

“I have been reading, studying, writing and teaching theology to Jews—including many present and future Rabbis—for nearly half a century. Yet I still think of myself primarily as a seeker. That means living in pursuit of an ever-present yet ever-elusive God, the One of whom scripture says, “Seek His face, always (Ps 105:4).” There is no end to such seeking.”

Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism*

“A certain king was very wise and through a magic illusion he made walls, towers and gates around him. He commanded his citizens to come to him through these gates and towers. He also commanded his servants to scatter the king’s treasures in front of each gateway. There were those of his citizens who went as far as the first gate, took the riches and returned home. This continued at various gates, until the king’s only child made a great effort to go all the way to the king, so that no obstacle would divide them. For everything was really a magical illusion.

This parable is understood as follows: The Holy One, blessed be He, conceals Himself behind various garments and partitions. We should know that God fills all the world with His glory, and that every movement and thought comes from Him. Similarly all the angels and all the heavenly halls are created and made, as it were, from His essence, like a snail whose garment is made out of his own body. There is absolutely no partition which separates human beings from God when we know this.”

The Ba'al Shem Tov, *Keter Shem Tov*

“What is the world? The world is God, wrapped in robes of God so as to appear to be material. And who are we? We are God wrapped in robes of God and our task is to unwrap the robes and thus discover that we and all the world are God.”

-Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl (quoted by R' Jeff Roth, citing R' Arthur Waskow, *Or Chadash*)

“What is Jewish Enlightenment? Well before the term entered common usage, and centuries before it became associated with rationalist philosophy, Jewish mystics pondered the prophet Daniel's prediction that “the enlightened (maskilim) will shine like the radiance (zohar) of the sky.” The Zohar, the masterpiece of Kabbalah which takes its name from that verse, explains that the enlightened are those who ponder the deepest “secret of wisdom.” What is that secret? The answer varies from text to text, tradition to tradition, but in the Zohar and elsewhere, the deepest secret is that, despite appearances, all things, and all of us, are like ripples on a single pond, motes of a single sunbeam, the letters of a single word. The true reality of our existence is Ein Sof, infinite, and thus the sense of separate self that we all have—the notion that “you” and “I” are individuals with souls separate from the rest of the universe—is not ultimately true. The self is a phenomenon, an illusion, a mirage. This view is called “nonduality” (“not-two”), and it is found at the summit of nearly every mystical tradition in the world. Nonduality does not mean we do not exist—but it does mean we don't exist as we think we do.”

Jay Michaelson, *Everything Is God*

“From the perspective of a person, there is a separation from the Holy One, Blessed Be, but from the perspective of the Holy One, there is no such separation.”

Rav Yehuda Ashlag (1885-1954)

“Not the individual person, nor a single generation by its own power, can erect the bridge that leads to God.”

-AJ Heschel, *Thunder In The Soul* (edited for gender inclusive language).

What is nonduality?

Nonduality is a word which derives from the sanskrit advaita (not-two) school of vedantic philosophy. Vedanta (“the end, or purpose, of the sacred scriptures”) is a group of philosophical schools in India which debated and developed the mystical teachings of the Upanishads, poetic texts written by forest-dwelling philosophers, shamans and yogis in India.

Advaitavedanta asserts that there is one true reality, and the idea that there are many things is, in some sense, an illusion. It also teaches that this Oneness is both the ultimate nature of the self (atman) and of the Divine (brahman). In other words, one’s true identity is the true identity of the cosmos. These are, again, not-two.

There is also another form of nonduality that developed in India in Tantric traditions. Tantric nonduality tends to emphasize that the many things are not illusions so much as expressions of divine oneness. In these traditions one doesn't pull away from the many things of the experiential world but rather one learns to understand that they are expressions of the ever-present Oneness—with no reality except as expressions of the One. One formulation of this says: *the world is an illusion; only the divine [brahman] exists; **the divine is the world.***

The Tantric perspective is similar to visishtadvaita, or “qualified non-dualism”, another popular position in Hinduism, which asserts that the world is the body of God. Here the world is only an illusion if one fails to understand that it is God. These teachings can be tantalizing to a Jew, who recites every day, “Listen, Israel, YHVH our God, YHVH is One.” Do these teachings resonate with Jewish theology? Are there similar Jewish teachings?

