Soul

נפש

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The development of the Jewish conception of the soul has been determined by two basic, contradictory attitudes regarding the soul's nature and its relationship to the world. The one views man as a psychophysical unity, while the other claims a separate metaphysical existence for the soul. The former conception, founded on the biblical worldview, has little religious significance; it considers the soul subordinate to time and nature, existing within the confines of physical reality alone. The latter view, which developed under the influence of Greek ideas regarding the metaphysical, immortal nature of the soul, radiates deep religious significance.

The decisive Jewish conception of the soul is thus founded to a large extent upon the assumption that man does not, fundamentally speaking, belong to the natural world; his essential being is not corporeal, for its source is divine; and the temporal and spatial distinctions governing nature do not apply to it; that is to say, the soul's existence does not depend upon its physical expression, for it existed before the body and will remain after it. The definition of man is therefore fundamentally metaphysical, belonging

to the supernatural order, and the laws governing the soul are therefore neither physical nor rational, but metaphysical. It is from this point of departure that Judaism's attitude toward the nature and function of the soul and its role in religious thought are determined.

The severance of the soul from existential experience and its bursting of the bounds of physical reality are expressed in the development of the doctrine of preexistence, in the theurgical orientation of the kabbalah, in the development of ideas of reincarnation and postexistence, and in eschatological conceptions of the soul's ultimate destiny. The pivotal role played by the metaphysical view of the soul in shaping classical Jewish religious thought is explained by the fact that apart from its divine source, as expressed by the idea that man was created "in the image of God," the soul partakes of the divine in that it represents orders of existence that transcend time and nature. An interesting consequence of this orientation is that the Jewish conception of the soul is without anthropocentric interest. Its interest is entirely theocentric, for it is concerned with the soul only in its metaphysical manifestations. It dwells upon the mutual influences reciprocated by the human soul and its divine source. Its point of departure is God, not man. A further dimension of this theocentric interest is reflected by the fact that the Jewish conception of the soul is not primarily concerned with man's life in the present, but with what preceded it and what will follow after it; such an outlook perforce focuses its attention upon metahistory and eschatology rather than upon history. Even where it does concern itself with the present, its interest is in the ability of the soul to burst out of the confines of physical existence and unite with the divine.

According to the prevalent anthropocentric view, it is man's existence that expresses the relationship between God and his world, and it is in relation to man that God's kingship and providence are effective. The doctrine of the soul, however, takes an opposite, theocentric view, for it sees man's existence as having meaning only in relation to God. As he actualizes his potential metaphysical essence, man simultaneously distances himself further and further from his physical, material substance. The guarantee of his capacity to attain the realm of the spirit is to be found in the internal structure of his soul, which ascends level by level from the material to the spiritual. If man is created in the divine image and so has a fundamental relationship to God and an innate ability to serve him, it is by virtue of the structure and elements of his soul, which reflect the divine reality and endow him with the capacity to conceive of God.

The idea that man's essence is directed toward the spiritual dimension of existence, by which the divine aspect of his soul is drawn from the realm

of the potential to that of the real, is bound up with the concept of the perfection *(shlemut)* of man. Man does not belong to the natural order, which is complete in itself. Rather, he is viewed *ab initio* as being destined for perfection in a realm transcending that order. This notion of perfection, which shapes the purpose of man, thus relates to him as a supernatural rather than a natural being. It is by means of the Torah and its commandments, in the various ways in which these are understood in relation to the soul, that man's supernatural purpose can be realized. The Torah and the commandments are viewed as a force acting upon man to make his hidden metaphysical dimension a reality, that is, to expose the divinity of his soul and reunite it with its source. They are the points of contact between man and his metaphysical aspect, for it is by virtue of them that he can make his spiritual breakthrough from the confines of his physical existence, both during the course of his life and—since it is the Torah and the commandments that determine his spiritual fate—in time to come.

The Jewish doctrine of the soul, in its passage from its biblical beginnings to the later versions wrought by philosophy, the kabbalah, and Ḥasidic thought, has undergone a far-reaching transformation. In the Bible, body and soul are viewed as one, and existence and meaning are attributed to the soul on the physical, human, and historical plane. With the passing of time, however, the soul came to be viewed as a metaphysical entity that belonged to, affected, and was affected by the realm of the divine, transcending the confines of history and nature. The biblical conception, as noted, views the soul as part of the psychophysical unity of man, who, by his very nature, is composed of a body and a soul. As such, the Bible is dominated by a monistic view that ascribes no metaphysical significance to human existence, for it sees in man only his tangible body and views the soul simply as that element that imparts to the body its vitality. The soul is, indeed, considered the site of the emotions, but not of a spiritual life separate from that of the body, or of a mental or emotional life in conflict with that of the body; it is, rather, the seat of all of man's feelings and desires, physical as well as spiritual.[1] Such a conception views the entire entity of man as a "living soul," or, to put it in our terms, a psychophysical organism created in the image of God, whose existence has religious significance within the reality of time and place alone. Nevertheless, the fact that man is defined as having been created in the image of God allowed for the expansive development of postbiblical thought.

