

The Fourfold Nature of Man

LIKE MOST ANCIENT PEOPLES, the Hebrews saw man as a copy of the universe. He thus contains all the potencies thereof: spiritual, vital, material. Hence, Qabbalistic philosophy pictures each human being as comprising a number of elements:

when the Holy One created man He took the dust of the lower Sanctuary, but for the making of his soul He chose the dust of the upper Sanctuary. Just as in the formation of man's body from the dust of the lower Sanctuary, three cosmic elements [air, fire, water] were combined, so in the formation of his soul from the dust of the upper Sanctuary, further elements, to the number of three, were mingled, and so man was completely formed.

— *Zohar* 3:24b, Sperling 3:82

Generally, Qabbālāh divides the human constitution into four aspects. The highest element is *nēshāmāh*, meaning “breath, spirit, wind.” This spirit or divine breath is equivalent to the *pneuma* of the Greeks (from *pneō*, “to breathe”), the Latin *spiritus* (from *spiro*, “to breathe”), and the Sanskrit *ātman* (from *an*, “to blow, to breathe”). *Nēshāmāh* is the es-

sential consciousness, the first “breath” from ’ēin sōf, which animates the rest of the human being. Sometimes it has been mistaken for the vital principle in the human body (*ḥai*) because it is spoken of as the breath of God. The vital essence of the lower part of the human constitution is the reflection of *nēshāmāh*, much as in theosophy the *prāṇas* are the representation on the lower planes of *ātma-buddhi* in the human being. After death *nēshāmāh* “goes up direct to the very inner” (*Zohar* 2:142a, Myer, p. 394).

The second element is *rūah*, also “breath,” the spiritual soul. It is comparable to the Greek *nous*, the Latin *mens*, and to *buddhi-manas* or spiritual soul. It is ruled by and forms the throne or vehicle of *nēshāmāh*. In connection with ’*elohīm*, *rūah* denotes the mental quality of the gods, regarded in *Genesis* as moving over the waters of space or chaos at creation. Equivalent to the third Logos, it operates through the universe, producing what is noble and good in human beings and leading them to virtue. A similar meaning implies exceptional soul powers, as in the inspired ruler or prophet, hence the prophetic spirit, often represented as passing from one person to another. After death the *rūah* goes up to Eden, but not so high as the *nēshāmāh*.

The third element is *nefesh*, the “vital breath” or lower human soul. It corresponds to the *psuchē* of the Greeks, the Latin *anima*, and modern theosophy’s lower mind — *kāma-prāṇa* with the breath of *manas* (mind) upon it. Being closely associated with the physical body, it has no light of its own. It is the throne of *rūah* which rules and lights it and forms its crown. After death the *nefesh* or lower soul “remains in the grave Below” (*ibid.*).

These three breaths find expression on earth in *gūf*, the physical body, which corresponds to the *sthūla-śarīra*, the Latin *corpus*, and the Greek *sōma*.

It is significant that the first three aspects — *nēshāmāh*, *rūaḥ*, and *nefesh* — should all be derived from words meaning “breath” or “wind.” The Qabbalist understood the esoteric lining of truth, for all are manifestations in degree of the one fundamental breath of Being: *nēshāmāh*, the breath of divinity; *rūaḥ*, the breath of spiritual mentation; and *nefesh*, the breath of psychic vitality. These three breaths each has its field of action in one of the three higher ‘ōlāmīm above the fourth world of *qēlīppōth* or shells, where *gūf* is at home. Each is sustained by the element above it.

From observing these grades of the soul, one obtains an insight into the higher Wisdom, and it is wholly through Wisdom that in this way certain mysteries are connected together.

— *Zohar* 1:83b, Sperling 1:278

Nēshāmāh, *rūaḥ*, and *nefesh* may be looked at in several ways. *Nefesh* and *rūaḥ* are sometimes seen as two aspects of one grade, and when *nēshāmāh*

enters into them and they cleave to it, and when it dominates, such a man is called holy, perfect, wholly devoted to God. “Soul” (*nefesh*) is the lowest stirring, it supports and feeds the body and is closely connected with it. When it sufficiently qualifies itself, it becomes the throne on which rests the lower spirit (*ruaḥ*), . . . When both have prepared themselves sufficiently, they are qualified to receive the higher spirit (*neshamah*), to which the lower spirit (*ruaḥ*) becomes a throne, and which is undiscoverable, supreme over all.

— *Ibid.*

Using the analogy of the flame, nefesh is likened to the blue light at the bottom of the flame, which is attached to and exists through the wick (gūf).

