, Rav Hai Gaon argued with Rav Saadia in defense of reincarnation. In the medieval era, it was upheld by the Ramban and Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher. Throughout the renaissance it gained further scholarly attention and support.

¹⁴ The Ari and Ramak's systematization of kabbalah provided a full theological defense and context for reincarnation. Their study led to its acceptance by both the Baal Shem Tov and the Vilna Gaon.

However, *neshamos*, souls, are not always reincarnated in whole or in the same form held in their previous life. Sometimes only some of the components of the soul (*Nefesh*, *Ruach*, or *Neshamah*) are reincarnated, carved away from their fellows. The reincarnated souls, or parts of souls, may also not come back in human form.

Reincarnation is not common, and full reincarnation in human form is exceptionally rare. However, it does happen. Noahides are subject to the doctrine of *Gilgul ha-neshamos*, reincarnation as are Jews.

Summary of This Lesson

1. Man was created with a physical being and a spiritual soul. The imbuing of the spiritual soul was a more intimate act of creation than the creation of the physical body. The body was created by speech, the soul by breath.
2. The soul is a single entity which emanates into the world, radiating as three distinct expressions. These expressions are a chain which binds the soul in this world to its origin.
3. Each expression influences particular human qualities.
4. There are higher expressions of the soul, but these are rooted in the being of God Himself and essentially unknowable to us.
5. Man, as all living creatures also has a natural, animal soul, which animates the basic, rote physiological processes and desires needed for survival. This soul is the root of the *yetzer hora*, the evil desire.
6. The soul is immortal. All souls were created at the beginning of creation and set aside by God until their time to be born. When a person dies, their soul is transferred to another repository to await the World to Come.
7. Some souls or portions of souls are reincarnated as an act of divine compassion. They are not always reincarnated in human form, however.