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Chapter 1. The Human Soul

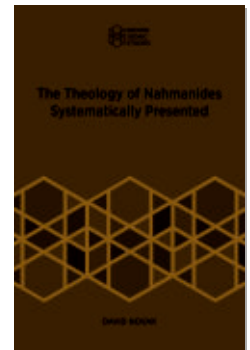
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Chapter 1

The Human Soul

[1.1] The human soul is the locus of the immediate knowledge of God, because it is not part of the created physical order. Thus it is capable of more than just experience of the world.

The virtue or excellence of the soul (*ma'alat ha-nefesh*), its source and its mystery... it did not come from the physical elements or by mediation of the disembodied intelligences. Rather, it is the spirit of the Great Name, from his mouth, knowledge and understanding. For it is from the foundation of Understanding (*binah*), by way of Truth and Faith (*emet ve-'emunah*). [CT: Gen. 2:7 - I, 33]

This passage is replete with allusions to the *sefirot*, the supernal manifestations of the Godhead, which were elaborately and precisely mapped by later kabbalists. But the central point is that the soul is no mere created entity but a direct emanation from the Godhead.

[1.2] As a composite of soul and body, a human being is in direct relationship with both God and nature. No adequate understanding of the human condition can ignore our compositeness. Nahmanides elicits this point from the use of the plural in the creation narrative of Genesis 1, where God says, "let us make (*na'aseh*) man":

Man's... nature is not like that of a beast. "In our image, according to our likeness" means that he resembles both... earthly beings (*tahtonim*) and higher, angelic beings (*'elyonim*). [CT: Gen. 1:26 - I, 27]

Although Nahmanides cites only the view of Joseph Kimhi (ca. 1150), rabbinic precedent too can be found for this theological anthropology, in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* (A, ed. Schechter, 55a; B. Ta'anit 16a). Unlike Maimonides (*Moreh Nevukhim*, 2.5-6), Nahmanides distinguishes the intelligent heavenly bodies from the higher angelic beings. That the angels are greater grows more evident in the sections immediately following.

[1.3] It is only the relationship with God that differentiates man from the beasts. Commenting on Kohelet's dismissal of the distinction between man and beast, Nahmanides writes:

This is astounding! How can it be that "man's preeminence over a beast is naught" (Eccl. 3:19)? Are there not humans who reach so high a level as to be covenanted with God, beloved of God like Abraham, rejoiced in like Jacob? But the intent of the verse is that by our own deeds we have no preeminence, and that no human being has the power to make his body greater than that of a beast. Yet we have the power to do the will of our Creator, to cleave to him, as the patriarchs did, who enjoyed exceptional intimacy with God, and heightened virtue (*ma'alah yeteirah*), and whose name and memory remains in this world even now for the generations of their descendants. [KR: *Sermon on Ecclesiastes* - I, 193]

[1.4] The duality of our nature explains the tensions inherent in the human condition:

Man... was to be like the ministering angels in his soul... but he was drawn in the direction of the flesh because he is carnal, not godly. [CT: Gen. 6:3 - I, 49]

Even more pointedly:

The root of man's suffering in the world of bodies is that man's body is like the body of an animal, produced under the influence of the stars and constellations, thus subject to vicissitudes. Only the soul is from God who gave it. [KR: *Commentary on Job 22:2* - I, 76]

For Nahmanides, both natural and moral evil arise in our embodiment. But natural evil seems necessary, whereas moral evil stems from our own volitions. Yet so does our potential for transcendence. Human beings who find their true selves in the soul rather than the body can even overcome many of the vicissitudes to which our embodiment renders us vulnerable.