When fully kindled it becomes a throne for the white light above it. When both are fully kindled, the white light becomes a throne for a light which cannot be fully discerned, an unknown something resting on that white light, and so there is formed a complete light. — Ibid.

When we are born we are endowed with nefesh “from the primordial ‘animal’ sphere, the sphere of purity, . . . the supernal order of angels,” also referred to as the perennial celestial stream. When we achieve purity in this aspect, we will be endowed with rūaḥ “which appertains to the sphere of the Holy *Hayoth* [living beings].” Rūaḥ forms a crown to nefesh. These two principles are intertwined, and if we do not strive after spiritual things, that is the extent of our being. But those of greater merit are endowed with nēshāmāh “from the region of the Throne” (*Zohar* 3:94b, Sperling 3:283-4). The nēshāmāh descends to the nefesh and rūaḥ, so that all three combine harmoniously to form a unity in those who serve the Divine:

the *neshamah* resides in a man’s character — an abode which cannot be discovered or located. Should a man strive towards purity of life, he is aided thereto by a holy *neshamah*, whereby he is purified and sanctified . . .

— *Zohar* 1:62a, Sperling 1:203

Over the body and the three souls is a fourth, supernal soul, which is

inscrutable and unknowable. Everything is dependent upon

it, and it is veiled in a covering of exceeding brightness. It drops pearls which are linked together like the joints of the body, and it enters into them and displays through them its energy. It and they are one, and there is no separation between them. — *Zohar* 2:245a, Sperling 2:378-9

Sometimes the highest principle “which remains above” is called the *tsūrāh* or divine “prototypal form.” This *tsūrāh* is equivalent to the spiritual monad. It produces the *nēshāmāh* as its reflection, and they are connected by a vital spiritual thread up which the *nēshāmāh* aspires to rise to perfect union with its prototype. Another term for this highest part of the human being is *yēḥīdāh* (the one, the only, the unique), the indivisible individuality of the human constitution. This term is comparable to the Greek word *monas*, meaning “one.”

A further aspect of manifested beings is brought out in this striking statement:

Over all these stars and constellations of the firmament there have been set chiefs, leaders, and ministers, whose duty is to serve the world each one according to his appointed station. And not the tiniest grass-blade on earth but has its own appointed star in heaven. Each star, too, has over it a being appointed who ministers before the Holy One as its representative, each according to his order. All the stars in the firmaments keep watch over this world: they are appointed to minister to every individual object in this world, to each object a star. Herbs and trees, grass and wild plants, cannot flourish and grow except from the influence of the stars who stand above them and gaze upon them face to face, each according to his fashion. — *Zohar* 4:171b, Sperling 4:92-3

The doctrine of reincarnation appears in the *Zohar* as the teaching of *gilgūlīm* (wheels), the revolution of souls, but it is more implied than explicit. Also implied is the idea that everything exists in divine form before birth. Qabbalists hold that the soul after death goes through a series of whirlings, which apply both to the transmigration of the physical and other atoms, and to the reimpodiment of souls (cf. *SD* 1:568n).

The soul puts on garments appropriate to the sphere which it is to enter. Before birth it wears cloaks of higher light (ʿōr). All is hidden in the divine form before it takes birth; hence the soul is the expression of its past karma within its divine form. All the forms of the earthly world were originally fashioned of supernal light in the Garden of Eden, the habitation of holy spirits.

After birth, while in *gūf*, the soul wears a cloak of skin or blindness (ʿōr). At death the soul removes the lower cloak of blindness and ascends into the inner worlds. The body has returned to dust and the soul is clothed in luminous garments. The *nefesh* disintegrates with the body, the *rūah* stays in the Garden of Eden, and the *něshāmāh* “ascends to the place where all delights are concentrated” (*Zohar* 2:226a-b, Sperling 2:326). When it leaves the Garden to imbody, the soul takes off its celestial garment and puts on an earthly body. Then when it leaves the earth, the Angel of Death takes off the earthly body so it can again put on the celestial garments in the Garden of Eden that it had left behind there.

There are two lines of human evolution: (1) recession of spiritual capacity as “cloaks of higher light” (ʿōr, אָר) be-

come veiled through material descent; and (2) the expansion of a physical “cloak of blindness,” of matter (עֹר, ‘ōr).

Adam then arose and realised that he was both of heaven and of earth, and so he united himself to the Divine and was endowed with mystic Wisdom. Each son of man is, after the same model, a composite of the heavenly and the earthly.

— *Zohar* 2:130b, Sperling 2:20

