PIRQE ABOT 3:1: The sleeping rider syndrome

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Where do you come from? Where are you going to? WHO are you going to be facing when you report what you have done with your life?

In this Mishna, ‘Aqabiya ben Mahalalel reminds us of the exciting topic of the interaction between body and soul. He says that the best way to avoid committing a transgression is to remember that my body comes from something that is materially insignificant (“a fetid drop …”), and it also goes to nowhere (“…food for worms”). In contrast, my soul has a nature that is not material. It is not made of atoms, molecules or cells. It will not die or disappear. It will survive the death of my body. My soul, in other words, is “I, less my body.” After life, my soul has absolute awareness of its identity (it knows that it’s “I”) , preserves my memory (knows the things I did with my life) and my conscience (feels righteous, if I led a righteous life). And, therefore, my soul can and should be held accountable by the Supreme Judge for whatever I may have accomplished during my earthly existence, when my soul, in other words “I”, was integrated with my body.

I recognize that it is very difficult to speak or describe the soul, because as we said, it is not an organ of the body or a physical part of the brain. I have always tried to find a metaphor which could help visualize better what the soul is, in itself and in relation to the body.

For a long time I thought that body and soul could be compared to a car and its driver. The car is the body and the soul the

driver conducting the body. Then it occurred to me that it would be more accurate to speak of a taxi (or an Uber.). The car is our body, the driver is our brain and the passenger is ME, I, my soul. The driver knows how to drive the car, and how to bring the passenger by the best possible way, etc. but the driver cannot*decide* for himself where to go… It is the passenger who needs to make that decision and determine the final destination!

I think that, although slightly better than the first, the metaphor of the taxi is far from "perfect". What I think is better to illustrate the nature of the soul and its interaction with the body is the motif of the horse and the rider. The rider, obviously, is the soul. And the horse is the body. The rider needs the horse to reach his goal and reach the final destination. A conscientious rider knows the horse has material needs and he makes sure not to neglect them. The rider feeds the horse, gives it to drink, allows it to rest, takes it often to the vet, and sometimes spoils it. He does everything possible to satisfy his horse's needs and to keep it as strong and healthy as possible. This is the ideal scenario in which rider and horse are interdependent, cooperate with each other, synergizing.
But there are less ideal scenarios. For example: What if the rider does not know where to go, or if he feels that there is no goal to reach, and therefore the rider just has to "kill time", find something for the horse to do and just the allows the horse to wander aimlessly? What happens when the rider cannot control his horse, gives up and ends up loosening the horse's reins? Probably the worst case scenario, and perhaps the most common one, is when the rider never gets that he is a rider, an independent entity separate from his horse. In other words, what if the rider never realizes and is lost or confused about his identity and feels more like a centaur (those half-men, half-horse of Greek mythology) than like a rider on horseback?

In all these cases, unlike the case of the taxi driver who will not move from his place until the passenger tells him where to go, the horse, having a life of its own, would live

the life of a horse. Its existential concern will be to find the best-quality grass and accumulate as much as possible of it. The horse will rest whenever it feels like it, and will run through the meadows without any specific goal, chasing female horses or anything else that appeals to it. The horse will not stay idle, waiting for orders from a sleeping rider…

The Tora teaches us that we are riders, and as such we must be constantly aware that there is a NON-MATERIAL goal to achieve. It also teaches us, through a lot of Mitsvot, how to feed our horse, how to avoid whatever is damaging for it, when let our horse rest, and how to tame and control it. How to keep our horse healthy and strong, so it is able to take us to our destination. And knowing that someday we will go down from our horse, bid a grateful farewell and continue our way, from the point that, with the horse's help, we were able to achieve.