

A recent study published in the journal *Science* found that people typically do not enjoy spending more than 6 minutes in a room by themselves with nothing to do but think and in fact many preferred to administer electric shocks to themselves rather than being left alone with their thoughts. In other words, most people prefer to experience pain rather than being alone with their thoughts!

The comedian [Louis C.K.](#) describes the same fear of being alone with your own thoughts this way:

“Sometimes when you’re in your car and you start going, and it starts to visit on you that you’re alone, and here it comes, this sadness. And that’s why we text and drive. People are willing to risk taking a life and ruining their own because they don’t want to be alone for a second because it’s so hard.”

I believe there is a spiritual problem behind the reason that so many people cannot tolerate even a short time alone with their thoughts, the same spiritual problem that challenges many people when they come to participate in a prayer experience like this one. However, rather than focus only on the aspect of the soul that is challenged and nourished by contemplative prayer, I want to pull back a bit and consider the larger picture as it relates to our body and soul, or souls.

Jewish mystical traditions believe that we are comprised of a body and one, three, or even five souls. The Midrash Deuteronomy Rabba¹, reads the final verse of Psalms, כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְהַלֵּל יְיָ, הִלְלוּ יְיָ, “Let all the soul praise God,” to say that there are five names for the soul. Some midrashim imagine that the lower levels of our souls are contained within us, but the upper levels are so large that they cannot be contained by the body, but rather hover over us like a funnel, channeling Divine light into our lower souls.

Based on midrashic and other Jewish texts, my friend Rabbi Aryeh ben David has connected each of the levels of the soul with some category of action that nourishes that part of the soul.² I want to suggest that there are five ways to pay attention to ourselves in order to fully take care of all of the different parts of our souls. Since it is Rosh Hashanah, a new year, it is a propitious time to organize our priorities and think about what we might do this year to better take care of ourselves. Each of the five types of action is important for a full spiritual life.

The five words for soul are: Nefesh, Ruah, Neshama, Haya, and Yehida. The levels of soul can be seen as a series of larger and larger concentric circles moving from the self to the universal.

Nefesh is a word that literally means throat, and by extension, body. It is the essence of the physical self, and it is typically used to refer to the lowest level of the individual soul, sometimes called the animal soul because all living creatures have a nefesh. The spirituality of the nefesh is the intensely personal and radically individual, the idea that each person has a unique spiritual path shared by no one else. Following that path is an individual effort.

Ruah literally means wind or spirit, and refers to the human soul above the animal soul. It can also refer to speech or emotion, typically the way we connect to an intimate group of people. I’m going to use it to refer to practices that reinforce the spirituality of the family or the small group.

1. D’varim Rabba Va’ethanan 26

2. Aryeh first learned this from David Aron, who talks about it in a book, unsourced. My primary source for the full version of the concept I use for the sermon are from Aryeh and a Rav Kook Source, Orot Hakodesh vol. II, pp. 458-9.

Neshama literally means breath, a deep breath. *Nishmat kol hai t'varekh et shim'kha*, “the breath of every living being praises Your name.” The Neshama is the means by which we connect with the Divine through religious community. This is the synagogue, a collection of people who have chosen to temper their individualism in favor of a shared spirituality. The synagogue believes that the radical selfishness of the individual needs to be balanced by work on behalf of a larger community. Therefore, it makes demands on its members that help them rise above their own needs and see the needs of the other.

Haya, the animating force of life, will refer to a national spirituality, the spirituality of a people who share a common fate. The spirituality of the nation transcends ethnic and religious boundaries to create a shared national culture that is distinct from other nations.

Finally, Yehida is a solitary point, and I am going to use it to refer to the idea that as our consciousness expands, we eventually reach the point where we recognize that the differences between us are an illusion. Yehida is the universal voice of the soul, the one which believes that there is only one shared soul in the universe. It is a universe as in ‘uni,’ one, and ‘versus,’ something which is turning or becoming. The universe is that which is becoming entirely one. This is a radical notion which erases all differences, all cultures, all nations, and all religions.

My contention is that in order to lead a full, healthy Jewish spiritual life, we should pay attention to all five levels of soul, or if you prefer, to five different kinds of spiritual development. We should try to be connected to the Divine on five distinct levels, in five distinct types of ways, the Nefesh (individual), Ruah (family/small group), Neshama (synagogue or community), Haya (nation), and Yehida (universal).

