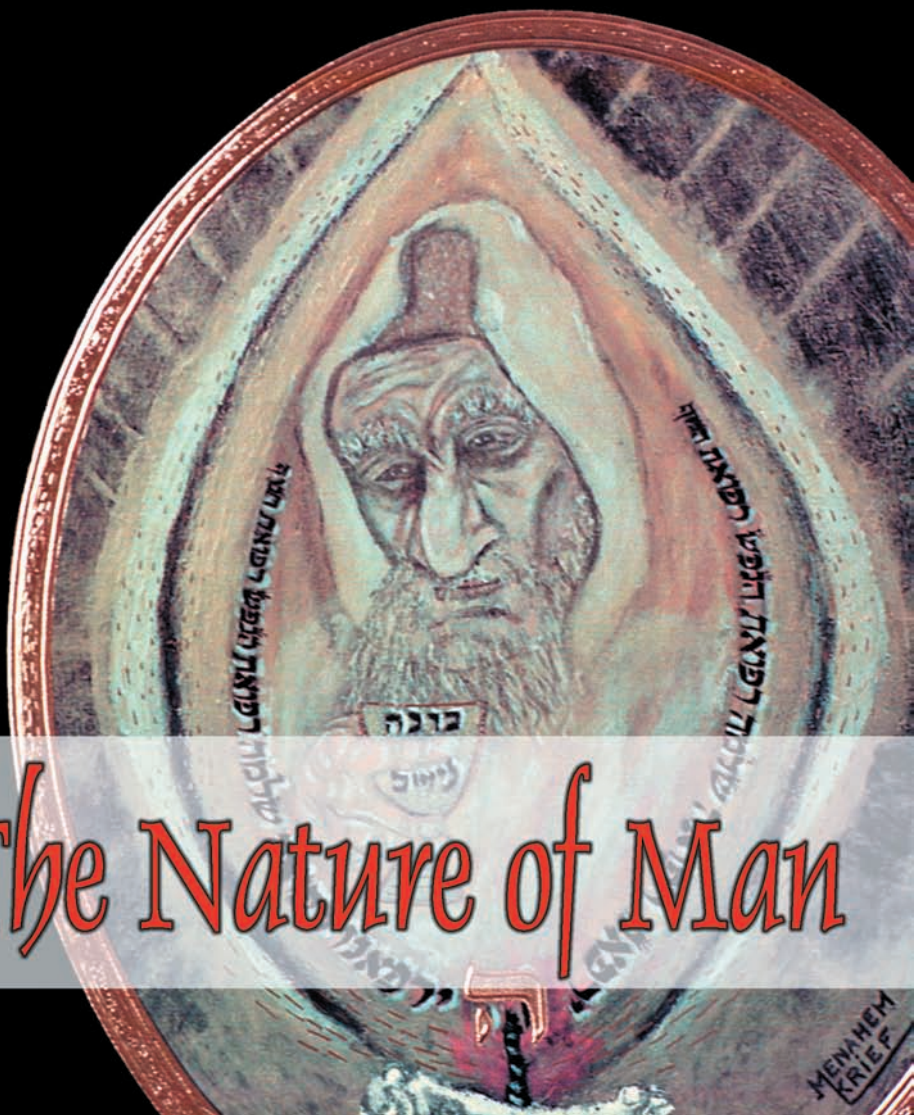




11

Shema Israel

Bible Correspondance Course



The Nature of Man

J. MENAHEM
KRIEF

What is Truth?

A strange question perhaps, yet one that expresses both our confusion and our skepticism regarding truth. Confusion, because with a multiplicity of religions and a diversity of beliefs around us we may genuinely wonder, “*Where is the truth?*” Skepticism, for it suggests that truth does not exist; in fact, there really is no objective truth.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, answers the question clearly. “*Hashem, God is the truth*” (Jeremiah 10:10; literal translation). For the Bible then, truth does exist; truth *is* association with God Himself. In fact, truth, *Emeth*, in the Hebrew language, is one of the 13 attributes of God. It falls seventh in the list in the exact center of the 13 attributes listed in Exodus 34:6; literal translation, a passage that is recited in the liturgies of Rosh Ha-Shanah Yom Kippur (Jewish New Year, Day of Attonement).

