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Are We A Soul Inside A Body, Or a Body With A Soul?

We have all heard of the term “*mesirus nefesh*” (to be self-sacrificing), but what does it really mean?

We need to differentiate between the concepts of *mesirus nefesh*, giving your “soul” towards something, and *mesirus haguf*, giving of your physical body, to something. The concept of “*mesirus nefesh*” is to exert your soul for something, while *mesirus haguf* is to exert your body for something. They are different forms of self-sacrifice, and they are not the same thing, just as your body and your soul are not the same thing.

Hashem created each person with a body and a soul. Usually, as a person grows up, he identifies himself as a body, not as a soul. As such, a person usually has the body’s viewpoint, not the soul’s viewpoint. The body’s view is a very different view than the view from the soul. It sees the external and superficial layer of reality, and it cannot see beyond the physical.

From the viewpoint of the body, a person is standing in front of another person and all he sees is the other’s body. He sees the height, weight and looks of the other person, and this is how he usually identifies people with. People even identify themselves and others based on what kind of clothes they wear.

When a person considers another person’s looks, he is essentially viewing the other person as a body. When a person sees another person who is physically handicapped, he feels sorry for him, because he sees him as a damaged body. Why? It’s really because he views another person as a body. He thinks that the body *is* the person, that the “I” of the other person is the other’s body, and therefore, he pities someone with a physical handicap, because he thinks that the other person is missing his “I”, *nebach...*

We mainly feel sorry for others who are physically handicapped. We all pity those who are physically damaged. But what about someone else whose *soul* has become damaged? We usually don’t feel sorry for this kind of “handicap”, because we are not used to identifying people (and ourselves) as souls.

If a person thinks that he is his body, what happens when he gets sick? He thinks, “I am sick”, and if his body gets a cut, he thinks, “I am hurt.” He thinks that his very essence, his “I”, has become damaged.

The body sees colors, beauty, and the physical. What does our soul see? Our soul has a different lens.

Our soul sees feelings, thoughts, and *middos*. When a person thinks that people are bodies, all he sees in people are their height and weight. But when a person knows that people are souls, he sees others' feelings, thoughts and *middos*.

We know that part of our task on this world is to work on our *middos* (character traits). If a person thinks that he is a body, then he will mainly focus on improving his body and how he looks. But when a person knows he is a soul, he mainly seeks to beautify his *middos*, to refine his emotions, and to develop his power of thought.

The truth is that there is a natural and inborn need for people to want to look good. The only question is what we do with this nature. It is usually channeled towards physicality, but we can use it for the spiritual. If a person thinks that he is a body, he uses the nature of "wanting to looking good" to focus on how his body will look. But when a person is deeply aware that he is a soul, he uses his inborn ability to want to "look good" for his soul – that his *soul* should "look good": that he should have good *middos*, refined feelings, and proper thoughts.

Most of the problems that people have on this world are really because people see only their body's viewpoint, thus they see themselves as mainly a body. If you take a look at most of the problems in the world, they are mostly body-oriented, because people are so busy with their body, which they erroneously think of as their actual self.

My "Body" Is Sick, Not My "I"

If a person gets sick and he goes to the doctor, which part of him is sick? Does he think "I" am sick, or does view the sickness as something on the outside that is affecting his body?

The Egyptians were struck with sickness; they suffered immensely from the plagues, and the depth of this is that since they identified themselves as a body, they felt like their very essence was hit.

If a person knows he is a soul, he will discover that his pain will be a lot less when he's sick. He can know that he himself, his "I", is healthy, and that it is just his *body* which is in pain.

In the *Refoeinu* blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*, we *daven* that the ill should have a "*refuas hanefesh*" (healing of the soul) and "*refuas haguf*" (healing of the body). When a person has a *refuas hanefesh*, he also has a *refuas haguf*. A healthy soul affects our body's health.

These words are not only true when a person is sick. Even a healthy person, who thinks that he is mainly a body, is terribly mistaken, because he is viewing his very essence as that of a body, not as a soul.

When a person thinks that he *is* his body, and then he gets sick, he thinks "I" am sick, and then what happens? He becomes more and more self-absorbed, and this makes him even more sick.

Strengthening Yourself When You Get Sick

Now let's see the other side of the coin.

When a person falls ill, his family as well suffers from the fact that he's ill. New feelings are brought out in the person and in his family from the experience. Herein lays the key to how he can cope with the illness: from this situation, he can come to truly identify himself for who he is, and this can help for his own recovery.

When a person falls ill, he now has the chance to help himself. He reveals from within himself a new

attitude how he can go about his illness and persevere: "I am a soul, not a body." When a person realizes, as he's frail and helpless, that he is more than just a body, and that he is obviously a soul – he can now have hope.

Chazal say that the *Shechinah* is present by the front of a sick person's bed. This is really because it is now a holy opportunity for the person to overcome his "body" viewpoint, and to realize instead that he is a soul, not a body.

When a person is sick and his body is racked with pain, either he will focus so much on his pain that it will get worse and worse, or he will come out of it, by revealing from inside himself that he is not a body. Being sick is an opportunity for a person to realize he is a soul – and this is the root of his way toward recovery.

There is a way for a person to heal himself - and it is from within his very self. This is when a person realizes he is a soul, and that no matter how much pain his body is in, deep down his soul is still healthy, and this is what he can tell himself.

People who are sick need *chizuk* (inspiration), but to hear these words is the greatest 'chizuk' that a sick person can hear: that he has the power to heal himself – by realizing he is a soul.

'Mesirus Nefesh': The Viewpoint From The Soul

Most people think that "*mesirus nefesh*" is to exert your body; people think that exerting their bodies for others is considered "*mesirus nefesh*" for others, such as by spending money on others. They confuse '*mesirus haguf*' with "*mesirus nefesh*". But "*mesirus nefesh*" is really to live a life from the viewpoint of one's soul.

A person who knows that he is more than just a body is truly living life; a person who thinks that he's a body is sort of dead. A person who experiences life through his soul's viewpoint will be able to face difficult times with strength. Our soul is healthy and eternal; it is undaunted by pain and illness.

These words are like a light in the darkness. A person who thinks he's a body is really living in a very dark world. The soul of a person, however, is alive and full of light that radiates the darkness of this world. If a person knows and is aware that he is more than just a body – that he consists of *middos*, feelings and thoughts – then he also will be able to view others in the same way.

Say It and Believe It

Therefore, every person must say, "I am healthy!"

Your soul is always healthy, because your soul is a *cheilek eloka mimaal*, a "piece of Hashem." That is who you really are; your body is just your outside. If your body is suffering, this does not mean that "you" are suffering, because "you" are not your body. "You" are a pure soul from above – your soul is a piece of Hashem, and that is who you truly are.

This is not in your imagination. It is to be connected to your inner essence. A person should feel this truth from within himself, and then connect himself to it. Always repeat to yourself, no matter what situation you're in, that you are always healthy, because you are a *soul* (*neshamah*).

I hope, from the depths of my heart, that these words will help you.