

Parashat Bereishit, 5784, 2023:

To Be Partners with Hashem in Creating the World

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May Hashem protect our brothers and sisters in *Eretz Yisrael*, and may He bring a speedy end to this war. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Our *parasha* has always fascinated me. In my view, it contains some of the most thought-provoking and intellectually challenging *pasukim* in the Torah. One of the most notable examples is the description of humankind's creation: "And the L-rd G-d formed man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life (*nishmat chayim*), and man became a living soul (*l'nefesh chaya*)." (*Sefer Bereishit* 2:7, this and the following Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Like the very first verse of the Torah, "In the beginning of G-d's creation of the heavens and the earth," our *pasuk* conceals far more than it reveals. Little wonder, then, that it has captured the attention of our greatest *meforshim*.

Rashi (1040-1105), building upon the translation of Onkelos (35-120 CE), focuses his interpretative efforts on the phrase, "*l'nefesh chaya*," and suggests the following analysis: "Cattle and beasts were also called living souls, but this one of man is the most alive of them all, because he was additionally given intelligence and speech." Somewhat surprisingly, in his monumental work of Torah exegesis entitled "*Kli Yakar*," Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550 – 1619) completely rejects Rashi's gloss. Moreover, in his view, *nishmat chayim*, rather than *l'nefesh chaya*, is the crucial phrase to grasp in order to understand humankind's authentic nature:

Nishmat chayim must be understood as the eternal rational soul (*hanefesh hamaskelet hanetzachi*). Come and learn [after all,] who was the One who breathed [into Adam the soul of life]? We, therefore, find that this [the *nishmat chayim*] refers to a portion of G-dliness (*chalek Elokah*) from above. (This and the following translations my own)

In sum, Rav Luntschitz shifts the emphasis of the *pasuk* from *l'nefesh chaya* to *nishmat chayim*, defines the latter term in an unprecedented manner, and declares it to be a *chalek Elokah*. Beyond a doubt, this is a theological *tour de force*.

Rav Luntschitz continues his exposition of our verse and notes that Hashem's overwhelming kindness in providing every person with a *nishmat chayim* is necessary but insufficient for the achievement of the highest level of humanity. Instead, we must respond in kind, and tirelessly expend our energies in order to reach the heights of that which makes us truly human:

This is to say, that although Hashem breathed the eternal rational soul into Adam, nonetheless, man, at the outset of his being, is indistinguishable from any other living soul (*nefesh chaya*) and is just like the other animals. [As the text states:] "For man is born as a wild donkey." (*Sefer Iyov* 11:12) [Moreover,] the essence of man's perfection (*shlaimuto*) is contingent upon the diligence of his labors and the degree of good inherent in his choices as he opens his [potentially] intellectually maturing eyes (*einei sichlo*) while growing in age.

At this juncture, Rav Luntschitz clarifies the crux of his presentation:

Regarding the beginning of a person's life – although Hashem has already breathed into an individual the soul of the breath of life (*nishmat ruach chayim*), this soul will nonetheless never be actualized and will remain solely in potential, unless he will try with depth-level efforts to go to the "head of the troops," and fight the war of Hashem. If he fails to do so, he will remain in his original animalistic state (that is, ruled by the *yetzer harah*) and will be the equivalent of an animal...The text reveals this matter to us [through the use of the phrase, "*nishmat chayim*,"] in order to teach us the [vital] lesson that man should never beguile himself into thinking (lit. "saying") that he can achieve perfection (*shlaimuto*) without tremendous effort and persevering exertion...rather, everything depends upon his own actions...

In my estimation, Rav Luntschitz's explication of *nishmat chayim* is reminiscent of Rabbi Akiva's famous response to the evil Roman governor, Turnus Rufus, when asked: "If

[your] G-d is desirous that man should have a *brit milah* (ritual circumcision), why does the newborn not exit his mother's womb in this state?" Rabbi Akiva's response informs our understanding of the *mitzvot* until our present moment: "Because the Holy One blessed be He did not give the *mitzvot* to the Jewish people except to [spiritually] purify them through their performance." (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Parashat Tazria V, translation my own) Rabbi Akiva is teaching us a fundamental lesson concerning our relationship with the Almighty: A newborn male baby is born in a state of physical imperfection; the *mitzvah* of *brit milah* removes this deficiency, and sets him on a lifelong path toward spiritual perfection. Therefore, through the fulfillment of this commandment, we join our Creator and become His partner in Creation (*shutfim HaKadosh Baruch Hu b'ma'aseh Bereishit*).

I believe that Rav Luntschitz is teaching us a parallel lesson on the moral–ethical plane of human existence: Just as we perfect the physical body that Hashem has bestowed upon us through the *mitzvah* of *brit milah*, and thereby serve as *shutfim im HaKadosh Baruch Hu b'ma'aseh Bereishit*, so, too, must we consistently actualize the *nishmat chayim* that He has given us, in order to be His partners in Creation and ultimately become all that we can be. As the Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) taught us so long ago in a celebrated liturgical poem (*piyyut*), "My soul thirsts for G-d, for the living G-d, my heart (mind) and my body run to the living G-d." (Translation my own)

With Hashem's help and our fervent desire, may we ever seek to become His *shutfim b'ma'aseh Bereishit*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)