

"BODY AND SOUL"

This hour is dedicated to the memory of loved ones, especially parents, on the most sacred day of the year. It is an hour of recollection and reunion, when our minds reach back to yesteryear and our hearts respond with old love and reawakened affection as in the days of old. How freely and warmly we today affirm the Torah's commandment to honor father and mother, and the Rabbis' remark that this applies even to the memory of parents already gone from this mundane world.

It is surprising, therefore, that the first mention in the Torah of the parent-child relationship is negative. Immediately after Eve was created the Torah already informed us: al ken yaazov ish et aviv v'et imo ve'davak b'ishto ve'hayu le'vasar ehad, "therefore let a man leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and they shall become as one flesh." Is it not disconcerting to learn that the Torah's first judgment on the parent-child relationship is not one that encourages unity and togetherness, but, on the contrary, speaks of separation and divergence between the generations?

Moreover, as we read the history of the fathers of our people, we learn that this injunction to leave parents was <sup>generally</sup> not obeyed. Thus, when Abraham sends his servant to look for a wife and his son Isaac, he makes him swear: rak et bni al tashev shamah -- do whatever you will, but do not take my son there, away from me. ~~And~~ later, when Isaac meets with his intended bride, Rebecca, va-yevi'eha Yitzhak ha-ohelah Sarah imo -- he brings her into the tent of his mother Sarah. There is, then, a spirit of union between father and son, even between son and the memory of a deceased mother. <sup>A generation later,</sup> What is Jacob's major prayer? -- ve'shavti be'shalom el bet avi, "may I return in peace to the house of my father!" Before Joseph dies, he pleads with his brothers and reminds them: our Father Jacob was buried with his parents in the Holy Land, therefore ve'haalitem et atzmotai mi-zeh - when I die, carry my remains too away from

Egypt and back to the ancestral burial place.

How, then, do we account for this constant tendency by the Patriarchs to return to their parents, when the Torah tells us at the very beginning al ken yaazov ish et aviv v'et imo, "therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother?" <sup>Q</sup> May I commend to your attention an answer suggested by one of the greatest preachers of the past generation.\* And that is, that there are two separate words that the Torah uses for human beings. One of them is basar. Literally, that means "flesh." This is a term that is used for mankind from the beginning until Abraham. Thus, when the Torah refers to the all-to-human limitations of the first race of sinners, it says be'she'gam hu basar - though they be but basar, flesh. When the Lord decides to destroy the generation of the flood, he says ketz kol basar ba le'fanai - the end of all men (flesh or basar) has come before me; as le'shahet kol basar, to destroy all mankind (flesh or basar.)

From Abraham and on, however, there is a sudden change in terminology. Man is no longer referred to as basar, but as <sup>a</sup> nefesh - soul. When the Torah wishes to describe the people Abraham and Sarah had converted from paganism to the belief in God, it says ve'et ha-nefesh asher asu be'haran - the souls they won in Haran. Ten li ha-nefesh - give me the souls, meaning: the man. Ve'nikhreta ha-nefesh ha-hi me-ameha - that soul, nefesh, or person who violates the law of circumcision shall be cut off from his people.

And here, in this distinction between man as basar and man as nefesh, we come to an understanding of the change in the Torah's judgment. For, its decision that al ken yaazov, that parents and children have no relation with each other, It is predicated on man's accepting a philosophy of materialism or naturalism. is based only on the conception of man as mere basar, mere flesh. If humanity conceives of itself in purely materialistic terms, as mere physical specimens,

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\* Conveyed to me by Rabbi Harry Wohlberg in the name of Rabbi Mosheh Avigdor Amiel.

as machines enclosed in flesh, then indeed parents and children remain distant and remote from each other; for their relationship is merely biological. If man identifies himself as merely an advanced animal, then like the animal, which leaves its nest or den as soon as it is weaned, so man leaves his parents and their ways as soon as he no longer is dependent upon them. As long as man never transcended the level of basar, then the old artery-hardened <sup>a</sup>basar of the past generation, and the young, vigorous physique of the new, must go their different ways. Therefore, ve'davak b'ishto ve'hayu le'vasar ehad, "they shall be one flesh" - one basar. But if they conceive of each other as spiritual beings as well, as humans who also possess a soul, a nefesh, then parents and children remain linked together inextricably. The words al ken yaazov ish et aviv v'et imo, that children shall leave parents and depart from them, was meant to be valid only until the days of Abraham. But after Abraham, when Abraham's teaching had made mankind realize that it possess a nefesh, a soul as well as a body, then children remained spiritually united with the generations of their forebearers.

