

LBT's From Light to Liberation: Soul/Nefesh

Week of January 10, 2021 / 26 Tevet 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: In one Rabbinic discussion, we find Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer engaging in a debate about *where* life emerges from in our body -- they grapple with a question about the essence of our souls as how it relates to our body. In Deuteronomy, the Torah teaches that the elders of a city are responsible for a dead body that is found outside the city walls when there is no evidence or way to prosecute the murderer. But in the extraordinary case where the dead body is found exactly between two cities, the rabbis debate: from where on the body should we measure to determine which city is responsible? The Rabbis turn this didactic discussion into a powerful conversation on the essence of life as they explore the essential question of where our soul resides.

משנה סוטה ט"ד'

(ד) מאין היו מודדין. רבי אליעזר אומר, מטבורו. רבי עקיבא אומר, מקטמו.

Mishnah Sotah 9:4

(4) From what part of the body do they measure? Rabbi Eliezer says: from the navel. Rabbi Akiva says: from the nose.

סוטה מ"ה ב:ט"ו

מאין היו מודדין במאי קמיפלגי מר סבר עיקר חיותא באפיה ומר סבר עיקר חיותא בטיבוריה

Babylonian Talmud Sotah 45b:15

Regarding the teaching in the Mishnah, "From what part of the body do they measure," the Talmud asks: In what way do they disagree? Rabbi Akiva holds that a person's life is sustained mainly in the nose (as breathing is the essence of life). Rabbi Eliezer, holds that a person's life is sustained mainly in the navel (as life emerges from the umbilical cord, the essence of life).

Questions for Reflection:

1. The Talmud does not provide any additional insight into the reasoning of Rabbi Akiva or Rabbi Eliezer. Where would you locate the essence or center of life in your own body?
2. How have you embraced or resisted the idea of a soul in your own life?
3. When have you experienced the neshama or soul of another? What did it reveal about your own essence?
4. As you sit this week you are invited to explore this question of your center, of your essence within and beyond your breath, within and beyond your body.