

Part VII

Believer: What you say is correct if we assume that there is no more to the human “I” than meets the eye. That the “self” is intrinsically selfish. I disagree. I believe that there is a higher ego implicit in the quest for self-fulfillment which so dominates our lives. Chassidic teaching explains our moral schizophrenia in terms of two souls which each of us possesses: the “Animal Soul” (nefesh habehamis) and the “G-dly Soul” (nefesh ho'elokis). The Animal Soul is the essence of physical life: it focuses exclusively on self, its every act and desire motivated by the quest for self-fulfillment and self-enhancement. The G-dly Soul is its diametric opposite: it is driven not by ego and self-interest but by a quest for self-transcendence and self-negation. The G-dly Soul is like a small flame set beside a great fire: the flame incessantly pulls towards the fire, seeking to be drawn in and consumed by the fire's greater being. Were the flame's desire to be realized, it would cease to exist as a distinct entity; nevertheless, such is the nature of the flame. Similarly, “the soul of man is the lamp of G-d” (Proverbs 20:27). Although the basic nature of every created entity, including man's own Animal Soul, is to tend towards self-preservation and self-advancement, man also possesses another, higher self: a soul that is a “lamp of G-d.” A soul whose very “I” is defined as the desire to shed its identity and be nullified within its infinite source. So while the Animal Soul seeks the fulfillment of self, the G-dly Soul gravitates to its Divine source, striving to fulfill the purpose of its creation and thereby connect to the all-pervading reality of G-d. As both these souls have the same brain, heart, hands, etc. at their disposal, this makes for the perpetual struggle of life: the struggle between substance and spirit, between self-assertion and self-nullification. Any thought, desire, or act of man stems from either of his two souls, depending upon which has gained mastery over the other and is asserting itself through the person's behavior...

Skeptic: Sounds like your basic religious theology: the old dichotomy between good and evil, the cosmic struggle between G-d and Satan...

Believer: Not exactly---remember that Judaism sees evil as a non-entity, akin to the non-phenomenon of darkness. So obviously evil is not a counter force to good, only the (temporary) concealment thereof. Notice that I said nothing about evil, only a bout self versus selflessness...

Skeptic: But aren't you saying that selfishness is the source of all evil?

Believer: Yes, selfishness is often the source of evil, but it can also serve as the source for good. Left to its own devices, the self-oriented drives of man tend to the most immediate and superficial of gratifications, to the utter disregard of any one or anything else---even his own long-term good. But when the G-dly Soul dominates the mind with its perception of the Divine truth, the Animal Soul is also affected. The “selfishness” in man can then be refined and re-directed as a positive force. The education of the Animal Soul is best defined by the verse (Deut. 30:20) “To love the Lord your G-d... for He is your life.” The Animal Soul loves its own life. When it recognizes that “He is your life”, that G-d is the source and sustainer of its very being, its entire perception changes. The very same ego that craved the most base and material of pleasures is now drawn to attach itself to the Almighty, out of the realization that such an attachment would constitute the ultimate enhancement and perfection of self. So it will devote itself to the fulfillment of the Divine purpose for creation, sacrificing its present material expressions of selfhood for the promise of a higher and more fulfilling existence. This, to me, is the meaning of the Talmud's story about the attempted assassination of the “evil inclination.” The objective must be not to kill the ego, but to temper its extremes so that its essence may be revealed and re-directed; to strip away its external, negative expressions and uncover the positive force at its core. In the quest for material gain, men and nations may (and inevitably will) clash over conflicting interests. But when humanity uncovers its true self, the pursuit of self-fulfillment becomes a harmonious endeavor. For while each one of us has his own unique mission in life, these are all complimentary parts of the overall Divine plan.

Skeptic: But haven't you contradicted your own premise? If nothing can transcend itself, how can man, whose soul, as you point out, is comprised of conflicting drives and desires, unify his splintered self? Is not man, too, like the prisoner who cannot free himself?

Believer: My whole point is that, ultimately, these drives aren't truly conflicting. That's why I gave you that whole speech about the "G-dly Soul" and the "Animal Soul." True, the Animal Soul is selfish while the G-dly Soul is utterly selfless; but when properly guided and directed, the selfish animal in man drive strives for the very same goals as does his G-dly self. In other words, man is a "prisoner" who, in some deep secret place, holds the key that opens the gates of his cell. Nevertheless, until he accesses this key and use it, we cannot reach beyond the limitations of his present condition. So as long as we have not harmonized our conflicting drives within, we cannot hope to bring true and enduring peace to the world without.

Skeptic: You still haven't solved the problem of disharmony within the human soul. You still have a human being who is polarized between altruism and transcendence on the one hand, and an "animalistic" drive for self-fulfillment on the other---albeit a "kosher" animalistic drive for self-fulfillment.

Believer: But that's what harmony is: the co-existence and integration of diverse elements. Beauty is rarely to be found in a single color, a single note of music, or a single syllable of literature; it is the synthesis of contrasting elements that makes the picture, the symphony or the poem harmonious and beautiful. Similarly, the very essence of life is the tension between the personal "I" and the cosmic "we", between immanence and transcendence, between self and self-negation. This is also reflected on the physical level: look at to and fro of life--the contraction and expansion of the heartbeat, the intake and expulsion of breath--and you will behold the vacillation from being to nullity and back again. But this tension itself can be a source of harmony, when these opposite tendencies become the diverse motivations to a common end. When both the animal and G-dly souls devote themselves to the same goal, each for its own reasons: the G-dly soul to be drawn and nullified within the all-embracing Divine reality, and the animal soul to gain the ultimate in self- fulfillment and self-realization. The same is true of the harmonious world of Moshiach. It is not a world of seamless homogeneously. If perfection, on the human level, were to come in one flavor, the Messianic Era could be populated by a single human being who is the ultimate realization of man as created in the image of G-d. Who needs another five billion of the same thing? The world of Moshiach is the same world we live in today. It is a world comprised of differences and contrasts: male and female, intellectuals and sensualists, scientists and artists, etc., etc. But when each individual and element has attained its most perfect and ultimate state, diversity will not be the instrument of conflict but of harmony.

Skeptic: You're making the prospect of a perfected world seem even more hopeless than I say it is. If man has to wait until he achieves inner harmony and perfection before attempting to improve matters on the global scale, the human race would not survive long enough to allow him to do so...