

The Soul Proprietor
Studies in the Shema – Pt. 3

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“And you shall love the Lord your God ... with all your *nefesh* (soul)...”

Nefesh... Ever wonder about that word? What exactly is a *nefesh*, and where’s mine?

According to rabbinic lore, Rabbi Akiva struggled with this command his whole life. “How will I ever fulfill this mitzvah?” he pondered. Tradition tells us that even as Roman soldiers pulled the flesh from his body with iron combs he was faithful to recite the Shema. “Even if He takes your *nefesh*,” he taught his talmidim. Certainly this story has strengthened Jewish resolve to be willing to die for the sanctification of God's name. In spite of the Roman prohibition, this rabbi would not for a moment refrain from the study or teaching of the holy Torah. Akiva understood “your *nefesh*” in the Shema to be referring to his physical life.

However, the Torah itself teaches us that there’s more to the word *nefesh*, and hence this command. “That *nefesh* shall be cut off from its people” is a recurring phrase in the Torah (Gen 17:14; Ex 12:15; Lev 17:14; Num 19:20; etc.). A *nefesh* can be ‘cut off’? And if ‘cut off,’ what is the thing it is ‘cut off’ from? Its people. If a *nefesh* being cut off from its people is a punishment, how much more does it flourish when living properly among them? Thus the Torah teaches that the rightful place of a *nefesh* is among its community. As a matter of fact, in ancient Semitic languages the root *nun, peh, shin* has the sense of flourishing or fruitfulness. This connotation helps us understand why the verb “cut off” makes sense here. Phrases like “the axe is at the root of the trees” (Matt 3:10; Lk 3:9) start to pack a bigger punch.

Therefore, when I read “with all your *nefesh*,” I am thinking about my life in the context of serving others. My God-given capacities to act are to be channeled for service within the social settings that Hashem has placed me. To live with integrity, I am to be consistent with a servant-hearted attitude in all spheres of life; whether fellowshiping with other believers or conducting a business transaction. Not only is it contrary to our design to “forsake the assembly (Greek: *episynagogue*)” (Heb 10:25), but Paul exhorts us to “walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt...” (Col 4:5-6). My *nefesh* is to be sincerely engaged in the lives of others. Serving others is the essence of loving God with your soul.

As Yeshua said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life (Greek: *psyche*; Hebrew: *nefesh*) a ransom for many.” (Mk 10:45)