

"The Nephesh Tansfer"

By Howell Lind, Interim Senior Minister

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This morning I wish to speak about "The Nephesh Transfer," and – at the onset – I recognize that a definition is in order. To that end, I would offer the definition of the noted Biblical scholar, Edmond Jacob, that, in concise words, defines *Nephesh*. Jacob put it this way: "*Nephesh is what results when basar is animated by ruach.*"

. . . Judging from the quizzical looks and tittering, perhaps further clarification is required. Rest assured that I am not intentionally making words up, but rather utilizing Hebraic thought conceptions to express a truth about life – a truth that I would hope to remind each of us about this morning. Permit me to further define the Hebrew terms that I am using.

"Nephesh is what results when basar is animated by ruach." *Basar* is Old Testament Hebrew for skin or flesh or bones. In the Hebraic thought conception process, *basar* takes on the meaning of one's whole body – it becomes one's outward appearance. *Ruach* is accurately translated from the Hebrew as the "Breath of Life" – the spirit of life or the quality of one's "livingness." An example of this is found in the seventh verse of chapter two of Genesis when it states that Yahweh-Elohim – or, the Lord God – formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils *ruach* – or, the breath of life – and man became a *nephesh chayyah*.

Given the descriptive quality of Old Testament Hebrew, the term *nephesh* is slightly harder to define. *Nephesh chayyah* translates as "living being," so that the line from Genesis would read: "God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being."

Yet, *nephesh* means more than merely a quality of being alive. *Nephesh* translates also as will, as personality, as character, as decision-making ability, as one's heart, one's soul, one's inner divinity – or, as I would like to use it this morning – *nephesh* is one's unique individuality. Let me go back to Edmond Jacob's definition: "One's unique individuality is what results when one's whole body is animated by the breath of life."

This becomes a significant distinction and definition. For, to the ancient Hebrews, a person could be alive – existing – yet could lack that sense of individuality which truly gives one a life of significance, meaning and quality.

Throughout the Old Testament all of the texts that tell of the Spirit of Life or God, stress the power which creates life wherever it acts. Penetrating within the human being, this creative power of life reveals itself with varying degrees of intensity and passion. There is no life without spirit – as the Genesis passage clearly states.

Nephesh is that “quality of being alive” that gives a person his or her unique individuality – his or her soul – his or her spark of divinity and potential – that provides a human being with an inner sense of the true, the right and the just. It is *nephesh* – the unique personality – which is the source of our potential for growth and understanding. It is that spark of divinity – common to all of life though expressed distinctly differently in each one of us. *Nephesh* provides each of us with our individual identities.

In Pattern and Growth in Personality, Gordon Allport offers a cogent comment when he says that – and here I am paraphrasing – “the criterion of individual identity calls for authentic participation by the person in some significant spheres of human endeavor. To be participant is not the same as being merely active. True participation gives direction to life. Individual identity advances in proportion as lives are self-extended.”

For me, *nephesh* – that individual potential for growth, for risking, for gaining added insight and significance – is a gift and a capacity which many humans do not fully utilize.

And, in saying that, I am brought back to my title for this morning – “The Nephesh Transfer.” When I add “transfer” to the concept of *nephesh*, implied is a passing on, a handing over, a transference of this quality of individuality and decision-making ability. I perceive several distinctly important ways in which such a transference of *nephesh* is accomplished.

First, there is the method of transferring *nephesh* through example. For young Amelia, Sally and Jack Pfohl, who were dedicated earlier, they each will have their own individual personalities developed by the nurturing and the role modeling of those who love them – their parents, grandparents, family and friends. In truth, given to them in degrees by all living beings who come into contact with them and touch their lives.

Through the modeling of quality living by those who come into contact with these children, they will learn who and what they are and be helped to grow into the best that they can become.

Through the examples of others, these children will learn to be honest both with themselves and with others – for honesty is a basic human value. They will learn to love truth – no matter from whence it comes. They will discover the joy of fidelity to the active participation in life and what that can mean towards their development and growth.

Amelia, Jack and Sally will discover courage in themselves and in others – a courage of the spirit that empowers one with the strength to stand for good against evil – a courage to speak out for the right and the just – and a courage to remain loyal to deeply held convictions at whatever costs.

These young children will learn through the examples of others – and of each other as they grow – a sense of the breadth of humanity – a sense of a need for common sharing if the ideals and loftiest visions of humanity are to be won. Through the role models before

them, Amelia, Jack and Sally will cultivate kindness – for kindness does not often surface without cultivation – and a genuine sense of kindness is so desperately needed in a world that has become far too cruel and harsh. It is through example that all of us learn to recognize humility. We learn that even though we are uniquely ourselves – we are not unlike other people. We learn through the modeling of others that all of life – no matter what differing gifts of talent, ability, or uniqueness – all of life – all of humanity – must work together, cooperatively, utilizing the individual *nephesh* of each, to create the better world. The transfer of *nephesh* through the example – the role modeling – of others is a vital way for young lives – in truth, for any of us of any age – to uncover the potential and the power of one's individual spirit for good in the world.

A second method for transferring *nephesh* is through instruction – through the teaching of one's relationship to her or himself; through teaching one about his or her relationship to others, to the world, to nature, to life! The transfer of *nephesh* through instruction rests greatly upon the shoulders of all who will love these young children and who would help nurture their individual personalities and spirits into their fullness.

