

The Jewish Post & Opinion

Presenting a broad spectrum of Jewish News and Opinions since 1935.

Volume 84, Number 1 • November 8, 2017 • 19 Cheshvan 5778

www.jewishpostopinion.com • www.ulib.iupui.edu/digitalscholarship/collections/JPO

MY WEAKER SIDE

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

I have often wondered why one half of my body is weaker than the other half. My left leg is weaker than my right leg. My left arm, wrist, and hand are weaker than my right. My left eye is weaker than my right. No doubt there are “scientific” explanations for this condition, but as far as I can determine they are all *speculative*—not based on solid research findings. One thing that does seem clear, however, is that this condition is common. That suggests it’s possibly not the result of an idiosyncratic cause, such as injury during birth. Could it be like an “inheritance” that is widely shared, given to us by God? But if so, how might we understand it?

If we regard human beings as God’s creatures, not simply the random outcomes of mindless forces, we can appreciate that, in fact, there are no “mindless” forces in the Creation. A clearly identifiable set of *fixed* laws governs the action or behavior of every material thing in the universe, no matter how small or large. In other words, although the Creation is constantly changing in myriad ways, somehow the laws, by which all change occurs, themselves stopped changing and became fixed. How did that happen? What “force” stopped and fixed that part of the ever-changing Creation. Of course, there are those who say the laws are simply the outcomes of another random set of events, which might be believable if these specific “outcomes”—that is, fixed laws—didn’t turn out to govern every other facet of the Creation. Nothing occurs “mindlessly” in the Creation, including our physiological inheritance.

Which brings me back to my inheritance of a weaker side and a stronger side—presumably somehow from God who stopped a part of the Creation and fixed the laws that govern all the other parts. What might be the purpose or meaning of this condition? I’m assuming, of course, it is not a random, meaningless outcome of mindless forces.

Pondering the question, a vision came to me of Jacob in the night wrestling with an angel, and Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch’s commentary on that event. (Bereshit

32:25-29) Rabbi Hirsch describes the fight as a prototype that lasts throughout history. It’s the conflict between the purposes of empire, as evidenced by Roman conquest and domination, represented by Esav and symbolized by the scepter and sword; and the godly principles and practices Jacob lived out in his own life and passed on to his posterity—righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness. Jacob, lamed and weakened, refused to give up the fight and admit defeat. He would only stop if his opponent would bless him—in effect, give Jacob assurance that what he stood for, although weakened, would continue and ultimately defeat Rome and dominate the nations.

I take it that, in giving me weaker and stronger sides, the Creator has implanted within me a reminder of the conflict between Jacob and the purposes of Rome. But what does it mean for me? Certainly, I can make several interpretations. I believe that the “truth” of them, however, rests entirely on the extent to which they serve to help me mimic Jacob’s godly purposes. I now see that my strong side is a reminder of how I can use my strength to further evil in the world, which I have done, and my weak side is a reminder that even from a place of weakness I can further goodness, which I have often failed to do. I have also learned that I can strengthen my weaker side by “exercising” it, using it more to create goodness.

Withal, I’m reminded of the blessing we recite before the morning blessings: *Elohai, neshama shnatata bi, tehora hi* (My God, the soul you placed in me, it is pure—אֱלֹהֵי נִשְׁמָה שְׁנַתַּת בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא). I have begun to recite this blessing slowly each morning after arising, savoring each part and its meaning to me:

Elohai (אֱלֹהֵי)—*My God*: Gaon Hakol, Mastermind of all Creation Who created me as a human being, Who has given humankind a wondrous world with all we need to survive and succeed, in joy and contentment with justice and compassion, and Who cares for our world by sustaining the moral infrastructure of mitzvot;

neshama shnatata bi (נִשְׁמָה שְׁנַתַּת בִּי)—*the soul You*

placed in me: You breathed into me, as one of human-kind, unlike all other creatures, the ability to know right and wrong and the free will to choose between them, and—in Your image—You have given me the power to bring that moral spiritual (non-material) goodness into existence in the material world;

tehora hi (טהורה היא)—*it is pure*: I affirm that purity by recalling myself as a small child with an untarnished soul, before others betrayed me and, consequently, I began betraying others and poisoning my own happiness;

but that essence of pure soul remains, nonetheless, and I can uncover it whenever I choose—and God sustains me by giving me the Torah’s blueprint for the Creation, which enables me to find my way.

Incidentally, I have also found it useful, after saying the blessing for myself each morning, to repeat it in a slightly altered form, replacing “the soul You placed in me” with “the soul you placed in them” (אנשׁוֹת בְּתוֹכָם)—that is, in all other human beings, so I remind myself to treat all others as “soulful” children of God.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here](#)!