“Nonduality” is not a term Indigenous to Judaism, though of course in Judaism there is a massive emphasis on “achdut”, or divine one-ness, and the principle that all that exists is God, expressed by phrases such as “alles iz Gott” (all is God), “ein od milvado” (there is nothing other than God) and many others.

In recent centuries a number of philosophers and mystics noticed that similar teachings existed in most religions and among some philosophers, including Christianity, Islam, Mahayana Buddhism, Sikhism, and many schools of Hinduism. These similarities led to the English word “nonduality” being applied to a number of similar, though not identical, teachings. Recently Jews

who are aware of nondual teachings outside of Judaism have begun, rightly, to call our own teachings of this sort “Jewish nondual teachings.”

Keeping it simple for now, we could say these all teach the oneness of reality and the oneness of the divine and the world. In a little more detail, though, we find a list of teachings which seem to recur, and which today are being actively shared between religions through the hands of those who share an interest in nondual spirituality. What I want to do here is a few things: 1) look at the cluster of perspectives that nondual sages the world over tend to have; 2) look at the particularly Jewish set of nondual teachings; 3) ask what it means to embody nondual wisdom in a Jewish religious setting today, and if these teachings apply to some of the struggles Jews face today. I also want to ask what happens when we take these teachings to their radical consummation, and see that—in my opinion— within a Jewish context two possible paths open up.

Let’s also make sure to start with a very important question: ok, so if reality is nondual, all one, and all that— then so what? Why should we care? This whole course is actually an attempt to answer that question, but let’s have an initial check-in here at the beginning.

All is one

Life is stressful. Here I am, an embodied being seeking pleasure, the love of others, people to ally with, wanting to stay close with those who delight me, wanting to increase my knowledge, skills, power and resources. I want to defend myself against sickness and pain, to protect myself against dangers. In this I am conceiving that here “I” am, a separate being from the rest of the

universe, a “thing” in my own mind, if you will, and I am trying to control (or at least strongly influence) what other separate things (people, animals, possessions) do.

Nondualists generally see this common sense picture as false in important ways, and see it as a source of suffering, and/or as a source of estrangement from God and a delusion that obscures the beauty and truth of reality. They attack this basic program in two ways. One they argue that it’s not true: no “things” are separate, and so my attempt to separate out and control “things” that don’t exist is doomed to failure. Two, the thing that is me can’t perfectly control itself (since it’s neither a separate thing or under the control of a separate thing) and cannot reliably control other things either, both because they don’t exist as separate things and because there is no separate “me” or separate “my power” to do any such controlling in any case. We’ll look at specifically Jewish takes on this in classes to come.

Nondual teachings, then, often attack either the idea of separation, or the idea of control, or both. On both counts they are sometimes met with fear, especially by those with a vested interest in things like polarized thinking, hierarchies, and, well, control. In other words, religious leaders!

For this reason until recently, with the advent of the free information ecology, they were often either seen as esoteric, advanced teachings, or as secret or even forbidden ones. In Islam they were integrated into religious society (at least for a while) in an acceptable form by some Sufi orders; Nondual teachings found a home among some Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian mystics; in Judaism they were guarded by Kabbalists and only to be taught to those over 40 (who were less likely to break the rules). That is until the birth of the Hasidic movement, which was

initially so controversial that its founders were placed under cherem (ban) by religious authorities. We will touch on the relationship between nonduality and law, hierarchy, and dual thinking throughout this course. Let's take a look now at when and how it arose in a Jewish context.

A Short and Idiosyncratic History of Judaism

The beginnings of Jewish history are shrouded in mystery. It appears that at some point our ancestors, probably a small nomadic clan of shepherds, wandered from their homeland and were enslaved in Egypt. When they escaped and returned to their ancestral land they saw themselves as diametrically opposed to the burgeoning fascist-agrarian empires of Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, etc and everything they stood for. They had an intuition of the one life that breathed through all things, the dignity of every creature, and they wanted to build a society which reflected that.