[1.5] In the souls of the righteous, the spiritual dimension is more pronounced:

In the tradition of the Rabbis of blessed memory, God created the souls of the righteous; and, without doubt, the soul is an exceedingly fine and pure spirit. It is not a body and not confined to a place... but it comes from the category (*kat*) of the angels and is exceedingly exalted. [KR: *Torat ha-'Adam*: Sha'ar ha-Gemul - II, 285]

[1.6] The souls of the righteous all stem from the very source and origin of creation. Nahmanides here affirms the primordial existence of human souls:

Those who err spiritually think that souls are created every day, each with its own storehouse [the body]. But that is not so. For God does not create them *ex nihilo*. The higher beings (*ha-'elyonim*) were created from the very beginning before all else (*me'az*). The lower beings (*ha-shefalim*), which come to be and pass away are made one from another, altering and assuming forms. [KR: *Commentary on Job* 38:21 - I, 117-118]

[1.7] Since the human soul is an immediate creation of God, it presupposes nothing else:

For generation is by the blessing of God. For souls are not born but were created from nothing (*me-'ayin*). [CT: Gen. 5:2 - I, 47]

Elsewhere, he elaborates:

The correct and clear interpretation of this section [the creation narrative of Genesis 1] is that God did not create everything *ex nihilo* on those days, but only the primary substances (*ha-hiyulim*) mentioned... But regarding the creation of man he stated... [as it were] "I and the earth"... for the body is earthly in form and likeness in that it is mortal and perishes, but the soul (*nefesh*) is in a higher form (*tselem*), which is not corporeal and over which coming-to-be (*ha-havayah*) and perishing have no dominion. [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 157-158]

[1.8] An immediate divine creation, the human soul can be augmented by God in a subsequent act of creation. Commenting on the traditional play on words which finds in Scripture an apparent reference to ensoulment on or of the Sabbath (*vayinafash*, Exod. 31:17), Nahmanides, following the

Talmud [B. Betsah 16a], locates the ensoulment in the Jew who observes the Sabbath and thereby receives an "additional soul" (*nefesh yeterah*):

The additional soul comes from the foundation (*yesod*) of the world. [CT: Exod. 32:13 - I, 505]

Yesod is the ninth of the ten *sefirot*. Nahmanides' use of this kabbalistic language underscores the emanative origin of the soul. It is not produced like some material object.

[1.9] The function of the body is to serve the soul. For the soul performs its obligations by means of the body. The death of the body is to be mourned as the loss of the outward capacity to fulfill the commandments:

It seems to me that the soul functions in the body as the names of God function on the parchment of a Torah scroll... One might also say that as one rends his clothes when a Torah scroll is burned [B. Mo'ed Qatan 25a], so should one rend his clothes when those who uphold the commandments die... for with their death the performance of positive commandments is diminished. Thus everyone should rend his clothes at the death of any Jew, even a woman. [KR: *Torat ha-'Adam* - II, 52]

[1.10] Only human beings have immortal rational souls, but even the higher animals have souls in the sense of a life principle or vital spirit. Thus they are not to be exploited without limitation:

The souls of those creatures with an animal soul (*nefesh ha-tenu'ah*) have a certain elevated standing, whereby they resemble creatures with rational souls (*ha-nefesh ha-maskelet*)... God gave human beings permission (*reshut*) to slaughter and eat them, since they exist for the sake of humans. But he did not permit us to eat their soul, that is, their blood. [CT: Gen. 1:29 - I, 29]

In Scripture, the vital soul of an animal is its blood and the force it embodies. That blood is offered back to God (Gen. 9:4; Deut. 12:23-25). Vegetative life and minerals, however, do not have souls even in this limited sense; hence, they may be used unreservedly.

[1.11] Animals remain subordinate to human purposes, not least in matters of religion. For their blood plays an important role in the sacrificial cult. For Nahmanides, sacrifice serves not only human needs like that of expiating sin, but it also allows participation in the divine life itself:

It is not right to mingle the mortal soul (*ha-nefesh ha-nikhretet*) with the immortal soul (*ha-nefesh ha-qayyemet*), but it is to be an atonement on the altar, to be pleasing before the Lord. [CT: Lev. 17:11 - II, 95]

[1.12] The distinction between the human soul and that of the higher beasts is that the beast's

spirit is from the elements (*ha-yesodot*), but man's body will separate from his soul. [CT: Gen. 1:20 - I, 25]

The term for soul (*nefesh*) seems to be used interchangeably in Scripture both for human and animal life (see, e.g., Gen. 1:24, 2:7). But Nahmanides makes a careful distinction between the vital but mortal soul of animals and the rational and immortal soul of human beings.