The talmudic conception of man has its roots in the biblical worldview, but it was also influenced by developments in religious thought and by ideas current in the postbiblical world, especially within Hellenism, which

embraces the possibility of the soul's simultaneous existence on both a physical and a spiritual level.[2] Although in rabbinic texts we find the heritage of the biblical conception regarding the psychophysical unity of the soul, under Greek influence there begins to develop alongside it a moderately dualistic anthropology suggesting a different status for body and soul.[3]

Once belief in the immortality of the soul, the revival of the dead, and the World to Come had become part of postbiblical Judaism, its religious view of man in relation to the world underwent a change. The religious significance of the world was no longer limited by concrete reality or by its psychophysical expression in a human entity, which consisted of a united body and soul existing within historical time. Alongside that reality was another, different one, which looked beyond the historical present and future. Thus, Judaism began to adopt a transcendental view of history and the meaning of human existence, and at the same time to view the soul as existing on a spiritual plane. It began, too, to speak of the soul remaining beyond the demise of the body, and of a spiritual life beginning prior to material existence.[4]

The rabbinic view of the soul as an entity having a spiritual character and as a fixed, defined metaphysical element almost certainly developed under the influence of Orphic and Platonic Greek thought. We may assume, too, that the Greek view of the soul as belonging to the realm of the divine, infinite, and eternal, and the body to the realm of the material, finite, and mortal, also left its mark upon Jewish thought. Plato's idea of the preexistence and eternity of the soul, derived from his dualistic outlook, which set matter and spirit at odds with one another, was also influential. We must bear in mind, however, that for all that the dualistic anthropology expressed in the rabbinic texts had in common with the Platonic and Stoic attitudes current in the Hellenistic world, the rabbinic sages' conception of this dualism and of the conflict between flesh and spirit was far less radical than that of the Greeks, who viewed body and soul as an absolute dichotomy.[5]

The dualistic conception of man in which body and soul are diametrically opposed bears within it, in addition to its metaphysical significance, the first stirrings of a religious striving toward the ideal of liberating the soul from the bonds of the physical, thereby enhancing its spiritual purity. This kind of outlook was entirely foreign to biblical Judaism, but became highly developed in medieval thought and especially in the kabbalah.

Having accepted the idea of the divine essence of the soul, Judaism now had to elaborate the nondivine, more vital and functional aspects of the human soul. This need to elaborate, as well as the influence of Greek thought, led to the development of the distinctions between the soul's mate-

rial and spiritual elements, between its intellectual, vital, and vegetable natures, and between the divine soul and the animal soul. These divisions gradually yielded symbols of spirit and matter, of nonbeing *(ayin)* and being *(yesh)*.

In later stages of development, the Jewish conception of the soul was influenced by Greek philosophical views, as these were reformulated and interpreted by the Moslem and Christian theologians of the Middle Ages. For the first time, Judaism viewed the doctrine of the soul as belonging to the realm of philosophy, and medieval Jewish thought made a unique attempt to adapt these philosophical views to the Torah and to make them a means for interpreting concepts relating to ethics, religious piety, prophecy, and the knowledge of God. Medieval Jewish thought focused its attention on the one hand on the immortality of the soul and the relationship between body and soul, or between matter and spirit, and on the other on the hierarchy of the upper worlds and the theory of knowledge. The answers that were proposed for these problems were clearly influenced by the medieval interpretations of Stoicism, Neo-Platonism, and Aristotelianism.

In consonance with these influences, the medieval Jewish doctrine of the soul was often associated with the idea of perfection. Personal perfection could be achieved by means of the soul's communion with or, as the Hebrew had it, cleaving to *(devekut)* the spiritual element surrounding it, that is, the "universal soul," the "active intelligence," or God himself. Looked at from a different perspective, the emphasis on communion meant that man's relationship to God was established through intellectual effort, philosophical contemplation, or mystical devotion.

