YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Being Chosen:**

**A Philosophical Investigation into the Election of the Jewish People**

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**Shiur 38: Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson**

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) was the seventh Rebbe (or grand master) of the Lubavitch (or Chabad)sect of Chasidism. He was a hugely influential figure who transformed Chabadinto one of the largest Jewish movements in the world. In this week’s lesson we examine his attitude to the election of Israel.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), otherwise known as theAlter Rebbe*,* was the first of the seven Lubavitcher Rebbes. His writings, especially his *magnum opus*, known as the *Tanya,* carry an authoritative weight in the Chabadmovement. Accordingly, Rabbi Schneerson will not have wanted, at any point, to contradict them.

We saw in lesson 31 that the Alter Rebbeexplicitly endorsed the attitude of the *Zohar* and of Rabbi Chaim Vital, when it comes to the souls and spiritual status of gentiles. In the opening chapters of the *Tanya*,he argued that Jews have two souls – one animal or human soul, and one Divine soul that is somehow, or in some sense, an actual fragment of the Divine (although this raises an obvious difficulty, because the Alter Rebbe also subscribed to the Orthodox Jewish view that God is indivisible, and therefore has no parts). Gentiles, he claimed, by contrast, have only the animal, or human soul, and even that human soul is less inherently holy than the human soul of a Jew.

We know that Rabbi Schneerson was committed to the writings of the Alter Rebbe, and we also know that he was particularly concerned for the spiritual and physical welfare of non-Jews. Two anecdotes stand out as particularly illustrative.

**Two Anecdotes: Shirley Chisholm and Chinatown**

In 1968, Shirley Chisholm was elected to Congress as the first Black congresswoman. She also happened to represent the NYC district where Rabbi Schneerson lived. When she arrived in Washington D.C., she was dismayed to discover that the leadership of the House of Representatives had bowed to pressure from numerous racist congressmen and placed her on the House Agriculture Committee, where, they thought, she could have little influence over policy areas that mattered most to her.

Amidst her disappointment, she received a phone call from the Rebbe’s secretary asking her to come for a visit. In their meeting, the Rebbe tried to transform her sense of disappointment into a newfound sense of mission. He saw her new post as a blessing and an opportunity from God. He pointed out that the United States has a massive food surplus, and yet there are so many people – especially in the inner cities – going hungry. He challenged her to find a creative way in which to use her new station to alleviate that hunger.

Eventually Chisholm was reassigned to a committee that was more appropriate for her constituency, but she never forgot the Rebbe’s advice. Utilizing relationships that she forged because of her initial posting on the Agriculture Committee, she worked to expand the national Food Stamp Program, which allowed poor Americans to buy subsidized food. Then, together with Bob Dole, a Senate Republican she had come to know because of her early association with agriculture, she helped to create a national program that would channel targeted food supplements to pregnant women and infants at risk, to be administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Eight million people now receive help from this program each month.

Years later, at her retirement party, Chisholm gave credit to Rabbi Schneerson for encouraging her to see that a challenge can actually be a gift from God. She went so far as to say that “if poor babies have milk, and poor children have food, it’s because this Rabbi in Crown Heights had vision.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The second anecdote concerns a senator from New York State, Patrick Moynihan, who came to consult with the Rebbe on matters of Jewish affairs. At the end of the meeting, which had left Moynihan grateful, the Rebbe reportedly said that he had a favor to ask. Moynihan knew there was no such thing as a free lunch. As he described matters:

The Rebbe has a community of thousands in New York City and institutions all over the state that could benefit from government programs. I am in a position to help secure funding for them.[[2]](#footnote-2)

So, he was expecting the Rebbe to call in such a favor in return for the consultation that the senator had just received. But, to his surprise, the favor had nothing to do with the Rebbe’s personal programs, or with anything affecting his own community. Instead, the Rebbe was concerned for the growing population in Chinatown. “These people,” the Rebbe said, “are quiet, reserved, hardworking and law-abiding – the type of citizens most countries would treasure.”[[3]](#footnote-3) But he was worried. Because their culture celebrated a certain sort of reservedness, he feared that this might lead them to be overlooked and that some of them would fail to receive the government help to which they were legally entitled. The Rebbe’s request was that Moynihan, as a U.S. senator from New York, should concern himself with their needs. Moynihan was blown away. He couldn’t imagine that the Rebbe had ever been to Chinatown, or that anyone there would know who he was. But their wellbeing was on his mind.

What emerges from these two anecdotes (and many more like them) is a picture of a rabbi who had the physical welfare of gentiles on his mind. His additional concern for their spiritual welfare is best illustrated by his unprecedented campaign to communicate and to teach the seven Noahide laws to as wide a gentile audience as possible (more on that later).

Admittedly, none of this entails that the Rabbi wasn’t a supremacist. It is technically possible to care deeply for gentiles despite thinking them to be of a lower spiritual status. But the combination of a racial supremacy with such a high degree of love and concern for others is, at least, unlikely. It raises the suspicion that, if we were to take a closer look at his philosophy, we’d see a route by which to undermine the racist appearance of the *Tanya*.

**Nothing-Elsism**

In last week’s lesson, we saw how Rabbi Kook was able to use elements of the kabbalistic tradition to undermine its own racist-seeming elements. Yes, there are sources that portray gentiles as demonic, but those sources describe nothing more than an *appearance* – even if that appearance, given the history of antisemitism, has been typical of the Jewish experience of gentiles in many times and places. This appearance must nevertheless give way, in the fullness of time, to an underlying *reality* that can know of no supremacism, nor of any distinction between Jew and gentile.

This Kookian strategy for transcending the apparent ethnocentrism of the Kabbala relied upon his interpretation of a doctrine that I have called Jewish nothing-elsism. Rabbi Kook’s interpretation of that doctrine, we saw, amounts to existence monism – the doctrine that, when all is said and done, only one *thing* exists, and that thing, according to Rabbi Kook, is God. Unfortunately, if my arguments of last week were sound, existence monism cannot be rendered coherent.

