

The Seven Sabbaticals of Life

The Extended Biography of a Human Being

Lesson 1: Before Life, Life, and After-Life

Overview:

- The story of a human life is usually chronicled from birth and ends at death. This has not prevented many from wondering about our 'reality' prior to this world or the location of the piece of real-estate that we might inhabit once we've left. There is no shortage of questions about the afterlife: Is it temperature controlled? Is it temporary or permanent, boring or blissful? Are there many stages in the journey of the soul? What is in store for the long term future? Is this body of mine only a rental? And so on.... In response, this class will map out an extended biography of the soul as it travels through seven general stages from its origin above, prior to first descending into a body, through to the Jewish teachings about the resurrection of the dead and the world to come.
- The Torah can be seen as one's ongoing autobiography as it unfolds in real time. All of the events of a person's life, the nuances of a person's experience, the texture of one's emotion, right down to one's private thought processes, are deposited within the Torah. Consequently, we must strive to see the Torah in a personal way. This is not to suggest that the reading of the Torah, at the level of a world historical or socio-political experience of a nation amongst nations no longer applies. Rather, we have a multi-layered history or histories, a record of the collective and the individual. Moreover, it is not limited to history. A timeless description of human psychology and the fabric of the future also dwell in the text. The Torah is pregnant with all that will be.
- Souls in their pre-life life come from the *otzar haneshamot* (אוצר הנשמות) or treasure house of souls on high. They are depicted as nesting in the Divine. This expression in Jewish mysticism clearly asserts the pre-existing condition of the soul. Like a disembodied consciousness of questionable 'self' awareness amidst the overall unmediated presence of the Divine, resides the soul on high.
- The stages on life's way can be compared to the seven basic emotive spheres. The first sphere of the heart relates to loving-kindness or *chesed* (חסד-אהבה). Taken as the unconditional offering, the pure gift granted without warrant or merit, the prime gesture of loving-kindness, is to bestow life itself. Everything is given automatically and freely. This depiction invites comparison to the child in the creature comforts of the womb of the mother—of life purely and freely given. Another way of thinking about this chapter of one's larger life is to consider it as a non-judgmental state of being. This is consistent with the idea of this period relating to loving-kindness. Moreover, love here acts like a blank slate or *tabula rasa* wherein our lives are undefined.
- Judgment, by contrast, requires greater and greater degrees of differentiation or definition. Love is clean of such distinctions just as the soul has un-clarified attributes at this juncture. This is the undefined state of being which works in pure fluidity. Here we have a super-fluid space with no clear separation between ourselves and others or between ourselves and G-d. The soul is amorphous, undefined, unlimited but also unaccomplished. The descent to this world [עולם הזה] is a process of fitting-in and exercising self-restraint. This is the second of the emotive spheres and is called "severity" or "strength," *gevurah* (גבורה) in Hebrew.

- The third chapter in our biography relates to the sphere of *tiferet* (תפארת) which is understood as beauty, synthesis, and balance. Acting as “a place of comparison” the reality introduced here is for those who have passed out of this world into the Garden of Eden [*Gan Eden* (גן עדן)]. Here the soul enjoys both an insider and an outsider perspective in the post-life life of the soul after leaving the body.

In summation:

- Our first three stages of our extended biography align with the first three emotive spheres in the soul. The inalienable kindness of G-d’s infinite presence depicts the pre-game of life experience of the soul on high. Subsequently, the descent into this world is marked by the restricting of the soul into an embodied state, while simultaneously appearing to contract the limitlessness of Divine revelation into the finite appearances of a world with the pretense of independence from its Creator. Finally, the beauty of a merger of perspectives is attained in the post-game reality of *Gan Eden*, (the Garden of Eden) where worldly embodied experience is contrasted with the detachment and perception of the soul returned back on high albeit to a new position other than that of stage one.