If truth is identified with God’s character, it does not come from us but is to be found outside of us – in God. This recognition implies that in order to find the truth we should not approach it with the preconceived idea that we know what the truth is. Instead, we should approach the truth with a question, “*What is it?*” This is the very same question, in fact, the ancient Israelites asked when confronted with the *manna*, the bread of God in the wilderness. “*What is it?*” they asked, and the question gave the name to this heavenly bread, for the Hebrew word *manna* means “*What is it?*” The meaning of the word *manna* suggests an important lesson regarding how we should approach Biblical truth. We should approach it with the question: “*What is it? What is truth?*” We should approach it with the same humble and honest mindset as the ancient Israelites approached the *manna* in the wilderness, asking “*What is it?*” Asking the question from this frame of reference no longer suggests confusion or skepticism. Instead, it implies sincere questioning from one who expects a true answer from above.

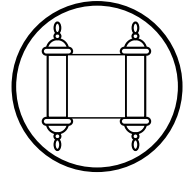
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Mail: *Shabbat Shalom*
Andrews University
Berrien Springs, MI 49104-1535
Fax: (269) 471-6202
e-mail: sshalom@andrews.edu

Bible Study – Lesson # 11*

The Nature of Man



notes

Neither Angel or Beast

Before the philosopher Pascal, the rabbis of the Midrash Rabbah understood that man was neither angel nor beast. *“If God created man it is because he was not content with the angels and the beasts”* (Gen. Rabbah 14:3, 4).

In reality, the identity of humans incorporates *both* angelic and beastly dimensions. Abraham Heschel defines the ideal of the Hebrew as being both “human and holy:” holy in that they are bound to God and given a vocation separating them from nature and other human beings, human in that they are of earthly substance, of “flesh and blood.” In fact, the human person encompasses both of these dimensions—holy and human—rendering any attempt to define him/her senseless.

Neither angel or beast, the human person is not definable; he or she is not, as traditionally believed, a static amalgam of elements, but a dynamic whole and a mysterious being.

**Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Reader’s Version of the Bible, Copyright 1998, by The Zondervan Corporation.*

1. How did humans originate?

So God created man in his own likeness. He created him in the likeness of God. He created them as male and female (Genesis 1:27). (cf. Acts 17:26)

- “For this reason man (Adam) was created only one person, for the sake of peace between mankind, so that one man should not say to his fellow: ‘My father was greater than yours’” (*Sanhedrin* 88b).

2. What is the human person made of?

Then the Lord God formed a man. He made him out of the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into him. And the man became a living person (Genesis 2:7). (cf. Genesis 3:19)

3. What does the “soul” mean in Hebrew?

But what about the cities the Lord your God is giving you as your own? Kill everything in those cities that breathes (Deuteronomy 20:16).

- The term *nefesh* means the neck of the throat (Ps 69:1) or the breath that passes through

the throat (Job 41:15-16) , or the life-blood (Lev. 17:10, 11).

- The term *neshamah* also means breath (1 Kings 17:17).

4. What are the functions of the soul?

The Lord your God will increase your territory, just as he has promised you. When he does, you might get hungry for meat. You might say, "I'd really like some meat." Then you can eat as much of it as you want to (Deuteronomy 12:20). (cf. Proverbs 3:22)

- The *nefesh* can be hungry (Ps 107:9), thirsty (Ps 143:6), enjoy good food (Isaiah 55:2); it can also love (Genesis 34:3), be troubled (Psalm 31:9), know (Psalm 139:14), be wise (Prov 3:21-22), worship God (Psalm 103:1); it can die (Judges 16:30) and may refer to a corpse (Lev 19:28).

5. What are the functions of the flesh, or the body?

Upon all the high hills in the wilderness spoilers are come; for the sword of the LORD devoureth from the one end of the land even to the other end of the land, no flesh hath peace (Jeremiah 12:12 JPS).

- The words for soul and body are often interchangeable (Numbers 31:35; Psalm 145: 21 literal translation).

6. How did God create man?

Then God said, "Let us make man in our likeness. Let them rule over the fish in the waters and the birds of the air. Let them rule over the livestock and over the whole earth. Let them rule over all of the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1:26, 27)

- "The love of God for humans is manifested in the act that God created them in His image, and especially, that He revealed this to them" (*Avot* 3:15).

7. Why is it forbidden to kill men?

"Anyone who murders man will be killed by man. That is because I have made man in my own likeness" (Genesis 9:6).

- "He who destroys one soul in Israel is as if he had destroyed the whole world" (*Mishnah, Sanhedrin*, 37).