The Jewish doctrine of the soul, however, did not remain within the confines of the Greek schools of thought and their view of the soul as being essentially a philosophical problem. The philosophical concepts it had acquired regarding the spiritual hierarchy of the universe and questions bound up with the conception of the soul underwent a mythical-Gnostic transformation in the twelfth century, when they encountered the early kabbalah and the *Sefer ha-Bahir*.[6]

In the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the creation and the molding and sustenance of souls is bound up with an erotic myth that speaks of sexual union between cosmic entities in the world of the *sefirot* (divine emanations) and of the process of creation in general. The text alludes, in highly symbolic language, to a system that was further developed in the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic literature. Three stages of development are discerned in the formation of souls: the ideal, the ontological, and the actual. These stages parallel both the processes of intercourse, pregnancy, and birth, by which the physical

body comes into being,[7] and the relationships between the *sefirot* in the supernal world. The erotic symbolism by which the dynamic relationship between the various aspects of the divine is described in the kabbalistic system relates to the idea that the creation of souls takes place in connection with an act of cosmic union. In addition, it reflects deep religious implications regarding the exalted nature of the soul that were attached to human sexual union on account of its archetypal parallel in the supernal worlds.[8]

The kabbalistic doctrine of the soul is based upon three fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of man: (1) the divine origin of the human soul; (2) the idea that man is structured in the image of the *sefirot*, and that his soul reflects the hierarchy of the supernatural worlds, and (3) the idea that man can influence the world of the divine.[9]

The kabbalah borrowed the philosophical division of the soul into parts and superimposed a mystical quality upon it, holding that each part was expressive of different *sefirot*. The transition from the philosophical version of the tripartite division of the soul to that of the kabbalah took place toward the end of the thirteenth century. Man, by virtue of the origin of the elements of his soul and their relationship to strata within the hierarchy of the transcendent worlds, enjoyed therefore a fundamental connection with the hierarchy as a whole and with each of its separate manifestations. His spiritual structure made him capable of affecting and being affected by all of reality, on every level. Each element of his soul was able to affect the higher level from which it had sprung. All of the realms and all of the souls exerted a continuous influence upon one another. The tendency of the kabbalists to build their spiritual structures upon the principle of the infinite mutual reflection of their foundations left its mark upon the mystical significance of the doctrine of the soul. Since the structure of the soul parallels that of the hierarchy of the *sefirot*, it would seem that man may decipher the secret of the divine by contemplating these qualities that exist in his soul: "For anyone who knows the secret of the wisdom of the soul knows the secret of divine unity."[10]

The anthropology of the kabbalah took shape on the basis of these assumptions. It taught that the essential quality of humanity was to be found not by determining man's relationship with the other creatures of the earth, but rather by defining the bidirectional links connecting him with the *sefirot*. On the basis of its assumption of the divine nature of the human soul and of the intimate relations binding it to the godhead, the kabbalah arrived at a most important conclusion: man's relationship with God could not be reduced to his one-sided need for heavenly mercy; it was characterized, rather, by reciprocal influence and mutual assistance. The kabbalah's con-

ception of the soul was shaped by a theurgical orientation. Man was sustained by the downward flow from the world of the *sefirot*, but he also exerted an upward influence of his own. By means of special *kavvanot* (pl. of *kavvanah*, lit., directed intention) and *yiḥudim* (pl. of *yiḥud*, lit., unification) recited in conjunction with his religious activities, he was able to endow the divine *sefirot* with vitality and assist their harmonization. In the view of the kabbalah, moreover, the harmonious interplay of the spheres of divine life depends upon the actions of man. The worship of God thus took on a magical, theurgical dimension. This conception of the soul as a spiritual power that brought man into communion with God and exerted its own influence upon the divine was of crucial importance in shaping the kabbalistic interpretation of the worship of God, according to which the purpose of all the commandments is to enable the soul to unite with God and to bring about a union of the elements of the divine.

A further link between the kabbalah's interpretation of the commandments and its doctrine of the soul is to be found in the doctrine of reincarnation, which came to Judaism from Platonic thought. There is evidence of its presence in Jewish circles, where it aroused a good deal of controversy, from the eighth century onward. It occurs in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, and the kabbalah therefore accepted it as sacred doctrine.

