



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

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Kol Yisrael Part 2

All of Israel have a share in the World to Come, as it says (*Yeshayahu* 60:21), "And Your Nation, all of them are righteous, they will inherit a portion in the World to Come forever, the shoot of My planting, My Handiwork to be proud of" (*Sanhedrin* 10:1).

Back to Adam

All of Israel have a share in the World to Come. This share is spirituality, and it is our souls which will partake. Let us try to understand what this concept means.

Our Sages cite the verse "Where were you when I created the world?" (*Iyov* 38:4). On a profound level, this is a reference to our connection to Adam, the first man. The question means, where were you within Adam? What was your share in him? Were you created from his head, his neck, or from some other limb? (*Tanhuma, Ki Tisa* 12).

Adam, Hashem's Own handiwork, was initially created so tall that he reached the heavens (*Bereshit Rabbah* 14:10). His stature was colossal, far beyond the norms of the ordinary physical world. When he sinned his height was reduced to a mere one hundred *amot*, approximately 200 feet high (19:16, *Hagigah* 12a).

The *Mekubalim* tell us that Adam's height was not only physical. He was so great that he encompassed within himself all the souls of the Jewish people which were destined to come into the world, from Creation until the end of time. The six hundred thousand souls of Israel subdivide to many, many particles or sparks, which



were all present in Adam. Every Jew who would ever be born was included in this first ancestor; they were all parts of his soul. In essence, then, Adam *was* the Jewish people.

So, our Sages ask, where were you in Adam? What part of his soul were you? For example, some truly special souls come from Adam's head. Others come from less prestigious parts, like the heel. We all have a part in Adam, who in turn was created in the image of G-d (*Bereshit* 1:27). We know that the Al-mighty has no physical shape or form, so this refers not to man's body but to his spiritual element. In the Higher Worlds, all the various components of Adam's soul correspond to different levels of revelation of Hashem's Glory in those worlds. Every single soul, whether it comes from Adam's thumb or eye or nose or ear, has a source in the Higher Worlds, which corresponds to its source in Adam. This source is the soul's share in the World to Come.

All of Israel have a share in the World to Come. The location of our **share in the World to Come** is determined by the source of our soul and its link to Adam. Its character will depend on the level of perfection of the *mitzvot* we performed in this world. The quality of the closeness to the Al-mighty which we merit in the World to Come will be the direct outgrowth of the effort we invested in fulfilling His commandments in this world.

Complete

At birth, our soul descends from its source in the higher spiritual worlds to enter the body. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes that only a small portion, the sole of the soul, is actually inserted in the body, while its principal part remains in the Higher Worlds (*Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, Chapter 19; *Ruah Hayyim* on *Avot* 1:1). We find this principle in the verse which describes Yaakov's prophetic dream. Yaakov saw "A ladder standing on the ground and its head reaching the Heavens" (*Bereshit* 28:12). In this world our feet are planted firmly on the ground; we are physical. But our head, our most elevated element, is symbolic of our higher being, our soul, and that is connected to the Heavens, all the way up to its original source.

The Arizal teaches that every soul is a "*komah shelemah*," a complete spiritual structure. Man is composed of two hundred and forty-eight physical limbs and three hundred and sixty-five physical sinews, corresponding to his soul's two hundred and forty-eight spiritual limbs and three hundred and sixty-five spiritual sinews, as well as to the Torah's two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments and three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments (totaling six hundred and thirteen). It is our job to fulfill all these positive and negative commandments.



The *Nefesh HaHayyim* writes that when we prepare ourselves to fulfill a commandment, it makes an impression in the higher spiritual spheres even before we actually carry it out. We are clothed in an aura of light emanating from the spiritual world related to that particular *mitzvah*. This light envelops us and helps us bring the *mitzvah* to fruition (*Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, Chapter 6).

