



Published on www.bilvavi.net

[Home](#) > Four Elements Self-Awareness - 002 General Overview of the Soul

Four Elements Self-Awareness - 002 General Overview of the Soul

This is a translation from the original audio class.

Introduction

In the previous lesson, we explained about the need to recognize the human soul. Now we will explain, with the help of Hashem, the fundamentals of how one can know himself – his soul.

The Body, the Lower Soul (Nefesh) and the Higher Soul (Neshamah)

Man contains two parts – a body taken from the earth, and a soul, breathed into him by Hashem. There is the *guf* (body), and there is the soul, which contains the *nefesh* [lower soul] and *neshamah* [higher, Divine soul]. Man's task includes recognizing the body and its needs, and this is explained in the Rambam's *Hilchos De'os*. However, we will not be explaining about this part here. Our study here is about the soul.

The Root of the Soul and Its Parts

The soul, at its root level, is one unit. In its revealed state, however, it manifests as several parts. We will explain these parts of the soul, from lowest to highest parts. But as a general outline, we must know that the soul is really one unit, and it is only that we experience different parts of it.

The Six Levels of the Soul

- 1- The lowest level of the soul is called the *nefesh habehaimis* (animal soul).
- 2- Higher than the “*nefesh habehaimis*” area of the soul is the *nefesh Elohis* (“G-dly” soul).
- 3- Higher than the *nefesh Elohis* is the level of the soul that is called “*Ruach*”.
- 4- Higher than *Ruach* is the *Neshamah*.
- 5- After the *Neshamah* is the *Chayah*.
- 6- Higher than the *Chayah* is the *Yechidah*.

Altogether, we have six levels of the soul. These parts of the soul were included in the “breath of life” that Hashem has breathed into man, known generally as “the soul”.

Working Our Way Upwards

Man's task in knowing his soul is to recognize all of these parts mentioned – from the lowest level, the *nefesh habehaimis* (“animal” level of the soul) all the way to the highest level, *Yechidah*. However, it is clear that we must study the soul in this order of progression. First we must recognize the lowest level, the “*nefesh habehaimis*”, and then we can proceed to study the level after that, the *nefesh Elohis*, then the *Ruach*, etc. We must know all the soul's parts, but we must study them in the order of lowest level to highest level.

Therefore, in these lessons where we will be studying the soul, we will start by explaining the lowest level, and as we continue, with Hashem's help, we will study the higher levels of the soul.

The Nefesh HaBehaimis (Animal Soul)

Just as an animal has a soul, for it contains in it a “*nefesh chayah*”, a living spirit – so do human beings contain a soul that resembles an animal. This is called the *nefesh habehaimis* (animal soul) in a person. It is not completely like an animal, though, but it is the part of the soul that is closest to physicality. The Sages refer to this part of the soul as “*nefesh shitufa d'gufa*”, the part of the soul that is ‘partners with the body’. It has desires for the physical and therefore it is referred to as the animalistic part of the soul.

The *nefesh habehaimis* is therefore connected with animalism and with physicality. It is not simply a *nefesh* in and of itself, but a *nefesh* connected with the material world and with the physical body's desires. Part of recognizing the *nefesh habehaimis* is to recognize its natures, its contradictory forces, and the internal battle that it brings upon man.

As a general definition, there is a specific manifestation of the *yetzer hora* (evil inclination) in the level of the *nefesh habehaimis*, which is essentially an inner force of contradictions, and this creates an internal battle in man. This is the *yetzer hora* inside the *nefesh habehaimis*: contradictory forces within. There are also higher levels of the *yetzer hora*, which are in the *nefesh Elohis* and in the *Ruach* (where it is in the category of “angel”). But right now we are only explaining the *yetzer hora* that is in the *nefesh habehaimis*. It is the very reality of inner contradictory forces within man, which creates an internal battlefield for man.

The *nefesh habehaimis* has a root, as well as many branches with their details. Its root is called the “*nefesh habehaimis*” itself. It has four main branches: the elements of earth, water, wind, and fire. The details of these branches are many, and the Vilna Gaon^[1] describes 70 of these forces in the animal soul, which are a general description of these branching details. These are the root powers of the *nefesh habehaimis*.

The System of the Four Elements

In the books written by the gentile nations of the world, of which some have entered into the Jewish people, there are many more details that have been uncovered about the soul. However, the works of our Sages have revealed to us the root forces, as we have explained. There are differing opinions in the Sages as to how many main forces are; there are opinions who list 10 main forces, while others list 13.^[2] However, the approach which we will explain here is based upon the opinion in the Sages that there are 4 main forces in the animal soul: the elements of earth, water, wind and fire.

