

## **The Nose Knows** **Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer**

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### *Rosh Hashanah*

A quarter of a century ago, Rebbe Zalman Schachter-Shalomi noted that we modern Jews have become alienated from our bodies. This alienation, he added, has led to interpersonal alienation and, ultimately, to alienation from the Blessed Holy One. Reb Zalman asks us to go, when we are feeling alienated, to that place within us where we consult our values, and he goes on to discuss the technique of focusing developed by psychologist/philosopher Eugene Gendlin.

At this season of the year, when our liturgy takes us back to that place of soul-inventory, we may add a bit of variation to Reb Zalman's words by suggesting that the *place* where we might consult our values need not be solely a spiritual place within our being. Rather, that *place* may be a physical location on the body which has important associations with spiritual matters. The physical place is none other than . . . the nose!

Initially, this sounds ludicrous, especially when we remember that the associations between Jews and noses have usually been negative ones, caricatured in the cartoons and jokes of anti-Semites and self-deprecating Jews. Due to these associations, the nose has been popularly thought to be the distinguishing mark of so-called "Jewish" physiognomy, in need of bobbing and re-formation and restructuring, even though it was shown long ago that the so-called "Jewish nose" occurs more often among non-Jews than among Jews.

Unfortunately, through our superficial pre-occupation with the cosmetic aspects of the nose – probably in reaction to the mockery of a hostile Gentile culture – we have failed sufficiently to cultivate positive attitudes toward the nose. On a spiritual and religious level, we have overlooked a powerful metaphor, one that is particularly appropriate for the High Holy Day season.

To be sure, positive things have been said about the nose in Jewish sources. The Talmudic sage, Rabbi Levi ben Hayta, regarded the nose as proof of the Divine Genius behind the creation of humanity, when he said, "It is unbecoming for a waterspout to be at the entrance of a palace. Yet the Supreme Architect created human beings with spouts over their mouths, and these spouts constitute their beauty and their pride."

The nose has also been linked linguistically to certain aspects of the human personality. In Scripture, the expression denoting rage and anger is *kharon af*, literally a *burning nose*, sometimes shortened to just *af*, *nose*. The Book of Proverbs labels one who is easily angered as *k'tsar apayim*, *short-nostrilled*. The expression for becoming slow to anger is *he'erikh apayim*, *lengthening one's nostrils*. One of G\*d's thirteen attributes, as

expounded by Maimonides, echoing Exodus 34:6, is that of *arikh apayim*, *having long nostrils* or, in the usual rendering, *having abundant patience*. Biblical and rabbinic sources frequently take the nose as symbolic of the entire face, and the Talmud records situations in which it was the nose of a person which established his or her identity.

The most important reason for holding the nose in high regard is that it is the receptacle and residence of the *neshamah*, the third level of the soul, as we see from Genesis 2:7, where it is written, “G\*d the Eternal breathed Into Adam’s nostrils the *neshamah* of life,” and from Genesis 7:22, which refers to “all those in whose nostrils is the *neshamah* of the spirit of life.” From these verses, the rabbis concluded that a person was considered alive so long as breath could be detected in the nostrils. These verses, then, affirm the nose as the physiological site of life, of aliveness, but the word *neshamah* denotes *soul* as well as *breath*, and it is therefore clear that the nose is to be considered the place where the soul may be found, the place into which the Blessed Holy One breathed not only the gift of physical animation but spiritual vitality as well, as Job said (27:3), **The spirit of G\*d is in my nostrils.**

With so distinctive and honorable a function, the nose is indeed a source of beauty and pride, especially for the religious individual. This beauty and pride, which is derived from the knowledge of the presence of the *neshamah* in the nose, is expressed in our traditional prayers:

- ✧ The *neshamah* Thou hast given me is pure.
- ✧ Thou hast breathed it into me.
- ✧ So long as the *neshamah* of life is within me, I will thank Thee.
- ✧ The *neshamah* of every living thing shall bless Thy Name.
- ✧ Let everything that has *neshamah* praise the Eternal.