For when people are conscious of their identity as nefesh, then the tie between them transcends the biological, and there is a community of ideas and loyalty, a mutuality of ideals and faith, permanent bonds of soul and heart and mind. Then, as we are told of Abraham and Isaac, va-yelkhu sheneh<sup>e</sup>m ya'hdav - the two of them went together. Then, ve'shavti be'shalom el bet avi - may I return in peace to the home of my father. For time inexorably corrodes <sup>a</sup>basar, flesh; whilst nefesh, soul, remains supremely unaffected by the sharp edge of the passing years.

The question that confront us, in this tender and moving hour, is: what standard shall we, in our modern age, maintain? We live in a time when enticements abound urging us to slide effortlessly into easy assimilation. Which, then, shall it be:

basar or nefesh? It is not that we Jews have ever deprecated material comforts. Not at all: we have always believed in enjoying God's bounty. It is, rather, a question of emphasis. Even more: it is a question of whether man shall today have some spiritual aspect to his personality -- or none at all! And the difference as to whether one's self-identity is that of nefesh or basar, just flesh and bones or also heart and soul, is a consequential one indeed.

It has to do with the respect we accord to age itself. In a society where nefesh is supreme, age is honored; for the soul's wisdom and accumulated experience increased with the years. But, in a society where basar is dominant, where material values are treated with the greatest reverence, there pre<sup>e</sup>eminence is given to youth and the elderly are ignored; for basar disintegrates with age.

The choice between basar or nefesh has to do with the attitude of the worshipper to a service. A nefesh-Jew attends the whole service with equal attention, for Yizkor is considered only a <sup>part</sup> of the service. For such a person, the link with the past is not one of mere sentimentalism, merely conjuring up the physical form of a parent, but is part of a larger religious and spiritual context.

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But if the basar standard prevails, th<sup>e</sup>n the relations between that person and the generation that preceeded him is merely a biological or emotional one, not one of shared principles, ideals, faith. It is paradoxical, but it is true: if the Yizkor is to be meaningful, if <sup>this</sup> ~~the~~ hour of reunion is to be sincere and authentic, then it cannot be taken out of the context of the rest of the services. If you mean Yizkor with all your heart, then it has got to be merely one part of an entire religious devotion, and not the major part at that. For that is the way we express ourselves: Yizkor Elohim <sup>et</sup> nishmat... May <sup>u</sup>od remember the soul of my beloved relatives... It is the soul, the spirit, the nefesh that remains dominant.

The question of flesh or soul is crucial to the understanding of the nature of this day. For in this, indeed, is the main message of Yom Kippur. We fast this day, not in order to punish ourselves and thereby psychologically to relieve

ourselves of the burden of <sup>g</sup>guilt; but to indicate to ourselves that we can get along for 24 hours without <sup>a</sup>basar; but never without nefesh. The fasting is not so much to deny our <sup>a</sup>basar as to elevate and celebrate the quality of nefesh, our spiritual dimension. This is the essence of Yom Kippur.

And the choice of basar or nefesh standards has to do with how we relate not only to our parents, but <sup>also</sup> as parents to our children. If we desire to keep them, to live on through them, then our emphasis in our homes must be: nefesh. If we impress them only with our ambitions of basar -- success, career, wealth, social standing -- and we ignore the demands of the spirit, of Torah, then we may well lose their loyalty later in life, because mundane goals take them into new social and moral currents, and with the passage of time, father and son and mother <sup>and</sup> ~~the~~ daughter drift apart. But if the child becomes aware from earliest youth that, important as career and material comforts are -- and they are important, nevertheless the most significant function of man, his destiny, his purpose for being, is nefesh -- Torah, God, Israel -- then parents and children may yet walk together, as Abraham and Isaac did: va-yelkhu shenehem yaḥdav.