8. What does the fact that God created man in His image imply for men in their lives?

“Speak to the whole community of Israel. Tell them, ‘Be holy, because I am holy. I am the Lord your God’” (Leviticus 19:2). (cf. Genesis 9:6; Exodus 20:8-11)

- “Walk in the ways of God; as God is merciful and gracious, so you will be; as God is righteous and just, so you will be; as God is holy, so you will be” (*Sifre, Ekeb 85a*).

9. What is the relationship between the physical (body) and the spiritual (soul) dimension of the human person?

“Please test us for ten days. Give us nothing but vegetables to eat. And give us only water to drink...He asked them for advice in matters that required wisdom and understanding. He always found their answers to be the best. In fact, the men were ten times better than anyone in his kingdom who claimed to get knowledge by using magic (Daniel 1: 12, 20).

- “The body cannot survive without the soul, or soul without the body” (*Tanh. Va-Yikza 11*).
- “I will tell you a parable. To what is the matter likened?”

To a king who has a beautiful orchard ... and he placed two guardians over it, one a cripple and the other blind. Said the cripple to the blind man, 'I see beautiful ripe fruit in the orchard. Come on, carry me and we will bring and eat them.' The cripple rode on the back of the blind man and they brought and ate them. After a while the owner of the orchard came and said to them, 'Where is my lovely fruit?' The cripple answered, 'Do I have legs to go?' Answered the blind man, 'Do I have eyes to see?' What did he do? He placed the cripple on the back of the blind man and judged them as one—so also the Holy Blessed One brings the soul and throws it into the body and judges them as one" (*Sanhedrin* 91a-b).

10. How does the spiritual dimension affect the physical?

Don't let love and truth ever leave you. Tie them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will find favor and a good name in the eyes of God and people (Proverbs 3:3-4).

11. How does the physical dimension affect the spiritual?

My son, hold on to good sense and the

understanding of what is right. Don't let them out of your sight (Proverbs 3:21). (cf. Psalm 31:9-10)

12. Why is health a spiritual issue?

They are life to those who find them. They are health to your whole body (Proverbs 4:22). (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16)

- “The preservation of the health of the body is one of the godly ways” (*Yad* 4).

13. What is the connection between being alive and being spiritual?

When you send your Spirit, you create them. You give new life to the earth (Psalms 29-30). (cf. Numbers 27:18)

- Life is a dimension of the “encounter” between God and man. The notion of “air” or “breath” (*ruah*) (Job 15:30; Isa 26:18) which refers to the Hebrew principle of life (Gen 6:17; 7:15; cf. Gen 1:2; Job 33:4; Isa 38:16), refers also to the Hebrew principle of spirituality (Num 27:18; Isa 63:10,11). The lesson of this identification is double. First it means that man owes his life to God. God gave him the *ruah*, the breath. God is the Creator. It also implies a philosophy of existence. Man

exists only in relationship with God. Man is spiritual, or he does not exist. The religious dimension is not simply an answer to spiritual needs, it is a biological necessity (Gen 2:17; cf. 3:17, 19).

- Religion is not a choice, it is simply the observation of a fact. We cannot omit the spiritual life as we cannot omit breathing. On the other hand, if a man stops breathing, his spiritual life stops; the dead cannot worship (Ps 115: 17).

14. Can man survive apart from his fellow human beings?

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him" (Genesis 2:18).

15. How does the nature of man affect his destiny?

"You will have to work hard and sweat a lot to produce the food you eat. You were made out of the ground. And you will return to it. You are dust. So you will return to it" (Genesis 3:19).

All in All: The Hebrew Conception of the Human Person*



What can I learn about myself in the ancient Scriptures?

“**S**hmah Israel Hashem Eloheyinu Hashem Ehad,” Israel, listen to me. The Lord is our God. The Lord is the one and only God (Deuteronomy 6:4). Such is the prayer uttered daily by the Jew his entire life until he dies. It reminds him of the existence of the unique and incomparable God, the only God whom he is to adore. But in this encounter with the “One,” referred to as the “Him,” or the “Other” by Martin Buber, the Jew paradoxically discovers himself to be “one.” This lesson is given in Genesis 2 at the height of creation as God, who created them man and woman, exclaims: “*The two of them will become one*” (Genesis 2:24). Thus man is defined in the Bible as “created” by God, and consequently, *ehad*, that is “one” and “unique,” like God.