The Rebbe had a different strategy for transcending the apparent ethnocentrism of the Kabbala. It relied upon a different interpretation of Jewish nothing-elsism. This interpretation has deep roots in the Chasidic tradition, and though it may strike the uninitiated as wacky, I would argue that this Chasidic take on nothing-elsism is both coherent and – ultimately – difficult for a theist to deny.

In the *Tanya*, the Alter Rebbe writes:

[E]very intelligent person will understand clearly that each creature and being is actually considered naught and absolute nothingness in relation to the Activating Force… continuously calling it into existence and bringing it from absolute non-being into being. The reason that all things created and activated appear to us as existing and tangible, is that we do not comprehend nor see with our physical eyes the power of God.... If, however, the eye were permitted to see and to comprehend the life-force and spirituality which is in every created thing, flowing into it… then the materiality, grossness, and tangibility of the creature would not be seen by our eyes at all…. Hence, there is truly nothing besides Him.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A sunbeam illuminates things outside of the sun. But before the sunbeam has left the orb of the sun, it is totally absorbed in the sun. Even beyond the orb of the sun, a sunbeam is merely an *emanation* of the sun. Using this metaphor, the Alter Rebbe tells us: “It is only in the space of the universe, under the heavens and on the earth, where the body of the sun-globe is not present, that this light and radiance appears to the eye to have actual existence.”[[5]](#footnote-5) From the perspective of God, who is analogous, in this metaphor, to the sun, the world itself apparently doesn’t exist as an independent entity. There is “truly nothing besides Him.” The Alter Rebbe was a nothing-elser. But what exactly does that mean, and how can we save it from the incoherence of existence monism? To understand the Alter Rebbe’s brand of nothing-elsism, we must take a detour through the philosophy of *tzimtzum* (lit. contraction).

**Tzimtzum**

*Tzimtzum* is a kabbalistic notion first developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), with some earlier precedents.[[6]](#footnote-6) Rabbi Luria’s most prominent disciple, Rabbi Chaim Vital, provides the first explicit, written account of the doctrine. God’s creation, he tells us, began with the infinite light of God, uniformly extended, leaving no space untouched; next, there was a *contraction* of that light away from a central point, leaving a circular void surrounded by the light; finally, there was a line of light penetrating the circle, creating a channel for the light to move from the outside to the inside. Only after these three stages could the creation begin.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Together with Tyron Goldschmidt, I have worked on trying to uncover the underlying philosophical motivation for thinking that some sort of Divine contraction must have preceded the creation.[[8]](#footnote-8) Some would tell you that the problem looks like this:

1. God is infinite.
2. If God is infinite, then He (or His light) fills all space.
3. If He (or His light) fills all space, then there is no space vacant in which creation can occur, therefore:
4. If God is infinite, creation cannot occur; therefore
5. creation cannot occur; but
6. creation *did* occur. **Problem!**

If this really *is* a problem, then the traditional theist can only escape it if she accepts either:

* 1. God must have contracted His infinity, or
	2. God didn’t *really* create a world outside of Himself.

But this can’t really be the problem. For one thing, line 2 seems to trade on an elementary confusion about infinity. To be infinite *isn’t* to fill all of space. The natural number sequence is infinite, for example, but it doesn’t take up *any* space. A more charitable reconstruction leaves *infinity* behind and concentrates on *omnipresence* instead. It might look like this:

1. God is omnipresent.
2. If God is omnipresent, then He fills all space.
3. If God fills all space, then there is no vacant space in which creation can occur; therefore,
4. if God is omnipresent, creation cannot occur, therefore
5. creation cannot occur, but
6. creation *did* occur. **Problem!**

Once again, if this really is a problem, then the traditional theist can only escape it if she accepts either:

1. God must have contracted His omnipresence, or
2. God didn’t really create a world outside of Himself.

But, again, line 2 is problematic. Omnipresence needn’t entail that God is actually located in space. Rather, omnipresence can be understood in terms of God’s power and knowledge extending over every region of space. Indeed, God’s being non-physical could be taken to imply that, despite having complete knowledge and control over what’s going on in every region, He isn’t *literally* located anywhere at all. And even if you think God *is* literally located in every region of space, you might think that because God is *immaterial*, He is the sort of being who can *share* His location with other things. That would mean that line 3 is faulty too: God’s being in a region doesn’t foreclose the possibility of other things happening there.

Goldschmidt and I argue that we do better to interpret Rabbi Vital’s talk of God’s light filling all of space as a metaphor.[[9]](#footnote-9) We’re not really talking about light, and we’re not really talking about space. Rather, the talk of God’s light getting in the way of creation is a metaphorical way of conveying the idea that some Divine attribute or other, metaphorically rendered as “light,” makes creation *impossible*. It’s not that God’s nature leaves no room in *physical* space for creation, but that God’s nature leaves no room in *logical* space for creation. To put the problem more formally, we could say:

1. God has perfection *P* (we’ll say more about what this perfection might be later).
2. If God has perfection *P*, then there is no logical space for creation; therefore,
3. there is no logical space for creation.
4. If there’s no logical space for creation, then creation cannot occur; therefore,
5. creation cannot occur; but
6. creation *did* occur. **Problem!**

What perfection could we substitute for *P,* so as to arrive at something compelling? Goldschmidt and I argue that there are number of candidates.[[10]](#footnote-10) For example, it might be that God’s *goodness* gets in the way of creation. You might think that any entity that isn’t God could always be somehow improved. If that’s the case, then any universe (being an entity that isn’t God) could always have been, even in its very initial conditions, somehow *better*. But if God is perfectly good, there’s reason to think that He wouldn’t (and, indeed, couldn’t) create any universe that could have been, from the very beginning, somehow better. This means that God’s goodness could serve in our argument as perfection *P*, and entail that there’s no room in logical space for God to create a universe. A perfectly good God couldn’t create anything, because nothing would be worthy of His goodness.

