YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/faith/27faith.htm>

Shiur #27: Soul and Spirituality

# Introduction

In the previous shiur, I discussed the Rambam's understanding of the soul as "the form of the body," i.e., as the organizing principle of the human personality rather than an entity unto itself. Given this conception, important questions arise: how can there be life after death if the soul is not a separate entity? What distinguishes one individual from another if not their souls? What is the nature of spirituality if souls are not separate entities? I hope to address these questions in today's shiur.

# *Olam Ha-Ba* and the Eternity of the Soul According to the Rambam

Two related questions arise when we consider the Rambam's understanding of the soul as an inseparable component in what makes people human. As I discussed in a previous shiur, the Rambam is deeply committed to a notion of *Olam ha-ba* which is an eternal *spiritual* existence.

Thus, the Sages of the previous ages declared: "In the world to come, there is neither eating, drinking, nor sexual relations. Rather, the righteous will sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence."[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Rambam insists that the absence of eating, drinking, etc. proves that this is a purely spiritual existence and the physical imagery of sitting, crowns, etc. must be interpreted metaphorically. But if the soul is not an independent entity but rather simply part of our analysis of what makes a person human, how can there be spiritual life after death? Once the body is destroyed, the form of the soul is lost too.

The Rambam addresses this problem explicitly, in a manner which is somewhat obscure and some may find unsatisfactory:

…The extra dimension which is found in the soul of man is the form of man who is perfect in his knowledge. Concerning this form, the Torah states (*Bereishit* 1:26): "Let us make man in our image and in our likeness" - i.e., granting man a form which knows and comprehends ideas that are not material…

Therefore, when the matter [of the body], which is a combination of the fundamental [elements], decomposes, and the *neshama* ceases to exist - for [the *neshama]* exists only together with the body and requires the body for all its deeds - this form will not be cut off, for this form does not require the *neshama* for its deeds. Rather, it knows and comprehends knowledge which is above matter, knows the Creator of all things, and exists forever.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The term "soul" when used in this context [i.e., of *Olam ha-ba*] does not refer to the soul which needs the body, but rather to "the form of the soul," the knowledge which it comprehends according to its power. Similarly, it comprehends abstract concepts and other matters. This is "the form" whose nature we described in the fourth chapter of *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah.* This is the soul referred to in this context.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In short, the Rambam posits an additional spiritual layer, which is independent of the body but connected to the soul. This is the "form of the soul" which seems to consist in the knowledge [or perhaps knowledge of God] that a person acquires during his or her lifetime. It is this knowledge, which is abstract and hence eternal, that survives after a person's death. A person's *Tzelem Elokim*, his or her similarity to God, does not consist in the capacity for intellectual achievement but in the realization of it. Insofar as one knows truths, one is created in the image of God.

The most basic problem with this understanding of life after death (I am going to ignore how this notion of "the form of the soul" seems, at least to me, to be contrived in order to make room for *Olam ha-ba* in the Rambam's system) is that the actual individual does not seem to be contained in what is left after death. If only the (metaphysical) truths a person has gained knowledge of survive the extinction of the body, then it is hard to see how that can constitute individuals who "delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence."[[4]](#footnote-4)

Interpreters of the Rambam differ on this point. Some consider the knowledge that a person gains that survives even after death, "the form of the soul," to be individualized.[[5]](#footnote-5) It contains at least enough of an individual's personality such that there is an identifiable individual benefiting from the radiance of the divine presence.[[6]](#footnote-6) An alternative interpretation concedes that for the Rambam there is no personal identity after death. The knowledge that remains is not personalized. It has been argued that on this point the Rambam was a mystic: the glory of *Olam ha-ba* consists in the mystical union (*unio mystica*) of the individual with God. Personal identity is obliterated in this context, but without that being considered a loss, since it involves union with God.