Through instruction, young Amelia, Jack and Sally must learn, if their *nepheshes* are to be matured, the imperishable values of life. To Jill and Richard, their parents, and to all of us who are knowingly or unknowingly involved in instructing others – in transferring a sense of the potential for growth – in transferring *nephesh* – I would offer this enjoiner:

To whomever you meet on the pathways of life, teach them truth that they may know its value

- teach them independence that they may come to feel its freedom and its power
- teach them responsibility that they may actively participate in the work of the world
- teach them honor and love and the pursuit of sagacity and wisdom
- teach them to prize beauty wherever it may be found
- teach them to cherish values and to be sensitive to life, in all of its forms
- teach them to prize the quest – the seeking – for growth of the human spirit comes from the continual search for meaning in this journey from swaddling to grave.

And, instruct them to view the world as it is and yet give them the hope of purpose by opening up a vision of what the world ought to be, and can become, if every individual utilized her or his *nephesh* and worked toward a common shared goal of peace and goodwill.

. . . A third way of transferring *nephesh* is through a naming. Now, this may sound rather simple and relatively easy compared to the responsibility of transferring *nephesh* through example and by instruction. Yet, let me assure you, the transfer of *nephesh* through a naming – through a giving of identity – is a most important method of such a transferring of individual personality.

The ancients recognized that the manner in which a person was given a sense of identity – individuality – a unique personality – a *nephesh* – was through his or her name. Great importance was attached to such a ritual and ceremony. In the Old Testament, for

instance, one's name was everything – it told who and what you were – of one's self-awareness as a person of worth and meaning and potential in and of the world.

The perfect illustration of the importance of one's naming that comes readily to my mind can be found in Alex Haley's classic novel, Roots. In the opening passage of the book, Haley describes the naming of Omaro's son, Kunta. In West African life, the naming ceremony takes place eight days after the birth of the child. It is during this period where the father – alone – has to give his child a name. This name is both a gift and a challenge, for it is hoped that the child will make his or her own some of the positive qualities which the name implies. On the eighth day, in the presence of the entire village, the child is named. In Alex Haley's words: "Omaro then walked out before all of the assembled people of the village. Moving to his wife's side, he lifted up the infant and, as all watched, whispered three times into his son's ear the name he had chosen for him. It was the first time the name had ever been spoken as this child's name, for Omaro's people felt that each human being should be the first to know who he was."

. . . I can readily identify with that feeling of the importance of one's name as I recall how I wanted my own daughters to be the first to hear their new names as they were delivered into the world.

So far as I know, all cultures – religious and secular – have ways of recognizing the singularity of the moment when a child acquires her or his own name.

In our own religious tradition's Dedication and Naming Ceremony, we say to the young child, as the child is named, that this is a new name – an original name – for him or her, no matter how many others may have worn that name. And that with the new name, we – as the community – hope that the child will wear the new name with pride, with responsibility and with honor and that world will come to look upon this particular individual and his or her name and find it blessed.

For, in truth, there is a mystical relationship between a person's name and his or her identity. There have been a number of psychological studies conducted on the type of individual who bears a certain name – on how he or she behaves – what one's temperament is – on their *umwelt* or how they perceive the world. The studies show that one's name, given at birth, consciously affects one's growing sense of individuality, how he or she perceives the world and how he or she is perceived by others.

What I am attempting to convey is that through the Ceremony of Naming – a transfer of *nepshesh* – one's name creates a sense of self-awareness, self-description, self-identity, and a uniqueness as an individual personality.

. . . But let me not mislead you. The transfer of *nepshesh* is not something which we do only at a Dedication and Naming Ceremony, nor is it something which we do only for a select few or at a special moment in our lives. Transferring *nepshesh* or a sense of one's personality, character, individuality, identity, will, spirit or soul – as the Hebraic term fully

translates – is a trans-ference which goes on in every moment of our lives . . . for each and every one of us!

Every time when we come into contact with another living being and every instance where we are alone with our innermost feelings and thoughts, a sense of *nephesh* is transferred and we have the potential to grow into a wider, fuller awareness of who and what we are.

It has been variously described as the “Aha moment,” an epiphany of understanding, the “Eureka!” insight, or as a “cleansing experience of clarity.” Whichever phrase resonates with you, it is that moment when we catch a glimpse of our better selves, our deeper humanity, our individual intimations of divinity.

It is when we are in touch with our true humanity – when we become aware of our individual uniqueness – our individual responsibility and power to use our voice to speak out against injustice and inequity; to use our hands to work for peace and equality; to use our hearts to bring a greater measure of caring compassion and intentional kindness – to live out of our deepest values and beliefs. It is that moment when we recognize our kinship and connectedness to all of life – when we realize how our unique individual personality is needed to make a positive difference in living in the world.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way: “All are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”

Nephesh is what results when one’s whole being is animated by the Breath of Life.

The human being was created as a partner with the creative forces of life – created as an independent being, yes – but the human individual only attains that independence by an ever-renewed contact with life. Through the utilization of one’s own *nephesh* is a person able to choose and to decide if he or she will merely exist or live life. The passage from Deuteronomy comes to mind: “It is only by choosing life that the human individual truly becomes what he or she is.”

It is a lifelong quest to live from the depths of this gift of *nephesh* – to become the noblest and the best that is within each and everyone of us. To use this gift of life – to grow in our own infinitely rich potential – grow in our individual uniqueness and identity – that becomes the responsibility ever before us as we journey from cradle to grave.

Each individual unique personality is desperately needed to make this remarkable adventure known as human life all that is can and should be. Then let us be about the task, for the tenure of human life is, oh, so fleeting.

Basar ruach nephesh chayyah.

So May It Be Shalom

and Amen.