

# The Soul That You Have Given Me is Pure

*Yom Kippur Morning 5770*

Late last year I taught a one-session class on the Jewish Views of Life-After-Death. It was the largest turnout for a single class I have received in nearly twenty years. Close to sixty people showed up. Not that I'm surprised. We all want to know if there's a hereafter. (I've always wondered about this phrase, *Hereafter*. You'd think it would be *Thereafter*. Just a thought.) Even more than wondering about God, we are beyond fascinated with the question of whether or not there is life after *this*. (Although as Woody Allen surmises, the question should not really be whether or not there is life-after-death, but rather can you get a *Nathan's* hot dog there?)

This reflects, of course, the most primal of human fears. Is this all there is? From humankind's earliest beginnings, the question has dominated our consciousness from the very moment we became aware of our mortality. Pyramids, catacombs, requiems have all been built and composed to soften the blow, to help *us* cope with not knowing. But, of course, if we *did* know, were we to actually have surety that there is *something* after *this*, life would lose its grasp on the urgency that makes this existence so compelling. And worth living.

This has always been the Jewish orientation toward the big question. Hence the opening *midrash* of *Bereishit Rabbah* where the rabbis pose the query why it is that Torah begins with the letter *Bet* (and not the letter *Alef*); that is, why the Torah begins with the *second* and not the *first* letter of the *alef-bet*? The answer is simple: Just as the *Bet* is closed on the top, the back and the bottom and open only on the front, we are told that what is above us, what is below us, and what has preceded us (as in where did the universe come from) are questions to which there are no possible answers. The only question we can ask is how to deal with what is open before us? The only question worth posing is, to quote Harold Kushner (author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*), "Where do I go from here?" Thus the Jewish focus on the *here and now*. Thus the Jewish concentration on *life*. This is why we wear *Chai* around our necks.

It's not that Judaism doesn't believe in the eternality of the soul. It's not that Judaism rejects the belief (or for that matter even discourages the belief) that there is something after a bodily existence. On the contrary, as I demonstrated to the attendees last spring, our tradition—from the Biblical period and throughout the course of Jewish history—has never wavered from a clear and unequivocal belief in life-after-death. We just don't focus on it. No doubt initially to distinguish Judaism from the otherworldly orientation of Christianity (at least as we have experienced it), Jews have historically downplayed the importance of such beliefs (and as a consequence often led many Jews to conclude that we just don't believe in it). But we do. As do I.

About two months after my mother died, I started noticing something *odd*. Every so often, no more than once a day but often several days in succession and usually multiple times a week, I'd find a quarter on the floor. Just a quarter. Never loose change. Never a quarter with a nickel or a dime. Just a quarter. This went on for several weeks. At first I didn't think much of it. "Oh look, a quarter..." I'd think to myself, and stick it in my pocket. Then it would be, "Oh look, *another* quarter..." but I wouldn't pay too much attention to it. Until, that is, after several weeks turned into two to three months of the quarter-thing.

One night I shared this phenomenon while having dinner with friends, whereupon someone said, “You know I’ve heard of such experiences, especially after a death. Maybe it’s your mother trying to tell you something?” Of course, I was skeptical. “Did quarters have any special meaning for your mom?” they asked. I thought about it. “No, not really. But...one of her classic characteristics was to always try to make things better by giving money. If there ever was an argument or strife, Mom could always be counted on to *make-up* by calling us over, reaching into her purse, and then pushing some money (usually more than quarters) into your hand. She wasn’t so good at saying *I’m sorry*, but money she could give freely.”

The quarters went on. And on. Always just a quarter. And always on the floor. Then, after about six months of this, I made the mistake of telling my kids. Hannah in particular, started then to *plant* quarters. But even that was just a few times. (At least that’s what she said.) For the next five years the quarter-thing would continue, sometimes with great frequency, sometimes once every two to three weeks. But I’d still find quarters. Until this past May.

Now this is the part of the story where I should tell you about my brother, Larry. He’s the *spiritualist* in the family. He’s the one who writes about mysticism and the life of the spirit. So, of course, it would be natural to tell him. And what does he say? “I only get *nickels!*” And predictably, after I give him a hard time for being so resistant to such possibilities, he would invariably say (like not remembering that he says this *every time* the subject comes up), “When someone comes and tells me where they buried the money, *then* I’ll believe.” He also said, “I don’t think I’d talk about this to your congregation until *after* you’ve signed a new contract.”

So this past May Larry was in town to speak at our *Tikkun Leyl Shavuot*, our all-night study session on the eve of *Shavuot*. Two days before Larry was to speak I found a dime on the floor in my study. I put it on the mail table in the living room. Later that day I found another dime, this time in the front hallway; that one I also put on the mail table next to the other dime. I didn’t think anything of it. After all, they were *dimes*. For the next two days, as I’d pass the mail table, I’d see the two dimes sitting next to each other, again not really paying any attention to them. But I distinctly remembered being aware of seeing those two dimes, as if they were a pair. Then, on the morning of *Shavuot*, as Larry and I were gathering to come here to Temple, we met in the living room – next to the mail table. And then I looked down. The dimes were gone. But in their stead...were a quarter...and a nickel. When I called its attention to Larry, without saying a word, he threw his arms around me and we hugged. We both believed, whether true or not, that Mom had given us her message (whatever that might be).

