The Idea of the Soul in Judaism
Part 1: Introduction and the Bible

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Course Agenda

- Purposes
  - Present an historical survey of the idea of the soul in Jewish thinking
  - Provide background for studying anything Jewish
  - Suggest ways of thinking about our own spirituality
- Topics: the Jewish soul in . . .
  - The Bible
  - Greek philosophy, the Apocrypha and the Talmud
  - Medieval philosophy
  - Kabbalah & The Zohar
  - Lurianic Kabbalah & Hasidism
  - Contemporary ideas

Who am I?

- Retired US civil servant
- Second career in adult Jewish education
- Graduate (MA) in Jewish history and philosophy at Baltimore Hebrew University
- Lecture & teach about Jewish (and other) topics in the neighborhood
- Edited a book on Jewish mysticism: Kabbalah and the Art of Being by Shimon Shokek
- Came to this later in life and will be learning it as long as I’m able
General Approach

- Lectures
  - Slides, handouts, etc.
  - Multiple forms of information because people absorb in different ways
  - "Academic" approach to naming, dating, etc.
  - Reference to the bibliography (in handouts)
- Discussion
  - Questions for clarification are always welcome
  - Other discussion might be postponed until end of session

Why Study the Soul?

- Important Jewish idea since Biblical times
- Integral part of all western religious ethical systems
- Suggests approaches to human psychology
- Essential component of Jewish mysticism
- May eventually provide clues with regard to the ultimate mysteries . . . .
  - Klezmer music, bagels, falafel & Chinese food

What Do You Think The Soul Is?

Please take five minutes and think about what you believe the soul to be and then write down your thoughts.
Thoughts About “Jewish Soul”

- Beliefs about the nature of the soul have changed greatly & are still changing
- At any time, there have always been many ways to think about the soul, even in the same community
- The “Jewish Soul” has always been powerful culturally
  - Jews feel in relevance to taste, ethics
  - “Soul stuff” resonates in popular literature
  - Suggests questions like “What is Jewish music”
- Prominent in important Jewish poetry and music, e.g. Hatikvah (The Hope):
  As long as is the heart, within,
  A Jewish soul still yearns,
  And towards the end of the East
  An eye still watches toward Zion

More Thoughts

- Traditionally observant (and other) Jews use the idea as a basis of spiritual meaning
- Jewish converts often see it as drawing them to the Jewish people
- For those who “believe in” the soul, it is an essential part of being human
- A key question about the soul is what happens after death—we will consider this
- Open question how these meanings relate to this seminar—let’s keep them in mind and discuss at end

A Thought About Jewish Literature

- External influences on all Jewish texts and ideas:
  - Bible: many, varied, complex (not an issue here)
  - Talmud: Early Christianity & Greek philosophy
  - Medieval texts (philosophy, mysticism, ethics)
    - Ancients (filtered through Islam)
    - Islamic Aristotelians & mystics
    - Christian scholastics
  - Modern: clearest of all (U. S. & Israeli culture)
- In every era, Jewish thought creates & innovates using:
  - Prior Jewish culture
  - Wider culture in which it's embedded
  - Not “creation from nothing”
A Thought on Beliefs

◦ Do we need to “believe in” the soul to study it or be fascinated by it?
  − I don’t think so
  − Whether it exists is not a topic for this course (I’m not much of an expert on that)
  − Again, this course presents the history of the idea of the soul
  − For the record, I do believe the soul exists, but I fully understand why others don’t


Questions so far?

The Soul in the Tanakh

◦ “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7)
  − Breath of life: nishmat chayim
  − A living being: nefesh chayah

◦ Basic idea for all that follows
Creation and the Soul

- But let’s not forget about Genesis 1:1
  “When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water . . .”
- Translations of ruakh Elohim
  - Jewish Publication Society: A wind from God
  - Everett Fox: A rushing-spirit of God
  - Artscroll: The divine presence
  - Literal: God’s spirit

Kinds of Soul

- Words generally used
  - Nefesh most common for soul
  - Ruakh for wind, spirit
  - Neshama for breath
- What is the soul? Sometimes . . .
  - The personality
  - The “living essence,” what is gone when death occurs
  - The “divine essence,” what remains vital when death occurs
  - The complete person
- In the Tanakh, always unified with the body

Nature of the Soul in Tanakh

- Where does it come from?
  - First one comes from God (Gen 2:7) . . . the rest?
- Where does it go?
  - It may survive the body and return to God (Gen 5:24)
  - Or it may simply go down to Sheol (more later)
- What does it do?
  - Can rejoice, desire, sin, love
  - Act or think independently of the body or jointly with the body
  - See the Psalms, especially 77:3, 84:3, 86:4, 88:4
- Often is a metaphor for a body acting spiritually
- Not very important religiously! (Or is it?)
Sheol
- An important Biblical “place”
- A place for the dead
  - See Psalm 88
  - To sleep in silence and oblivion, with little energy
  - Initially beyond God's care or reach, but this changes with the Prophets
  - Initially for the righteous and the wicked, but becomes a place for the righteous to wait for the Messiah
- Sometimes compared to Hades (Greek)
- Pre-Hellenistic and not religiously important during and after Rabbinic times

Resurrection
- A key Jewish concept, and critically important to understanding the soul
- Definition: at some future time, the soul will be reunited with its physical body
  - Yes, many questions come to mind
  - Idea first appears in book of Ezekiel (dry bones)
  - Hints elsewhere, e.g. book of Isaiah (26), and Daniel (12)
- Also important because God now (6th cent. BCE) is seen as having power over souls of the dead
- Soul transformed during Biblical times from dying with the body to immortality

Summary
- Why study the soul?
  - Why study the soul through the eyes of Judaism?
  - Do we need to "believe in" the soul?
- The soul in the Bible
  - Important in the creation narratives
  - Key words: nefesh, ruach, neshama
  - Where does the soul come from? Where does it go? Sheol and resurrection
  - How does the idea of the soul evolve in the Bible?
Next Time

- Soul in Greek Philosophy
- Soul in the Apocrypha
- Soul in Talmud and Midrash