These passages – from various parts of the Siddur, our prayerbook – constitute the reason cited by the sages for reciting a blessing when smelling sweet aromas. In the Jewish tradition, the smelling of sweet spices and the recitation of the appropriate blessing is a part of the Havdalah ceremony at the conclusion of Shabbat. It is viewed as compensation to us for the loss of the *neshamah y’teira*, the extra soul that comes to us every Shabbat, and it is also a going-away present for the *neshamah y’teira*. Further, it is a gift to the only one of the five senses whose exercise cannot be a transgression. (One can touch inappropriately; one can see that which one should not; one can hear forbidden *lashon hara*, slander; one can taste forbidden foods; but there is no smell which is itself a transgression.)

Smelling sweet spices at Havdalah is particularly meaningful because it symbolizes the interplay between two seemingly antithetical concepts which are both integral to the moment when Shabbat ends – despair and hope. This interplay is depicted by the nose’s two functions – breathing and smelling. The exhalation of the *neshamah y’teira* is regarded

as cause for momentary – only momentary – sorrow, and it is expressed through a profound sigh. But this is followed immediately by the inhalation of the spices' aroma, representing hope in the sweetness and fulfillment of Shabbat to come. This is the hope that resuscitates and revives.

The symbolic importance of the nose is emphasized again when we remember the ancient adage that the soul departs and returns with each breath that a person takes. A modern parallel is the contemporary psychological notion that a person's breathing patterns are often valid criteria for evaluating psychological and emotional health and personal awareness. Arnold Gerstein, author of a major book on conflict resolution, has written, "The quality of breath is [one of] the most subtle and sensitive instrument[s] . . . with which to notice contact and withdrawal." In counselling clients, he often reminded them that shallow and restrained breathing may produce a loss of interpersonal contact. He often asked a client to stop breathing entirely, in order to mirror how the client was depressing himself or herself physically and emotionally.

It is thus easy to see how *shallow breathing* would be a fitting metaphor for the spiritual symptoms caused by the *neshamah's* dis-ease. In Jewish thought, these symptoms are believed to be the result of *het* – a word, as in our prayer *Al Het Shehatanu L'fanekha* – usually translated as *sin* but really connoting a missing of the mark, a misdirection, a deviation. The same word *het*, incidentally, is used to designate an arrow which deviates from its target.

We usually speak of *het* as having to do with wrong actions, with misdeeds. If we view *het* as *deviation*, however, a deviation which obstructs and impairs our spiritual "breathing," then it is not unreasonable to speak of experiencing *het* as one might experience a deviated septum. Indeed, *het* is a deviated septum of the spirit. This may sound dangerously close to the un-Jewish idea of sin as a pre-condition of our human-ness, with its origins in the transgressions of the first human beings. What is intended, however, is a statement not of causation but of description. We are susceptible to error as the first human beings were, not *because* they yielded to this susceptibility.

Whence cometh this susceptibility? Our sages teach, based upon the spelling of the word *vayetzer* (וייצר) in Genesis 2:7 with two letters *yud* (whereas it would normally be spelled ויצר with only one), that each human being contains both a *yetzer*, that is, an inclination, toward good and a *yetzer* toward wrong. In that same verse we read that **G\*d the Eternal breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life.**

Imagine, if you will, the Blessed Holy One, zealously excited over the creation of this first human being, breathing so powerfully into Adam's nose as to deviate Adam's septum, with all these serious repercussions for the *neshamah* which takes up residence there.

The symbolism is clear; as the first human being suffered a deviated septum, so do we all. Our spirits are fragmented; our souls are obstructed; our *neshamah*/breath/soul is impaired. Lest we think, incidentally, that this fantasy ascribes any error, G\*d forbid, whether intentional or unintentional, to G\*d, let us note that the *yetzer ha'ra*, the negative inclination, is viewed by the Talmudic sages as something necessary to human progress and fulfillment. It is beneficial to humanity, even though we do not always perceive it so. Similarly, our susceptibility to *het* caused by our deviated spiritual septa is beneficial in that it makes us begin the process by which the deviation and obstruction which impair our breathing can be repaired. As Martin Buber declares, we are always capable of proving right before G\*d. This is the process known as *tikkun*, restoration.

For the individual, a primary component of *tikkun* is *t'shuvah*, return from the path of deviation. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook describes the power of *t'shuvah* by saying, "In the great channel in which the life-sustaining Force flows, there is revealed the unitary Source of all existence, and in the hovering life-saving spirit of *t'shuvah* all things are renewed to a higher level of the good, the radiant, and the pure."