Other perfections, such as God’s omnipotence, or His perfect rationality, could also be used as candidates for perfection *P*, to give rise to the same sort of problem.[[11]](#footnote-11) But those other candidates needn’t detain us here.

Once again, our problem leaves us with our two familiar options. Either:

1. God contracted His perfection *P*, or
2. God didn’t really create a world outside of Himself.

If we adopt option *a*, then we’re taking *tzimtzum* literally. This gives rise to a doctrine known as *tzimtzum ki-peshuto.* But there are reasons to resist option *a*. First, Orthodox theological sensibilities might bristle at the suggestion that God isn’t currently perfect in every way, even only temporarily. Second, you might think that one of the things a perfect being can’t do, by dint of His perfection, is to render Himself less than perfect. A being who can be rendered less than perfect is a being with certain *vulnerabilities*, but God – you might think – is invulnerable.

For good reason, then, many Chasidic interpreters of the kabbalistic tradition, including the Alter Rebbe and Rabbi Kook, prefer option *b*. There simply *isn’t* a world outside of God. The appearance of such a world is an *illusion*. God didn’t really contract Himself, even if He *appears* to have done so. His *contraction* was an illusion. This is known as the doctrine of *tzimtzum she-eino ki-peshuto.* But there are multiple ways of making sense of this doctrine. One way is to deny that there is any distinction whatsoever between God and His creation. This was the route of Rabbi Kook, which gives rise to existence monism and to acosmism – the view that the universe itself isn’t ultimately real. Another route is what I have elsewhere called *Chasidic idealism*.[[12]](#footnote-12) As I understand things, this – or at least something very similar to it – was the route adopted by the Alter Rebbe.

**Chasidic Idealism**

Chasidic idealism has two ingredients. Philosophers would call these ingredients: (a) priority monism, and (b) ontological pluralism. Priority monism is the view that even if many concrete things exist, only one concrete thing – call it the fundamental object, *FO* – is fundamental.[[13]](#footnote-13) That is to say, many concrete things can exist, but there is one concrete object, *FO*, upon which all other concrete things *depend* for their existence.

Priority monism would be difficult for any theist to deny. If God exists, then God is *FO*. All concrete things depend upon God for their continued existence.

Ontological pluralism is the idea that some things are not just more fundamental than others, but that some things are somehow more *real* than others. Ontological pluralism, in other words, is the view that there are multiple forms of existence, some of which are more, and some of which are less, full-blooded. According to the ontological pluralist, it’s not right to say that either a thing is real, or it isn’t. In actual fact, they would say, reality comes in degrees. For example, Shakespeare is more real than Hamlet, and Hamlet is more real than the fictional king who appears in the play that’s performed within *Hamlet*. And none of these beings, you might think, is as real as God.

Combining these two ingredients gives rise to the claim that God is both the most fundamental, and the most real, of all beings. But, unlike Rabbi Kook, the Chasidic idealist needn’t deny that other things *exist*. Lots of things *exist*, but only one thing is maximally fundamental, and only one thing is maximally real. Chasidic idealism allows us to make sense of both *tzimtzum she-eino ki-peshuto* and of Jewish nothing-elsism.

Regarding *tzimtzum*, the Chasidic idealist says that God didn’t *really* contractperfection *P*. Instead, He created a world that *appears* to be outside of His mind, but which, in actual fact, has been in His mind all along. In other words, every existent being, other than the mind of God, is an idea in the mind of God. Again, it’s not that other things don’t exist. They do. But they only exist *in the mind of God*. And there, in the mind of God, they are like a beam of light within the orb of the sun. They are totally absorbed so as to have no real significance.

“Hold on a minute!” you might say. There are lots of things in this universe that aren’t ideas. There are trees, and animals, and oceans; and those oceans are actually *wet*! But the Chasidic idealist would reply: that’s only because God has ideas of things which are *not* ideas of ideas.

Let me explain this another way. Imagine that the universe is a story that God tells. Fictional characters and fictional objects, like Harry Potter and his broomstick, really do exist. They’re just not as real as you and me, and, outside of the stories, Harry isn’t really a person and his broomstick isn’t really a broomstick. Outside of the stories, these things still exist – after all, we’re talking about them, aren’t we? – but they exist as something more like *ideas*. Obviously, they’re not ideas *in their story*. But *outside* of their story, that’s all they are. So too, water exists in the story of this world. And it’s wet in the story. But from *God’s* perspective, water isn’t wet because water’s just an idea; just a fictional substance in a story that He’s telling.

Moreover, if God wants to appear as a character in the story that He tells, and if, in the story, His character is the Creator of all that exists outside of His mind, then, in the story, it must be true that He contracted whatever perfections got in the way of His creating a world. That is to say: *tzimtzum* happens, but only in the story. Beyond the story, of course, God remains as perfect as ever He was. The Alter Rebbe describes this by saying that *tzimtzum* occurred from our perspective but didn’t occur from God’s perspective.[[14]](#footnote-14) What occurred was that God created the appearance of *tzimtzum*, but for God, that appearance is transparent.

Jewish nothing-elsism, on a Chasidic construal of that doctrine, doesn’t deny the existence of the cosmos. The cosmos is a set of ideas in the mind of God. It’s just that nothing exists as *fundamentally* as God does. And, since, from God’s perspective, all other things are imaginary, there’s a profound sense in which all other things are less *real* than He is. Outside of the story, all that exists are ideas that are totally absorbed within the mind of God, much like a beam of light within the orb of the sun. We are, in the Alter Rebbe’s metaphor, just a beam of light. When considered from the perspective of the sun itself, we are *as if* nothing at all. But when considered from some less elevated perspective, we’re perfectly real. And thus, when we say that there really is nothing other than God, we mean that, at the most fundamental, and at the most *real*, level of being, there is nothing other than God.

