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Steinsaltz

THE SOUL

Exclusive Preview Sample



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The Soul
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*We dedicate this wonderful book in honor of our forefathers
and our ancestors with the desire that our descendants
continue our family legacy: be true to our Jewish values,
be humble and charitable, and always lead by example.*

Alberto and Gay Peisach

Foreword

HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED your soul yet? Are you paying attention to your soul?

When a secular entrepreneur has the rare opportunity to have a close encounter with a giant talmudic scholar, a Torah master, and an evolved soul seeker of the stature of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a new dimension opens. No magical lights, no sounds, no fireworks, no epiphany, no revelations, and at first no conscious transformation; but a door to the Infinite opens from the subtle soft voice transcending all physical dimensions from above to below as one experiences a soul-to-soul encounter.

For some reason unbeknownst to me, it was my destiny to meet and get to know Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. In one of our many meetings, I saw that Rabbi Steinsaltz was tired from his work and there was still a room full of people waiting to meet with him. I asked him, “Rabbi, you have so many things to do, lectures to give, books to write . . . Why do you spend the time talking to me?” He looked at me with his deep, penetrating blue eyes and profoundly said, “Because you listen.”

The Rabbi explains that “people run around a lot, not in order to get to any particular place, but mainly to escape from themselves. But, in

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fact, a person should pay attention to the anguish of his soul, however it manifests itself...”

I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work on and discuss *The Soul* with Rabbi Steinsaltz. If we want to evolve as human beings, we need to assume the responsibility of acknowledging our soul, to distinguish our actions from reactions and behave accordingly. Listen to your soul.

Alberto Peisach

About the Soul

IT IS UNCLEAR how early in life we discover that we have a soul. Nevertheless, the soul is one of the first things we do perceive, even if we don't perceive it fully. This is similar to our perception of our bodies, which also develops in stages. As children, we probably discovered our stomachs because there was sometimes pain there, for example. Then, through the senses of sight and touch, we gradually discovered our hands, feet, and other body parts, until we came to a full awareness of our bodies. As adults, we conduct a constant, loving dialogue with the body (possibly too loving!) and are always dealing with it and caring for it to some degree. Nevertheless, more of it is hidden from us than perceived by us. While we are able to see and touch the external parts of our bodies, we are not so intimately acquainted with our internal organs and systems, whose workings are hidden.

Likewise, the experience of the soul does not enter our consciousness as a complete, unified perception. It penetrates our consciousness as an accumulation of experiences: love and hate, attraction and abhorrence, curiosity and learning, and so on. These experiences appear individually. Only at a later stage do they accumulate and form some sense of Self.

When the totality of these experiences is finally perceived by us as the Self, even an unsophisticated person can differentiate between self in the physical sense and Self in the spiritual sense, which is a part of the soul. Our acquaintance with the soul is fundamental, and we are aware of it long before we can give it a name. However, just as our acquaintance with our bodies begins with externally focused perceptions, our acquaintance with our souls also begins with externally focused experiences, while its inner workings are far less apparent.

So the soul is something we sense. We are as certain of its existence as we are of the body's existence, but we don't know much about it.

Throughout the ages, attempts have been made to define the soul – not only to define it, but also to locate it. The Greeks thought the locus of the soul was the diaphragm. By contrast, the Torah states that “the blood is the soul” (Deuteronomy 12:23). This perception is perhaps related to the idea that the heart is the basis of physical existence as well as the focal point of the soul. All of these efforts are attempts to resolve the enigma of the soul by locating it somewhere in the body.

After many generations of observation, it is generally accepted that the soul is located in the brain. However, scientists and philosophers, as well as other thinking people, know that this sort of definition is merely convenient shorthand and not really a description. Even those who locate the soul in the heart or brain know that these organs are pieces of flesh. They are, at best, points of contact with the soul, but do not constitute the soul itself.

