

Within Our Hearts: The Holy of Holies

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“And God formed the human from dust... and breathed into its nose the soul of life, and the human became a living soul.” (Genesis 2:7) The simplest way of understanding this verse is according to its Aramaic translation: “And the human became a living spirit,” which is to say that when the human was only a body, it was actually dust, with no life or motion. But when the “soul of life” was breathed into the human, it became a living being, moving and speaking. For, indeed, the verse does not say “and the living soul was in the human,” but rather “and the human became a living soul,” which teaches that every person is a living soul in countless ways. Just as every behavior and motion of a body is due to the power of the soul within a person, so, too, is every person the living soul of countless facets of existence, all led by human hands. (Nefesh HaChayim 1:4)

Great power exists in our universe, whose very existence flows from God, and in whose image every human being was created through the gift of God’s breath. We are both the semblance of that divine power and radically less. It is as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once taught: “Here we are — images of God, a fraction of [God’s] power at our disposal.” And yet a fraction of God’s infinite power is still infinite. Is it possible to live a life embodying this weave of warranted humility and thrilling exaltation? Again, a teaching of Heschel comes to mind: “To be only human is to be less than human.” What happens if we, wielders of some of God’s creative power, remove our energy from the universe, even for an instant? It is hard to accept our role as an agent of the divine. And yet, it is what we are. What if I forget? What if I cannot accept this sacred charge?

Stanley Martin Lieber (aka Stan Lee) taught, “With great power comes great responsibility.” The inherent power every person wields must never be underestimated. No act is neutral, not even inaction, for an agent of divine energy. Deeds matter, words matter — *thoughts matter!* Whereas Jewish tradition has long held that emotions cannot be commanded and that intentions do not carry legal consequence, it is also true that our thoughts truly impact the world. We are powerful even if we reject these ideas.

Consider our place in the world today. Stanisław Jerzy Lec, among the most noted of post-Shoah Polish political writers, once suggested, “Thoughts, like fleas, jump from man to man, but they don’t bite everybody.” Lec’s notion that the contagion of thoughts depends upon proximity is fascinating. Today, where closeness is less about geography and more

about connectedness, are thoughts truly consequential deeds? Given the contagion of ideas in a wired world, how can we learn to act, speak, and think responsibly?

When we realize our divine power, it can become hard to make any decision. If everything resonates in the universe, then every decision we make requires serious reflection. But cherish this self-awareness. It is a universal human affirmation, one woefully out of reach for many, many people. It is normal to wonder about our potency, the meaning of life, our place in the world. But it is self-denial to ignore our own inherent power. Every person, by virtue of the fact that they are breathing, contains a stirring of the divine. The air we breathe is the very thing with which God animated the very first person.

The Holy of Holies, the place from which God’s voice once emanated between two golden cherubs above the “Ark of the Covenant,” now beats within the human heart. There, within each of us, the angels face each other. And that is where God dwells. But remember that our potential for good is matched by the possibility of corruption. Our deeds must be harnessed for the common good, not for self-satisfaction. Those cherubs shelter both the broken and the whole parts of our hearts.

Humanity is the central animating force of the universe. Human beings are the self-reflective respiration of life itself, inevitably influencing every surrounding thing. Consider, therefore, that the body is the vessel for the divine. Through the gift of God’s breath, we have become something more than bodies. We have become living spirits, the pulsing hearts of the universe, with the ability to heal or destroy everything around us.



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