The early Jews believed the one life and creator of all things was on the side of kindness and justice. They came to identify it as their God, YHVH, whose name may mean "was, is, and will be" and whose name they also said was "I will be what I will be" or "I am what I am" (Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh). The Jews also used some more common God names like Elohim (divinity, literally "gods" a generic term), El (a Canaanite name for a chief god), and El Shaddai (probably meaning "nurturing god", as Shaddai likely originally referred to breasts). Yet the intimate name of the Jewish God was YHVH.

The ancient Israelites believed that they were called to a relationship with YHVH, particularly to follow His ethical, political and ritual demands. If they did so they would be blessed and a truly kind and just society which reflected the oneness and dignity of all life would be created. They

envisioned what a society of justice and kindness would be like, and though some of their practices and laws fall short of what we would applaud today (and others exceed it) we can understand the direction they were moving in.

The people were led for centuries by shaman-like figures, both male and female (shoftim and nevi'im) who were said to be filled with the spirit (*ruach*) of YHVH. They told stories of their ancestors which reflected their mythos, and recorded their own historical attempts to live in “covenant” with YHVH, particularly stressing their failures and critiquing their rulers as failing to live up to the dream.

The belief, reiterated so often in the Tanakh, is that if the people as a whole lived in utter surrender to and faith in YHVH and embodied YHVH's desire for kindness and justice, then they would be protected from invasion, warfare, famine, and poverty. Eventually the people demanded that the shoftim and nevi'im be replaced with Kings like those around them had, and this initiated centuries of monarchy, with an increasing belief that the King's morality and devotion to YHVH was a key issue in the survival of the old dream.

The people as a whole could not live up to the demand for intense, unified discipline and faith which their belief asked for, and when Israel suffered catastrophes the religious leaders- now free ranging nevi'im (prophets) and priests of the centralized Temple- blamed it on this failure.

Eventually the state of Israel was destroyed in war with the Roman invaders, and most of the Jews scattered throughout the massive Roman Empire. The surviving leaders of the people were

the Rabbis, who had been working on a project, in the face of colonization and disempowerment, to shift the demands of the Torah away from national and land-based fidelity towards more individualistic and portable spirituality. A Jew's faithfulness and ethical purity would now result to their own good standing with God, a good afterlife (a belief recently imported from Graeco-Roman and Zoroastrian cultures) and a contribution to the eventual coming of the Messiah, a divinely appointed savior who would usher in a return to their ancestral land, defeat death and injustice, and bring peace to the world (a vision which had been growing in both Jewish and Zoroastrian circles).

As Jews spent centuries wandering in exile the Biblical command to "seek YHVH's face, always" led them into deeper and deeper explorations of philosophical thought, ethical pondering, and shamanic and mystical meditations and journeys. Out of this came the Kabbalah and eventually the Hasidic and current neo-Hasidic streams of Jewish spiritualities. Jewish understandings of the Torah, of the land of Israel, and of Jewish law evolved and transformed constantly, but we won't be exploring that here. What we will be focusing on is the development of the understanding of YHVH, the one life, reality, wisdom and power of the universe.

An Evolving Oneness: The Shma

The history of Jewish theology and mysticism can be seen in changing ideas about the meaning of the prayer most central to Jewish life, the Shma.

The scholarly consensus is that the original meaning of the sh'ma was "Hear, O Israel, YHVH is our god, YHVH alone." This fits perfectly with the context, in which Israel was declaring its sole fidelity to YHVH, not the gods of others- whether these gods were seen as lesser or not. It also is what the sentence literally means- "echad" does not mean "is one", that would be "yachid." Echad meant "one" in the sense of "alone" (and sometimes "first"). Only in the time of Isaiah did Jews begin to believe that YHVH was the only God that *existed*, and that others were imaginary or demons.

As Jewish questing into the meaning of YHVH got deeper, Jewish thinkers contemplated the claim that YHVH was the one, only God more and more deeply. They came to say that YHVH was the one power behind everything, the one wisdom in and behind everything, and finally the one reality of everything, even the one substance that everything was made of. They stressed divine oneness more and more deeply, asserting that YHVH had no body, no parts, no internal divisions, and could not be grasped by the human mind with its tendency to understand through analysis, or breaking things up into parts.