# The Individuality of the Soul According the Rambam and Ramban.

This brings us to a further question which I have already raised. Besides the question of the nature of the soul's survival, the Rambam's conception of the soul does not give a good account of individuality. The organizing principles of humanity are the same for everyone, and it appears that the differences between persons are not functions of the soul so much as degrees of success by which those principles are realized in concrete physical reality. Some people have great intellectual capacities, others great emotional abilities and others are stronger in their imaginative abilities. When the Rambam describes the soul, he gives no account as to how this comes to be. The only account available seems to be that which he (and other Aristotelians) gives to individual differences amongst particulars of the same species: that it is the material component that gives rise to individuation.[[7]](#footnote-7) That is to say, the differences between people are simply a function of the particularities of their bodies and carry no spiritual significance.

Thus, according to the Rambam, the emotional, psychological and personal differences between individuals exist only when the soul is realized in a body (except, perhaps, the differences between their intellects). What makes a person himself or herself cannot be understood on a merely spiritual level. At least one interpretation of the Rambam's position is that the nature of the soul has nothing to do with what makes each individual who he or she is. If that is the case, it is a very disturbing conclusion – most of us consider the uniqueness of each individual to be an almost self-evident spiritual reality. Furthermore, the "folk" model described in the previous shiur places great emphasis on how our "real" selves are spiritual and the body is mostly a problem or, at least, something that interferes with true spirituality. If that is your point of departure, then the Rambam's understanding of the relationship between the soul and the body presents a challenge.

However, there is another way of thinking about the Rambam's idea that individuality is manifest essentially in living human beings (though the Rambam himself did not take it in this direction). That would be to maintain one's focus on the fundamental inseparability of body and soul (which the Rambam did not do in his conception of *Olam ha-ba*). Thinking of body and soul as simply ways to analyze various aspects of the human personality, rather than as separate entities, allows us to give credit to the fundamental ways that our physical bodies contribute to who we are without exhausting the content of who we are. It seems clear that many of our personality traits are inherited from our parents genetically: being short-tempered or easy going, optimistic or pessimistic, runs in families. Furthermore, no one can deny that physical traits have an effect on an individual's personality. Being beautiful or ugly, tall or short, clumsy or athletic, makes an important difference to how one grows up and the experiences one has. We all know people who love playing sports: What does it mean to be a disembodied soul who loves playing sports? Is not the accomplished musician (and the accomplishment was necessarily physical – no one plays the piano with his soul) affected by her musical training? Likewise, does not the actual (i.e., physical) performance of *chesed* develop someone's personality in ways that the contemplation of it cannot?

To claim that the body plays a role in personality is not to claim that we are only physical entities. It is merely to reject the notion of personality being spiritual *as opposed* to physical. Personality and individuality are functions of whole spiritual/physical individuals and though it may be possible to abstract one or the other, the abstraction will never be able to encompass the whole individual.

The Torah's insistent this-worldliness, on the keeping of *mitzvot* rather than "saving one's soul," supports the idea that we should give priority to the embodied self over the disembodied soul. But if the soul is realized essentially in the body, how can there be life after death? I believe the Ramban's account of *Olam ha-ba* can provide an answer to this. According to the Ramban, the souls of the righteous are preserved until such time as God brings about *Olam ha-ba* and revives the righteous in physical bodies. Admittedly, the Ramban conceives of souls as spiritual substances. He posits, however, that this spiritual reality is inferior to physical reality and for that reason the righteous receive bodies in *Olam ha-ba*. This notion of *Olam ha-ba* as a physical reality, in which human souls are brought to life in new bodies, is far more congenial to this conception of the soul as integrated into the body than the notion of *Olam ha-ba* that the Rambam articulates. I see no obstacle to combining the Ramban's conviction that the manifestation of the soul in physical reality is superior to purely spiritual reality with the Rambam's idea that the soul is fundamentally the organizing principle of a physical human being. Full human life includes both the physical and the spiritual and thus the ultimate reward must contain both elements.

