

"A Higher Octave": The Soul's Journey and the Symphony of Life

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In our prayer book class that meets on Thursdays, we've been talking about the soul.

Judaism says that every human being has one. But what is it?

From a strictly scientific perspective, there is no such thing as a soul.

As the historian Yuval Harari points out, "Scientists have subjected Homo sapiens to tens of thousands of bizarre experiments and looked into every nook in our hearts and every cranny in our brains. But they have so far discovered no magical spark. There is zero scientific evidence," he concludes, "that [humans] have souls."¹

Biologically, we human beings are animals, plain and simple—and like other animals, we are a mass of organic material—atoms and molecules strung together: no more and no less.

From the perspective of science, that's it.

And all that talk about souls, and being created in the divine image, and the inherent uniqueness of every human being? Those are fairy tales we tell to convince ourselves that our lives have meaning.

Well, I am here to tell you that I believe in the fairy tales.

It's not that I doubt science; I don't. It's that I know, in my bones, that there's more to reality and to our existence than science can explain.

For me, it's a matter of faith. It may not be empirically provable, but for me, that's irrelevant.

The soul is *real* for me. And it is a source of great meaning.

Our daily morning liturgy affirms the reality of the soul. It says: "*Elohai n'shamah she-nata bi, t'horah hi;*" meaning: "My God, the soul You have given me is pure."

The word "*n'shamah*" in this prayer—the word that's translated as "soul"—means "the breath of life."

We first encounter it in the *Genesis* creation story, when God forms Adam from the soil of the earth and blows the breath of life into him.

In our Jewish story, we human beings are filled with God's own essence. The *n'shamah*, the very breath of God, is the life force that animates our body.

Maimonides taught that the soul is the source of our emotions, our intellect, our character traits, and our capacities to imagine and reason and discern moral truths that transcend culture.²

The soul is the seat of everything about us that is intangible and metaphysical. Biological science cannot demonstrate its existence because the soul is not biological; it's *spiritual*.

Some may scoff at this. People say to me all the time: "I'm not a spiritual person."

To that I say, apropos *Leviticus*, "bull."

Every human being has both a physical and a spiritual dimension.

The physical is temporal: Our bodies last a while, then they break down and eventually decompose.

But the *n'shamah*—the soul that constitutes the spiritual, or *metaphysical*, dimension of our being—is eternal: It is the pure essence of who we are as a human being. It is not subject to physical or chemical change; it does not decompose or disappear into nothingness.

The soul lasts forever, because it comprises the elements of the human being that are infinitely cherished by God.

To believe in the reality of the soul is to affirm that we are more than just our body—that, while our bodies may experience illness or disability, or be broken or killed by some tragic accident of man or nature, the unique human being who was created by God and enlivened by the divine breath is indestructible.

Maybe this *is* a fairy tale. But, if it is, it's one worth believing in, because, as the late contemporary philosopher Neil Gillman put it, religion helps us "discern patterns in what appears to be anarchy, wrest cosmos out of chaos [and] sense out of senselessness."³

If we are no more than a blob of organic mass, there is no meaning to life: We are here simply by evolutionary accident.

But if we do, in fact, have a soul breathed into us by God—a spiritual essence that connects us to the Source of all existence—then it means we are here for a reason. Life has meaning and purpose: It is a sacred calling for us to discern and live out.

I believe each human soul has a unique purpose designated by God. Because it's different for each of us, we have to discern it for ourselves.

But writ large, Judaism says that the cosmic purpose of each soul is *elevation*.

The Kabbalah teaches that God creates every soul pure but unperfected.

The purpose of incarnation—sending the soul into the world in bodily form—is to refine and elevate it through the experience of living.

In this sense, each of us is the trustee of the *n'shamah* given to us. Our responsibility is to live the best way we possibly can in order to move it toward perfection.

But as you might imagine, that's too big a task for any one person, any one human life.

Which is why the Kabbalah says that a soul may need many journeys through worldly life to get it right.

That means reincarnation, of course. But don't worry: while each individual human bodily life is finite, souls are eternal. They've got the time.

Our job is to lift our soul a little bit higher than the one who had it before us, and then pass it on to the next person so they can bring it to the next level.

As the sages say, "It is not your obligation to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."⁴

I find that this week's parashah and tonight's special musical service provide good context for describing the soul's journey.

Our parashah begins with the words, "*Vay'hi ba-yom ha-sh'mini; On the eighth day*" (Lev. 9:1)—the eighth day of the installation ceremonies for Aaron and his sons as the *kohanim* (priests).

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a prominent 19th-century German Orthodox rabbi, explains the significance of the eighth day in Judaism:

"[T]he completion of a count of seven days," Hirsch says, "symbolizes the conclusion and completion of the condition that has prevailed until now; the eighth day marks a new beginning on a higher level—the beginning of a higher 'octave,' as it were."⁵

The octave is a beautiful metaphor.

- Just as each note of an octave rises in tone—one step or half step at a time—toward the root note, so too the soul—if nurtured well by its trustee—will rise step-by-step toward God, the Root of all existence.
- Just as the musical scale reaches completion in returning to the root note, the eighth in the sequence, and immediately begins again where the previous scale ended, only at a higher octave, so too the well-cared-for human soul completes one full cycle when the person in possession of it dies—and it immediately begins a new cycle at a higher level in its next incarnation.
- And just as the musical scale remains the same even as the octaves continue to rise, so too the eternal human soul endures even as one life elevates it and passes it on to the next trustee.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, the famous Hasidic master, taught that living life in a way that inspires and elevates the soul is like making music.

"Music is made," he says, "by sifting the good from the bad. ...

"The musician's task is to move his hands on the instrument in such a way as to produce good spirit, 'good vibrations,' while avoiding the 'bad vibrations'—the dissonant winds of gloom and depression."⁶

Rebbe Nachman says that to create beautiful melodies of the soul, we have to look for and gather up all the good that's in ourselves and other people—even, and especially, when that's hard to do.

When we judge people favorably—"even those," he says, "who seem totally bad"—and act with love and compassion toward them and toward ourselves, Rebbe Nachman teaches that we actually lift their souls and ours to a higher plane.

And in doing so, we create more than a collection of individual melodies; we create a beautiful symphony of life.

So, I'd like to conclude with a prayer from our siddur, *Mishkan T'filah*:

Let our souls evolve higher:
from instinct to inspiration,
haughtiness to holiness,
selfishness to service;
to join with the Soul of souls,
the Infinite One.⁷

As I elevate my soul to a higher octave, "I will praise Adonai all my life; I will sing to my God with my whole essence." (Psalm 146:2)

1 Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus*, 118-119

2 See *Sh'monah P'rakim (The Eight Chapters)*, chapter 1

3 Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 248

4 Pirkei Avot 2:16

5 R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Hirsch Chumash*, Lev. 9:1

6 *Likkutei Mohoran Torah* 282

7 *Mishkan T'filah: Weekdays & Festivals*, 159