Now, however bizarre all this might seem, we’ve arrived at something much less radical than existence monism. For the Chasidic idealist, and when looking (so to speak) from God’s perspective, you’re merely imaginary. For the existence monist, by contrast, you’re not merely imaginary; you are nothing at all!

It is in the context of the Alter Rebbe’s Chasidic idealism that the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe was able to transcend the appearance of supremacism in the kabbalistic and Chasidic traditions to which he adhered.

**On Jews and Gentiles[[15]](#footnote-15)**

The authorial analogy seems to me to be the best way to make sense of Chasidic idealism. In this mode of thinking, God is the storywriter of history, and we are His characters, and it is necessary to distinguish between two levels of reality: one corresponds to what goes on within the story of creation, and one corresponds to what goes on from the point of view of the author.

Within the story of creation, for example, it is true to say that we exist as people of flesh and blood, and that we have the freedom to shape our lives as we see fit. At the same time, from God’s transcendent perspective, *beyond* the story, it’s true to say that we exist only as ideas in the mind of God, rather than as real people, and that we do nothing that God doesn’t think up for us to do.

To see the world in this way is to recognize that all things are Godly – because all things are, in some sense, a projection of the mind of God, just as all things in a novel are a projection of the mind of the novelist. Accordingly, Chabad philosophy cannot rest easy with the notion that any of God’s creatures – be they Jewish or Gentile – are irredeemably unholy. From God’s perspective, every Jew and every gentile is nothing more than an idea, and nothing less than an idea that’s entirely absorbed within the mind of God Himself.

For that reason, multiple Rebbes have insisted that the Alter Rebbe couldn’t possibly have meant what he seems to have asserted, when he said that the impure *kelippot* (i.e., the husks of creation that conceal God’s light), from which (gentile) human souls derive, contain no good whatsoever. The third Rebbe – known as the *Tzemach Tzedek* – therefore insisted that even the most impure of *kelippot* contain the “vitality of a Divine spark in exile.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Similarly, the fifth Rebbe – known as the *Rashab* – wrote:

When the [Alter Rebbe] says that the three impure *kelippot* contain no good at all, this does not mean that there is no spark at all, as it is impossible for anything to exist without a good spark.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Moreover, the writings of the Alter Rebbe always did allow for certain exceptions. Rabbi Hillel of Paritch was a leading disciple of the first three Rebbes. He points out that various passages in the Alter Rebbe’s writings[[18]](#footnote-18) make it clear that he hadn’t intended to tarnish all gentiles with the same brush. For instance, the Alter Rebbe thought that the human souls of the “righteous of the nations” (the *chasidei umot ha-olam*) are rooted in *kelippat noga*, just like the human souls of Jews.[[19]](#footnote-19) In fact, the Alter Rebbe went so far as to say that the righteous among the nations can reach the level of angels in their comprehension of Godliness.[[20]](#footnote-20) What’s more, the Chabad movement was committed, from the very start, to an eschatology according to which all human beings will one day be illuminated by the light of God;[[21]](#footnote-21) in other words, the day will come in which all gentiles will be righteous.

So, in the unredeemed world – before the eschaton – there may be gentiles whose souls are rooted in impure *kelippot*. But: first, that is only true *within* the story of the world. From a more fundamental point of view, all things are a projection of God. The challenge for the *Chasid* is to be sensitive to both levels of reality at once. To be wary of the impurity of some of the phenomena that lie beyond the Jewish community, while – at the very same time – recognizing that every phenomenon, even those that languish in spiritual darkness, are *actually* animated by sparks of the Divine. Second, once we layer in the recognition that a time will come in which *all* gentiles will be righteous, the appearance of xenophobia has substantially subsided.

But, even if this picture is compatible with the sort of love and care that the Rebbe manifested towards the gentile world, what becomes of the supremacism of Chabadphilosophy, with its doctrine of two souls for Jews? Well, for one thing, the Rebbe seems to have come close to the Tiferet Yisrael’s position that the Divine soul of the Jew isn’t really the seat of their personality, or their mind, but is more like a spiritual booster-pack that helps them to live up to the extra responsibilities that come along with the election. In the words of the Rebbe, “additional obligations require additional powers in order to fulfill them.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Moreover, the “additional powers” that the Jew receives from their booster-packs don’t make any given Jew *better*, in any global sense, than any given gentile. Indeed, the Rebbe was convinced that every human being – Jew or gentile – has unique capabilities that are only granted to that specific person. To put it in the terms of Chasidic idealism, there is no character in a well-written novel that can be spared, and no character that doesn’t express a unique idea of its creator.

This attitude of the Rebbe becomes clear in a beautiful homily he delivered about the humility of Moses. The Torah states that Moses was “exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Citing a discourse of the Alter Rebbe, the Rebbe suggests a completely different way to translate this verse. Instead of saying that Moses was humbler than all people, the Rebbe reads it to be saying that Moses was humble *in relation to every person*. That is to say, if Moses were confronted with any other human being, he would be able to find some reason to be humble in their presence. It didn’t matter that Moses was a member of the elect, and that not all human beings are elect. It didn’t matter that Moses was a prophet, and that not all people are prophets. It didn’t even matter that Moses was the *greatest* of prophets. Moses knew all of that, but he also knew that every single person – Jew or gentile, prophet or layperson – brings something to the world that only they can bring, and in deference to that unique value, Moses would be humble.

Indeed, we can infer from the first of our anecdotes that, as far as the Rebbe was concerned, God had a very specific and very important mission for Shirley Chisholm to achieve – a mission for which only she had the requisite skills and found herself in the right time and place to fulfill. In his view, whatever it is that sets the Jews, as a collective, apart from others, it is not something that undermines the inestimable value, and unique mission, of each and every human being.[[24]](#footnote-24) But what exactly *is* the role of the Jewish people, for which they’ve been given their spiritual booster-pack?

