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Play opening verses from Soul Man – Blues Brothers

What an interesting concept – being a SOUL MAN!

I have been thinking a lot about the soul lately – and being a “soul person!” I must admit, I don’t think it has the same connotation for me that it did for the Blues Brothers!... And I am not sure that I think of it the same way that most Christian leaders do either.

If I were a Christian preacher it probably would not surprise my congregation for me to be preaching about the soul...but it is a lot less common of a topic in Jewish sanctuaries. I don’t intend to talk tonight about how you can save your soul...my guess is you don’t feel like yours needs saving any more than I feel mine does.

We Jews don’t frequently talk about soul, and yet it is not a foreign topic to our faith. In the Jewish prayers that are traditionally said each morning we find the prayer Elohai neshama- which begins “God the soul that you have given me is pure.” I always think of this wonderfully positive prayer as a rabbinic response to the Christian idea of original sin. It thanks God for the clean slate – the pure soul which we believe each person is blessed to have at their core. Another great soul reference is at the beginning of Psalm 104 which is often turned into a song in Judaism. It says “barchi nafshi et Adonai” – “Bless the Lord O my soul!” Here the Psalmist hopes that from his very deepest depth, from his soul, a prayer of praise will come forth to God. It is a beautiful image.

What do I mean by soul? As I have gotten older I have become aware of a part of me that is the most ME part of me! It is not my looks nor is it governed by my

age. It is my core identity/my essence/my inner self. One wise person explained it this way – “I HAVE a body but I AM a soul.” I imagine that if some aspect of me lives on after I die, this will be it. But I am not talking tonight about afterlife. The soul needs to be nurtured and tended to in this life.

The soul is not a physical part of the body – at least not as far as I know. Yet it is very real. Perhaps if SOUL seems like too theologically-laden a word for you, you might replace it with personality. I think we would all agree that our personality is a real thing and it should be noticed and tended to. I think of soul as connected to one’s personality but meaning something deeper and more spiritual.

The rabbis describe the soul as the mirror of God in each person. What a wonderful and perceptive teaching!

Rabbi Naomi Levy has recently written a very insightful book called *Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul*. Here is how she defines soul, “a spiritual entity, a holy guide, an eternal messenger of God dwelling within us.”

We don’t spend enough time talking about the soul. And I say that because I think that our souls need to be listened to. That inner part helps us to be our most authentic selves. And it often tells us when we are off track in our actions or thoughts. Our soul, when nourished, feels enlivened and joyful. You can see it beaming through some people’s eyes when they have nurtured that inner aspect. Conversely, some people’s eyes look deadened because they have stopped listening to that holy inner voice.

What kind of things enliven the soul and what tends to deaden it? In part, the answer is very individual. If we tune in to our inner self, it will be our guide. Some things that are often described as spiritually enriching or good for the soul include music, nature, creative outlets, beautiful scenery, quiet walks, reading for pleasure,

time spent with good friends. We don't think of these as things we NEED to do, but in fact a part of us does need these soulful engagements.

And on the other hand, often we feel it when the soul is not getting to be fully expressed....even when we don't have words to say this. When we try to squeeze our lives into parameters that don't fit us very well, the soul feels deadened. When we pick a career to please others rather than finding something that fits our aptitudes, values and interests, we may feel that an important part of us is not being tended to. When we work too hard or when life circumstances batter and bruise us, we often feel that numbness or contraction deep inside. We don't always have control over these events in our life, but it is still helpful to notice what these circumstances are doing to our inner self and see how we can listen to it and tend to it.

The Jewish mystics are very helpful when we talk about soul. One rabbi noted that “your deep soul hides itself from consciousness” (p. 124 EK). I think this is true. This is such an inner part of us that sometimes we fail to notice it – at least for a while. One of the images the mystics have for the soul that I really appreciate is that of a doe. They say that just as the deer is most likely to come out of the forest when there is quiet, so too our unique soul within us can best be heard when we quiet our minds and our lives. When our life is going at a frantic pace, it can be hard to notice that inner self and what it may be trying to communicate. One of the true gifts of meditation, prayer and therapy is that all of these pursuits give us the chance to step away from our doing and focus on hearing those deep needs, insights and truths. We stop and pay attention to what is true deep within us.

This might all be sounding pretty narcissistic and ego driven. But if we are mindful of wanting to both help ourselves and others, then tuning in to our inner self can actually make us more generous and giving. Listening to that inner voice, getting

in touch with one's soul, allows us to hear the ways that we can use our unique talents and drives to help the world. We notice the ways in which we can use our strengths to be helpful to others. And we see that when done in the right proportion, assisting others, even though it might take exertion or be costly, both nourishes our soul and improves a corner of our world.

Also we can interact with the world in a much more positive way when we feel more whole. Then we can bring that positive energy into what we do. As Hillel taught "if I am not for myself, who will be for me, and if I am only for myself what am I?"

Judaism teaches us to start with ourselves but not to end there. Seeing the divine in ourselves can help remind us of the divine in every person and every thing.

In religious terms this is sometimes called an expansive mind perspective. Rather than seeing the world as me versus everyone and everything else, the soul when nurtured can help us relax our defensiveness and appreciate the diversity in the world. We begin to understand that we all rely on and need each other.

Albert Einstein wrote "a human being is part of the whole, called by us "universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish the delusion but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind."

Einstein here reminds us that we are part of a greater whole. When we nurture our soul, we are more likely to then nurture other people and their souls.

Rabbi Moshe de Leon, writing in the 13th century, taught "the purpose of the soul entering the body is to display her powers and actions in this world, for she needs

an instrument.” In other words, the body gives the soul arms and legs so that it can do things in this world! Our physical embodiment gives us the opportunity not only to live a life that is fulfilling to us but that is helpful to others. When we do so, we are living a life of purpose and blessing. In other words helping others is one of the things that makes our soul feel good!

Rabbi Naomi Levi in her book suggests that we each need to take not a selfie but a Soulfie! What better time to do that than now?! She suggests asking these questions:

1. What has my soul been trying to say to me that I’ve been ignoring?
2. What activities and experiences nourish my soul that I don’t do enough?
3. What does my soul want to repair that my ego is too stubborn or too fearful to repair?
4. What does my soul want me to reach for?

Tuning in to our inner voice will not cure all of our ills. It does not promise us a life without sadness or difficulty. It does not mean we will never be depressed or unsure and never have to do jobs or chores that are frustrating or disliked. But it can make us more grounded, help us to feel more nourished, give us good counsel for our lives, and enable us to use our talents well.

As a new year dawns, I hope we will each explore the yearnings of our own soul (take that soulfie!) and that this careful attunement to our inner self will lead to enrichment and blessing in our life and in our world. Amen

With gratitude for wisdom from:

Essential Kabbalah (EK) by Dr Daniel Matt

Einstein and the Rabbi by Rabbi Naomi Levy