It is interesting to note that Rav Kook refers to "the great channel in which the life-sustaining Force flows." This is precisely what the nose represents, as the residence of the *neshamah*/soul/breath. A means to a higher level, to a level of unimpaired breathing, *t'shuvah* begins the process of *tikkun* in which the self undergoes corrective surgery, as it were, to straighten out its nose, to remove that which obstructs and impairs. *T'shuvah* begins the self's septoplasty, the restructuring of the self's spiritual septum, an essential part of what Rav Kook calls "the overall mending, both in the moral and in the purely spiritual realm, and in the area affecting the body and the strengthening of its faculties."

As with any operation, preparation is necessary for this surgery. Unlike physiological surgery, however, which requires sense-deadening anesthesia, *t'shuvah* as a spiritually corrective operation requires heightened sensitivity. One must be able more keenly to recognize what is right and what is wrong. The higher our sensitivity to right and wrong, the greater will be our *t'shuvah* and our *tikkun*. When the impairment is corrected, the *neshamah* will become deeper and stronger. Its vitality will grow fuller, and its resolve to do the good will become strengthened freely, without impediment.

This corrective surgery on an individual has ramifications on the social and cosmic levels as well. While it is true that we, as Jews, especially at this time of the year, are called upon to submit ourselves to such spiritual nose jobs, we must always bear in mind that it is *t'shuvah* which binds the soul of the individual Jew to the collective soul of the Jewish people, whose task, whose assignment, is to work always toward *tikkun olam*, the repairing of the world. As an individual begins with *t'shuvah* and continues with the supportive measures of study, prayer, and good deeds, s/he participates in a collective surgical effort.

The individual's personal septoplasty contributes to the larger objective – a redemptive world-straightening, a Cosmoplasty. We read again in the writings of Rav Kook, "Every deviation . . . damages the perfection that is characteristic of all people. In the end, the vigor of the life rhythm will overcome the deviation. They will attain full health, and they will assert it with great force."

The promise of perfect healing for Israel and for the world is inherent in visions of the Messianic Age. These visions promise liberation of the body and the spirit, restoration of the exiles, banishment of all that is wrong, and the establishment of perfect justice, appropriately tempered with perfect mercy. Messiah is the symbol of this Cosmoplasty, this ultimate restructuring and straightening of the world's septum. The promise is echoed in the traditional Friday night song, *Tzur Mishelo*, in which we sing, "May the descendant of Thy servant David, the anointed of the Eternal, the breath of our nostrils, come to redeem us." The image of Messiah as "the breath of our nostrils," taken from the Book of Lamentations, evokes the image of redemption, repair, and restoration of the life force to its unobstructed channels. Israel's trust in Messiah is such that Messiah is viewed not only as the means to "unimpaired breathing" but as the "unimpaired breathing" itself as well.

As the paradigm of perfection, Messiah will banish that which is wrong and establish a perfectly merciful justice by removing that which obstructs the good and the pure. Messiah will teach the meaning and value of a "perfect nose." The Talmudic sage Raba says, "Messiah will smell a person and judge guilt or innocence."

A model of rightness and right-directedness, the nose of Messiah will be so sensitive, so finely attuned, that it will be a perfectly reliable instrument in the establishment of the perfect merciful justice.

Though there have been those throughout Jewish history who have aspired to Messianic status, none has been able to pass this test of authenticity. According to a Talmudic midrash, Bar Kochba, who claimed Messianic status, was exposed as an imposter and was executed (by the Roman authorities, when his revolt against Roman oppression failed) when he failed a test of his sense of smell. Throughout our history, our Messianic hopes have remained unfulfilled, but we continue to hope and work for fulfillment. We still dream of the redeemer, of the mender, of the Jew with the perfect nose, even while we engage in our efforts to reshape our own noses. May we continue to work to straighten out the septa of our souls, aware that, as we do so, we participate in the *tikkun olam*, the repair of the Universe. May these efforts earn for us the privilege of being present when the final operation, the ultimate nose job, is successfully completed and the first full cosmic breath is taken.

Shanah Tovah.