

Messianic Rabbi: What Is a Soul?

Over the past year, between COVID, catastrophic weather events and regular daily life, almost everyone has experienced the death of a loved one. For many of us, it has been several deaths. For people like me who serve in ministry, it has been many. We have lost family members, friends and congregation members who have died. With each one's passing, my heart broke as I once again realized I would not see that person again on this side of the world to come. The more I thought about these souls who have passed from one world to the next, the more interested I became in the concept of a soul. What exactly is a soul?

If our souls are eternal, and I believe the Bible teaches that they are, then it seems that the answer to this question may be one of the most important answers we can seek. After all, we spend a whole lot of time teaching about eternity. We speak of our souls spending eternity in heaven or hell. Rabbis and preachers teach about the Good News of Yeshua (Jesus) in terms of His perfect sacrifice providing atonement for our souls. But what exactly is a soul?

We know that each of us possesses a body, soul and spirit. We also know that a body has been defined by some as a convenient carrying case for the soul. So since we know what a body is, we really are left trying to define and understand what a soul is and what a spirit is. We know that spirit and soul, while sometimes used synonymously, are really not synonyms. They are two different things entirely. This truth is established from the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis 2:7 (TLV):

"Then Adonai Elohim formed the man out of the dust from the ground and He breathed into his nostrils a breath of life—so the man became a living being."

When we read this verse in English, we may not even notice the words spirit and soul. However, both words are there in Hebrew. The words “breath of life” in English are the translation of the Hebrew word נְשָׁמָה or *neshama*, and the last English word of this verse, which is translated “living being,” is the Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ or *nefesh*, which means being or soul. But what exactly does it mean to be a living being?

So G-D breathed spirit into Adam’s nostrils, and Adam became a living soul. From this foundational creation verse, we can conclude that the spirit and soul are different things encased somehow in the body, fashioned from the earth. So far, this seems shallow and simplistic, but this is where my thinker began to think harder. What exactly was the soul before it became a living soul? Was it a dead soul? Can a soul even be lifeless in terms of what we generally consider life?

As I get older, more and more people around me are passing from this world to the world to come, and these questions become more and more important to me. As I get older and realize that even if I were to live to be 120 years old, I am still getting close to the halfway point of my time in this world. And the more I studied, the more I realized how much I didn’t understand about the soul. I knew I was one. I knew I had one. But I was not really sure what those two absolute truths meant. It seems to me that if you and I will eternally be a soul, it might be a good idea if we knew as much as we could about what a soul is.

My first and most surface definition of a soul is this: A soul is what makes you you and what makes me me. It is our character, our nature and our personality. As a soul, I can be distinguished from another person even if that person’s body looks exactly the same. For instance, identical twins may outwardly look exactly the same, yet their souls make them identifiably different. The carrying case may look the same, but what is inside is vastly different and easily differentiated from each other. In a more biblical way, G-D

robed our souls in flesh, and we dwell among each other. One could have cosmetic surgery over their entire body so they no longer looked like who they were, yet their soul would remain the same.

If, as I stated above, our soul is what makes us the person we are, and if the soul is eternal, then what actually happened when G-D breathed spirit into Adam and Adam became a living soul? How does something created eternal become living? I may have provided way more questions than answers. I hope you will think about these questions with me. After all, if Yeshua died to provide atonement for our souls, it would stand to reason that souls were important to Him. Shouldn't that make them important to us?

I began by discussing all the people we have lost over the past year. However, when we say "people we have lost," we are focusing our attention on their bodies. Because if their souls are truly eternal, then we have not really lost them at all have we? {eoa}

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