What parent <sup>r</sup> does not realize that the greatest heartbreak, the most agonizing disappointment, comes when our children leave our ways; and that, <sup>r</sup>con<sup>r</sup>trariwise, in the long run, the blessing that counts most is that precious and undefineable quality which we call "nachas" from children! And that blessing cannot be obtained by buying things for them, <sup>only</sup> ~~which~~ by binding our spirits with theirs; not be bribing them thru pampering their basar, only by imbibing together of the walls of nefesh. Leaving, after 120 years, insurance and an estate will help children; leaving the assurance that there is meaning in life will not only help them but hold them for the rest of their days. Styles change, interests change, social patterns vary; but Judaism, authentic Judaism, Torah, remains a constant. Family togetherness, therefore, must emphasize the religious and spiritual dimension, over and above the merely material and social. If you want to keep your children, then the Jewish tradition tells you: emphasize observing Shabbat together as well as "going out" together; study the same Sidra of the week, rather

than only discussing material business problems; a community of kiddush and havdalah, rather than style of socializing. Otherwise: al ken yaazov ish etaviv v'et imo.

But above all, the question of basar or nefesh has to do with how we shall conduct our own lives throughout the year. Now is the time for all of us, young and old, and especially young men at the brink of their careers, to listen closely to those lofty words of the U-netaneh tokef prayer. How the poet laments the destiny and fate of man! Emet ki Ata Hu Yotzram, v'ata yodeia yitzram, ki hem basar va'dam: in truth, as their Creator, Thou knowest their weakness to temptation, for they are but flesh and blood. Adam yesodo me-afar ve'sofo le'afar, "man's origin is in dust, and his bitter end is in dust." And then the paytan adds three words that put into bold, stark relief the greatest tragedy of any man: he'nafsho yavi lahmo - he wins his bread with his soul, his nefesh. Do you see the force of his words? Man's life is but a brief respite between an eternity of silence that preceded him, and an eternity of silence that follows him. Yet, with humble origin and disgraceful end, he was given a saving grace: a nefesh, a feeling, sensitive spirit, a bit of G-d, a diamond of immortality within him. And what does he do? In order to win a piece of bread, he is willing to sacrifice all that nefesh! He is willing to throw away his character, to destroy his personality, to yield all his most sacred principles, to give up Shabbat and Yom Tov -- and what for? For a few crumbs! Later in life, when we have achieved that success we have so passionately searched and worked for, the fruits of this success begin to turn bitter in our mouths. And we realize, to our dismay, that we have given up so much - for a piece of stale bread! - for another parcel of real estate, for another big deal, for another salary increase, for another professional honor! Be'lahmo yavi nafsho! We surrender our souls for miserable crumbs. We give up the immortal and eternal life and the ineffable delights of the nefesh for the ephemeral, flighty <sup>h</sup>c/imerical moment of the flesh. What a tragedy! No wonder al ken yaazov ish et aviv v'et imo - if the basar remains a standard, than father and son have

to talk about, and

nothing a mother and daughter have little in common. And all humans --  
sofo le'afar: a life lived and nothing accomplished. U-motar ha-adam min  
ha-behemah ayin ki ha-Kol havel -- if there is nothing, no nefesh to  
distinguish man from animal, then indeed: all is vanity, and life is not  
worth the struggle.

But today is Yom Kippur. Today our lofty tradition tells us that ~~that~~ our  
life ~~we have~~ need not be merely an insignificantly brief respite between  
afar and afar -- but that nefesh, and our awareness of it, can redeem us  
to eternal life.

If these sacred moments of Yizkor, when we commune with our memories, are  
to be meaningful, then we must now rededicate ourselves to that which all  
of us tend to ignore during the rest of the year: the nefesh, the neshamah,  
that which raises man above the level of a beast, that which makes him  
worthy of Yizkor <sup>E\</sup> Mokim of being remembered by G-d. As our thoughts go back  
to revered father and beloved mother, let us promise them that they, we,  
our children, and our children's children, will ever be united thru the  
eternal links of Israel's faith.

Ve'heshiv lev avot el banim ve'lev banim el avotam, and the Lord shall  
cause the heart of the fathers to return to the sons, and the heart of  
the sons to their father.