The “4 elements” system of the soul, which describes the animal part of the soul as four main forces, is first mentioned in the Zohar many times. Rav Chaim Vital, the student of the Arizal, based his entire *avodah* (inner work) on this system, as explained in his *sefer Shaarei Kedushah*. Therefore, since our earlier sources have based their entire *avodah* on the 4 elements, we will go in their footsteps and we will also explain *avodah* (inner work) based on this system of the 4 elements.

All of what we will learn here is based on the words of the sages of earlier generations, and not from any other foreign and secular wisdom, which has mixed the mundane into the holy, and which has caused much confusion to come upon the holy souls of the Jewish people.

A Change In Our Perspective

This order of the 4 elements is not only in the “animal” level of the soul; it is the very design of all of Creation. Hashem used the four elements to create the higher parts of the soul as well, even the *Ruach, Neshamah, Chayah* and even the *Yechidah*, for Hashem used the four letters of His name of *havayah* to create the soul, and these four letters are parallel to the four elements. Therefore, these four elements are not just material in the soul. They are a way to view the entire Creation, for they come from the very name of *havayah* that Hashem created the universe with.

Here are some examples to help us understand this concept. If a person has a hard time hearing, he buys a hearing device so that he can hear things. Everything that he will hear will pass through that hearing aid, in order for him to hear. Similarly, if a person cannot see properly, and he buys special glasses that enable him to see better, everything he will see will be through those glasses.

So too, we have all been placed on this world and we can sense and see so much, and there are many perspectives we may have, but there is one root perspective which Hashem has created the world in, which is the perspective that all the sages throughout the generations saw through, in order to view the world in front of them. This view is essentially the system of the four elements.

Therefore, the four elements are not just another “definition” to know about or another “path” to take. It is the very design of Creation which Hashem has made, and the Sages used this wisdom in order to view the world. Therefore, the four elements are not only the structure of our *avodah* – they are the way to view the entire universe and all that goes on in it.

Here is another example that illustrates what we mean. In recent years, there is much talk about health. Two people can be eating the same food. One person is eating it because it tastes good, and the other person is eating it for its nutritional value. They are each looking at the food through a different perspective. They are each seeing the food through entirely different perspectives.

In the same vein, living internally is essentially to view the entire world and all that happens through the view of the four elements. It means to gain this perspective, to view all of creation, with this view that focuses on the four elements in everything.

Inner *avodah* is therefore not about hearing details and guidance and then trying to act upon them. It is rather about changing our perspective - to change our very grasp on things. Surely this will lead to practical action as well, but it is not mainly about “what to do”. It is mainly about how to understand things. When we understand the structure of things, we can then know how to act upon these matters and to be able to behave properly.

At first, it may be difficult to understand how the four elements change our entire perspective on things. But as we continue in these lessons, we will see how to use the four elements not only on a personal level, but as a way to view all that we see in the creation, and then we will see how much these four elements change our entire perspective.

In Summary and In Conclusion

In summary, this lesson was an additional introduction to our *avodah* (inner work) which we will explain in the coming lessons. We will be learning about the four elements in the “animal” level of the soul – earth, water, wind and fire – but we will also slowly learn, understand and see how we can view

the entire Creation through these four elements. Therefore, the goal of these lessons will be to change our perspective on how we view everything that we sense and see, and through changing our *understanding*, we will eventually be able to change how we *behave* as well.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH THE RAV

Q1: Why is it so important to understand the four elements?

A: As mentioned, at first when you hear about this, it may be difficult to understand why it is so important. Rav Chaim Vital explains that all the good *middos* and the bad *middos* stem from the four elements. When a person is sad, it is not simply that "I am sad" - rather, it is that his element of earth is overtaking him. Therefore, it is so necessary to understand that the four elements are the root of all our behaviors. This system has not been devised by any one smart person; rather, Hashem has designed it our internal makeup with these four elements. Therefore, our entire inner work is to know these four elements.

Q2: Are the four elements also present in the higher parts of the soul, such as in the *nefesh Elokis*, *Ruach*, *Neshamah*, *Chayah* and *Yechidah*?

A: Very good question. The four elements are found in all levels of the soul. But in the higher levels of the soul, the elements are of a more spiritual nature. In the *nefesh Elokis*, the four elements are of a more spiritual nature than in the *nefesh habehaimis*; and in the *Ruach*, the four elements are of an even more spiritual nature, and so forth.

Q3: How do we see everything in terms of the four elements, just as a person with a hearing aid hears everything through a hearing aid?

