

General Jewish Thought

Rav Soloveitchik's "A Yid iz Geglichn tzu a Seyfer Toyre"

BY: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Translator's Note: The following is a translation from the Yiddish of the fifth section of R. Soloveitchik's yortzayt shi'ur entitled "A Yid iz Geglichn tzu a Seyfer Toyre" – "A Jew is Compared to a Torah Scroll." (Previous sections appeared in prior issues of this paper.) Dr. Hillel Zeidman transcribed and published the shi'ur, with an introduction, in R. Elchanan Asher Adler (ed.), Beit Yosef Shaul, vol. 4 (New York: Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, 1994), pp. 17-67. A Hebrew translation by R. Shalom Carmy appeared in the same volume (pp. 68-103).

The present translation – the first rendition of this shi'ur into English – was prepared by Shaul Seidler-Feller, utilizing Dr. Zeidman's original Yiddish transcription and R. Carmy's helpful Hebrew equivalent. Thanks go to R. Elchanan Adler and R. Jacob J. Schacter for their assistance in refining and editing this work.

Section V

Soul and Spirit

We must now focus on the second question which we formulated earlier.¹ First, **of what does the "internal" Torah scroll consist? Which aspect of the human personality must one purify and sanctify through *ibbud li-shemah* (processing the material for the sake of the mitsvah)?** Second, how does the processing express itself? What does the Creator of the Universe demand of us with respect to **the development of our own personalities?**

Let us analyze the first part of this question, namely what it is that Judaism considers the "parchment" of the Jewish personality.

According to medieval philosophers, the human personality consists of soul (*nefesh*) and spirit (*ruah*). In *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:8, Rambam writes:

"The *nefesh* of all flesh expresses itself in the form that God gave it. The unique understanding which was implanted into human nature represents the form (the substance or spiritual personality) of a person who has reached completeness (*shelemut*) through his intellect. Regarding this form, the Torah says, 'Let Us make man in Our form, as Our likeness, etc.'ⁱⁱ [...] This [specific *nefesh*-personality] is not the natural *nefesh* which can be found in every living creature and which enables a person to eat, drink, reproduce, sense, and think. Rather, it manifests itself in intellect, through which the potential personality transforms into an actuality (*tsurat ha-nefesh*). Regarding this actualized personality did the verse write, 'In Our form,

as Our likeness.' Many times, this form (the full realization of all the intellectual capacities of man) is called, 'soul and spirit.'"

The *nefesh* represents the sum total of all physiological-psychological abilities – all the wants and needs of a person as a natural creature, as a "living soul." The hunger drive, the sexual drive, all five of the senses, the [drive to] chase after corporeal beauty and pleasure – the entire instinctual world of a human being – can be attributed to the "living soul," which is manifest in sensation and primitive feelings. [In other words,] the driving force of the "living soul" is the quest for gratification.

Rambam characterizes the *ruah*, in contrast to the *nefesh* alone, as the "unique understanding which was implanted into human nature," etc. The *ruah* represents knowledge, the human intellect, the ability to understand, the human drive for information and exploration, [and] the human talent to formulate ideas and principles, draw conclusions, classify the world, and fathom its laws: "a form which understands and grasps concepts."ⁱⁱⁱ The motto of the *ruah* is the search for truth.

It is self-understood that the "internal" Torah scroll is composed of these two basic aspects of the human personality, the *nefesh* and *ruah*: the "parchment" is the natural *nefesh*; the "writing" consists of the ideas and truths that the *ruah* supplies. Hence, when we require "processing of the parchment" with regard to the "internal" Torah scroll, we mean [to refer to] **the development of Natural Man and his conditioning to absorb the "letters" of the *ruah*.**

The feeling soul (*nefesh ha-margishah*), before it undergoes processing, is compared to the [raw] pelt of a kosher animal. Only after the processing is the *nefesh ha-margishah* transformed into parchment.

With that, we must establish one more important idea. Just as the Halakhah differentiates between the two surfaces of "external" [animal] hide, the hair side (*tsad ha-se'ar*) and the flesh side (*tsad ha-basar*), which, in processed form, are called "*kelaf*" and "*dukhsustos*," [respectively],^{iv} so does it see in the "internal" [human] skin both surfaces, the *tsad ha-se'ar* and the *tsad ha-basar*. When the human personality is developed, the *tsad ha-se'ar* is transformed into "internal" *kelaf* and the *tsad ha-basar* into "internal" *dukhsustos*.

