

It has been taught [Talmud, *Niddah*] an oath is administered to it (to the soul before it entered the body), 'Be a *tzaddik* (a righteous person) and do not be a *rasha* (a wicked person). And even if the entire world tells you that you are a *tzaddik*, regard yourself as if you were a *rasha*.

In his commentary on this statement, Rabbi Adin Steinsalz says:

This oath has two parts: (1) to be a *tzaddik* and not to be a *rasha*; (2) to consider oneself a *rasha*, even if the entire world says that one is a *tzaddik*.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman's grandson, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (the third *Chabad Rebbe*) raises the question: What is the purpose of this oath? Does not the soul desire only good? Only the human being, saddled with a physical body and nature, is susceptible to evil, not his spiritual essence. So why administer this oath to the soul? Rabbi Menachem Mendel explains that this oath represents not only a promise but also an empowerment. Every soul possesses the necessary powers to overcome the evil inclination and 'not be a *rasha*;' however, these powers reside in the transcendent essence of the soul, where they are often beyond the reach of its conscious, experiential self. The oath that the soul takes has the effect of stimulating these potentials and making them accessible to its everyday life. Indeed, the Hebrew word *mashbi'in* (he is made to swear) can also be read as *masbi'in* (he is fortified).

It's important first to understand the main words being used in this statement. Being a *tzaddik* means to act in a righteous way, treating all people with respect and dignity, following the laws of Torah and holding ourselves to the highest standards of behavior. Being a *rasha*, a wicked person, is acting in any other way. There is not a middle ground in Jewish thought. We are either *tzaddikim* or *rashaim*.

It's equally important to say that the world is not really that black and white. It's impossible to be a complete *tzaddik*, to always act in exactly the right way. Most of us fall somewhere between *tzaddik* and *rasha*, hopefully falling closer to *tzaddik*.

But this commentary does not really tell us to be perfect but gives us the tools to make our actions and our understanding of our actions as conscious as possible. Rabbi Steinsalz wants us to pay close attention to the connection between our soul and our conscious self.

Before we were born our soul took an oath about our behavior and about our vision of ourselves. After we were born, we no longer had a conscious memory of that oath but it was still there in the memory of our soul. The oath required two things from us, that we act in a righteous way at all times. And that we think of ourselves as wicked no matter how many people tell us we are righteous.

Most of the time our actions are very automatic. We follow our inclination to have pleasure in our lives however that is available to us. Our time is spent pursuing that goal and most of the people around us pursue that goal along with us. The voice of our soul, of our highest wisdom is not readily heard over the voice of our conscious desires. But we can make that voice heard by being willing to listen to it, by knowing that we took an oath to behave in a righteous way before we were even born.

Along with that *kavannah*, that intention, we also have to see ourselves as a *rasha*, a wicked person even if no one else sees us that way and even if we don't think we act that way. This understanding will keep us conscious about our actions. It will help us see that we can always strive to behave in a more righteous way, to know that we can continue to approach the perfection that a *tzaddik* embodies. This understanding will keep us from

being complacent, thinking we've already done enough for others and focusing only on ourselves.

This understanding that we are ultimately *rashaim* will help us continue to put others before ourselves which is our ultimate task. It will help us continue to act in ways that are generous, kind and holy, rather than tell ourselves we've done enough. In terms of holiness and righteousness there is no such concept as enough. There is always more to do.

And on the other hand, we can't hope to do everything in one day or even in our entire lifetime. As *Rebbe Tarfon* says in *Pirkei Avot*, the Sayings of our Ancestors, 'We are not required to complete the task, neither are we free to neglect it.' We have to be able to act in a righteous way, knowing that we are in partnership with the Holy One and knowing that more we embody the *tzaddik*, the more righteous our world will be.

*Shabbat Shalom.*