Man: Created by God

The first page of the Bible affirms it: the human person was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). For the ancient rabbis, it was a sign of God’s love to create us in His likeness: “*The love of God for humans is manifested in the act that God created them in His image, and especially, that He revealed this to them*” (Avot 3:15). That is to say, we are fully ourselves only in relation to God. The Biblical text associates the idea of the likeness of God to the verb “create.” Humans must first accept their

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condition as created beings before they can find and develop the likeness of God which they carry within themselves. One must be aware of the fundamental difference between humans and God. Humans were created; therefore, they will never be God. This is an important postulate which must be the cornerstone of the foundation of Biblical religion. However, it is one which constantly escapes human awareness, leading to temptation and fall (Genesis 3:5, 22-24). From Babel to modern humanism, ignoring this reality has generated senseless ambition and resulting confusion. Because humans were “created by God,” humans come “after” God and are dependent upon Him.

This is why Biblical religion cuts deep into the heart of humans, underlining the duty to be faithful and to obey. One can be totally fulfilled only at the cost of abandoning one’s own laws and programs. Pride will suffocate us, hindering us from becoming truly ourselves. Throughout the Psalms, the *hasid*, even if he is a Levite or King David himself, is depicted as a beggar of God. He needs God for his physical life (Psalm 69: 2), he asks Him for his bread and water (Psalm 136:25). But he also needs God for his spiritual life (Psalm 63:1, 2), and invokes His mercy (Psalm 77:10), looking to Him as his last remaining Hope.

Man: One as God

Because he/she was created in God’s image, the individual person was created like God as “one.” This idea is already alluded to in the passage relating

* Jacques Doukhan, “All in All: The Hebrew Conception of the Human Person,” *Shabbat Shalom*, December 1996, 18-20.

to the formation of man: *Then the Lord formed [yatsar] a man. He made him out of the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into him. And the man became a living person* (Genesis 2:7). Here, the language of Genesis is suggestive of the image of the potter: just as the potter shapes (*yatsar*) the clay into a beautiful vase, the Creator shaped (*yatsar*) the dust of the earth (*adamah*) into the living human being (*Adam*).

The human person is not a combination of two distinct elements: breath and dust. He/she is instead the result of two actions of God, who forms and then breathes. This dynamic definition contradicts the pagan Greek concept which views the human person as a soul and a body. For the Bible, it is neither the dust nor the breath which makes the human person but the intervention of God. The human person surges forth from two verbs of which God is the subject, and not from two materials. In Hebrew, the soul without the body is like the body without the soul; the soul and the body do not exist separately. It has been said that in Hebrew thought man does not “have” a soul but that he “is” a soul.¹ What is called soul, the *nefesh*, is none other than the human person and exists only as a result of these two operations of God. Without the “breathing” of God, dust remains dust, that is, in Biblical symbolism, a void, a state of death (Psalm 30:9). Without the “fashioning” of God, the Potter (Jeremiah 18:6), the breath remains breath, that is, in the Biblical sense, a vapor without existence (Psalm 39:6, 12; Job 7:7).

The human person is a whole, or he is not. The implication of this anthropology is that everything, for the Hebrew, maintains its importance: the body, the spirit, the moral insight, nothing is insignificant. Each leaves its mark in the molding of the human being. The moral behavior influences the physical (Proverbs 3:3-4). Likewise, the exercise of the intellectual faculties is a source of physical health and beauty (Proverbs 3: 21). On the other hand, sin, falsehood, and slander ruin the body (Psalm 31:11). In this context, we understand the importance accorded to the health of the body (Leviticus 10:8-11; 11; 1 Corinthians 3:16). Health is a sacred duty. It is not surprising that the rabbis established a parallel between the sacred temple at Sinai and the organs of the human body.² In line with this same tradition, the Apostle Paul compares the human body to the Temple of Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 5:1, 4).³ The religion of the Biblical person encompasses all the aspects of the being. It is the “whole” being which is involved in his or her relation with God (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

Man: Unique like God

Because humans were created in the image of God, each human was created “unique”. God is unique, and consequently, He created each human person like Him, a unique individual. This is, according to the philosopher Bernard Henri Levy, one of the most original ideas of the Bible; it occurs nowhere else.⁴ This is already implied in the Biblical formulation of creating man “*in our likeness, in our*

resemblance” (Genesis 1:26). Each human being possesses in him or herself something unique. This is why God can love each man and woman as an individual. This is why He presents Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

One of the lessons of this definition of man consists in his duty to respect others. Their differences are the mark of God Himself. The Midrash says that man is “in the world the candle of God” (*Tan. B, Gen. 28*). The image of God in the human person is for the Bible the argument *par excellence* against murder: “*Anyone who murders man will be killed by man. That is because I have made man in my own likeness*” (Genesis 9:6).

