

Does Norman have a Soul?

Mendel the Chassid and Norman

By William Rabinowitz

Ever since I was a kid, in the last century as my grandchildren like to remind me, I have always had a dog. It is hard to imagine life without a chewing, barking, pooping, loving four legged companion. It also seemed a strange question to me, does Norman have a soul? The question was asked, seriously, by a dear non-tribal friend. Actually, I had never thought much of, do dogs have souls, except to think, of course. Does Norman have a Soul? That is a real question. Do dogs have souls? I assumed, of course.

"I assume".... how often have I heard the definition of I assume, "to make an ass out you and me."

Menachem Mendel Meyer sat quietly in my living room. He twisted his payyot listening to my question. His eyes smiled. Menachem, or Mendel as he prefers to be called, is a very close personal friend. We met awhile back when he was just transplanted to the second fastest growing Jewish community in America, Boynton Beach, Florida, by his Rebbe's strong admonition to leave Brooklyn, as soon as possible, because of his debilitating arthritis.

I'm not sure what prompted me to talk to him, certainly no one else did. There was this strange appellation, something out of hundreds of years ago from Jewry's European past sitting in the Starbucks on Congress Avenue next to the Vitamins R'Us super store. I had stopped off for a Mocha Java Grande with extra Mocha and cinnamon. To be sure and stick to my diet I threw in two Nutra-sweets. He was sipping a glass of water from a plastic cup at a corner table. Sweat visibly thickened through his white long sleeve shirt buttoned at the collar. He had a long black coat, a bit dirty and flayed at the hem that touched the floor. His oversized black felt hat, with the extra large firm brim, lay on the table. His full grey flecked beard wiggled whenever his hand nervously readjusted his black yarmulke. Mendel's large gentle eyes cried his tired confusion. He was out of his element. It was 82 degrees outside, very bright and humid.

We are two Jews from the same and different worlds. Yet we became close, each respecting the other. I welcomed him into my secular Jewish life and helped him get settled with a home and a job. Mendel welcomed me into his world where God and the living world are one. For the first time, since I virtually flunked out of the Yeshiva so many years ago, God was no longer so remote. It was Norman that brought us even closer. Norman is my little Cock- a- Tzu dog, a mix of miniature cocker spaniel and Shih Tzu. His breed name sounds like a chicken sneezing.

“Mendel,” I asked, “What is a soul?”

He stopped twisting his long hanging payyot and smiled before he answered.

“There is a long Kabbalistic understanding of the soul” he said. Then he looked serious.

“A soul is like a chain with one end linked into the brain and the other to a certain spiritual source. There are five levels of the soul like the five links in a chain, each one parallel to the spiritual sphere where it exists. However, we only relate to the three bottom links as we have no understanding about the two top ones. The three are 1) *Nefesh* 2) *Ruach* 3) *Neshama*. The *nefesh* is the spiritual existence which resides in the body and keeps the physical metabolism working and the person alive. The *ruach* is a connection between the *neschama* and the *nefesh*. It is the cause of feelings and personal qualities. The *neschama* is the spiritual existence which pulls the man towards G-d, to the performance of good deeds, to be pious and humble and to seek knowledge and achievement in spiritual fields. It resides around the head.

When a person dies, it takes seven days before the parts of the soul understand that it's all over and leave the body. Until then they hover around the grave and travel to and fro between the grave and the house of the deceased, waiting for the body to start functioning again. The *nefesh* does not completely leave until the body is decomposed.”

“Mendel,” I cried out, “What in our world does all that mean?”

He sat back and laughed. “In your world it does not mean a sack of beans.”

“But for those, almost living in the next world, it means a lot.”

“Can we stick to my world for now Mendel?” I asked. We both laughed again.

“O.K. what is a soul?” he half closed his eyes and thought.

Norman put his paws up on Mendel’s knees. His light brown eyes looked inquiringly into Mendel’s deep brown ones.

"An animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language - Martin Buber," Mendel said.

Mendel reached down and scratched him on the ear. It had taken Mendel a long time to be comfortable doing that.