I have not found another quarter since that day.

Now make of it what you will. “Maybe the Rabbi has a little too much *loose change* upstairs.” I don’t know. Maybe you’ve had similar experiences. I know in my telling of this story I’ve heard any number of other anecdotes from people who have sensed a very real connection with loved ones who’ve passed on. This is one of those areas where you either believe or you don’t. And the truth is, it doesn’t really matter. None of this changed my mind about the nature of life. But what it did do for me was to remind me that there is more to this universe than meets the eye. There’s more to life than our empirical faculties can discern. This is what *emunah* or faith is about. It’s about believing. Believing that life is more than just a gift. More than just a miracle, life is a *mystery*. We don’t know how we really come to be. We know how life starts, but how it is that *we* come to be, how it is that *I* come to be *me*, it’s all a mystery. Yet it only begins to become a mystery when we start to pay attention.

This is what I know. I *know* my body is, like all other things corporeal, destined to destruction. It is *matter*. We are “dust”. But what I *believe* is that the life-force within me, the *thing* that makes me *me* is more than just a combination of genetic alliances. I *believe*—with an *emunah shleimah*, a complete and unwavering faith—that within me is a *neshamah*—a soul—that is impervious to the laws of nature. I believe it is holy, sacred, undeniably unique. I believe that it comes from God.

Ours is an interesting age. We spend so much time on our bodies, working them out, obsessed with the food we put into them. We join health clubs, live lives of serial diets, completely absorbed with abs and muscle tone and weight and waist. It’s not really much different with our minds. We do everything we can to make sure our kids get into the best schools—from pre-school to college. We are on a never-ending mission to expand our horizons, consuming books and periodicals, always wanting to know more. “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” For us this is a sacred axiom. So, too, with our psyches. The therapist has become the shaman, the priest of individualized religion. In our quest to find happiness and contentment, we invest substantial resources to explore why we are the way we are—and how we can get better. But what about our souls? Why is it that we so often ignore the life of the spirit?

This is not a commercial for Shabbat. I’m not trying to convince you of the spiritual benefits of communal prayer and the study of sacred text. What I am trying to do, however, is to explore the potential of a life that *nurtures* the *neshamah*. What I hope is that I might be able to help you see that a life of the spirit is the reason we are here, it is the ultimate blessing of the human being. Because *we* know we have a *neshamah*. Unlike the other creatures of this world, we understand that life is a gift. We intuit that somehow there is more to all this than the mechanics of breathing and eating and reproducing and dying. And yet it all seems so abstract, so distant. And, of course, that’s the point. The rules of the *neshamah* do not coincide with the laws of nature. The *neshamah* is not of the body. It is beyond the capacity of the intellect. It cannot be seen or analyzed or measured. It cannot be held or examined. It can only be embraced. And allowed to flow.

This is what I have come to understand about Judaism’s take on the *soul*.

The first principle is that the soul is God-stuff. Whatever that means. More than just it comes from God, the soul is of the highest level of God-stuff. It is, like God, transcendent of the laws of nature. It is indestructible. It is eternal.

This is not at odds with the pantheism of which I spoke at *Rosh Hashanah*. That is, if everywhere is God, if God is the totality of all that is, then it follows that all creation is infused—on one level or another—with divine essence. But if that is so, then how does the soul get differentiated? The Torah, in fact, uses three terms to refer to the spiritual: *ruach*, *nefesh* and *neshamah*. Although the tradition has never been clear as to the differences between these three terms, there is a consensus that they are more than just three terms for the same idea. These three terms suggest to us that there are different levels of the spiritual, and *neshamah* is the highest. *Neshamah* is the dimension of me (as opposed to the *part* of me) that connects me to God. Like a *ma’ayan*, a well-spring, our *neshamah* is a life-line from God and to God.

The second principle is that the soul is unalterable. Unlike our bodies or our minds or our psyches—all of which we spend enormous resources to improve upon, the soul—as our prayers remind us—is perfect. *Neshamah she-natata bi, tehora hi*—The soul that You have implanted with me is pure. It cannot be tainted. It cannot be improved. There is no difference

between any of us. We are all created *B'tzelem Elohim*—in the image of God. All human beings, blends of finite matter and infinite spirit, are created equal.

This past summer I had occasion to go to see Quentin Tarantino's newest film *Inglourious Basterds*. His films are not for everybody. But neither are they just unadulterated forays into gore and sensationalism. Behind the "brains all over the back seat" (of *Pulp Fiction*) and the "scalping of enemy soldiers" (in this most recent film) is a consistent message about the nature of being human. Admittedly he seems to be preoccupied with our *darker* side.

