

*“When Things Fall Apart” – Buddhist and Jewish Perspectives
on (Human) Nature: life and death*

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Humans and Nature

Bereshit Raba 11

פילוסופוס אָחד שָׂאל אֶת רַבִּי הוֹשַׁעְיָה, אָמַר לוֹ אִם תְּכַיָּבָה הִיא הַמִּילָה, מִפְּנֵי מָה לֹא נִתְּנָה לְאָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן, אָמַר לוֹ מִפְּנֵי מָה אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ מְגַלַּח פְּאֵת רִאשׁוֹ וּמְנִיחַ אֶת פְּאֵת זָקְנוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ מִפְּנֵי שֶׁגָּדַל עִמּוֹ בְּשִׁטּוֹת, אָמַר לוֹ אִם כֵּן יִסְמָא אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּקְטַע אֶת יָדָיו וַיִּשְׁבֵּר אֶת רַגְלָיו, עַל יְדֵי שֶׁגָּדְלוּ עִמּוֹ בְּשִׁטּוֹת. אָמַר לִיה וּלְאֵלֵינוּ מִלֵּיא אֶתֵינוּ, אֶתְמָהָא. אָמַר לוֹ לְהוֹצִיאָהּ חֶלֶק אֵי אֶפְשָׁר אֲלֵא כָּל מַה שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּשִׁשֶּׁת יָמֵי בְּרֵאשִׁית צְרִיכִין עֲשִׂיהָ, כְּגוֹן הַחֲרָדֵל צְרִיךְ לְמַתּוּק. הַתּוֹרְמוֹסִים צְרִיךְ לְמַתּוּק. הַחֲטִין צְרִיכִין לְהַטָּחוֹ. אֶפְלוּ אָדָם צְרִיךְ תְּקוּן.

A philosopher asked Rabbi Hoshayah: He said to him, if God so loves circumcision why did he not give it to Adam. He said to him, why does that man (you) shave the corners of your head and leave the corners of your beard? He said to him because it grew with me in folly. He said to him: if so you should blind your eyes, lop off your hand, and sever your legs since they grew with in follow. He said to him: To these words we have come wonder. He said to him: Anything created in the first six days, needs further actions, for example mustard seeds need sweetening, peas need sweetening, wheat needs grinding, even humans need fixing.

...[H]e asked the doctor why the plaster was necessary. "So the rabbi will not move his arm," says the doctor. "Why would I move my arm if it is not necessary to do so?" Rabbi Dovid asked. And so, for three months, Rabbi Dovid walked about with a broken arm, without a cast, and did not move it even a hair's breadth. His outstanding disciple, Rabbi Yosef Zvi Reinhold, testifies that months later, when an x-ray was taken, it became clear that the fracture had been fully integrated. This in turn made it clear that the rabbi's arm had not remained immobile independently [of his will], that in fact it could not have turned even a fraction of an inch without its master's knowledge. At that moment, a great light shone on Rabbi Dovid's face. It was the supreme triumph of a *Musar* soul who for months had succeeded in exercising sovereignty over the instincts of the arm, and excising from his bodily movements any inclination not compatible with the reign of [conscious] knowledge.

Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 89a.

When Moses ascended to the Heights, [to receive the Torah], the ministering angels said before the Holy One, ‘Blessed is He: Master of the Universe, what is someone born of a woman doing among us?’ God said to them: ‘He has come to receive the Torah.’ They said before Him: ‘The coveted and treasured [Torah] that was stored by You 974 generations before the world was created, and You intend to give that to flesh and blood?’

Povarsky 1987: 42 – 43.

The Grandfather,¹ of blessed memory, explained this as follows: the angels were asserting, that the fact that Moses comes to receive the Torah is of itself [*gufa*]² a sin, for here a man born of woman, a man with a body [*guf*]², approaches to touch the Torah! Let us now imagine with what kind of "body" Moses approached [to receive the Torah]! His is a body of which scripture says: “He (Moses) ascended on high [into Heaven],” and, “He neither ate bread [nor drank water].” And yet, for all that, the ministering angels assert that [even with such an exalted body as Moses had] it is impossible to approach the Torah! How then can we, with our [very ordinary] bodies, dare to approach the [Torah observance] of Rosh Hashanah, and to recite *Malkhuyot*³?

Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 89a.

[Moses] said before Him: Master of the Universe, the Torah that You are giving me, what is written in it? [God said to him]: “Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it”. [Moses asked the angels]: Do you engage in any labor from which you would need to rest? [...] What else is written in it? “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal.” Moses asked the angels: Is there envy among you, or is there an Evil inclination among you? Immediately they conceded to the Holy One, Blessed be He.

¹ Rabbi Salanter, the founder of the *Musar* movement

² ‘The Grandfather’ plays on words here, relating the Aramaic term *gufa*’ (meaning “of itself”) to its Hebrew cognate *guf* (meaning “body”). The clear implication is: “the body [*guf*] is of itself [*gufa*] sinful!”.

³ *Malkhuyot* means literally “Sovereignities” – a portion of the special prayers for the Rosh Hashanah service.

Anonymous 1999: 67 – 77.

Then Rabbi Isaac fixed his gaze on me, and declared: “In other words, the adult beast takes and leads the young beast... [For] even animals will care for their young very well in such a fashion.” Then Rabbi Isaac went on to explain, adding, “*Ner Was?* What, then, should we say [in a situation like this]? [Say,] rather, this: that you are about to [observe the Jewish halakha and] do an act of lovingkindness, for [the benefit of] a Jewish child, who, incidentally, happens to be your own child as well.”

Friedman 2011: 319.

It is not accurate to say that he detested food; Rabbi Gershon ate. But his way of eating always reminded me of a *man pouring fuel into his engine* [...] There was no connection between his act of eating and his soul, his true self. Rabbi Gershon’s body always stood to one side, alongside his burning spiritual world. His body was always being dragged along, smoldering, behind his great spirit, and he would occasionally toss his body something material, so it could carry on.

Friedman 2006: 57 – 58.

If you see your body as a “horse,” your life will change utterly. You must internalize, and root within yourself the understanding, that you and your body are two forces, two entirely separate beings!!! The moment of this blessed distinction is a moment of new birth. Has someone hurt you? They hurt the “horse!” Has your *Musar* mentor publicly humiliated you for being late, for contempt of learning, for the materiality that takes control of every good part of you? It is the “horse” that he castigates! You are tired? Hungry? Miss home? Depressed? [This is] the “horse.” [...] If your “horse” is having a life crisis, is slandered in the yeshiva, or is unsuccessful at *shiduchim* [matchmaking – i.e. finding a spouse], understand that it is your “horse” that is being called ugly, idiotic and uncouth. [...] You must take the reins of this maligned, crude and ugly creature. [...] Exert your control! Make it clear who is the king, and who is the subject!

Being Now

Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 1.1.

The manner of a man's [*ba'adam*] sitting and walking and all his behavior when he is alone in his house, is by no means the same as his sitting and walking and behavior when he is in the presence a great king. [...] Even so, when a man [*'adam*] is aware, with all his heart, that the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He, whose glory fills the whole earth, is standing over him, watching all his actions [...] at that moment he will be touched by awe and submission, and by a holy fear of the Blessed Name [of God], and will always have a sense of [reverent] shame before Him. Such a man, then, can never be shamed by anyone else who mocks him for his worship of the Blessed Name [of God].

Struggling with God

The Babylonian Talmud, Brakhoth 31 a-b:

If Thou wilt indeed look: Rabbi Eleazar said: Hannah said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, if Thou wilt look, it is well, and if Thou wilt not look, I will go and shut myself up with someone else in the knowledge of my husband Elkanah, and as I shall have been alone they will make me drink the water of the suspected wife, and Thou canst not falsify Thy law, which says, She shall be cleared and shall conceive seed.