Jewish tradition is very confused about dogs. On the one hand Cain was reputed to have had a guard dog. We know of the many times that IDF dogs have given their lives so that Jewish soldiers might live. Yet on the other hand the Talmud prohibits the keeping of vicious dogs in the house or on long leashes. Amongst the Chassidic community dogs are seen as unclean, even evil. For the rest of us, there are good dogs and bad dogs.

Midrashic tradition holds that God granted a special dispensation to dogs in Jewish households.

"The Torah states that just before imposing the Tenth Plague upon the Egyptians (killing of the first born), God told Moses that while there would be loud wailing throughout Egypt, but that where the Hebrews lived, not even a dog would bark.

The Midrash states that just before the Angel of Death descended, God instructed the dogs living amongst the Hebrews to be silent. The dogs complied with loving obedience. God was so impressed that He told them that because they had obeyed with such love, He would reward them. He would instruct the Jewish people that hereafter they should give their non-kosher food to the dogs."

In Mendel's Chassidic community dogs were a rarity. Dogs were not pets. Little children were taught they were filthy, dangerous, to be avoided. I have seen little girls in Jerusalem cowering behind their father's legs as a dog on a leash walked by. Their fathers glowering at the dog and its owner.

Mendel had been raised in the same tradition. Shmuel Herskovitz, who lived across from his as a child, had not. Shmuel had a little mutt he named Peanut because of his color. Shmuel and Mendel were friends. Twice a day Shmuel would walk Peanut. Mendel waited downstairs, out of sight of his parents, for Shmuel and Peanut to come down. Together they all would go for a walk and romp and play. Shmuel would let Mendel hold his leash while they walked and Peanut would lurch forward savoring God's world with his nose, with curiosity, with delight before doing his business. One day Mendel came home with Peanut hairs all over his black pants. His mother was distressed and his father hit him before sending him to his room. Mendel promised to never disobey his parents again. He stopped playing with Shmuel and Peanut.

"The dog was created especially for children. He is the God of frolic - Henry Ward Beecher," I told Mendel when he shared his story with me.

We often enjoyed bantering quotes back and forth to cover the conflicted feelings we had deep inside us.

Norman had been a long time discussion in our home. The kids were married, settled up North in their own lives. Sheila did not want another dog. We had had one for 17 years when the children were growing up and Sheila was “retired “now. Rosey had died almost ten years ago. It was just Sheila and me in the house. Working steadily and surely, I unsuccessfully tried every which way to convince Sheila why a dog was needed. It was her 87 year old mother who did the job for us.

She is 87, has a hard time breathing, can not bend over to pick up after things but zested for life. She said to Sheila one day, “I want a dog. I can’t manage a dog but you can. If you get a dog, I can come over and play.”

Sheila and I had talked and talked about it. She joked with me about my persistence.

“I can’t decide if we should buy a dog or have a child. I can’t make up my mind if I want to ruin the carpet or ruin our lives?” she said.

“Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole- Alex Caras,” I said.

It was a weak “O.K.” but it was an O.K., I heard her say. Moss does not grow under my bottom for long. We loaded into the car and headed for the Puppy Palace on Boynton Beach Boulevard. Norman was the third dog she picked up. He was a white and gold ball of fur that squirmed and licked and licked Sheila’s face until the makeup ran down her eyes from tears. He came home that day with us.

The first time Mendel met Norman, he was taken aback. Norman’s way of meeting people is to bark and bark loudly. He lunges for the door, jumping and trying to get to whoever is coming in. Not knowing if Norman was ferocious or not, even if he could see he was only a little dog, Mendel backed away. Norman never showed teeth, he just jumped and barked. I came in first and Norman jumped up on my legs, tail wagging, his face eagerly turned up to me. Picking him up for a warm hug, Norman’s licker went to work on my face. “I missed you so much” he seemed to be saying.

Turning to Mendel, still holding back on the portico, I said “There is no psychiatrist in the world like a puppy licking your face- Bern Williams” I said.

