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, Qabbalāh 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 ʾeīn 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 rūāh, 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 ʾelohîm, rūāḥ 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 rūāḥ goes up to Eden, but not so high as the nēshāmāh.

The third element is nefēsh, 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 rūāḥ 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 gûf, the physical body, which corresponds to the sthûla-śarīra, the Latin *corpus*, and the Greek *sôma*.

It is significant that the first three aspects — nêshâmâh, rûâḥ, 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: nêshâmâh, the breath of divinity; rûâḥ, 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 'ôlâmîm above the fourth world of qêlîppôth or shells, where gûf 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

Nêshâmâh, rûâḥ, and nefesh may be looked at in several ways. Nefesh and rûâḥ are sometimes seen as two aspects of one grade, and when nêshâmâh 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 (gûf).

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 rûaḥ “which appertains to the sphere of the Holy Hayoth [living beings].” Rûaḥ 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 rûaḥ, 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 *tsûrãh* or divine “prototypal form.” This *tsûrãh* is equivalent to the spiritual monad. It produces the *nêshâmãh* as its reflection, and they are connected by a vital spiritual thread up which the *nêshâmãh* aspires to rise to perfect union with its prototype. Another term for this highest part of the human being is *yê×îdãh* (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 *gilgūlim* (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. Qabalists 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 reimbodiment 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 (ʾōr). 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 rūaḥ stays in the Garden of Eden, and the nēshāmāh “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” (ʾōr, त्रिम) be-
come veiled through material descent; and (2) the expansion of a physical “cloak of blindness,” of matter (эр, בلال). 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