The *mitzvot* we fulfill bring perfection to the Higher Worlds at the level of the root of our soul, which is unique to us alone. Our specific soul, as well as our physical body, which performs the act of the *mitzvah*, are connected to the source of our soul. With every *mitzvah* we do, we rectify the corresponding sinew or limb at the distinctive Heavenly level which is the source of our soul, and which only it can reach. The *mitzvah* achieves rectification at three levels: the soul's source in the Higher Worlds, the soul itself, and the body (see *Shaare Kedushah*, Part 1, *Shaar Alef*).

This is what the *Tanna* is telling us. **All of Israel have a share in the World to Come.** The perfection that we achieve in the Higher Worlds through our performance of *mitzvot* is our **share**. If we knew the root of our soul and to what part of Adam we belonged, we would also know where our share of the World to Come will be. In previous generations, great *tzaddikim* on a high spiritual level approaching prophecy were able to know the source of their souls. In our times, we have no knowledge of these matters.

What we do know, however, is that the way to achieve spiritual perfection and rectification of our personal limbs and sinews – our *komah shelemah*, or the root of our soul – is through the performance of the corresponding *mitzvot*. We should therefore do our best to latch onto any opportunity to fulfill a *mitzvah*, because we need every last one of them – there are no superfluous commandments. The very fact that the chance to do a particular *mitzvah* (or prevail in a particular trial) comes our way, is an indication that for us, that *mitzvah* (or that trial) is a spiritual necessity. It is not a haphazard occurrence; Hashem gives us exactly what we need. These circumstances are Divinely ordained tests intended to purify and refine our soul in the precise way that will bring it to perfection in the relevant area.

This raises an obvious question. Some commandments, like Shabbat and *kashrut*, are readily available. Others, however, are not. There is a vast body of *mitzvot* whose fulfillment is conditional on the *Bet HaMikdash*, with sacrifices as the most obvious example. We do not at present have the *Bet HaMikdash*, so we are obviously unable to fulfill them. Many other commandments are contingent on actual halachic possession of *Eretz Yisrael*, which is also beyond our reach. And yet, we need to fulfill all these *mitzvot* to complete our job on earth and attain our soul's due place in the World to Come.



If we cannot physically perform a *mitzvah*, we can nonetheless fulfill our obligation through learning Torah. While we can no longer offer an *olah* sacrifice, we can instead learn the laws of sacrificing an *olah*, in keeping with the verse “And let our lips substitute for cows” (*Hoshea* 14:3). Our Sages tell us, “This is the law of the sin offering” (*Vayikra* 6:18), and ‘This is the law of the guilt offering’ (*Vayikra* 7:1). One who engages in the laws of a sin offering is as if he has sacrificed a sin offering, and one who engages in the laws of a guilt offering is as if he sacrificed a guilt offering” (*Menahot* 110a). Even if we cannot actually fulfill the *mitzvah*, but we do learn the relevant *halachot*, we are credited with that *mitzvah*. At the very least, through the knowledge so acquired, we will be ready and able to perform it when the opportunity arises. At times we may wonder if there is any point in learning *halachot* which are not applicable in our times or in our circumstances. As we see, we definitely should learn them, because they are both valuable and important.

Future Worlds

What exactly is **the World to Come** discussed in this *mishnah*?

The term *olam haba*, usually translated as “the World to Come,” more correctly means “the World that Comes.” The Arizal teaches that *olam haba* is a world which already exists; it “comes” continuously. It is also known as “*Gan Eden*” and the “*Olam HaNeshamot*” (World of the Souls). It is the place where the soul rests until the time for the ultimate Resurrection of the Dead (*Etz Hayyim, Shaar Mem-gimel*, Chapter 3)

After death, the body of the deceased is buried and left to decompose. The soul, now with no connection to the body, undergoes punishment. When it finishes paying the debt incurred by its sins, through suffering in this world and then after death in *gehinom*, it goes on to enjoy the ecstasy of closeness to the Al-mighty in the lofty spirituality of the “World that Comes.”