**The Role of the Jews**

Informed by the *Tanya*, the Rebbe argued that the primary mission of humanity as a whole is to make this world a *dira ba-tachtonim* – a dwelling place for God in the lowly realms. In essence, the idea is to prepare the world for God to dwell within it in the most revealed way possible. This mission has multiple elements, but for the Rebbe, a major part of making the world a fitting dwelling place for God is making it a fitting dwelling place for mankind. In his words:

The most vital and encompassing mission of the nations of the world is to make the world a fitting place to be settled by humankind. And through the world becoming a settlement and a dwelling for man below, it will ultimately also become a dwelling for “Supernal Man” [i.e., God].[[25]](#footnote-25)

Within that global mission, the Jews play two fundamental roles. (1) We create the conditions for human flourishing by teaching the world about the seven Noahide laws. (2) We help to make the world a dwelling place for the Divine, more generally, by virtue of our being an earthly manifestation of an element of Divinity that the gentile world doesn’t manifest. Let’s examine those two notions in reverse order.

**Manifesting the Divine**

The first two names of God that appear in the Bible are the Tetragrammaton and the name *E-lohim.* The tetragrammaton (i.e., the four-letter ineffable name of God) represents God’s very essence, an essence which transcends nature and reason. “*E-lohim,*” by contrast, reflects those properties or aspects of God which are revealed through the natural world.

What it means for Jews to possess an additional soul is for them to be indelibly bound to the Divine essence. This, in turn, is supposed to be reflected in the Jewish people’s special connection to the tetragrammaton.[[26]](#footnote-26) The rest of humanity, just like the rest of the natural world, reveals, and is connected to, those aspects of God picked out by the name *E-lohim*.[[27]](#footnote-27) According to the Rebbe, this is what pushes the Jewish people into an entirely different category from the nations of the world.[[28]](#footnote-28)

To put it in the terms of Chasidic idealism, the Jewish people, collectively, are a character in the story that God tells. This character, unlike any other character, represents, or is deeply associated with, God’s essence. The other characters also represent some element of the creator – but not His *essence*. This difference, according to the Rebbe, is manifest both in the distinctive nature of Jewish religious experience, and in the distinctive ways in which we’re commanded to serve God.

In terms of religious experience, and knowledge of God, the Rebbe claimed that gentiles can only apprehend God using their rational faculties, to appreciate the ways in which the Creator is manifest in His creation.[[29]](#footnote-29) It is their reflection upon the creation that “brings them to [the] recognition of God.”[[30]](#footnote-30) But because of our additional soul, things are different for the Jews. In the words of the Rebbe:

The faith of the Jewish people does not emanate from the world. The Jewish people are bound essentially with Godliness; therefore, Godliness is axiomatically intuited by them…. In this [intuition] there are none of nature’s constrictions, and they axiomatically intuit levels of Godliness that transcend nature too.[[31]](#footnote-31)

So, Jews experience God differently because – as characters in God’s story – they express a different, and indeed, a more intimate aspect of the author. As Yosef Bronstein explains, this difference is also manifest, according to the Rebbe, in the different ways in which Jews are called upon to serve God:

The *mitzvot* given to mankind as a whole comprise matters whose merits can be appreciated even by human understanding. Whereas those given to the Jewish people include many precepts that fundamentally transcend reason and are instead fulfilled out of a sense of suprarational and essential subjugation to God.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The people of Israel bring blessing to the world by manifesting an element of God that only they can represent, which helps the universal project of making the world a suitable dwelling place for Divinity. Because the element of God that they manifest transcends reason, so do many of their commandments. In addition, we have an important role to play in teaching the nations. Indeed, more than any leader in Orthodox history, the Rebbe expended a tremendous amount of energy in seeking to spread the teaching of the seven Noahide laws to the gentile world.

**The Noahide Campaign**

Maimonides recognizes no obligation for gentiles to convert to Judaism, even if – as we saw in lesson 25 – he thought it meritorious to try to convince people to convert where possible. He did think that if we have the power, it really is incumbent upon Jews to “compel” all of humanity to keep the Noahide *mitzvot*,[[33]](#footnote-33) but this ruling seems to have had very little influence over the development of Jewish law in practice. Perhaps it was an obligation that was thought, by the Rambam’s successors, to exist only in Messianic times. Or perhaps later authorities simply rejected it. Whatever the reason may have been, this law is nowhere cited in the *Shulchan Arukh*, and one could be left with the impression that normative Judaism knows of no halakhic obligation to compel or otherwise persuade gentiles to adhere to the Noahide Code.

True to the Chabadtradition, which places tremendous weight upon the halakhic writings of Maimonides, the Rebbe argued that the *halakha* unequivocally obligates Jews to encourage humanity as a whole to obey the Noahide Code.[[34]](#footnote-34) He also argued that the Rambam’s appeal to *compulsion* needn’t imply anything physically coercive, but can be fulfilled through attempts to convince and persuade.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The Rebbe was insistent that this duty ideally befalls all Jews at all times, even if our history of persecution, at the hands of gentile political powers, hampered our ability until now. Only in modernity have conditions allowed for the responsibility and the privilege to actually fulfill this halakhic obligation.[[36]](#footnote-36)

A peculiar detail of the Rambam’s dealing with the seven Noahide laws is that, according to him, they are only really fulfilled if the gentile obeys the laws in recognition that they were commanded in the Torah given to Moses at Sinai – not if they happen to behave in accordance with them for some other reason. Moreover, the Rebbe thought that gentiles are ethically obligated to perform all of the commandments in the Torah that conform with the dictates of reason – not just the seven Noahide laws.

