

## 25. Human Beings and their Troubles

["No man has control over the spirit – to hold back the spirit" (Ecclesiastes 8:8)] – And the Sages say: No man can control his own spirit to withhold it from himself.

Rabbi Hanina said: It is written, "And formed [yotzer] the spirit of man within him" (Zekhariah 12:1) – He bound up [tzar] the spirit of man within his body, for were it not so, when trouble [tzara] comes upon him, he would take and cast it out from within himself.

*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 8:8, ed. Vilna, fol. 22c

*A person cannot always control how he or she feels, especially when beset by troubles. During hard times, the individual may be tempted to give up on life entirely. And so God binds the spirit of a person deep within the body, so that it is no simple matter to cast it out. We are meant to struggle with life, not to forsake it.*

### The Author's Reflections

This midrash is ambiguous. It is not clear why the binding of the soul to the body protects a person from hardship. But the midrash may inspire us to reflect on how our spirits confront challenges and deal with life's dark periods. Somehow our spirits are able to endure even some of life's most harrowing and distressing moments. This demonstrates

the power of the spirit, even to those who are skeptical of theological concepts. Whether we interpret the term "spirit" in the traditional mystical sense of a spark of God within us or in the rational sense, we cannot deny the fact that peoples' ability to overcome difficulties inspires a sense of awe, since that ability often lies beyond what we perceive as the body's physical capacities.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- What is the meaning of the words, "No man has control over the spirit to hold back the spirit"? What is our own spirit? Are there aspects of our spirit that are not within our control? What are they?
- What is the meaning of the phrase, "He bound up the spirit of man within his body"?
- What is the connection between "binding up" and "trouble," which are phonetically similar in Hebrew? Why does the fact that the spirit is "bound up" in a person prevent him from casting out his troubles?
- What can help alleviate the troubles of the human spirit?

[Reflections inspired by this text study]