While there is an essential perception of Self within the soul, this perception has no content; it is merely a declaration. In other words, our acquaintance with our souls is essentially no different from our acquaintance with other people. We might know what clothes they wear, what they look like, or even their way of thinking. Nevertheless, they are still foreign to us. They are familiar to us only through their extrinsic features, not their inner content. A person's mind contains millions of details, most of which are unknown to anyone else and are

unlikely to ever become known to anyone else. But the awareness of Self is beyond these details. “I know,” “I think,” “I feel,” and even “I am alive” are manifestations of self-awareness. But they cannot bring us closer to real familiarity with our souls.

Some people are inclined to contemplate the essence of their souls. Others can live their entire lives – even lives of intellectual activity – without taking an interest in their souls at all. These different attitudes are influenced by personality certainly, but also by our inner world of experiences. Those whose lives are externally centered do not give their own souls much thought. The more we are aware of inner experiences – such as love and hate, hope and despair – the greater the chance that these experiences will awaken some sort of awareness of the full depth and breadth of our souls. But even people who are self-aware – who spend at least some time thinking about their souls – do not usually reach beyond the scope of their existing experiences.

So while every person has a soul, the soul eludes definition. The Maharal¹ puts it like this: “In one way or another, we all sense our soul and know that it exists, yet we do not know what it really is.” It is specifically those who spend time exploring the soul who understand that although they are familiar with the layers and parts of the soul, and even with its functions, they are still unable to perceive its essence. They are aware that they are dealing with superficial manifestations of its existence and not with its ultimate nature. It has been said of God that He is “the closest being and yet the most distant being.”² So, too, the soul.

These and other mysteries that dwell beyond intellectual consciousness have been revealed to only a few individuals over the course of time. These few are the ones who can speak of the essence of a soul.

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1. Judah Loew ben Bezalel, widely known as the Maharal of Prague, was an important sixteenth-century talmudic scholar, Jewish mystic, and philosopher. This comment appears in the introduction to his work *Gevurot Hashem*.
 2. Rabbeinu Bahya ben R. Yosef Ibn Pekuda, *Hovot HaLevavot, Sha'ar HaYihud*, chap. 10. Rabbeinu Bahya was a medieval Jewish philosopher.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

The content of this book draws on the illumination of, and is written in the spirit of, those true masters of the soul – certain great sages who were aware of their divine souls and were intimately connected to them. Having been party to such knowledge, they have conveyed some of its mysteries and have revealed parts of its essence to us.

What Is the Soul?

W

E HAVE SEEN that it is impossible to pin down the soul. Yet, if we wish to speak about it, we need a common understanding of what we are talking about. Language, though imperfect, is the only tool available to us for this purpose. Whatever vocabulary or terminology we choose is certain to create a particular image of the soul. Such an image can be useful in moving us ever closer to some understanding of the soul. But it is only an image. Thus, in the chapters ahead, we will not confine ourselves to a single image. To do so would imply that the soul actually can be confined in this way – or confined at all. Instead, we may use different language in different contexts, which will conjure different imagery in different chapters, or sometimes in the same chapter.

To begin, then:

The soul is, of course, immaterial, and it is not only beyond matter but also beyond what is considered spirit: that is, it is beyond whatever the intellect, at its highest, can reach and understand or make clear to itself. The soul is thus not to be conceived as a certain defined entity, caged in the body, or occupying a finite space. Instead, it should be thought of as

a continuous line of spiritual being, stretching from the primary source of all the souls to beyond the specific body of a particular person.

When we speak of the primary source, the foundation of that ineffable presence that is the soul, we can say that all souls emanate from a single point; all souls are like reflections of one source of light on different objects. While each soul is a singularity unto itself, the light of the primary source exists within it, too. We could say, then, that all souls come from the same source, all souls have the same value, and all souls exist on the same level. However, when souls descend to the world from this primordial source, and even more so when they become manifest in the reality of our world – in other words, when they come to dwell in human bodies – they are no longer equal. What is more, no two souls are identical. Every soul is unique; each soul has its own essence and character that is different from those of any other soul.

The soul, then, in relation to the entirety of life, is like the vital force that animates everything in existence. This energy is not something we may take or leave; it is an inner reality. It is what germinates the seed of the fruit and causes the tree to grow. It lies at the foundation of every living being.