Reincarnation means that the soul exists within different bodies at different times; in other words, the life of the soul is independent of the confines of the physical existence of the individual. The doctrine of reincarnation thus represents an attempt to endow human life with broader dimensions, both in terms of time and in terms of its spiritual and religious dimensions.[11]

Because of its halakhic implications (with respect to levirate marriage and the rules of ritual slaughtering), the kabbalah cloaked the basically irrational concept of reincarnation with a good many surface coverings of rationality. Moreover, the concept received an added dimension of significance in connection with the concepts of exile and redemption. It came to symbolize the situation of the unredeemed world, the discord that had entered the primeval order on account of the sin of the first man. The external, physical exile of Israel on the historical level is paralleled, on a metaphysical level, by the inner exile of the soul. Reincarnation and exile become the main symbols of the "shattered" reality. The world was in need of restoration and redemption on both a physical and a spiritual level; with the end of the historical exile, the bodies of men would be redeemed and the exile of the souls—the cycle of reincarnation—would cease.[12]

The doctrine of the soul became more and more central to Judaism with the growing influence of mystical trends, which removed religion from the

realm of history and the physical world, emphasizing instead the life of the godhead, metahistory, and redemption.

In the latter stages of kabbalistic thought, the Platonic ontology upon which the above interpretation of man's creation in the image of God had been founded was no longer dominant. The monistic theology that had described a unidirectional hierarchy of emanation that was reflected in the divine soul of man gave way to a dialectic conception of the universe that viewed the divine essence and its human counterpart as being characterized by an ontological split.

From the Lurianic kabbalah onward, kabbalistic thought was founded upon a recognition of the basic polarization of all existence and upon the idea that the divine life is played out through two simultaneous processes, that of emanation and that of *ẓimẓum* (contraction); that of creation and actualization and that of annihilation. Moreover, this ontological duality within the divine essence was assumed to have its counterpart within the soul of man.[13] The dialectical polarization characterizing all of reality is reflected in the idea that man has two souls, a divine soul and an animal one. These represent two opposing but interdependent systems, which manifest themselves throughout the universe in concealment and exposure, the hidden and the revealed, being and nonbeing, flow and contraction, covering and uncovering, unity and separation.

These two poles have their counterparts, as noted, in the two conflicting spiritual elements within man's soul—his divine soul and his animal soul. The divine soul represents the principles of flow, spirituality, uncovering, and infinity, while the animal soul represents limitations, physicality, covering, restriction, and finitude. The animal soul cannot exist without the divine soul, which gives it life, but the divine soul, too, can have no individual existence without the animal soul, which restricts and clothes it; the two are thus dependent upon one another. The divine soul represents the yearning of the spirit to return to its source and its awareness of the truth of the world of unity, from the divine perspective. The animal soul, in contrast, represents material being, differentiated reality, a way of being that does not see itself as part of the divine unity, and man's thirst for the physical aspects of life. The relationship between the divine and the animal souls parallels that between the spiritual and the material, the infinite and the finite, throughout existence. This relationship is not static, for the divine soul continually yearns to transform the animal soul and bring it within the sphere of the divine, while the animal soul yearns to transform the essence of the divine soul and bring it down into the world of being. Man's existence is thus paradoxical, for his animal soul provides the constitutional element

necessary to conceal the revealed divine essence and bring it into the world of being, while his divine soul yearns with all its might to do away with this concealing element so that it can reach the sublime, unconcealed divine essence.

In the kabbalah and Ḥasidic thought we find a dualistic ontological structure in which positive and negative spiritual systems parallel one another, united by their common origin despite their very different manifestations. These systems are called by different names, depending upon the epistemological plane on which they are being discussed. On the one side we find nothingness, holiness, unity, and substance, which are expressed through the divine soul; on the other we find Being, the *sitra aḥra* (lit., the other side, that is, the realm of evil), separation, and concealment, which are represented by the animal soul. The dialectic between being and nothingness is the same as that between the animal soul and the divine soul, and that between impurity and holiness; a metamorphosis that takes place on any one of these levels thus has implications for all the rest. This dualistic ontology gradually underwent a mythic-Gnostic transformation. The conflict between the divine and the animal soul came to be viewed as a struggle between good and evil, between the *Shekhinah*, the divine Presence, and Satan, or between holiness and the impure *kelippot* (shells). This struggle began with the sin of the first man, and would end only with the ultimate redemption, the defeat of the *sitra aḥra* and the victory of the holy.[14]

The reason for the centrality of the doctrine of the soul for Jewish mysticism is thus clear: the soul had become the arena in which the cosmic struggle between the holy and the *kelippot* was played out, with the two sides to the dialectic represented respectively by the divine soul and the animal soul. They were aided in their struggle by, on the one hand, the performance of the commandments and the recitation of the various *yiḥudim*, *kavvanot*, and *tikkunim* (pl. of *tikkun*, lit., restoration) that accompany this performance, and, on the other, acts of sin and transgression and extraneous evil thoughts. The relationship between the divine and animal souls was a reflection both of the changing metaphysical situation within the divine being and of the active influence exerted by the human soul upon the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

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