

Rabbi Mark L. Solomon

Not a Simple Soul: Jewish Views of the Human Psyche

This paper surveys Jewish concepts of the human soul from Biblical to modern times, showing the changing ideas of the psyche over the centuries. It commences with an examination of the vocabulary of the human spirit in Hebrew Scriptures, involving terms like *nefeš* (life, breath, self, life-force), *ruah* (wind or spirit) and *nšāmāh* (breath, breathing thing). Early Biblical writings show little sign of body/soul dualism, but by the later stages, passages in the Psalms and Ecclesiastes, for example, raise questions about the possibility of spiritual survival after death.

Intertestamental writings, and the New Testament, show that such dualism had developed, probably under Hellenistic influence, and became a topic of interest in Rabbinic discourse, where ideas about post-mortem spiritual survival coexist in a complex and unresolved way with the belief in bodily resurrection at the end of days. In contrast to Christian orthodoxy, which insisted on the creation of the soul simultaneously with the body at conception, a Rabbinic consensus developed that all souls were created at the beginning of time and exist in inchoate form with God until their time comes to be incarnated.

In the influential synthesis of Rabbinic Judaism and Islamic Aristotelianism created by Moses Maimonides (12th century), the focus of belief in immortality shifts from the soul to the mind. The soul, as the form of the body, perishes with its material counterpart, and only the “acquired intellect” survives. The impersonal and elitist implications of this concept proved unacceptable to most contemporary and subsequent Jewish thinkers. Under Neoplatonic influence, Jewish mystics drew upon the variety of Biblical terminology to create a complex, multi-layered theory of the soul. This evolved from an earlier three-tiered model (*nefeš-ruah-nšāmāh*: active-emotional-intellectual) to a more complex one, in which only the lower levels were “contained” in the body, while the higher ones exist constantly in a heavenly sphere. To this was added the idea of the universal soul, like that of Adam.

Stemming from the Shi'i-influenced teaching of Judah Halevi, that Jews inherit an *'amr ilāhī* as their unique connection with God, later Kabbalah and Hasidism came to teach that Jews alone possess a divine soul that is “an actual portion of God from above.” The paper explores the particularistic implications of this doctrine. Finally, the paper considers developments from Bruno Bettelheim's interpretation of Freud's concept of the psyche to the prevalent agnosticism among many Jews today, about the existence of an immortal soul – perhaps a return full-circle to the non-dualist Biblical conception of the human being.



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