[In this context,] we should not lose sight of the halakhot with regard to "external" Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot*: *tefillin* are written on *kelaf*, a *mezuzah* on *dukhsustos*, and a Torah scroll on *gevil*, which combines the two, *kelaf* and *dukhsustos*, *tsad ha-basar* and *tsad ha-se'ar*.^v Rambam in *Hilkhot Tefillin* 1:8 quotes the discussions in *Shabbat* (79b) and *Menahot*

(32a) and writes: "It is a halakhah given to Moshe at Sinai that one write a Torah scroll on *gevil* in the area [from which] hair [grows]..."

The Men of Flesh and the Wicked of the World

The purpose of *mezuzot* and *tefillin* consists of remedying two different types of sins. The *mezuzah* comes to repair those sins that are rooted in the *tsad ha-basar* of the human personality; therefore, one writes a *mezuzah* on *dukhsustos* (the upper side of the skin), which symbolizes the flesh of a human being. The mitsvah of *tefillin*, [on the other hand,] was given as a remedy for those sins which are bound to the *tsad ha-se'ar* in people; therefore, Halakhah requires that they be written on *kelaf* (on the lower side of the skin), which represents the human being as a Hirsute Man (*Ish Sa'ir*).

A human being, as a Man of Flesh (*Ben Basar*) and *Ish Sa'ir*, is a sinner with whom the Torah constantly busied itself and whom it desired to purify and raise to a higher level of spiritual existence. On Rosh ha-Shanah, we pray in "*Malkhuyot*" (the Coronation passage) for the mending of human beings, both with respect to the *tsad ha-basar* and with respect to the *tsad ha-se'ar*. We beg of the Master of the Universe: "Let all the *Benei Basar* call out in Your Name, to cause all the Wicked of the World (*Rish'ei Arets*) to turn to You"^{vi} – the human being, as [both] a *Ben Basar* and as a *Resha Arets* (i.e. an *Ish Sa'ir*), should return to the Creator of the World.

The return of the *Benei Basar* and the *Rish'ei Arets* to the Master of the Universe can only come about when a person correctly grasps the idea of the *mezuzah* and *tefillin*.

Let us understand, fundamentally, how the sins of the *Benei Basar* express themselves and what the transgressions of the *Rish'ei Arets* are.

"Let all the *Benei Basar* call out in Your Name" – may the human personality which is bound to the corporeal be fixed. The *nefesh ha-margishah*, "which enables a person to eat, drink, reproduce, sense, and think," must be processed. It cannot remain raw material, a primitive hide. The skin on the *tsad ha-basar* does not want to absorb the letters of the Torah, since it is saturated with the moisture of flesh, [i.e.,] with raw instincts, with the passions of boiling hot blood, with the cravings of the naked, unabashed body. It [the skin on the *tsad ha-basar*] is full of sensuality, with the impurities of guzzling and gorging, drunkenness and corporeal licentiousness. If one would wish to attempt to write the letters of the Torah on such primitive skin, the filth would wipe away the ink. The first task, [then,] of processing the hide on the *tsad ha-basar*, i.e., [of processing] the *nefesh ha-margishah*, is the purification of the *nefesh* from the drive towards pleasure.

The Senses in the Service of Hashem, *Yit-barakh* (May He Be Blessed)

Judaism does not seek to destroy the *nefesh ha-margishah*. To the contrary – it conceives of [the *nefesh*] as the most important part of the human personality. The Halakhah very much values all five senses with their [attendant] feelings. If a person does not possess the sense of sight, for example, and cannot see the colorfulness, brightness, and magnificence of the world of the Holy One May He Be Blessed, or if he is a deaf-mute and is incapable of perceiving the sounds of the Act of Creation, he is not only physically blemished, but spiritually so. It is not for naught that Hazal ruled that a deaf-mute who cannot hear and cannot speak has the same status as a mentally incompetent person (*shoteh*) and a minor [in that he] is not obligated [to observe the mitsvot]. Also with respect to a blind person, R. Yehudah believes that he is exempted from all the mitsvot in the Torah.^{vii}

The *nefesh ha-margishah* brings a person into contact with the world. Through it, he senses the full impact of existence, the beauty and charm of Creation. Despite that, Judaism desires to purify the *nefesh ha-margishah* and to subject it to a procedure of processing in order to prepare the *tsad ha-basar* so that it should be able to absorb the letters of the passages of the *mezuzah*.

