

Do non-Jews have souls?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

A recent exchange from [JROD](#):

QUESTION: Jeremy, I've always been uncomfortable with the notion of Jews having a "higher" level of Neshama than non-Jews. I was wondering what variety of opinions we have on this in our tradition and, in fact, how a neshama is defined.

RESPONSE: Hey this is heavy duty stuff and an excellent example of an issue that has lots of different answers but by and large divides between rationalist and mystics.

The words used in the Bible to describe the soul—ruach, nefesh and neshama—are all used of humans and animals.

Ecclesiastes (Kohelet) 3.19. says, "There is one spirit (ruach) to all creatures. Who knows if the spirit of man rises and the spirit of animals descends? Everything goes to the same place!"

According to Greek philosophy there are two eternal substances, "matter" and "mind", and humans are made up of both. Around 2000 years ago "mind" came to be associated by Jewish philosophers with "soul".

The [Midrash](#) adds two other words, ot and yechida. The Midrash gives a range of different ideas trying to define or delineate them, but all within the rather non-rational and non-systematic approach that characterizes the Midrashic method.

You need to look to [Maimonides](#) on the one hand, and the Zohar on the other to see how the ideas of soul have developed.

According to Maimonides ([Hilchot Teshuva](#)) our souls are, indeed, our intellects, the vehicle for understanding and connecting with God. If we develop our minds to think of God they will survive us after death and return to unite with God (based on Aristotelian thought). And this is what is meant by "Heaven" or Gan Eden. But we can obliterate it through neglect, and when we die that is all there is. And that is what the rabbis meant when they talk about "Geyhinom" or "Hell". According to Maimonides only humans have souls.

The Zohar distinguishes between an animal soul and a Divine soul. Divine souls are made of a special Divine substance and there is a limited amount. Soul material is what sustains spiritual beings, Jews, and is constantly recycled to ensure that such human beings are helped to elevate their bodies. There is some disagreement in mystical circles as to whether only Jews have such souls or whether other spiritual people do, too.

Lubavitch, for example, drawing on Zohar sources, believes [only Jews do](#) and any convert must have received his or her soul from an earlier Jewish source

(this is an opinion that does not make sense to my limited mental or spiritual capacities).

To complicate matters, we say every day in the "Modeh Ani" prayer that we thank God for returning our souls when we wake up, which implies that soul has something to do with consciousness.

Philosophy has now discarded the mind/body division (beautifully demolished for a popular audience in [Koestler's The Ghost in the Machine](#)). It does not make sense to talk about Mind as if it were some non-physical substance. After all, cut off the oxygen or blood and it stops functioning.

So we would need to talk about soul as that faculty or sense through which we recognize, appreciate, sense the Divine. But that still places it in a quasi-physical context.

We could go down a variety of [Spinoza's Pantheism](#) and talk about an instinctive association with the universe, something close to Buddhism. But Judaism is a transcendental religion, which means there has to be a personal engagement with God. And this is why I favor the "sense" theory.

But I also like mysticism, and mysticism is, to me, poetic. So the passionate love between a human and God is something one experiences and engages with on a visceral, non-cognitive, poetical level. It's like abandoning oneself to love, very often in a way one neither understands nor is conscious of, or of what mechanism is being used. "Intoxicated with God" is the expression often used of mystics. Allowing oneself to let go of logic is also a recognition of one's limitations, and possibly of areas of one's brain that are still uncharted.

There is no actual command or even Maimonidean dogma attached to soul, specifically, though in practice there is no way to understand life after death without some notion of soul. Therefore it is up to the individual to come to his or her own conclusion and decide what theory or approach suits them personally.

I find it a great strength of Judaism that we do not have too rigid a theological system and there is such room for variations and personal input, given, of course, our brains differ in style and depth of function.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: So, from what you are saying, the logic of the Rambam would lead me to conclude that anyone (Jewish or not) can potentially reach the same levels (spiritually). If one were to take the view of the Zohar and interpretations following, then there are levels of spirituality, which apply to Jews, non-Jew, animals, etc?

RESPONSE: Most definitely, according to Maimonides, non-Jews as well as Jews are capable of the ultimate spirituality that gives them "a place in the world to come". Indeed, the Talmud says this quite specifically (Sanhedrin 105a). What's more, the Talmud also says that both Jewish and non-Jewish communities are sustained by the presence in each of good, caring "pious people".

It is only in Kabbalah that you find this idea I equally find repulsive that only Jews have Divine souls but everyone else only has animal souls (including, of course, animals—philosopher [Peter Singer](#) please note!).

However, given that this idea emerged at a time when Jews were being massacred, raped and burnt to death for their religious beliefs I can understand the historical context even if I don't agree with it!

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