

Parashat Bereishit, 5785, 2024:

What Makes Us Human?

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו כל בני ישראל, בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

Parashat Bereishit contains some of the most thought-provoking *pasukim* in the Torah. One of the most notable examples is the description of man's creation: "And *Hashem Elokim* formed man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils *nishmat chayim* (the soul of life), and man became a *nefesh chaya* (a living soul). (*Sefer Bereishit* 2:7, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105), in his *Commentary on the Torah*, analyzes *nefesh chaya* in this manner:

"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." In his work, *Kli Yakar*, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550 – 1619) rejects Rashi's interpretation. In his view, *nishmat chayim*, rather than *nefesh chaya*, is the crucial expression for understanding humankind's true 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 [*nishmat chayim*] refers to a portion from above (*chalek Elokah*). (Translations and brackets my own)

In shifting the verse's emphasis from *nefesh chaya* to *nishmat chayim*, Rav Luntschitz defines this term in a unique manner and declares it to be a heavenly portion from above.

In addition, he maintains that Hashem's overwhelming kindness in providing each person with a *nishmat chayim* is necessary but insufficient for attaining the highest level of humanity:

This is to say, that although Hashem breathed the eternal rationale soul into Adam, nonetheless, man, at the outset of his being, is indistinguishable from any other living soul 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 intellectually maturing eyes (*einei sichlo*) while growing in age.

At this juncture, Rav Luntschitz clarifies the diligence that is required to actualize our eternal rationale soul and thereby achieve perfection in our service of Hashem:

...this soul...will remain solely in potential unless he will try with all of his 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 (ruled by the *yetzer harah*) and will be the equivalent of an animal...man should never beguile himself into thinking that he can attain *shlaimuto* without tremendous effort and persevering exertion...rather, everything depends upon his own actions...

Rav Luntschitz’s words are reminiscent of the well-known expression of Ben Hey Hey: “*L’fum tza’arah agra*—According to the effort is the reward.” (*Pirkei Avot* 5:23) This phrase is interpreted by Rav Yisrael Lifschitz (1782-1860) in his commentary on the *Mishnah, Tiferet Yisrael*, in this manner:

Rabbeinu HaKadosh (Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi) concluded this section of the *Mishnah* with this statement in order to teach us that whether we are engaged in the act of Torah study, the fulfillment of its *mitzvot*, or in the improvement of *middot hanefesh* (ethical characteristics), [the same rule applies, namely,] their reward will grow according to the effort that one expends on them in order to perfect themselves....

Both Rav Luntschitz and Rav Yisrael Lifschitz focus on the need to expend great effort in refining ourselves so that we can overcome our “original animalistic state” and become true servants of the Almighty. As we study His holy Torah, perform its *mitzvot* and perfect our *middot hanefesh*, may Hashem help us to realize this goal. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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