The Spiritual nourishment of the nefesh (individual) is self care, focusing only on yourself as an individual. This is personal spirituality - what gives you a sense of the Divine Presence in the world, in your life? This is your chance to be selfish, to go off by yourself, to retreat, to meet God by taking a walk on the beach, a bike ride, a hike up a mountain. Reb Nahman encouraged the spiritual practice of *hitbodedut* in which a person would go somewhere by himself and talk to God, share and unload gratitude or burdens, whatever one’s spirit moved a person to do. This is a place to be “Spiritual but not Religious,” to explore one’s sense of the Divine without being trapped in the institution of a specific religious framework.

Focusing solely on one’s own spiritual desires, which fulfilling, is isolating and ultimately selfish. The higher levels of the soul encourage one to reach out and make connections with other people. The Ruah (family/small group) soul is nourished by making a regular practice of eating Shabbat dinner with one’s family or a rotating group of friends. When you put your hands on your child’s head and bless him or her, you are making a connection and transmitting a spiritual quality on the Ruah level. The Ruah soul is also nourished by learning Torah in Hevruta, with a single study partner or by starting or participating in a study group.

Moving farther away from the self-centered care of the nefesh is the Neshama level of the synagogue or community. This introduces the notion of a Jewish practice which is determined by a community, to which the individual subjugates himself or herself. The message inherent in this level is that one of the struggles in leading a full spiritual life is learning how to participate in a larger community, which means giving up or setting aside one’s own needs and desires for the good of the larger collective. Participating in public prayer in a synagogue minyan is the classic way to nourish the Neshamah. This is the antithesis of the spiritual but not religious movement.

The Neshamah asks that one embrace the discipline of joining a religious community and behave according to its standards. The discipline of Kashrut, a consistent Shabbat practice, participating in the communal life of Sukkot and Shavuot, or having a Seder on the days designated by the Jewish calendar as the first and second day of Pesah, these are all ways that one aligns one's self with a larger entity.

Expanding outward and upward one more soul-level, we come to Haya, the stage of peoplehood or nationhood. The spiritual path of Judaism asserts that it is not only a religious practice but also a religious people as well with a language and a land. This aspect deserves its own exploration in its own sermon tomorrow.

Finally, when we reach the level of the Yehidah we have reached the fully universal. At this stage, there is no particular Jewish path - the path is that which is in common with every other human being. This is the path of inter-religious cooperation, understanding and action. This is the level of serving humanity in the broadest possible way - giving time and money to organizations dedicated to human goodness. Help build a home with Habitat for Humanity, make sandwiches for Kid's Food Basket, staff a Family Promise shelter, clean up a roadside.

Just as there were some who believed solely in the nefesh level of personal spiritual quest, there are those who believe solely in universal spiritual service - the quest to erase differences between religious traditions. Jewish tradition believes in the universal, but asserts that it is insufficient on its own. The fullness of the Jewish spiritual path requires both the particular and the universal, tending to the self, participating in the Jewish community, and serving others.

Some of us are better at the personal or the family, some are better at the universal, and some are more attracted to the communal or national levels of spiritual care. You know what you are good at, and you know where your challenges lie. In order to fully develop your soul, I challenge you this Rosh Hashanah to pay attention to all five levels of your souls, the personal, the family, the synagogue, the national, and the universal. The benefit to you? You will be a more patient person, better able to focus on the task at hand without distraction. You will better appreciate and be appreciated by your family. As the more personal and family levels of your soul expand, you will connect more strongly with the national and universal levels of your soul. You will feel a oneness with your people and your world. As you spend more time working on behalf of your universal soul and the good of the world, your nefesh soul will also be strengthened - studies have shown that people are happier when they are working on behalf of others, and thus set aside their own worries. The critical center, holding together the personal/family soul with the national/universal soul, is the soul connected to the religious community. The benefit of involvement in a synagogue is support both for your individual soul and for your universal soul. The religious community is both a source of wisdom and insight into yourself and a source of encouragement to go beyond yourself. May you challenge yourself this year to grow in all of the aspects of your souls, and may you thus be enriched and elevated in the new year.