

## Partnering with God

By Abraham J. Twerski

**M**y rabbinic career began with a mission—to help individual *neshamot* (souls) in their relationship with God. When I became a physician, it was to cure the ills of the *body*. As a psychiatrist, I dealt with the *mind*. Finally, as a specialist in alcoholism and drugs, I dealt with the *spirit*.

One may ask, “Is not the spirit the same as the soul?” Our rabbis teach us that when God “breathed” the soul into man, He breathed from within Himself. Hence, the essence of the soul is Godly and corresponds to the *yetzer tov* (the good inclination) within us. In contrast, the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) within us is the desire to gratify all material and bodily urges. The Talmud says that a person should use his *yetzer tov* to subdue his *yetzer hara*. Clearly, there is an entity within a person that is neither *yetzer tov* nor *yetzer hara*, which is charged to employ the *yetzer tov* to battle with the *yetzer hara*. I refer to this entity—which mediates between the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer hara*—as the *spirit*.

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This ability to choose the *yetzer tov* over the *yetzer hara*, and to strive for moral perfection is unique to the human being. While animals possess a life force, they do not possess anything comparable to the human *spirit*. Animals do not contemplate the purpose of their existence or their goals in life. I doubt a cow has ever thought, “What must I do to become a better cow?” Similarly, animals are unable to learn from the experiences of previous generations, whereas man, of course, can. The ability to volitionally improve oneself is distinctly human. Animals cannot think about what the ultimate consequences of their actions will be. Humans can. Animals are not truly free, because they are completely dominated by their bodily drives. Unlike humans, animals cannot defy a bodily drive because of ethical or moral considerations. Except for the maternal instinct within animals, and pet dogs that may adopt certain human traits, animals do not generally sacrifice themselves for the benefit of other animals. *Chesed* is a wholly human trait.

Thus, moral growth is uniquely human and is, in fact, a prerequisite for acquiring Torah. This concept, found in the writings of many Jewish ethicists, is forcefully expressed by Rav Aaron Kotler, who cites the *midrash*, “If a Torah scholar is bereft of good sense, a dead carcass is better than him” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 1:15). Rav Kotler adds, “If there is a lack of prop-

er behavior, all one's Torah learning is worthless...because the Torah was given to man *only after he achieved human perfection as it applies to mid-dot*” (*Mishnat Rav Aaron* 1:135).

One may ask, “But is not Torah study the means to achieve character refinement?” After all, the Talmud quotes God as saying, “I created the *yetzer hara*, and I created Torah as its antidote” (*Kedushin* 30b). From this *gemara*, it would seem that Torah study is of value *before* one has achieved refinement of *middot*. Torah, is indeed, the vehicle whereby one can refine one's *middot*. Rav Eliyahu Lopian explains that Torah study can help a person transform his character traits, *but only if he wishes it to do so* and therefore engages in it with that intent. Torah knowledge that is not directed towards the refinement of *middot* accomplishes nothing (*Lev Eliyahu* vol. 1, p.74).

Just as learning Torah without aspiring to grow morally is a worthless endeavor, being ritually observant without being morally conscientious has little, if any, value. A person who is meticulous about observing *kashrut*, for example, but has no reservations about swindling his business partner, is not a truly religious person.

We send our children to fine institutions of Torah learning. However, *middot* must be developed in the home, primarily through the model set by parents. Perhaps the reason that we

are plagued by so many rebellious youngsters and dropouts from Torah institutions is because we have overlooked the Talmudic dictum that refined *middot* are essential prerequisites for Torah (*Vayikra Rabbah* 9:3).

Rosh Hashanah does not mark the first day of Creation; it marks the sixth—the day on which God said, “*Na'aseh Adam*,” “Let us make man.” To whom was God speaking when He stated “Let us?” According to the Ba'al Shem Tov, God was addressing the newly formed human being. God was, so to speak, saying to man, “I have given you potential which you must develop and thereby become *Adam*, a *mentsch*. You will be different from angels who are created spiritual and holy. You will be different than animals, which have instincts only but no spirit. When you actualize the potential I have given you, you and I together will have made *Adam*.”

Rosh Hashanah is the day on which we were given the charge to develop our moral character, and become, as the Talmud puts it, “a partner with God in the work of creation.” **JA**

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