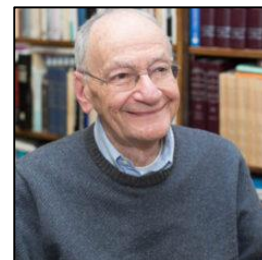


Yom Kippur 5787
Shabbat Shuvah

יום כפור תשפ"ז
שבת שובה

From Where to Whence

Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor Emeritus, and Rabbi Herman Abramovitz
Distinguished Service Professor of Jewish History



Yom Kippur turns on a stunning paradox. A prodigious effort at repentance yields but the modest request of one more year to address our failings. Living life from the end is intended to heighten our appreciation of every passing day. The attainment of eternity is not susceptible to a single leap, but only to daily, arduous labor.

It is for that reason that our liturgy begins each morning throughout the year with a brief reminder of our origins. We thank God for restoring us to consciousness or, more poetically, for reuniting our lifeless body with its animating soul. In deeply personal terms, we acknowledge the purity of the soul which God granted us: "You created it, You gave it individuality, You imbued us with it, You care for it daily, and someday You will take it from me only to restore it to me in eternity." The words ennoble us as they obligate us. We bear within us a spark of the divine that calls upon us to make the utmost of our lives.

Rabbinic Judaism, however, was not the first to propound the kinship of the human soul with its divine progenitor. Hundreds of years before, Plato, facing execution, defined immortality as the release of the soul from its beclouding body. Indeed, Plato contended that the philosopher with his lifelong disdain of pleasure and materialism was the only human who came close to approximating the liberation that came with death. Irrespective of its provenance, the notion that a touch of the divine would inhabit the lifetime of a human would become a beautiful article of Jewish faith.

A 16th-century mystic in Safed named Eliezer Azikri composed an exquisitely poetic Hebrew prayer of reunion predicated on the same existential division of body and soul. While many synagogues today have appropriated *Yedid Nefesh* to introduce Kabbalat Shabbat, the true intent of Azikri's poem was as a deeply, daily personal plea to God to grace his awakening body once again with God's elusive presence. Rabbi Jules Harlow's English translation captures the delicate intimacy of Azikri's relationship to God. God is indeed his Soulmate, that is, Azikri's soul derives directly from God's. Their shared identity is what drives the poet's tireless love and prompts him to even call himself poignantly the offspring of God's love. Throughout, Azikri blends his own yearning for reunion with acute awareness of the universal blessing that would attend God's return to the world.

If Azikri's allusion to the rabbinic formulation of the soul's patrimony is elliptic, that by Nahmanides in the 13th-century is full-blown. When Gershom Scholem came to translate Nahmanides's ramified *piyyut* into German in 1936, he titled it a "Hymn on the Fate of the Soul." And indeed, the great Sephardi master of Jewish literature depicted in 16 stanzas the fate of a single divine soul through its peregrinations on earth. Upon its return to God, the soul narrates its journey in the first person (I appropriate and adapt Scholem's lucid and elegant translation to exhibit a few stanzas):

*From time immemorial I was kept among God's hidden
treasures,
out of sheer nothingness He called me forth,
though at the end of days,
I will be brought before the King again.*

*My life flows from the abyss of the spheres,
which provides the soul with form and structure.
Divine forces shape and nurture it,
thereafter it will be preserved
in the chambers of the King . . .*

*I was made out of dust, though Your Spirit hovers in me.
You know that I am like a stranger who goes about
aimlessly in the land.
"How long do you have yet to go?
When will you seek to return that you may gain the
approbation of the King?"*

*For the road I must take You gave me a light,
which illumines fully the most remote corners of my being.
And as I departed did you not warn me: "Fear God, the
King, my child?" . . .*

*Loaded with anxiety, I hurry to confess my sinful state
before death will sweep me away.
There my own signature bears witness against me,
who would dare to contest the accusations of the King?*

*Driven by desire I bestrode the barren land,
till I nearly came upon my own grave among those felled by
their lust.
But as I pulled back in deep regret,
I lamented that I failed to heed the words of the King . . .*

*With You, God, is the grace that covers (Your servant).
With You, God, is the mercy that enshrines him.
With You, God, is the forgiveness that elevates
the deeds (of your servant) to the standard set by the King .
. .*

I hope the poems by Azikri and Nahmanides will convince you that an idea will not be discarded to the dustbin of Jewish history simply because it comes from outside. The conception of humans as a composite of body and soul, of part earth and heaven imbues our journey through the cosmos with purpose and nobility, and no less important, renders us all equal.

May you all be inscribed for a life of meaning and contentment.