Gan Eden, another name for *olam haba*, is called the “World of the Souls” because it is there that the soul, separately from the body, rests and enjoys its reward until the time of the Resurrection of the Dead, which our Sages also refer to as *l’atid lavo*, literally “the future to come.” *Olam haba*, the World that Comes, is not “*l’atid lavo*.” They are two separate entities. *Olam haba* exists now, while the Resurrection of the Dead is still in the future.

At the Resurrection of the Dead, Hashem will restore all the souls to the bodies which originally hosted them. Together they will continue to exist forever, on such an exalted spiritual plane that even the body, known to us in its present grossly physical



form, will be almost as spiritual as the soul itself. As one they will continue to advance from level to level, going on to scale new spiritual heights, until they reach the eternal reward of *netzah netzahim*, all eternity. This is *l'atid lavo* (see Ramhal's *Maamar Halkkarim*, *B'gemul*).

Body and Soul

This does not necessarily mean that the soul accomplishes its entire mission in the span of one human life. It may well mean that a soul spends several lifetimes in this world, until it at last performs all six hundred and thirteen commandments properly.

Our understanding of the ultimate state of spiritual bliss for the resurrected bodies and their corresponding souls raises a question. We said that a soul may return to this world more than once – perhaps even ten or fifty or a hundred times, always in a different body – until it finally manages to fulfill the requisite six hundred and thirteen commandments required for its spiritual perfection and rectification. In other words, the same soul has used what may add up to a considerable number of bodies. How, then, is this reunion going to work? Will there not be more resurrected bodies than there are souls to inhabit them?

The Arizal explains. Every body fulfills various *mitzvot* during its earthly sojourn. In the future, the body will be reunited with the spirituality of those *mitzvot* which it performed, and be joined together with that part of the soul which corresponds to its own *mitzvot*. With this in mind, we can understand how one soul can be resurrected in many bodies, because each body will receive its own particular share of the soul (*Shaar HaGilgulim*, *Hakdamah Daled*).

Obviously, there are certain commandments which everybody, and every body, must keep. All *mitzvot shebegufo*, commandments fulfilled by actual performance of the required act, including daily prayers, *tzitzit*, *tefillin*, and Shabbat, are always obligatory, no matter how many times we may imagine that our soul has already been here and discharged these duties. We cannot say that our soul is probably covered for the standard commandments, and we need only concentrate on the more exotic ones. Perhaps if our soul has already fulfilled the commandment to send away a mother bird before taking the nestlings (*Devarim* 22:7) in an earlier life, we will not need to be reborn in order to fulfill it once again. But our soul will need us to wear *tzitzit* and keep Shabbat every time it lives on earth.



Hashem's Garden

The reason we are all granted a share in the World to Come, and will all undergo the rectification necessary for us to attain it, is because we are **the shoot of Hashem's planting**. We are His **Handiwork**, and He is **proud** of us.

We can understand this concept by picturing the planter of a beautiful garden, who has lavished much effort and much love on its cultivation. One day, an intruder invades and wreaks havoc on the carefully nurtured plot. He uproots the seedlings and saplings, and the planter cries out in protest; he cannot bear to watch the ruin of **the shoot** of his **planting** after he has invested so much in tending it.

We, the Jewish nation, are Hashem's beloved seedlings and saplings. We are the "apple of His Eye" (*Sifri, Bamidbar* 10:35), the most special and most important part of His entire magnificent Creation, His **Handiwork to be proud of**. He does not want us to be destroyed, He wants us to thrive.

Purpose

Hashem takes pride in us, so to speak, and we do our utmost to bring satisfaction to our Creator by doing His Will. When we obey Him we achieve perfection and rectification and earn our share in the World to Come, allowing Hashem, as it were, to fulfill His purpose in Creation.

What is Hashem's purpose in Creation, and why does He need us in order to fulfill it?

