

Parashat Bereishit, 5773, 2012:

The Soul of Life

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Sefer Bereishit's narrative of man's creation never fails to intrigue us and capture our attention. Perhaps each of us discovers a small part of ourselves as we encounter Adam and Chava's beginnings, and, by definition, our own. In many ways, our successes and failures mirror those of Adam and Chava, and therefore, their story is our story.

As is widely known, there are two distinct versions of man's creation. In the first chapter of *Sefer Bereishit* (26-30) we read the following:

And G-d said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth." And G-d created man in His image; in the image of G-d He created him; male and female He created them. And G-d blessed them, and G-d said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth." And G-d said, "Behold, I have given you every seed bearing herb, which is upon the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed bearing fruit; it will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and to all the fowl of the heavens, and to everything that moves upon the earth, in which there is a living spirit, every green herb to eat," and it was so. (This, and all Torah translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Herein, Hashem created man in His image (*b'tzalmeinu*), after His likeness (*kidmuteinu*) and, according to a famous Midrash, as a plural, yet single entity ("zachar u'nekavah bara otom," "male and female He created them.") Man was given G-d's blessing to populate the world. Additionally, he was given the role of Hashem's steward of the planet

with the right to rule over Nature. We do not know, however, of what man was composed or how exactly he differed from the rest of the mosaic of Creation. While clearly Nature's master, he appeared to be a part of, rather than apart from, that which he was designated to rule.

In sharp contrast, chapter two's version of man's creation is short and pithy: "And the L-rd G-d formed man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul." (2:7) This verse teaches us a great deal about man that was hidden in chapter one's presentation. Man's creation was different, in kind and degree, from the rest of Creation. Unlike all other living beings, we learn that he was formed "from the dust of the ground," in some majestic and mysterious manner that defies our comprehension and understanding. In addition, Adam, in this description, was at first created solely male. He was required to wait in wrenching existential loneliness for the creation of Chava and his concomitant recognition of her: "And man said, 'This time, it is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...'" (2:23) Herein, as well, man was granted a distinctive gift that further separated him from the world of the beasts of the field: G-d, in His ineffable wisdom, endowed Adam with "the soul of life" (*nishmat chaim*).

What exactly, however, is this *nishmat chaim* that man received? As one might suspect, the classic *meforshei haTorah* (Torah commentators) offered many different interpretations of this phrase. In my view, one of the most compelling explanations is found in the famous 16th century Torah commentary of Rabbi Shlomo Efraim of Luntchitz (1550-1619) that is known as the "*Kli Yakar*":

...the *nishmat chaim* is the eternal intellectual-based soul (*hanefesh hamaskelet hanitzachi*) Come and learn who the breather (*hanofeach*) was [i.e. none other than G-d, Himself]. You will then [surely] find that this [phrase *nishmat chaim*] references [literally “speaks about”] the G-dly portion [of man] from above. It should be said that even though G-d breathed into man this intellectual soul, nonetheless, man at the moment of his coming into being was nothing other than a living being like other living creatures “... and [from] a wild donkey a man will be born.” [*Sefer Iyov* 11:12] It, therefore, follows that the essence of man’s perfection is contingent upon his determination and efforts; as well as exercising his free-will properly when he opens his eyes to his intellectual faculty as the time progresses. [To reiterate:] In the beginning of his existence – even though the spirit of the living soul has been breathed into him, his soul [i.e. intellectual ability] only exists in potential and has not been actualized. [Therefore,] if man does not expend every manner and variety of zealotry to be “at the head of the army” and be a soldier to fight the war of Hashem [for righteousness and human dignity], he will remain in his animalistic state and be compared to a beast.

The phrase “*nishmat chaim*” for Rav Luntchitz, therefore, refers to Adam’s intellectual abilities. When used astutely on behalf of righteousness and human dignity, Adam’s rational and logical faculties can launch him far beyond the beasts of the field with whom he shares basic biological and physiological needs. In sum, the unique gift of the *nishmat chaim* provides man with the potential to leap beyond mere animalistic desires, and become a *shutaf im Hakadosh Baruch Hu b’maaseh bereishit* (a partner with G-d in the ongoing creation of the world).

The past century bears horrific witness to man’s failure to utilize his intellectual powers for the benefit of mankind. The Holocaust, and many other acts of genocide, demonstrate the consummate evil of which man is so deadly capable when he fails to use his brilliance for good. As the *Kli Yakar* succinctly states, if unchecked and uncontrolled, man “will remain in his animalistic state and be compared to a beast.”

We are now at the beginning of a new and, hopefully, outstanding Jewish year. May it be a year wherein mankind will finally see the folly of rejecting good and embracing evil.

May it be a year wherein mankind will finally pursue peace with the same unflagging zealously that we have pursued power, riches, and honor. Most of all, may it be a year wherein we finally use our *nishmat chaim* for the benefit of the entire world, and together help bring *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the one and only Righteous Messiah) soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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