According to Jewish mystical literature, there are several levels of the soul, and they are parallel to levels in the spiritual universe in general. In the language of the Kabbalah, the *nefesh* level corresponds to our world, which is called the “world of action”; the *ruah* level corresponds to the “world of formation”; and the *neshama* level corresponds to the “world of creation.” Because these worlds, despite their differences, are in a certain sense a single unit, the levels *nefesh*, *ruah*, and *neshama*, although distinct, are located on a single continuum.

The higher level of the soul, the *hayya* level, essentially corresponds to the world of *atzilut*, or proximity to God, which is not exactly a world but a type of divine revelation. Therefore, people seldom discover this level, and when they do, it is only thanks to tremendous effort on their part, which enables them to ascend and reach some sort

of connection with the divine revelation. The highest level, the level of *yehida*, is beyond even the world of *atzilut*, and in a certain sense, it is not part of the soul of a specific individual but is included in the primary source of all souls. This is why it is called *yehida*, singular, as it is the single, general soul that is shared by all. Throughout the generations, there have been only a few individuals, called “masters of the *hai*” (an acronym for *hayya-yehida*), who achieved enlightenment on the level of *hayya-yehida*, essentially setting themselves apart from other human beings.

It is possible for human beings to ascend from one level to a higher one, but it is a task involving great exertion. In fact, our spiritual personas can be likened to a multistory building where the first, lowest floor in the building is the *nefesh* level, above it is the *ruah* level, and above that is the *neshama* level. Above that is the lofty level of the soul called *hayya*, and above this is the ultimate level called *yehida*. All of these levels exist within everyone! However, some of them are accessed only by certain individuals. Most of us dwell on the ground floor of this multistory building, the *nefesh* level, and do not necessarily occupy that floor fully. We start to ascend when our awareness of our inner selves does not remain at the first level but starts to rise. While success in making this ascension is due, in some measure, to the grace of God or our God-given gifts, it depends first and foremost on our own conscious decision to attempt the climb. But even if most people choose to remain on the ground floor – and there are those who actually prefer the basement – the entire building is open to anyone who makes the effort.

For our purposes here, we are interested in two levels of the soul: the *nefesh* (the vital soul) and the *neshama* (the godly soul).¹ At the most basic level, everything in the animal and mineral world has a *nefesh*. For human beings, as we have seen, the *nefesh* is the lowest level of our

1. In the imagery of the Kabbalah, the level of the soul that includes the *nefesh*, *ruah*, and *neshama* demands the presence of all three. For our narrative, however, the focus is on the *nefesh* and/or the *neshama*, but not the *ruah*.

non-material existence (thoughts, feelings, etc.), and we are in constant contact with it. But unlike the *nefesh*, which includes many components related to both the physical and the spiritual sides of life, the main characteristic of a *neshama*, a soul, any soul, is that it is a spark of God. This is why the entirety of the soul's existence is impelled toward its Creator.

From another perspective, we can say that the difference between the *nefesh* and the *neshama* lies in their foundations and their basic inclinations. The *nefesh* is the Self, the more conscious part of our inner being, and it works within every person to fulfill the needs and desires of the Self, whether they are physical and instinctive or abstract and spiritual. (More about the Self in the next chapter.)

The *neshama*, on the other hand, is not driven by the Self, but exists beyond the Self. It has no physical anchor; it is spiritual and abstract. It is not directly involved with the human body; it is involved with sanctity and with the human relationship with God. It connects with the human Self through the *nefesh*.

It follows that, in a certain sense, these two components of the soul – the *nefesh* and the *neshama* – are one, or are at least located on the same continuum. But in another sense, they are distinct. For this reason, human beings hold within them an inherent duality: two souls that act as one but on two different paths. At times, the fundamental differences between the impulses of these two parts of the soul lead them to conflict. What's more, the interaction between them is constantly influencing our thoughts, speech, and actions. And since these two souls act as one more often than not, we do not always perceive them as distinct from one another. Therefore, we do not know the source of every thought or urge we have. Indeed, a large part of our spiritual development is learning to distinguish these different components – the vital soul (*nefesh*) and the godly soul (*neshama*) – and hearing how each addresses us individually and how they address us as one.



The Soul

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