For example, gentiles are obligated to honor their parents, even though no such law appears in the list of seven. The Rebbe saw it as essential for the gentile world to see itself as commanded, not merely by the dictates of reason, but also by the word of God. Explaining the peculiarity in the Rambam’s treatment of the Noahide code, the Rebbe wrote in one of his notebooks, before the outbreak of the World War II:

Acceptance of the Seven *Mitzvot* due to the dictates of rationality alone will not last truly and eternally; moral logic may be refuted by immoral logic. This is why the obligation is to “*accept* the Noahide *mitzvot*”… i.e., as the *command* of God.[[37]](#footnote-37)

It’s true that gentiles, and Jews as well, are bound by the dictates of reason. But our faculty of reason only has a weak hold over us, and we’re often able to use it to deceive ourselves into justifying what really shouldn’t be justified. Only if we recognize the existence of a God who can see through our self-justifications, and hold us to account, can our reason-based systems of ethics be trusted to last. After the horrors of the Holocaust, the Rebbe reflected upon the fact that:

The very country in which science and the philosophy of ethics flourished, from there sprang a behavior that was entirely barbaric, to the point that no one believed that human beings are capable of acting in such a way! Especially people who prided themselves with their philosophy and morality, and were prone to say that the whole world should learn morality from them!

The reason for this was that their morality was not founded on the most basic foundation of everything – the awareness that there is an “owner to this palace.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

And thus, we cannot expect the world to become a suitable habitation for humanity, let alone for the presence of God, until we have succeeded in spreading knowledge at least of the revelation and the seven Noahide laws. Beyond that, the Rebbe was enthusiastic about teaching to the gentile world all of the aspects of the Torah that overlap with the Noahide commandments or with the broader dictates of reason.[[39]](#footnote-39) He also championed the idea that Chasidic ideas in particular should be shared with the wider world, especially those parts of the *Tanya* that deal with what we’ve called nothing-elsism and Chasidic idealism.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The *Tanya* teaches that there is no joy higher than a created being living with the sort of dual-consciousness that Chasidic idealism can foster – when a creature sees herself both through the prism of the story in which she lives her life as an autonomous being, *and* through the prism of her fundamental being as an idea in the mind of God – all at once.[[41]](#footnote-41) A gentile who experiences that joyful dual-consciousness is all the more likely to live up to their unique potential.

**All on the Same Side**

The Two-Track Model of the election is evident in the Rebbe’s thinking. But it’s quite different from the Two-Track Model of the Tiferet Yisrael and Rabbi Hirsch.[[42]](#footnote-42) On the Rebbe’s account, the Jewish track is not dedicated *solely* to setting an example (either in practice or by way of our history) to the gentile world. That is just one duty that befalls the Jew. Another aspect of the election is to manifest a unique aspect of Divinity in the world, and to serve God in ways that reflect this connection that we uniquely have to God’s most transcendent essence.

This relieves two pressures from the Two-Track Model. First, it frees the theory from having to explain – as Rabbi Hirsch tried to do – every single commandment in terms of setting an example to the wider world. Second, the Rebbe’s theory isn’t at all threatened by the fact that non-Jews can be just as good at spreading the message of ethical monotheism to the wider world. Indeed, that element of the election, the Rebbe was keen to present as something that gentiles could take upon themselves. In his view, our evangelizing mission isn’t what makes the Jews distinctive. Indeed, in a lecture in 1964, the Rebbe cited the following passage from the legal code of Maimonides:

Not only the tribe of Levi, but each and every person of all the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him, and who understands with his wisdom, to separate himself and stand before God to serve Him and minister to Him and to know God, proceeding justly as God made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings which people seek, he is sanctified as holy of holies. And thus, David declared [Psalms 16:5]: “God is the lot of my portion; You are my cup; You support my lot.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

As the Rebbe then noted:

Maimonides [here] makes an extraordinary point… which the commentaries do not highlight: The vocation of a Levite is not only accessible to Jews, but to “all the inhabitants of the world.” That is, non-Jews too can reach this lofty station.[[44]](#footnote-44)

By dedicating herself to God, and choosing to serve His ends in this world, a gentile can join in the universal elements of the Jewish mission, and thereby be sanctified as “holy of holies.” Moreover, as creatures of one God, and sharing in the universal mission of making this world a suitable dwelling place for Him, all of humanity is on the same side. To that extent, the division between Jew and gentile was, as far the Rebbe was concerned, somewhat irrelevant.

When the first Black mayor of New York, David Dinkins, came to visit the Rebbe, in the wake of tensions between (gentile) Black and Jewish communities, they began to speak about the people of good will on both sides. And then the Rebbe, having spoken about “both sides,” corrected himself. We are, he said, “one side, one people, united by the management of New York City.”[[45]](#footnote-45) On another visit from Mayor Dinkins, the Rebbe expressed his hope that the “melting pot” of New York City

…will be so active that it will not be necessary to underline that “they are negro,” or “they are white,” or “they are Hispanic,” etcetera, etcetera, because they are no different. All of them are created by the same God, and created for the same purpose: to add all good things around them…[[46]](#footnote-46)

Ultimately, the coming of the Messiah is to benefit all people, and part of what will bring the Messiah is the attempt to realize the Messianic vision of universal peace and brotherhood in the here and now. In the words of the Rebbe:

Every person should do everything possible to spread goodness and righteousness among all nations of the world… to inspire a deeper awareness of the “eye that sees and the ear that hears” ... This, in turn, should lead to additional action… to [their observance of] the seven Noahide laws.…

Doing this in accord with Torah and through the path of Torah, “whose paths are pleasant, and all her ways are peaceful,” brings people closer together, including causing closeness of heart between Jew and gentile. This new closeness between people will bring peace to the world – and all concerns and worries about the world shaking and trembling, and about war brewing between nations, they all dissolve, and peace and harmony prevails in the world.…

With this peace and harmony, we taste the harmony of the seventh millennium, the harmony of body and soul (i.e., the Messianic era)...[[47]](#footnote-47)

Indeed, any person who lives a life connected to God will feel a tremendous sense of unity with all people. As the Rebbe put it:

When a person connects to God, he unites with all the people around him, and with all of humanity in its entirety. For our one Father in heaven created “all the people on the face of the earth”; every human being throughout the world was created from “the simple oneness of God.”