Nonetheless the Rambam himself insists that spiritual, disembodied existence (however difficult it is for him to articulate its nature) is superior to embodied existence:

The good that is hidden for the righteous is the life of the world to come. This will be life which is not accompanied by death and good which is not accompanied by evil…. There is no way in this world to grasp and comprehend the ultimate good which the soul will experience in the world to come.

We only know bodily good and that is what we desire. However, that [ultimate] good is overwhelmingly great and cannot be compared to the good of this world except in a metaphoric sense.

In truth, there is no way to compare the good of the soul in the world to come to the bodily goods of this world. Rather, that good is infinitely great, with no comparison or likeness. This is alluded to by David's statement (*Tehillim* 31:20): "How great is the good that You have hidden for those who fear You."[[8]](#footnote-8)

I do not know how to fully answer the question as to why *Olam ha-ba* must be wholly spiritual, despite the conceptual difficulties that this entails, beyond pointing out that from the Rambam's intellectualist perspective, the only true way of connecting to God is by means of the intellectual abstraction which he regarded as spiritual activity. Everything having to do with the body is at best a necessary precondition for this activity and at worst a distraction. The intellect, as the Rambam conceives it, does not require either a body or even a personality on the part of the person cognizing and as such these can neither have true value nor can they be part of the ultimate reward.

# The Rambam's Understanding of the Soul and Spirituality

I have focused my discussion on a certain tension in the Rambam's understanding of the soul. The soul, as he conceives it, is integrated with the body and inseparable from it – it is that which makes human beings what they are. Spirituality, however, the ideal of connection to God, involves disconnection from the body and the achievement of abstract truth. I have perhaps been too one-sided in my discussion of the soul in my focus on the Rambam's notion of the soul as inseparable from the body. There are many forms that substance dualism (the idea that the soul and the body are separate entities) can take and a sophisticated version can address many of the issues raised here. My goal in the above is more to raise consciousness that the commonly accepted notion of the soul as a separate entity is not the only conception of the soul that is valid. Likewise, spirituality does not need to be conceived in exclusive terms either as part of a person's embodied emotional expression or as abstract intellectual cognition. It was in pursuit of a disembodied notion of spirituality that led the Rambam to emphasize the intellect as the locus of the spiritual. But even if we distance ourselves from the Rambam's conception of the spiritual as disembodied, we can still embrace the insight that spirituality includes intellectual activity, in contrast to the current trend which tends to focus on the emotional elements of spirituality.

# Conclusion

There remains a great deal more that can be said, for one's conception of the human soul cannot be separated from the most fundamental questions of human nature and its relationship with God. Particularly missing from the discussion is an elaboration of how spirituality and the soul relate to our notions of holiness and how the soul is connected to God. Furthermore, many readers may correctly criticize me for being overly focused on the Rambam to the exclusion of ideas that do not fit his model – particularly ideas found in *Chasidut* and *Kabbala* where there are profound discussions of the soul and spirituality. I cannot but respond that my own limitations are the primary reason for this bias towards the more rationalistic trends in Judaism. I hope to at least partially ameliorate this bias in the next shiur.

1. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:2. Translation courtesy of chabad.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rambam *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4: 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rambam *Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:2-3. Translation courtesy of chabad.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:2. Translation courtesy of chabad.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There is a longstanding debate in the interpretation of Aristotle on a related point: whether human souls should be regarded as universals (and hence individuation is a function of matter) or whether there can be particular forms (such that human souls could be individuated). I cannot go into this here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This interpretation is very interesting (though I think difficult to justify in the Rambam) in that it relates to eternal metaphysical knowledge as requiring a personal or subjective element rather than existing as an abstract universal. Accordingly, divine knowledge is, in a sense, expanded by the addition of the subjective perspective of each individual. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is a very difficult and complex topic that I cannot go into here. For our purposes, the metaphysics of matter and form are irrelevant. What is important, however, is that on this interpretation, individuals exist only as full-blown human beings rather than as spiritual entities. See below in the text for discussion of this. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva*, 8:1,6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)