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BODY AND SOUL

A blind man and a lame man steal some fruit from an orchard guarded by a high fence. They do this by joining forces. The lame man climbs onto the shoulders of the blind man and guides him toward the fruit. When caught, each of them claims that he is obviously unable to commit the crime due to his disability. The orchard owner places the lame man on the back of the blind man and they are judged as one. [A parable to the soul and the body]

Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 91a

THE THIRD DIMENSION

Kabbalistic wisdom states that this world is comprised of three dimensions: time, space, and soul.¹

These three dimensions are inseparably linked. Einstein demonstrated this connection with regard to time and space, declaring that one cannot accurately describe one without the other. There is not time and space. There is only space-time.²

1 *Sefer Hayetzirah* 6:1. In Hebrew, this is known as *Olam* (“world”—space), *Shanah* (“year”—time), and *Nefesh* (one of the words for soul).

2 This was a part of Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity, which he announced in 1915.

Likewise, from the Jewish perspective, one can only speak of time-space-soul.³ In fact, it goes further than simply linking these dimensions together. Kabbalah states that the energy source sustaining the world is the soul. It is the internal spiritual dimension that sustains the other two.⁴

BODY-SOUL INTEGRATION

We are created as two seemingly contradictory parts: body and soul. Our bodies, which are very physical, are created by God's "hidden face." Our souls are created by His "revealed face."⁵ The body is an exact replica of how God hides His face in the world, and the soul is an exact replica of how God shines His light in this world.⁶

Neither alone can define us. We are not our body. The body is a transient creation, made from the dust of the earth.⁷ When its time on earth expires, it will return to the dust of the earth.⁸ However, we can't be our soul either. When saying the morning blessings, one declares: "God, the soul that you have placed in me is pure."⁹ If so, there must be a "me" external to the soul that can receive it.

In this world, body and soul are in constant tension. Each of us—the being that is made of these two elements—is essentially a paradox. The miracle of man is that God integrated the soul and the body into one being. When we think of ourselves, we don't think of two beings—a body and a soul. They are both just us. One who cannot think this way will be alienated from his own being. (Alternatively, he may be an existential

3 *Yosher Divrei Emet* 53.

4 See below.

5 *Ramchal, Daat Tevunot* 80.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Genesis 2:7: "And the Lord God formed man dust from the earth and He blew into his nostrils the breath of life." The body was from the "dust of the earth," while "the breath of life" refers to the creation of the soul.

See also *ibid.*, v. 17, where God also forms the animals from the ground. However, the term "dust of the earth" is only used with reference to man.

8 Genesis 3:19: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat bread until your return to the ground, for you were taken from it, for you are dust and you will return to dust."

9 *Prayerbook, Morning Blessings.*

philosopher.) If man thinks he is only his soul, then when his body acts with sensual passion or craves materialism, or wants to sin, who is that?

If we want to integrate the multiple facets of our being and still be the same person, we have to become soul-people. Only then can we connect all the dots of a self that is part angel and part animal. Only then can we stay true to ourselves across the spectrum of our lives.

THE WONDROUS CREATION

How this works—how body and soul come together to create “me”—is one of the ineffable mysteries of the creation.

There is a blessing that is said after using the bathroom, in which we praise God for allowing our bodies to work properly. We declare that should any opening of our bodies be clogged or anything ruptures, we would cease to exist, and it is God who maintains our existence. This blessing ends: “Blessed are You, O God, Who heals the flesh and acts wondrously.” While there are many blessing of praise to God, the inclusion of “wonder” is unique to this blessing. What is the wonder here?

In the early morning, this blessing of the body is followed directly by the blessing of the soul. The wonder is that these two—body and soul—come together in a new synthesis. God “acts wondrously” and man remains mystified. Recognizing this, we choose to bless God appropriately.¹⁰ The very mundane act of going to the bathroom stimulates our sensitivity to this wonder of the creation.

THE LIMITATION OF THE SOUL

While we are composed of both body and soul, the soul is the component that defines us. Because of its spiritual nature, the soul is much closer to the source of ultimate energy—i.e., God Himself—and hence is much more powerful than the body.¹¹

*We are first
and foremost
soul-people.*

10 Rabbi Moshe Isserles (the *Rama*), glosses on the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 6:1.

11 *Ramchal*, *Derech Hashem* 1:3:13.

In a statement that is both profound and multifaceted, the Sages describe the relationship of the soul to the body as similar to the relationship God has with the world:

To whom was [King] David referring to in these five [verses beginning with] “Bless the Lord, O my soul” (Barchi Nafshi)?¹² He was alluding only to the Holy One, blessed be He, and to the soul.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, fills the whole world, so too the soul fills the body.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, sees but is not seen, so too the soul sees but is not itself seen.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, nourishes the whole world, so too the soul nourishes the whole body.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, is pure, so too the soul is pure.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, abides in the innermost precincts, so too the soul abides in the innermost precincts.

Let that which has these five qualities come and praise He who has these five qualities.¹³

This means that the soul’s spiritual energy is comparable to God’s expression in the world. Given this, it is so much stronger than the body that, left to express itself fully, it would immediately “whoosh” the body up to the highest spiritual levels possible.¹⁴ There would be no choice, no ethical struggle, no world as we know it here.¹⁵ The purpose of creation—that we choose to do good and reject evil—would be defeated.