Or, as the Rebbe insisted when speaking to Mayor Dinkins, we’re all on one side.

**The Difference that Remains**

The accusation of racial supremacism will not easily stick to the Rebbe. Fundamentally, he saw all of humanity as being on the same side. He saw the fundamental mission of creating a dwelling place for the Divine as one that all of humanity shares. And though he thought that the nature of the Jewish soul creates differences in terms of the sort of religious experience/knowledge Jews can have, and in terms of the sorts of service they must render to God, he recognized that every single individual has a unique mission to fulfill in this life that only they can fulfill. In recognition of the individual vocation of each and every individual, the Rebbe thought that even Moses would find good reason to be humble.

Moreover, the Rebbe didn’t think – like the Rihal[[48]](#footnote-48) – that the Jews were chosen because they were special. Rather, their specialness (i.e., the Divine booster-packs attached to their souls) came to them as a result of their being chosen, to help them fulfill their task. The reason the Jews were chosen, rather than some other people, remains a mystery. According to the Rebbe, talking about the election of the Jews: “We do not know the ways of the Creator and His reasons for acting in a certain way.”[[49]](#footnote-49) And since the chosen were to have their souls rooted in the Divine Essence, which transcends reason, we shouldn’t *expect* the choice itself to have been beholden to reason, still less to a reason that others could grasp. As the Rebbe wrote:

For reasons best known to God Himself, He wished that there should be many nations in the world, but only one Jewish people, a people who should be separated and different from all the other nations, with a destiny and function of its own…[[50]](#footnote-50)

But even if the label of “supremacism” doesn’t stick, there is still an essentialism that runs in tension with the much more universalistic views of Saadya Gaon and Maimonides; an essentialism that some will find distasteful. Even in the Rebbe’s conception of the end of days – according to which both Jews and gentiles will experience a utopic world in which God’s presence can dwell more fully than at any time in history – a fundamental difference between Jew and gentile will remain. For the first time in history, every gentile will be able to have some sort of apprehension of God’s ineffable essence (to which the tetragrammaton refers), but the distinction will not be transcended, as Rabbi Kook insists it will.[[51]](#footnote-51)

It seems that according to the Rebbe, in his exploration of the ways in which the gentiles will experience the final redemption, they will ultimately apprehend God’s ineffable essence only because this essence will be so brightly manifest in the people of Israel. Here, the Rebbe is drawing from the *Tanya* and its assertion that at the end of days, *so* much heavenly light will fall upon the Jews that it will also illuminate the nations of the world.[[52]](#footnote-52) It is almost as if all of humanity merits to experience a beatific vision, but what they see is God’s most essential light *incarnate* in the people of Israel, who are utterly one with God, since their higher souls are rooted in the very essence of the Divine.[[53]](#footnote-53) The Rebbe, at the conclusion of this discussion, makes it sound as if God reveals itself to humanity through Israel – His avatar – in the eschaton.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Even if the Rebbe’s vision leaves no room for any Jewish *individual* to feel a sense of arrogant pride in the face of any gentile *individual*, one might worry that a sense of *collective* arrogance – which is still quite out of kilter with Jewish ethics – does seem warranted by this eschatology. This creates reason to demur. Perhaps the right response to that worry says: (a) all people manifest Godliness, even if only Jews manifest something of God’s *essence*; (b) the distinction is only really skin deep when you recognize that, outside of the story of this world, all of us – Jew and gentile alike – are nothing more than ideas in the mind of one God; and (c) if we’re all enjoying something like a beatific vision, nobody will be coarse enough to feel hard-done by due to whatever differences remain between Jew and gentile.

**Conclusions**

The Rebbe’s conception of the election of Israel manages to combine elements of all the Biblical models we have identified,[[55]](#footnote-55) the incarnational elements of certain Rabbinic models of the election,[[56]](#footnote-56) elements of Maimonidean universalism,[[57]](#footnote-57) supra-rationalism (since God’s choice of Israel remains a mystery),[[58]](#footnote-58) and the Two-Track Model,[[59]](#footnote-59) all within the contours and terms of Jewish mysticism and the Chasidic tradition. He also manages to package all of this in a way that greatly diminishes concerns that one might have about racism or supremacism.

Personally, however, I am not wedded to the inerrant authority of the *Tanya* or any other work of Jewish mysticism. I seem them as part of the unfolding of the Oral Torah, but they are not scripture! I think that Chasidic idealism is ingenious and that any theist, upon reflection, should find it hard to resist.[[60]](#footnote-60) After all, there *can* be no creation without *tzimtzum*, and Chasidic idealism is the best way of making sense of *tzimtzum*.

But I see no reason to adopt the doctrine of two souls. It isn’t rooted in scripture, it isn’t rooted in the Talmud or Midrash, and it goes against the consensus of the rationalistic Jewish philosophers.

Even if I believe that people of other faiths are liable to misinterpret certain details of their religious experiences, because their own religious traditions (on my understanding of the world) are liable to lead them astray, I have no reason to believe that their experiences themselves are any less vivid or real than the religious experiences of Jews. Nothing about the spiritual, psychological, or social profile of Jews leads me to believe that there is any metaphysical distinction to draw between Jew and gentile. Orthodoxy doesn’t demand that I draw any such distinction. So, I would rather do without it.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Schneerson provides a masterful theory of the election which meets many of the desiderata that we set out in lesson 1. Indeed, his theory might be the very best available for somebody committed to the inerrant authority of the *Zohar*, Rabbi Vital, and the *Tanya*. But people who don’t share that commitment, like me, might want to adopt a slightly different picture, even if they end up drawing great inspiration from the teachings and example of the Rebbe.