In the 5th century the intellectual center of Judaism had moved to Iraq, where the authoritative version of the Talmud was completed between the 5th-7th centuries in and around what is now Baghdad. For the next five centuries Jewish theology would be profoundly impacted by the birth and growth of Islamic culture, which integrated into itself Graeco-Roman philosophy.

Maimonides (1134-1204) launched a project to re-imagine Judaism in terms that made sense in a world dominated by Aristotle and Islamic theologians. Maimonides stressed the absolute oneness of God, and God's non-anthropomorphic (i.e. non-human) nature. For the Rambam, God

was one, incorporeal, indivisible, and beyond human concepts. God could be understood through God's activities (i.e. nature) but the direct experience of God Godself would require abandoning all concepts and all dualities. When the Torah speaks of God's body, thoughts, emotions or actions, this is all symbolic speech "in the language of human beings" and not literally true.

At the same time, Jewish mystics living in the sphere of Christian culture cooperated with those living in Islamic realms to develop a mystical cosmology and theology influenced by neo-Platonism, Christian mysticism, and Sufism. Neo-Platonism saw the universe as a series of emanations from the One; Christian mystics had ecstatic experience of the internal dance of God's personas; and Sufis cultivated the abandonment of senses and self in absorption in the divine one-ness. These Jewish mystics were the Kabbalists, who asserted that God's innermost being was the Ein Sof (Limitlessness) which emanate energies through which it interacted with creation, the *sefirot*. All of creation was an emanation of elements, numbers, words and energies pulsing from the Ein Sof. The Spanish mystics of the Zohar would go so far as to say that the God of popular religion, YHVH, was actually an emanation of the sefira of Tiferet ("Beauty") and a kind of a palace or mask allowing humans to interact with the formless, boundless Ein Sof, the true Godhead. Some Kabbalists would practice hitbodedut, a type of meditation based on letting go of the world of the senses and thought, and others attained ecstatic visions or absorption through chanting, asceticism, and prayer.

The first really non-dualist statements arise in the writings of the Kabbalists, as shown by these selections from Daniel Horwitz's excellent *Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism Reader (JPS)*:

One should avoid fashioning metaphors regarding Ein Sof, but in order to help you understand, you can compare Ein Sof to a candle from which hundreds of millions of other candles are kindled. Though some shine brighter than others, compared to the first light they are all the same, all deriving from that one source. The first light and all the others are, in effect, incomparable. Nor can their priority compare with its priority, for it surpasses them; their energy emanates from it. No change takes place in it; the energy of emanation simply manifests through differentiation.

-Azriel of Gerona (1160-1238), Commentary on the Ten Sefirot

He understands all, but there is none that understands Him. He is not called by the Name Yud, Heh, Vav, Heh, nor by any other name, except when His light extends itself upon them. And when He removes Himself from them, He has no name of His own at all.

-Zohar 3:225a, Ra'aya Meheimna (12th century)

Do not attribute duality to God. Let God be solely God. If you suppose that Ein Sof emanates until a certain point, and that from that point on is outside of it, you have dualized. God forbid! Realize, rather, that Ein Sof exists in each existent. Do not say: "This is a stone and not God." God forbid! Rather, all existence is God, and the stone is a thing pervaded by Divinity.

-Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570) Shiur Komah, 206b

True and absolute faith states: "In heaven above and on the earth below, there is no other [ein od]" (Deut. 4:39). The meaning of this verse is not as some have said, that there is no other God than He. This much we already knew from "[Hear O Israel,] The Lord is God, the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4)! Rather, the

meaning is that there is nothing else in the world besides His Divinity. To clarify: there is nothing in the world of any kind, which has vitality, power, and movement, even inorganic matter, which has not been emanated from Him, in accord with the verse: "You give life to all of them" (Neh. 9:6).