*Inglourious Basterds* kind of seems like a blending of every World War II movie ever made, a little bit of *The Dirty Dozen*, *The Eagle Has Landed* and *Kelly's Heroes* all squeezed into one. At the outset, it seems pretty simple. The Nazis are the bad guys and Brad Pitt is leading a select team of Jewish soldiers behind enemy lines to kill as many Nazis as possible. Yet by movie's end the message is equally simple but profoundly more disturbing than when it began—there really is no difference between the Nazis, the guys in the French underground, the Allies and even the Jews. Each one is capable of behaving like an animal. There is no moral ground. Nazis kill Jews in cold blood. Jews savagely rip the scalps off Nazis. Allied soldiers don't think twice about shooting enemy soldiers who pose no threat. The French underground has no problem killing hundreds of German officers and their female escorts by locking them in a burning theater. And the leader of the pack, the American hero, delights in carving swastikas into the foreheads of his Nazi opponents.

Of course we understand that Tarantino isn't rewriting history. We know full well that there was no moral equivalence in the killing fields of Europe during the *Shoah*. The Nazis really were evil; nothing anybody else did came even close. But we would certainly be naïve and morally arrogant as to presume that only Nazis can perpetrate such atrocities. Tarantino is not the only filmmaker to explore this deeper question. The Dutch film *Black Book* addresses the same theme, blurring the lines between what we've always considered to be the good guys and bad guys of World War II. And perhaps even most dramatic was the Academy Award nominated Israeli film we showed here just two weeks ago—*Waltzing With Bashir*. While not all are comfortable with its message, the underlying truth of the film that even Jews can have bloody hands cannot be denied. The political realities of our world notwithstanding, human beings are human beings.

At the very beginning of *Inglourious Basterds* the Nazi officer, Colonel Hans Landa, sits down and engages in a philosophical query with a French farmer. He asks him what he would do were a rat to come into his farmhouse. The farmer responds that he would kill it. "Why?" "Because it is dirty, it carries disease." "Yes," Landa replies. "But so does a squirrel. Yet you wouldn't be so repulsed by a squirrel, would you? A squirrel is also a rodent. It also carries disease. It just *looks* cute." And even though for Colonel Landa the *rat* is the *Jew*, the implication is clear—we might look different but we're all the same. At the end of the dialogue, Colonel Landa concludes his *lesson*, "...[you see] I'm aware of what tremendous feats human beings are capable of...*once they abandon dignity.*"

For me "dignity" is just another name for *soul*. Once we abandon our soul, once we break loose of the sacred within, we are nothing more than animals.

On some level, perhaps the most important level, we need to assimilate this truth as we confront ourselves on this Day of Atonement. For as long as we see the world as a conflict

between *us* and *them*, as long as we distinguish ourselves in our own minds as being *different* than others, we fail. There is no difference between Jews and Nazis anymore than there is a difference between Israelis and Palestinians. We are all born with the same potential.

The real question this day, then, is not what have *they* done, not look at all the evil out there, but rather what have I done, why have I forsaken my sacred potential? And the bottom line message of this day is, my fate, my destiny, who or what I become is entirely up to me. “See, I set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse. *U’vacharta ba-chayyim*—Therefore, choose life...that you may live.”

The challenge of being human is not to nurture the soul but rather to allow our souls to nurture us. The challenge of being human is to open the gates of our souls and allow the potential for holiness to permeate our existence as human beings. As opposed to the body and the mind and the psyche—all of which require development, the *neshamah* requires the exact opposite. In order for the soul to be experienced one needs to *inhibit* the demands of body and intellect and ego.

For Judaism we do this through the performance of *mitzvot*. But think of *mitzvot* as the behaving in consonance with the commanding Voice within. When we act in a way that is consistent with our *neshamah*, we are acting of a whole—that is, with *integrity*. And we do it not just in the sanctuary, but everywhere. In our business dealings, in the ways we interact with others, in the ways we treat ourselves.

Why is it that we are so hard-pressed to attend to our souls? Why is it that we have such a difficult time addressing the life of the spirit? What does it take to stop and pay attention? What do we have to lose from listening to the world about us? Can we not see the power of looking into the eyes of another? Do we not understand that at the end of the day, all the things around which we spend so much time and devote so much energy are of no value? The challenge of being human is to discover the way for the finite and the infinite to be in harmony. And once we do that we discover the key that opens the gate and paves the way for the discovery of our humanity. Can we not see that every thing we do is pregnant with the opportunity to be *soulful*? Everything.

And perchance you should not share my belief in the nature of the soul, then just replace the word “soul” with “dignity”. You’ll get the same results. Because for Judaism, when all is said and done, that’s the most important part.

You are a child of God. Live your life as if it were true.