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. According to David Luchins, who was at her retirement party (<https://www.chabad.org/548435>). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As reported to the Rebbe’s personal secretary (https://www.chabad.org/79954). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Tanya*, *Sha’ar Ha-yichud Ve-ha’emuna*, Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Bracha Sack, “R. Moses of Cordovero’s Doctrine of Ẓimẓum,” *Tarbiz* (1989): 207-237. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Etz Chaim* 1:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See our paper, “Divine Contractions: Theism gives birth to Idealism,” *Religious Studies*, 56/4 (2020): 509-524. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For details as to how that might work, see ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See for instance, my book, *The Principles of Judaism* (Oxford University Press, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I call an entity concrete if it has causal powers and/or causal liabilities, and if it can act upon, or be acted upon, by entities located in spacetime. On that definition of “concrete,” God is concrete. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Tanya*, *Sha’ar Ha-yichud Ve-ha’emuna*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In this section, and in the rest of this lesson, I’m greatly indebted to chapter 16 of Rabbi Dr. Yoseph Bronstein’s, *Engaging the Essence: The Torah Philosophy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2024). Almost all of my references to the teachings of the various Rebbes, and the lists of sources cited in my footnotes, are owed to that insightful chapter, and to Rabbi Bronstein’s meticulous research, even if my framing of those writings, through the prism of Chasidic idealism, is my own way of making sense of them. I am also extremely grateful to Rabbi Dr. Eli Rubin for his great erudition and his generosity with his time, for reading through a draft of this lesson, sharding insightful pointers, and discussing many subtleties of Chabad philosophy with me. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See *Derekh Mitzvotekha, Hosafot – Kitzur Tanya*, p. 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Be-sha’a She-hikdimu* 5672, p. 770. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. He cites *Seder Tefillot Mi-kol Ha-shana*, vol. 1, 287b. For other similar sources, see *Sefer Ha-arakhim Chabad*, vol. 2, “*Umot Ha-olam*,” p. 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Likkutei Biurim* to *Kuntrus Ha-hitpa’alut* 47b. See *Likkutei Sichot* 8, *Hosafot*, p. 345, and *Lessons in Tanya*, *Likkutei Amarim*, ch. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Seder Tefillot Mi-kol Ha-shana*, 284c and 287b-288a, and 29a-b. See also *Ma’amarei Admor Ha-zaken* 5564, pp. 90-91, and *Ma’amarei Admor Ha’zaken Al Ma’amarei Razal*, pp. 40-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Tanya, *Likkutei Amarim*, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Shmuel Lew, “The Rebbe Speaks to College Students” (<https://www.chabad.org/354697>). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Numbers 12:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Torat Menachem*, 5742: 3, p. 1205. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Torat Menachem* 5750:1, p. 396. For elaborations on the relationship between settling the world (*lashevet yetzarah*) and creating a dwelling for the Divine (*dira ba-tachtonim*), see *Likkutei Sichot* 5, *Vayishlach* no. 1, *se’if* 8; ibid.,20, *Vayeitzei* no. 3; ibid., 25, and *Noach,* 7 *Marcheshvan*, *se’if* 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See, for example, *Tanya, Iggeret Ha-teshuva* ch. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For a list of sources see *Sefer Ha-arakhim Chabad*, vol. 2, “*Umot Ha-olam*,” pp. 266-7, 275, 285, 294, 299-302. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Torat Menachem* 5747: 3, pp. 356–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See *Sefer Ha-arakhim*, vol. 2, “*Umot Ha-olam*,” pp. 272–277. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Likkutei Sichot* 1, *Metzora*, *se’if* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Yosef Bronstein, *Engaging the Essence,* chapter 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Melakhim U-milchamoteihem* 8:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. “*Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach*,” 7. See also *Torat Menachem* 5743: 2, p. 637; ibid., 5743: 3, p. 1333. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. “*Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach*,” 7. See also *Torat Menachem*, p. 1333. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Torat Menahem* 5743: 3, p. 1333; ibid., 5747: 2, p. 616. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Reshimot Hoveret* 167 and 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Torat Menahem* 5743: 2, p. 900. See also *Torat Menahem* 5746:1, p. 406; Letter from the Rebbe dated to 16 Shevat 5724, available at chabad.org/1899565; and Shmuel Lew, “The Rebbe Speaks to College Students.” [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Torat Menahem* 5746: 4, pp. 254-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Likkutei Sichot* 25, *Yod-Tet Kislev*, *se’if* 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Tanya*, *Likutei Amarim,* 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See Lessons 32-35 of this series. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Shemitta Ve-Yovel* 13:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Torat Menahem* 5724: 3, p. 228*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. <https://www.chabad.org/1599198> [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-etVw9PZUs> [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Torat Menachem* 5743: 3, pp. 1215-1216. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See lesson 26 of this series. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Likkutei Sichot* 6, *Hosafot*, *Yitro*, pp. 317–318. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Letter from the Rebbe, dated Chanukah 5732, available at chabad.org/1883988. A similar discussion can be found in *Likkutei Sichot* 6, *Hosafot*, *Yitro*, pp. 317–318. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Likkutei Sichot* 23, *Balak*, no. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Tanya,* 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *Likkutei Sichot*, 23, *Balak*, no. 2.; see especially *se’if* 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. E.g., the arbitrariness of the Genesis Model, the sense of mission that one finds in both the Genesis and Priesthood Models, and the Marriage Model – as, although the Rebbe relates to Sinai as a moment of universal revelation, he also sees it as the marriage ceremony between God and Israel (see *Torat Menachem* 5712: 1, p. 95; 5719: 1, p. 135; and 5717:1, p. 87). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. See lesson 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. See lesson 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. See lessons 29 and 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. See lessons 32-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Indeed, I defend it at length in my book, *The Principles of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)