To level the playing field between soul and body, the soul is artificially restrained by God,¹⁶ “its power is obstructed and its brilliance reduced.”¹⁷

12 Psalms 103:1, 2, 22, 104:1, 35.

13 Talmud, Tractate *Berachot* 10a.

14 Ibid.

15 *Ramchal, Derech Hashem* 1:3:1–2.

16 Ibid., no. 13.

17 Ibid.

This allows for a balance of choice between the good and the bad—a perfect environment for choice that is delicately balanced between the possibilities of good and evil.¹⁸ The result is that two voices whisper into our ears at every turn, and every choice matters, moving us higher up toward the soul-reality or further into the material-reality.¹⁹ If we choose to do good, the soul gradually elevates and purifies the body.²⁰ The body then also becomes a force for good.

In the World to Come, the soul will be allowed to express itself fully and the body will move in total harmony with it, inexorably toward God.²¹ The World to Come functions entirely under the “revealed face” of God. With absolute clarity of God as the Source of everything,²² there will be no alternative to drawing close to God. There will be no choice.²³ The soul will express itself freely, rendering the body powerless.²⁴

The various stages of history can then be described as stages of the soul becoming increasingly more dominant with respect to the body. The body becomes increasingly purer as a result.²⁵

18 Ibid., no. 2–3.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., no. 7.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., no. 4.

23 The lack of choice already begins in the Messianic Era; *Ramban*, Deuteronomy 30:2.

24 Ibid. See above, “The Limitation of the Soul.” The *Ramchal* (*Daat Tevunot*, 88) describes the relationship of the soul to the body in five different stages:

1. The time during the soul’s sojourn in This World, a period of six thousand years: The body has significant control, and it is the job of the soul to channel the urges and passions of the body toward sanctity.
2. The Seventh Millennium, the Messianic Era: All body faculties are present but not necessarily operative. The soul is clearly the leading force.
3. The Eighth Millennium, the beginning of the World to Come (after Resurrection of the Dead): We are now in a world of pure and fine spirituality. The soul is the driving force and the body is hence also able to enjoy the spiritual rewards of this world. The body, at this stage, still has limited control with respect to some details.
4. The Ninth Millennium: a deepening of whatever happened in the Eighth Millennium.
5. The Tenth Millennium: By now, there is no control exerted by the body, which is now completely annulled to the soul.

25 See previous footnote. However, there will always be a slight difference between the body and the soul. *Ramchal*, *Daat Tevunot* 80 (p. 67), last paragraph.

This is only logical. The highest parts of any creature represent their essence, otherwise, why would they be endowed with that extra capacity?²⁶ Our bodies may be physical, but they are filled up by our souls.²⁷ The shape of our bodies reflects that.²⁸ Our body, in essence, is just a garment for the soul.²⁹

THE SOUL IS HOLISTIC—THE BODY IS FRAGMENTARY

If we define ourselves in any way that deviates from our spiritual authenticity, we will simply not be satisfied. We may become rich or famous or successful, but there will always be a voice inside that proclaims that we are missing out on whom we really are. I have met numerous people at the very top of their professions—doctors, business people, artists, architects—and they all told the same story. They always believed that reaching the top was the key to happiness—until they got there. They were stuck on the classical within-the-paradigm. They had been primed for only one mission, and when they fulfilled that mission, they found it wanting. This is part of the reason why Olympic participants often get depressed after the Olympics.³⁰ There was all that training and expectation, that rush of adrenalin during the games...but then what? They hadn't become better, more fulfilled, spiritual people. They were not their biceps or their legs or whatever else they used to get to the Olympics. Their essence had simply been ignored.

We need the fulfillment of the soul rather than that of the body, because the body, being physical, is subject to the fragmentation and atomization of this world. The eye sees and doesn't hear. The ear hears and doesn't see. The soul, on the other hand, being spiritual and a part of the Oneness of God, is intrinsically holistic.³¹ Even when it expresses

26 *Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 1.

27 Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen, *Machashavot Charutz*, no. 4.

28 *Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 4.

29 Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya*, chap. 23.

30 See, for example, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/08/post-olympic-depression/496244/>

31 *Daat Tevunot* 80 (p. 68), first paragraph. This is because the soul was created as a *chelek elokah mi'maal*—a part of God from above, and just like God is indivisible, so too is the soul.

itself in different ways, it is the whole soul operating.³² If we want to feel whole, if we want to feel a sense of unity between the different aspects of ourselves, we need to be soul-people.³³

Only when the body is an instrument of the soul can we be whole with our body as well. Many artists, dancers, and gymnasts have told me that they feel that they are doing something essentially spiritual, not physical; what moves them are the deepest wellsprings of their selves.³⁴ They are able to transcend the physical act and impregnate their actions with meaning. The artistic expression becomes the vehicle to express their soul. It is no longer just physical prowess or dexterity that is being displayed. It is no longer just to show others what their body can do, but rather to show themselves whom they are.

But this, too, will not suffice, for the body provides decreasing returns. Sooner or later, even the greatest dancers or sports-people find that their expression is more limited. They begin to live in the past, nurturing the memories of what they once were. Their life, as they defined it during those heroic years, is over. On the other hand, the person whose core is the soul keeps on growing until the end of his days.

The body is still an integral part of who we are, and it is important that we ensure its health and good shape. But this is just so the body will cooperate with the dreams of the soul.

We are first and foremost soul-people.

32 Ibid.

33 Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya*, chap. 23.

34 I showed this sentence to a world-class dancer, Eliana Girard, who also studies Torah. Her response: "I completely agree with that statement. Dance brings me into a quiet space in my mind where I hear Hashem without my ego contradicting my thoughts."