WHAT IS THE SOUL?
Exploring Our Hidden Inner Wonders

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WHAT IS THE SOUL?

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Zohar 1, 20b

"You cloth me in skin and flesh (Job 10:11)" - We often encounter the expression, "flesh of the person," implying that the real person is within, and the flesh – which is the body – is only a vestment.

Rachel Noam, The View From Above

I turned in to Bograchov Street.... Then it happened. Suddenly, I felt a violent blow strike my head. I fell flat on the ground in front of the woman. A heavy eighteen foot wooden beam, plunging from the scaffold atop the five story-structure, hit me and sailed into the street as if thrown by a catapult.

All at once, I felt I was outside my body, floating upward about twelve to fifteen feet above the sidewalk, watching the scene below. I did not know how I left my body, or how I got up there. Everything happened so suddenly that I was caught completely by surprise. I saw the large woman bending over my body, trying to detect a sign of life in my motionless form. Then she started screaming for help.

This is my body, I thought, but I am not inside it. I am looking at it from above. How is this possible? With what eyes am I seeing this, and where are my ears? How could I be hearing all this noise in the street?

I was baffled. Obviously, I existed, I was real, I was conscious, but not inside my frame. I always thought that "I" and my body were identical. I did not know I was a being that was more than just a physical body.

Genesis 2:7

And G-d the Lord formed the human of soil from the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, Song of songs 1:8

The soul is a part of G-d from above and it desires constantly to rise up to its "Father's house."

Proverbs 20:27

The candle of G-d is the soul of man.

THE DESCENT TO THIS WORLD

Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, Keter Shem Tov, Hosafot 424

The soul's origin is a supernal pristine place. Afterwards, the soul descends through the progression of the worlds: "You have created it, You have formed it, You have breathed

it into me," until it descends below and becomes invested in a body and the physical world.
At this point, the purpose is to unite and connect the level of the soul the way it is below with the source of the soul above. The way to achieve this is for the soul to fulfill its mission through refining the body, the animate soul, and its portion in the world. Through this, one achieves the purpose of creation – to transform this lowest realm into a dwelling place for G-d.

Genesis 2:15
Now the Lord G-d took man, and He placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it.

Rabbi Yeshayah Halevi Horowitz, Shenei Luchot Haberit, Sha'ar Haoteyot, Gimel
The soul was placed into man and was sent to this world - the world of physical action - "to work it and to guard it," referring to the study of Torah and fulfillment of Mitzvot. In this world, the soul is like a stranger in a strange land.
This can be compared to a king who sends an envoy from his trusted personal staff to a foreign land and commands him to engage in a particular task. The king urges him, "be very cautious and rigorous with the work of your mission...."
Similarly G-d, the King of Kings, takes the soul of its heavenly chamber, where the divine presence is felt, and sends it to this world, placing it into a body. G-d gives man commandments, his mission being the fulfillment of Torah and Mitzvot. As long as man is in this foreign land, he should not take his mind off his mission - even for a second.

Chasidic Song, based on Babylonian Talmud, tracate Menachot 99b
Come with me little soul, let me hold you in my hand and we'll fly away you and I together to a place down on the land. Come with me little soul, don't shy away do as your told, there's a little child waiting to be born today, you're to be his spark his soul.
But dear angel, no I don't want to go, there's so much pain and evil upon the earth below. Let me stay here up in heaven where it's safe and I'll be pure, please don't make me go away can't you see I'm so afraid.
Come with me little soul, it's time you faced your destiny, and as we fly beneath the clouds now I will show you, there's so much you can be.
Yes, dear angel, I can see holiness over there, look- someone's learning, there's another deep in prayer. I will stay here if you answer me it's all I need to know, you must promise me dear friend that I too will be like them!

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Nidah, 30b
It does not emerge from there before it is made to take an oath... What is the nature of the oath that it is to take? Be righteous and do not be wicked.