When one kills a man, it is a whole world that disappears, a unique world that will not reproduce itself. This emphasis on the individuality of the human person is found in the giving of names. Each individual receives a name which they will call their own and which will express the specificity of their person and of their destiny. The name is, however, never definitive. If in his life, a man changes direction, like Jacob, he can become Israel, or he can move from Abram to Abraham, or from Saul to Paul. Man remains free from fixed and arbitrary conceptions. This definition of man not only invites us to be tolerant of the other who holds a treasure which I do not, but it is also a call to the responsibility of sharing. At the same time, it inspires the courage to remain oneself before others, rather than merely

¹ Claude Tresmontant, *A Study of Hebrew Thought*, trans. Michael F. Gibson (New York: Desclée Company, 1960).

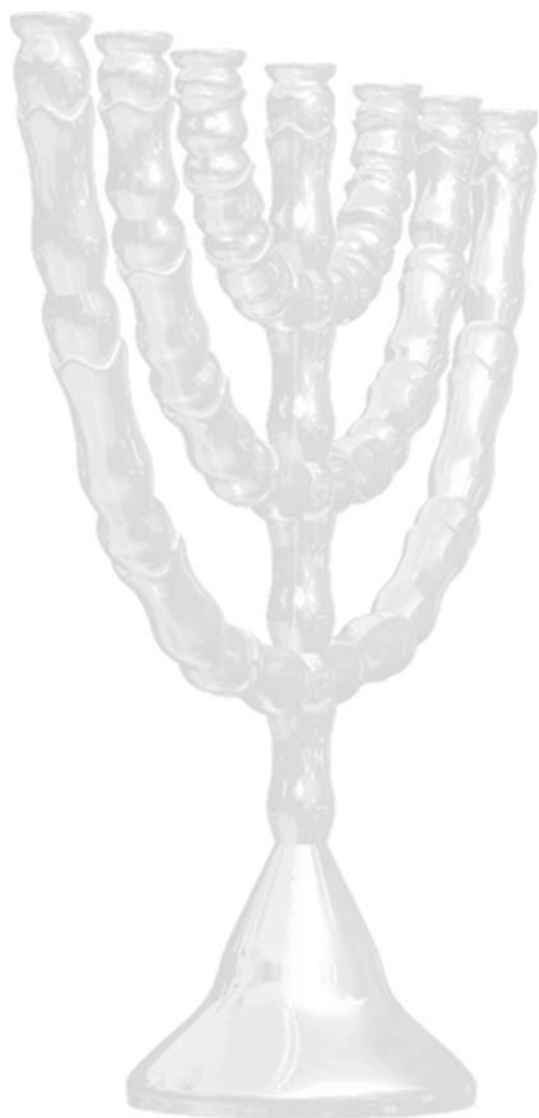
² *Mid. tadshe, Beit ha Midrash*, vol. 3, pp. 175ff.

³ Cf. 2 Peter 1:13, 14

“blend in.” But here again, the “uniqueness” of oneself can be discovered only through God. Paradoxically, it is because modern men and women have rejected God that they have come to create idols which have brought them to the level of slavery, asphyxiating what is unique in them. Man loses more and more of his individuality because he has lost contact with the Absolute which transcends him. From clothing to food, not forgetting the “perfect smile,” our mass media civilization creates clones which resemble each other more and more.

More than ever men and women need to be reminded of who they are. The ancient Bible testifies of the origin of mankind and contains the formula of their being, as well as, the recipe to their happiness. This is a call to become “one” in the engagement of all our forces, physical and mental. This is a call to be “unique” in the renewal of personality. But over all, this is a call to be “recreated” by God and to depend on Him. The ideal proposed implies a return to the great “Other,” the divine “One,” the Source and Point of reference of the human “one.” This ideal is inscribed in the ancient prayer: “*Shmah Israel Hashem Eloheynu Hashem Ehad.*” Hear Israel, the Lord is the one and only God.

⁴ Bernard Henri Levy, *Le Testament de Dieu* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1979), p. 78.



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