


CHABAD

 RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday night*..... שקד

Friday 13 November 2009 - 26 Cheshvan 5770
 Sedra Chayei Sarah



BODY AND SOUL

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BODY AND SOUL? DEEP HARMONY or continual conflict?

According to Jewish teaching, both are possible. At one level there is a conflict between the desires of the body and those of the soul. The soul seeks holiness, the body desires self-gratification. On another level there is a profound unity between them.

The relationship between body and soul is a central topic in the spiritual teachings of Judaism, such as in the book Tanya, written two centuries ago as a guide to inner life¹. It also relates to a theme in our Sedra², as explained by the Sages.

The Sedra commences with the passing away of our great-great grandmother - Sarah, wife of Abraham. She passed away in Kiryat Arba, meaning the 'City of the Four', in Hebron. The word Hebron itself means 'Joined'.

The Sages tell us that Sarah represents the life of the body. The physical body is composed of four basic components - earth, air, fire and water. These are the 'four' (City of Four) which are 'joined' (Hebron) during life. However, when the person passes away, the union of these four components dissolves. Now the physical body must be buried, but the soul still retains an attachment to it. For this

**Celebrating the International Conference of
 Lubavitch Emissaries in Crown Heights
 11-16 November 2009 - 24-29 Cheshvan 5770**

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reason the Torah tells us that Abraham, representing the soul, came to weep for Sarah, the body.

What does the story of Abraham and Sarah in the Torah tell us about the relationship of soul and body during the life of a person? We might imagine that there is conflict between them. Yet not only do Abraham and Sarah lead a harmonious life together; when they do occasionally disagree, G-d tells Abraham that he should follow Sarah's advice³. Does this mean that one should follow the dictates of one's body rather than of one's soul?

Here we come to one of the subtle teachings of Chassidism. Soul and body can form a harmonious whole. True, there often are the conflicts we might expect. Jewish law presents many do's and don'ts, about which the soul is enthusiastic while the body has its own agenda. Yet the entire purpose of these rules is that the *body* should keep them.

The laws of kashrut, Shabbat, business ethics, love of one's fellow - all govern the practical ways in which we relate to the world and to other people, by means of our physical selves. This fact emphasises the importance of the body. We cannot just forget the body and concentrate on the soul.

The purpose of the practical Commandments is to elevate the body, the physical self and everything relating to it. Each time we carry out one of the laws of the Torah, in some way our physical being is transformed. Gradually, it reveals its innate holiness.

This is the goal, which for most of us will be achieved only with the coming of the Messiah. At this moment, still in Exile, the soul stands higher than the body. But eventually the body will be higher than the soul. Then indeed we will understand why G-d tells Abraham to follow Sarah's advice. In relating to G-d and to life, the body will naturally realise the true path, and will give guidance to the soul. Then the harmony of spiritual and physical will be complete⁴.

1. The author was Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812). Tanya is also published with facing English translation. An easy to read "Lessons in Tanya" is available online at www.chabad.org. 2. Genesis 23:1-25:18. 3. Genesis 21:12. 4. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, English translation by Prof. Immanuel Schochet, vol. 1, p.57-61.

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SEDRA CHAYEI SARAH

TREE OF LIFE

Once upon a time there was a young apple...

A young apple!? How can an apple be young?

Well, it just was. It was young and small and still attached to its mother tree. It wasn't an ordinary apple. It had grand visions. It wanted to meet the other apples on the tree, and even the ones in the neighbouring tree. It wanted to travel the world in the pocket of someone who loved it.

Travel the world? Why would an apple...

I'm just testing to see if you're awake. So, this apple didn't want to travel the world, but it did want to grow up, and one day be picked by someone who would enjoy its sweet and subtle taste.

Did it? Did it grow up and get picked by someone who enjoyed its sweet and subtle taste?

The apple did grow up, and got bigger and riper every day. Until one day it felt a little tugging. The apple was finally being picked! Lucky for this apple, it was picked by someone who appreciated its tasty goodness, so much so that he made a blessing on it first, before he

took the first crunchy bite. The apple was ecstatic. When there was nothing left but a core with seeds, the man tossed the apple away, and it rolled into a shady spot near its mother tree. Slowly, the apple began to rot.

This is too sad. I can't listen anymore. I'm leaving.

Don't you want to hear the good part?

How can it be good? All we have now is a rotten apple.

Slowly, the apple rots and disintegrates into the earth. Slowly the tiny seeds start being transformed.. And then, beneath the earth, a tiny green stem begins to unfurl from one of the seeds. It grows bigger and bigger until it pushes above the soil, and stretches up to the sunlight. Years later...

It becomes an apple tree.

Yes. With many apples of its own. The end.

I'm sorry. I don't understand the point of this story.

You know this Sedra is called "Chayei Sarah," the life of Sarah? Isn't that a bit strange?

Because it only starts after her life is over. Yes, I didn't think of that.

That's the point. Her life wasn't really over. Because good deeds go on forever, and continue to make fruit in this world.

Like our friend the apple, making apple trees, bearing more apples, which make more apple trees...

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