Mendel did not respond. I put Norman down and he gently walked up to Mendel. His little face turned up. His eyes sought Mendel’s eyes. Mendel reached down and scratched Norman, tentatively. They walked into the house together. Every time Mendel comes over they are inseparable.

I volunteer at the Homewood House on Atlantic Ave. not far from the entrance to the Florida Turnpike, where we were able to get Mendel a job as toll booth operator. Sometimes, Mendel walks over to the home to sit and visit with me as Norman and I visit the patients. Many are disabled and some suffer from severe dementia but Norman brings something of the human back out from their distant past. Norman went to Service Dog School and the Homewood House is supportive of Animal therapy dogs. Norman is always a star there but so is Mendel the Chassid with his long full beard, payyahs and laughing eyes as he has the chance to introduce Norman to the folks in the day care room. I am not sure who enjoys it more, Norman, Mendel, or the patients.

Chanukah came late this year, almost at Christmas time. The director of the home volunteers came to me with a problem. The man who was going to play Santa Claus and bring gifts to the patients, both Jewish and non, was ill. He could not make it. Did I know of anyone who could fill in? It was a question that did not need to be thought of twice. Of course, I did, but would he do it?

Mendel had to think about this one a full day. He was a Chassidic Jew, could he play Santa Claus and bring a smile to the patients at the Homewood House and not violate his religious identity?

Mendel called his old Rebbe, Rabbi Fuchs of Beth Dovid in Brooklyn, for advice. Rabbi Fuchs was unable to take Mendel's call so Mendel explained the problem to Rabbi Fuch's aide, Rabbi Singer. Rabbi Singer seemed to start at the suggestion of a Chassid being Santa Claus but he told Mendel to wait. He would call him back. Half an hour later Rabbi Singer did call.

"Mendel," Rabbi Singer said, "the Rebbe thinks it would be a shande – a disgrace for you to be Santa Claus. It does not matter what good intentions you may have, it is wrong to misrepresent yourself. The Rebbe says no."

Mendel was saddened. That evening he was over the house and we talked.

"William." Mendel said, not looking at me. "William, the Rebbe said it would be a shande for me to be Santa Claus at the home this year."

"I understand, Mendel" I said. "But what do you wish to do? What do you think is the right thing to do?"

Mendel did not look up. Norman had come up to Mendel in his usual position, paws on his pants leg, looking up into Mendel's face. Mendel looked at Norman, "Norman what do you think I should do?" he asked, stroking his head.

Norman did not say anything, his soft brown eyes just looked into Mendel's and Mendel knew.

"William, I will do it," he said looking at me with conviction. "I will do it with one condition."

That Christmas, Mendel the Chassid came into the Homewood House in a full, bright red Santa Claus suit, his belly stuffed with pillows, a large bag over his shoulder full of gift for the patients in the day room and a large Star of David on his chest. Cheerfully, he passed out gifts to the Jewish patients with a Happy Chanukah and a robust, smiling Merry Christmas to the non-Jewish patients. Norman trotted along next to him.

"Mendel, do dogs have souls, do they go to Heaven?" I asked him that evening.

Mendel became serious.

"The question of whether dogs have souls is yes. I've never seen an answer to whether dogs go to heaven.

It's not a Jewish question because while we believe classically in heaven and hell, we are non-dogmatic about the nature of the other dimension.

On one level, no one has ever come back - so we can't know for sure.

On another level, the only way to know the other dimension is to be there - the quest to experience "heaven" mystically is only healthy for a very, very small number of people.

In terms of the literature about souls and animals - there is the probability of a spiritual continuation.

Dogs for example are different from humans since they lack the highest level of soul - the moral component.

Clearly dogs are alive and sentient - the lowest level of soul.

Dogs also seem to have feelings and thoughts - the second level of soul.

But the ability to make ethical choices - to postpone gratification for a higher good - is something that animals do not seem to have - this is what makes humans human spiritually.

Since we believe that the spirit lives after the body dies - then animals probably have a share of heaven - whatever that is, since the sentience and feelings would continue with God.