The Ramhal (see *Mesillat Yesharim*, Chapter 1, and *Derech Hashem*, Part 1, Chapter 2), based on the teachings of the Arizal (*Etz Hayyim, Shaar HaKelalim*, Chapter 1) explains that Hashem created the world in order to bestow His goodness upon His created beings. Our entire vast universe is only here to receive Divine bounty. When we achieve our maximum possible level of spiritual perfection, Hashem can then reward us richly for our efforts. It will be a reward that we can enjoy to the fullest, because *we have earned it with our labors*; it is not an embarrassing handout, but a dignified and hard-won wage.

We earn this wage with our ability to choose good over evil. In this world we are literally encircled by evil at every turn. It is all too easy to slip and fall, and end up drifting far, far astray. If we fight to stay on the right path, and invest our efforts in developing ourselves in Torah and *mitzvot*, we will be lavishly rewarded. We are **the work of Hashem's Hands**, the perfect beings who can receive His goodness in full by earning our share in the World to Come.



The Circle

Our Sages provide a vivid description of the eternal bliss of the World to Come. “In the future, Hashem will make a dance with the righteous and He sits among them in *Gan Eden*. Each one of them will point with his finger, as is written, ‘And he will say on that day, here is our G-d Whom we hoped for and trusted in, and He saved us. This is Hashem Whom we hoped for, we will rejoice and be happy with His salvation’” (*Taanit* 31b, citing *Yeshayahu* 25:9). In the World to Come, the righteous will dance in a great circle with Hashem at its center. Each one will literally raise his finger and point to Hashem in the center, saying, “He, the One at Whom we are pointing, is the G-d in Whom we trusted and Whom we longed for, and now we rejoice in His salvation.”

How are we to understand the significance of this scene? Rabbi Tzadok HaCohen of Lublin explains (*Mahshevot Harutz, Ot Zayin*).

There are many, many levels of souls and of roots of souls, and of servants and service of Hashem. However, these levels are not static. Our Sages teach that “Torah scholars have no peace in this world nor in the next world, as is written, ‘They will go from strength to strength and be seen before G-d in Zion’” (*Berachot* 64a, citing *Tehillim* 84:8). We can understand that they have no rest in this world, because they have so much to do and to accomplish. They continually move forward, from one tractate to the next, from one *mitzvah* to the next, from one *shiur* to the next. There is constant activity and constant growth.

Interestingly, our Sages tell us that the same is true of the World to Come. The souls of the righteous continue to move on “from strength to strength,” ascending to increasingly higher levels of spirituality and closeness to Hashem. Eventually they will all attain the level where they are close enough to Hashem to be part of the circle around Him, because they have reached the highest point possible for the root of their personal soul. This is the significance of the circle: its radius, the distance from the center to any given point on the circumference, is identical anywhere on the circle. Everyone will get there, sooner or later.

Does this mean that whatever we do, whether we are the next Hafetz Hayyim or a hardened sinner, our eternal reward will be the same – that it is only a question of time until we finish paying our dues? Can it be that everyone, no matter how lazy and wicked and uncaring they were, will eventually sit back and bask in the light of the Divine Presence on an identical level with our nation’s most saintly *tzaddikim*? After all, do our Sages not describe one great rapturous circle around the Al-mighty?



It is not quite so simple, Rav Tzadok explains, as we see from the words spoken by the otherworldly dancers. They say, “Here is our G-d Whom we hoped for and trusted in, and He saved us. This is Hashem Whom we hoped for, we will rejoice and be happy with His salvation.” In other words, the extent to which we “will rejoice and be happy with Hashem’s salvation” in the World to Come is *dependent* on the extent to which we “hoped for Hashem” in this world.

How much faith and belief did we have, and how earnestly did we long to come close to Hashem during our earthly lifetime? Our level of closeness to Him in this world will define our level of closeness to Him in the World to Come. Everyone will have his place in the circle and everyone will see something of the Glory of G-d, but the clarity of his vision, the quality of the influx of the Divine Presence which each individual merits, will differ vastly. What we made of ourselves here will definitely matter there.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.