

LBT's From Light to Liberation: Breath

Week of December 13, 2020 / 27 Kislev 5781

These texts are designed to be engaged in chevruta (with a partner), with a larger group, or on your own as part of your journey from Light to Liberation. As you approach these texts, you are invited to let the discussions and thoughts they foster live with you and be part of you. If you are reading these on your own or with others, we encourage you to read aloud.

Framing: The hebrew root N-Sh-M נ-ש-מ (bolded and underlined below) is one of the most dynamic words in our tradition. We first come across this word in Genesis as God breathes life into the nostrils of the Earthling. Later in the tradition, our daily prayer of Elohai Neshama transforms the word “breath” to mean “soul.” In the Jewish tradition, breath becomes the essential element of our aliveness.

בראשית ב'ד'-ז

(ד) אֱלֹהִים תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבְרָאָם בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת יְיָ אֱלֹהִים אֶרֶץ וּשְׁמַיִם: (ה) וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר הִשְׁדָּה טָרֵם יִהְיֶה בְּאֶרֶץ וְכֹל־עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יִצְמַח כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר יְיָ אֱלֹהִים עַל־הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אֵין לְעִבֹד אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה: (ו) וְאֵד יַעֲלֶה מִן־הָאָרֶץ וְהַשָּׂקָה אֶת־כָּל־פְּנֵי־הָאֲדָמָה: (ז) וַיִּצְרֵן יְיָ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֶפְרָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפֹּחַ בְּאַפָּיו נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנִפְשׁ חַיָּה:

Genesis 2:4-7

(4) This is the chronicle of heaven and earth when they were created: On the day the Eternal God made earth and heaven— (5) no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, because the Eternal God had not poured rain upon the earth and there was not a human to till the soil, (6) but a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth— (7) Then the Eternal God fashioned the Earthling — dust from soil — and breathed into his nostrils the **breath** of life, so that the Earthling became a living being.

Shacharit/Morning Service, Morning Blessings

אֱלֹהֵי נְשָׁמָה שְׁנַתָּת בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא

My God, the **soul** you have placed in me is pure.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why do you think *neshama* is translated as breath in one place and soul in another?
2. How do you experience breathing while meditating? How is it different than breathing at other points in the day?
3. While our tradition affirms that the soul God has given us is pure, when are you able to feel that to be true, when is it more difficult?