

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

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OLLI Loudoun Campus

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

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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* its 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 in 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
- See “Darwin’s God,” By Robin Marantz Henig, (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/04/magazine/04evolution.t.html>)

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Questions so far?

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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

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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

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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

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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?)

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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

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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

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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*, *neschama*
 - Where does the soul come from? Where does it go? Sheol and resurrection
 - How does the idea of the soul evolve in the Bible?

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Next Time

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

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