For humans as well as animals - does this mean that we are absorbed back into the Ultimate Spirit, does it mean we maintain our spiritual identity, or does it mean we're angel in a physical heaven - Jews may have personal answers - but there is no one authoritative answer."

"Sentience?" I asked.

I look at Mendel and we grinned together.

A few days later, Mendel and I were taking Norman for his 'business' walk. It was a pleasant afternoon that God had made for us to enjoy and savor. Certainly, Norman was savoring everything his nose could.

We were coming back down El Clair towards Pipers Glen. Mendel held Norman's 16' retractable leash. Norman led the way at full extension. As we walked by the Number 4, dog leg left, water hazard hole of the Westchester Golf Course a bright pink golf ball flew over the hedge and rolled next to Mendel. He, not thinking, picked it up and tossed it back over the hedge onto the course. I doubted if anyone could see us.

"Mendel" I said, "it is good sportsmanship not to pick up lost golf balls while they are still rolling- Mark Twain." He just looked at me and shrugged. We kept walking along as the yelling got louder.

There is an opening in the high hedge to let the golf carts into the teeing area of the hole. A very red faced man, in perfect white golf attire, flailed his arms at an equally perfectly attired woman golfer in pink.

As we approached the opening we heard him yelling.

"Can't you do anything right! What kind of f...ing idiot are you? I told you, and told you, and told you to keep you head down when swinging the club, follow through and turn your body towards the ball. You can't be this stupid all the time? Do what I tell you.

Now, watch me. Watch what I do, how I do it and do what I do."

He bent down put another one of her bright pink golf balls on the tee and lined up. First he addressed the ball and then he addressed the golf course hole for where he intended the ball to go. Swaying his golf club above the ball, wiggling his hips to settle

his golf cleats into the grass of the teeing area, he exclaimed angrily “watch you stupid bit...”

Norman, Mendel and I watched through the opening in the hedge next to the tee as the red faced man pulled back his swing in a mighty yank. His forward motion was a movement of powerfully fluidity as the club face raced toward the bright pink golf ball standing on the tee.

With a crushing thud, the club swing was short. The club faced crashed into the green turf kicking up a huge wedge of grass that flew into the air. The man lurched forward from the impact and suddenly his thick toupee flew off his head and hit the ground, with a whoosh, a few feet in front of him.

We did not know what happened. Norman swung into action. With a sudden surprising boldness he yanked the leash from Mendel’s hands and surged forward, toward the tee, grabbing the toupee. Without so much as a how to do, he took off with the toupee in his mouth down El Clair. Mendel and I chasing after him, yelling “Norman, drop the toupee.”

Part way down the block he did drop the toupee but he kept running, his tail wagging a mile a minute. Mendel continued chasing after him. I grabbed the toupee and returned up the street to the horrifically fuming, embarrassed golfer. With a “sh..t give me that,” he slapped it back on his head. The lady in pink stood looking at us in astonishment – I thought I perceived a tiny smile across her lips.

Mendel had disappeared around the hedge corner at Pipers Glenn still chasing Norman. I took off in turn after the both of them. As I turned the corner, there was Mendel sitting on the ground with Norman in his lap licking his face. I sat down next to Mendel and we both laughed and laughed like silly school boys.

Back to the house, Norman lead the way, head high and tail wagging.

I went to the wine rank and selected a special wine to celebrate; a bottle of Fire Hydrant Red from Dog Tail Vineyards in Murphys, California. Yes, there really is such a wine. I poured Mendel a full cup of Manishevitz from his private stash.

“William,” Mendel said. “If I have any beliefs about immortality it is that certain dogs I have known will go to heaven and very, very few persons. – James Thurber.”

“Mendel”, I responded. “If there are no dogs in Heaven then when I die I want to go where they went – Will Rogers.”

We lifted our libations, mine Fire Hydrant Red, his Manishevitz in his plastic cup and said together “L’Chaim.”

From: *The Boynton Beach Chronicles – Tails of Norman*

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