BODY & SOUL: A COMPLEX MARRIAGE

Babylonian Talmud, Tracate Sanhedrin, 91a-b
Emperor Antoninus asked Rabbi how there could be punishment in the life beyond, for, since body and soul after their separation could not have committed sin, they could

blame each other for the sins committed upon earth, and Rabbi answered him by the following parable:
"A certain king had a beautiful garden in which was excellent fruit; and over it he appointed two watchmen, one blind and the other lame. The lame man said to the blind one, 'I see exquisite fruit in the garden. Carry me thither that I may get it; and we will eat it together.' The blind man consented and both ate of the fruit. After some days the lord of the garden came and asked the watchmen concerning the fruit. Then the lame man said, 'As I have no legs I could not go to take it'; and the blind man said, 'I could not even see it.' What did the lord of the garden do? He made the blind man carry the lame, and thus passed judgment on them both. So God will replace the souls in their bodies, and will punish both together for their sins."

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, The Thirteen Petalled Rose – Chap. 3, "The Soul of Man."
The soul of man functions through its instrument or vessel, which is the body. Through it and with it, the soul thinks, perceives, feels and acts; through it and by it, the soul has to fulfill its double function in reality. First it has to perform a certain task in the process of perfecting the outer world, or at least that part of the world which it is destined. And second, its task is to raise itself.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, Torah Or 4a
In order to lift something properly, one needs to place their grip below the entire object. We see this clearly with a lever, which is placed totally under the object one wishes to lift. So too, the material that G-d used to create man was of the lowest form, so that man could successfully lift it back to its source.

THE SOUL'S PURPOSE: THE P.O.P.P. MAP

Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, Sefat Emet, Tazria 5631: Acharei 5657
The Mishna teaches that every Jew has a portion in the world to come. This is not stated in the future tense, rather, in the present. He has this portion now... Each and every activity contains this very "portion," which is hidden within the physical activity.

PERSONALITY

Proverbs 3:9
"Honor the Lord with your possessions."

Midrash, Yalkut Shimoni, Melachim 1:221
It states, "Honor the Lord with your possessions." This means with whatever He has graced you. For example, if you have a beautiful voice, lead the communal prayers.
Chiya, the nephew of Rabbi Elazar Hakapor, had a beautiful voice. Rabbi Elazar used to tell him, "Chiya, my son, rise and honor the Lord with what He has graced you!"

OPPORTUNITY

Esther 4:8-14
He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, “All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”
When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

Mishnah, Ethics of our Fathers, 4:1
Ben Zoma said, "Who is wise? He who learns from every person."

PLACES & PEOPLE
Pitgamin Kadishin, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev
Each person must clearly recognize that man's travels from place to place are not random, G-d forbid. Rather they are directed by G-d with precision; this person has a specific "portion" to rectify in this place - whether through study of Torah, prayer, or eating, drinking, and sleeping for the sake of heaven. As the Baal Shem Tov explained, "The Lord establishes the steps of man,” meaning, that G-d gives man the desire to travel to a specific place, G-d's intention being... that the person should engage in a particular divine service, thereby rectifying what he must rectify." Therefore, when a person comes to a particular place, he must take this to heart and ask himself, "Why am I here? For what purpose did G-d bring me here?

Babylonian Talmud, tractate Avoda Zara 18a
The venerable sage was wrapped in a Torah scroll—perhaps the very scroll that he had held in open violation of the Roman edict—and surrounded with bundles of vine branches. Lighting the pyre was not enough for the Romans; the sage's demise was to be slow and painful: Clumps of wool were brought, soaked in water and placed over the heart of Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon. Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon's daughter—herself sentenced by the Romans to a life of disrepute—cried: "Father, must I see you thus?" With tremendous courage, Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon calmed his daughter: "If I alone was being burned it would be difficult for me. Now that I am being burned and the Torah scroll is with me—He who will seek a reckoning for the insult to the Torah scroll will seek a reckoning for my insult."
As their teacher was nearing his end, the students sought to garner a final lesson: "Master, what do you see?" As the flames scorched his holy body, Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon shared a lasting image:
"The parchment is burning, but the letters are taking flight!"
Seeing their master's pain, the disciples urged: "You too—like the Torah whose physical shell is being destroyed—open your mouth and the fire will enter you, and your soul will