A: In order to understand it well, one needs to hear the coming lessons. The concept cannot be understood completely the first time you hear about it. We will explain it step after step, and we are only at the first step. This is the first time you have just heard that we need to see the entire Creation in terms of the four elements, and you cannot yet understand that yet. As we continue with the lessons, with the help of Hashem, we will explain how the entire Creation is designed with the four elements, and accordingly, how we can see it. As of now, this point will seem closed and mysterious to you, and hopefully as we continue, this concept will become clearer to you. The point of today's lesson was that we need to see everything in terms of the four elements; as for how exactly to do that, this will be explained in the coming lessons, with Hashem's help.

Q4: Are all events that take place in the world also made up of the four elements?

A: Yes - these four elements are in everything that is found.

Q5: Are these beginning lessons only meant for the purpose of learning, with no practical outcomes for right now?

A: It was explained in this class that part of being able to act practically is through changing one's perspective. These lessons help a person change his perspective and are not meant for practical change as of now. They can eventually lead to practical change, but in the meantime when we are first hearing these lessons, the point is simply to change our perspective.

Q6: How can we practically act upon this concept of the four elements when we don't yet know what it is?

A: You first have to hear about this concept slowly so that you can be able to absorb it. Even before you fully understand it, you have at least heard that there is such a perspective and way of seeing things.

Q7: How does our view change if we view the world through the four elements or not?

A: If a child sees reality a certain way and he asks questions about it, and then we view the same reality through the eyes of an adult, what is the difference? A child doesn't absorb reality properly, whereas an adult can absorb the reality in front of him and therefore he sees reality accordingly. The difference between these two views is like the difference between the sky and the earth. A child looks at matches and may see it as an item to play with, whereas an adult sees matches with a whole different perspective. And if a person heard that a volcano erupted, if he does not see the world in terms of the four elements, all he is aware of is that there was a physical act of the eruption. But a person who sees everything in terms of the four elements will see an act that involved the element of fire, and that all the events that were caused by the eruption have really been caused by the element of fire.

Q8: Regarding the *yetzer hora* and how it manifests in the four elements of the animal soul, does this mean that anger stems from the 'fire' of the *yetzer hora*, and that desire stems from the 'water' of the *yetzer hora*, and so forth?

A: This will be explained in a future lesson, but here is a brief explanation, since you have asked about it here. Every person contains all the four elements, and there is always one element which is the most dominant, then a second-to-most-dominant element, then a third-to-most-dominant element, and his least dominant element. So, for example, if there is too much fire in one's soul compared to his other elements (relatively speaking), there will be clashes within his elements and this will cause the fire to explode outward. In the level of *nefesh habehaimis*, this is called "the *yetzer hora*".

In the way Hashem created us, our elements were perfectly in balance. Ever since Adam ate from the *Eitz HaDaas* and the *yetzer hora* entered the soul, it has caused imbalances in the soul where one element is more dominant than another. Since our souls were all contained in his soul, our own souls have become imbalanced by the sin, and therefore it is our inner work to balance out the elements within each of our personal souls.

Q9: Is giving balance to our souls' elements a part of doing *teshuvah*?

A: *Teshuvah* means to return something to the way it was before. When one gives balance to the elements in his soul, this is therefore a big part of doing *teshuvah*.

Q10: Does Hashem give permission to the *yetzer hora* to cause imbalances in our soul?

A: As mentioned in this class, there are different levels of the *yetzer hora* in the soul: in the *nefesh habehaimis*, in the *nefesh Elokis*, and in the *Ruach*. Actual sin is a higher level of *yetzer hora*. Here we are talking about the *yetzer hora* found in the level of the *nefesh habehaimis*, which is not sin itself, but a lack of order in the animal soul's forces, and the inner contradictions caused by this lack of inner order. This internal imbalance in the elements of the soul is called the *yetzer hora* that is in our *nefesh habehaimis*.

Q11: Does the *yetzer hora* in the higher levels of the soul also cause imbalance in the animal soul?

A: The higher levels of the *yetzer hora* will feed on the imbalances in the animal soul. One who has a more balanced animal soul will have a stronger power of free will and he will have an easier time with his evil impulses to sin, whereas one who has not yet given balance to his soul's elements will have

less power of free will and he can be easier prey to his *yetzer hora*. For example, if a person gets angry and this causes him to commit all kinds of sins, i.e. breaking things and damaging other people's possessions, his *yetzer hora* is using the lack of balance in his element of fire and thereby causing him to actually sin.

[1] Gra Yeshayahu 11

[2] Editor's Note: The system of 13 powers of the soul is explained by Rav Hai Gaon, and are explained in detail by the Rav in "Getting To Know Your Soul".

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/four-elements-self-awareness-002-general-overview-soul>