How, exactly, does one process this *nefesh ha-margishah*? The purpose of this procedure is to repair the sin of the Generation of the Flood. What was the nature of the Generation of the Flood's sin?

The Torah describes the sin in six words: "*Va-Yikhu la-hem nashim, mi-kol asher ba-haru*" (They took wives for themselves, whomsoever they chose).^{viii} When the *nefesh ha-margishah* sins, it acts as a spark (*nitsots*) of the Generation of the Flood, [which was characterized by] utter licentiousness and rejection of discipline with respect to the desires of the flesh. The sin is manifest in [the adoption] of the search for pleasure [as] a guiding principle, in the belief that nothing should stand in the way of a man who chases after gratification.

Therefore, the mending can [only] be accomplished through limitation, restraint, and modesty, which is a fundamental value of Judaism.

What is modesty? Modesty means "self-binding" – in [the sense of] "Avraham bound," not just "Yitshak his son," but also himself; modesty consists of laying the *nefesh ha-margishah* on the "altar, on top of the wood."^{ix} What do all the laws of prohibited foods and forbidden relationships demand if not the wondrous act of "binding?" When a Jew refuses a certain pleasure or indulgence which teases and pulls at him, he fulfills the "Passage of the Binding" in its fullest radiance.

The *mezuzah* represents the symbol of the processing of the *nefesh ha-margishah* on the *tsad ha-basar*. It protects a Jew's house, his dining room, his bedroom, his private and intimate life, the silent phases of his existence. The quieter and more intimate the act, the greater the challenge of "whomsoever they chose" and the holier the "binding."

What is written in the *mezuzah*? "[You shall love Hashem, your God,] with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."^x Process your heart, so that even when it beats quickly and pulls [you] towards something obscene, you are able to control it. Process your blood, so that even when it boils, you are able to command it to calm down. Process your flesh, so that it not wash away the beautiful letters which are written on it. For this reason, a *mezuzah* is written on *dukhsustos*, which symbolizes man as one of the *Benei Basar*. Through the *mezuzah*, the *Benei Basar* will, in the end, return to the Master of the Universe.

The greater the seductive force of the "daughters of man, that they were good,"^{xi} is; the more powerful the drive of the *nefesh ha-margishah* towards the *tsad ha-basar*; the more a man yearns to act according to the principle "whomsoever they chose" – the more important are the processing of the hide and *hinnukh*, the more purely the *nefesh* leaves its internal struggle. The true "binding" of the *nefesh ha-margishah* is realized when one lays upon the altar the dearest, most beloved, and most enticing [desires], in the manner of "[Take] your son, your only one, whom you loved, Yitshak."^{xii}

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ⁱ See *Kol Hamevaser* 3,3 (December 2009): 27-28, at p. 28: "Of what, exactly, is the parchment of the 'internal' Torah scroll composed? And how does one process such a piece of parchment so that he should be able to write the letters of the Torah on it?"

ⁱⁱ *Be-Reshit* 1:26.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:8.

^{iv} *Shabbat* 79b; *Menahot* 32a. [See *Beit Yosef to Yoreh De'ah* 271:3 for a discussion of which side of the skin corresponds to which term.]

^v Torah scrolls: *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 271:3; *tefillin*: *ibid.*, *Orah Hayyim* 32:7; *mezuzot*: *ibid.*, *Yoreh De'ah* 288:6.

^{vi} This line comes from the *Aleinu* prayer recited all year round.

^{vii} *Bava Kamma* 87a.

^{viii} *Be-Reshit* 6:2.

^{ix} *Ibid.* 22:9.

^x *Devarim* 6:5.

^{xi} *Be-Reshit* 6:2.

^{xii} *Ibid.* 22:2.

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