

Humankind: Of Lower and Higher
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Shabbat Shalom!

The secular scientist says to G-d, "Listen, G-d, we've decided we don't need You anymore. These days we can clone people, transplant organs, and do all sorts of things that used to be considered miraculous."

God replied, "Don't need Me, huh? Let's see if You can make a human."

"Fine," says the scientist. He bends down to scoop up a handful of dirt.

"Stop!" says God. "Not so fast. Get your own dirt."

Parashat Breishit - in the Beginning - is all about beginnings. Of the world, of the animal kingdom, of humanity - the beginning of everything. Today let's take a closer look at G-d's two ingredients, as it were, for making humankind. Yes, dirt is number one. And the second? The divine breath of life. Here is Genesis chapter 2 verse 7, which describes how G-d formed the first human: "The L-rd G-d formed man from dust of the earth - *Afar Min HaAdamah* - and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life - *Nishmat Hayim*. So the human became a living being."

We see that humanity is formed from both lower matter - dirt - *and* upper matter - G-d's breath of life. We can't be exactly sure what the "breath of life" is, but it certainly comes from G-d. And it can't be produced in a science lab.

As it turns out, this dual-origin of humanity - from both the lower world and the upper - is unique among creatures. No other animal is described this way by the Torah. And this duality preserves a delicate balance in the universe.

Let me explain by sharing one of Rashi's insights. Rashi was the 11th century giant of a Torah commentator. To say he's just another rabbi or teacher is like saying Abt is just another appliance store! 1000 years later Rashi is still the first commentary many turn to.

Let me read you his take on this verse: G-d made "Adam from the lower world and the upper world - a body from the lower with a soul from the upper." Let me pause to say we're now going to go through each day of Creation taking note of each product's origin, whether it lives in the lower world or an upper world. Let's keep track:

- Day 1. *Shamayim VaAretz*, Heaven and earth. Both upper and lower.
- Day 2. The *Rakia* firmament in the skies. Upper.
- Day 3. The dry land and the seas. Lower.
- Day 4. The sun, moon, and stars. Upper.
- Day 5. The sea animals. Lower.

Are you keeping score? We are tied going into the final day of creation. It all comes down to this. The harmony of creation hangs in the balance. How can one more product - humanity - be created while preserving this equilibrium between upper and lower?

Day 6. Adam is created from dust of the earth - lower - *and* G-d's breath of life - upper. This unique fusion maintains the pristine balance.

Let's now take the next step and pursue what it means that humankind - then and now - possess something from both the lower world and the upper.

Let's consider three ideas. The first is articulated by Rashi himself. The lower part of the human is the body. We are indeed composed of organic matter. While the upper part of the human is the soul. Each of us is more than a body. Our spirit is not confined to this body. When our body isn't working that doesn't mean our personality is defective too. Each of us is a *Guf* and *Neshama*, a temporary body and an eternal soul. As the Etz Hayim Humash notes, "After death, the body returns to the earth, its source, and the soul to G-d, its source."

The second idea affirms that people must take care of lower needs and higher needs. "Lower" needs include the things we must do every day to survive: to eat and drink, to find clothing and shelter, to sleep, to create families, to socialize, to do the things many other animals do. But life is about more than surviving. As William Wallace said, "Every man dies, but not every man lives." We must also attend to "higher" needs every day, things unique to people: education, spirituality, community, ethics. We must remember to aim high.

Here's a third idea behind what it means for us to be a synthesis of both lower and upper matter: Each of us has the capacity to be an animal or an angel. The range of human potential spans from earth to heaven. Our individual actions can lower us to the level of animals - dust of the earth - or elevate us to the level of angels - G-d's breath of life. Every day we are faced with choices. Many of them are smaller choices. Some days we are faced with real challenges. How do we respond?

Last week I gave this example: You're parking the car and accidentally bump another car, giving it a good dent. Nobody is around to see. Do you drive away to avoid getting caught? Or do you leave a note and pay the damage you owe? Those who drive away respond with instinct, like animals do. But those who leave a note and pay the damage respond with ethics, like we would imagine an angel would. This is obviously where we should aim. When we make decisions - specifically challenging decisions - we place ourselves on the ladder of humanity which ranges from contemptible to commendable. From low character to high.

Here's another example. Let's say you find a wallet on the sidewalk. Nobody is around to see. Do you take its contents and run with them? Or do you return it?

I was living in New York City while studying at seminary and one day I dropped my wallet getting out of a taxi. By the time I realized it, the wallet was long gone. If this has ever happened to you, you know it's frightening. I froze with fear. What if these strangers grab the money, the credit cards, the driver's license, and run with them? Nowadays identity theft is the scariest

proposition of the three. That can wreck everything. What are the odds that somebody, with nobody watching, will take one of these? But what if these strangers are decent, honest human beings who will do the right thing even when they can get away with doing the wrong thing? In that moment, I was hoping as hard as I could that the finder was someone honest. In that moment, I also felt it was unlikely.

I sort of held my breath for the next few weeks, doing the things I could do to limit the damage. As I filed my police report, I thought, "I think it's a bad idea if I tell my wife, 'Honey, don't be alarmed, but right now I'm at the Harlem police station waiting for my paperwork!'"

A few months later, my wallet came back in the mail. All the cards and ID's were there but the money was gone. I breathed a huge sigh of relief. My faith in humanity had been restored - mostly. They shouldn't have taken the money, obviously, but they could have done much worse. On the ladder from animal to angel, they stood pretty high.

If and when you find a lost wallet, what do *you* actually do? Do you respond to your lower impulses or your higher sense of ethics? G-d created humans with the ability to respond in either way every day. It's in our hands.

This reminds me of a story about a butterfly. Once upon a time in a remote village lived an old wise woman. Everyone revered her for her intellect. Except for this one smart-aleck teenager. He had this impulse to discredit her and prove her wrong. One day he hatched a plan. The plan was to catch a butterfly and hide it in his hands. He would ask the wise woman if the butterfly was alive or dead. If she said, "Dead," the boy would open his hands to release the butterfly. But if she said, "Alive," the boy would close his hands, crushing the butterfly. It was a trick question. He had her trapped.

So he approached the wise woman and said, "If you are as wise as they say, tell me whether the butterfly in my hands is alive or dead." There was silence. The boy grinned mischievously. The wise woman spoke: "Son, whether the butterfly is alive or dead, is in your hands."

Let's return to our opening verse. "The L-rd G-d formed man from dust of the earth - *Afar Min HaAdamah* - and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life - *Nishmat Hayim*. So the human became a living being." Are we humans born to be like more like animals or angels? Either. To follow instinct or ideals? Either. Let's aim high. Because it's in our hands.