Isaiah Horowitz (d. 1630), Shnei Luhot ha-Brit, Toldot Adam, Beit ha-Behirah, sec. 4

In the directly pre-modern period two new forms of Jewish nonduality emerged. The first in time was that of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), the renegade Sefardic Jewish philosopher who was expelled from the Amsterdam Jewish community as a young man. Spinoza would become one of the most brilliant and influential philosophers of all time. Leaving aside his important thoughts on psychology, religion and politics, for our purposes what is important are his thoughts on God.

Spinoza argued that a rigorous logic leads us to the following conclusions: that all things are made of one cause which is the Substance of all, and that the qualities of this Substance, which Spinoza also called "God, or Nature" and commonly called "God" make up the universe. God unfolds naturally according to its own intelligent structure, and the universe is this unfolding. There is no God outside of the universe, rather the universe is God God-ing. God has no purpose and can not act other than it does. God simply expresses itself, and the universe is that expression.

Around a century later a group of radical Jewish mystics who came to be called Hasidim would argue along similar lines, though with important differences. The Hasidim took Kabbalist statements that "all is God" very seriously and cultivated states of ego-dissolution through intense prayer, dancing, study and meditation in which they could experience the presence of the

Divine and the boundlessness of the Ein Sof. A mysterious Rabbi and itinerant wonder-worker and healer named the Baal Shem Tov was the founder of Hasidism, though it was elaborated and given more scholarly clout by his main disciple, the Kabbalist Rav Dov Ber the Maggid of Mezritch. The Maggid had many disciples, but two of them would develop different and interesting versions of Nondual Judaism which we will look at: Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk and the Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch. Rebbe Nachman, the Baal Shem's grandson, taught that one needed to throw away Da'at (knowledge) and attain a state where there was no division between the self, prayer, and God.

[Those who seek to approach God,] who would cleave to Him in thought because of their love of Him, and linking themselves to Him with cleaving, longing and desire, likening themselves to Ayin [nothing], understand that were it not for the power of the Creator who continuously creates and sustains them, they would be nothing, just as they were before the creation. For indeed, there is nothing in the world except for God.

-Meshullam Feivush Heller of Zbarasz, Yosher Divrei Emet (1742-1794)

Although some feared that the Hasidim were pantheists or pure non-Dualists, i.e. that they equated God and the universe as Spinoza did, this was not the case. Hasidim came about as close to that position as one could while still retaining a traditional pre-modern Jewish worldview, as we shall see throughout this course, but they did not go as far as Spinoza. For the Hasidim God was always also transcendent of the universe, and though God made the universe out of God, God does have moral principles, purposes and concerns. Not until recent times with Rabbis like

Jay Michaelson, Arthur Green, and Rami Shapiro- neo-Hasidic teachers– would there be esteemed Jewish teachers who would adopt Spinozist views while still practicing Judaism.

Classical Hasidic thought asserts that God made the universe out of Himself, and is not absent from any part of it. God can be found even in the unholy and impure (if in a more hidden form). The universe both conceals God (hiding His oneness in plurality, his infinity in finitude, and his goodness in apparent evil) and reveals God—since without this hiddenness, or “enclothement” (lavush) there would be no finite creatures to comprehend God.

Yet for Hasidim God is more than the universe (this is called *panentheism*) and is in a sense separate from it, emanating it and guiding it according to His love and wisdom towards His own purposes. In India this position is called *vasishtadvaitavedanta* or “qualified nondualism” to distinguish it from pure *advaitavedanta*.

Chabad has resolved the tensions of these positions by asserting that YHVH is so boundless and infinite that YHVH encompasses both infinite and finite being: both beyond and within the cosmos, both personal and impersonal. To put it another way: YHVH is so vast and infinite that it can appear in both infinite impersonal expressions and finite, personal expressions. This position echoes that of the Zohar but expressed in philosophical terms.

I may not be able to see it right now, but the Holy One is the source of all reality. Being is made of God, you and I, everything is made of God—even the grains of sand beneath my feet—the whole world is utterly comprised of, and dependent upon God. I, while stubbornly insisting on

my own autonomy and independence, only succeed in banishing myself from any sense of the presence of God.

Kalonymous Kalman Shapira (The Piazeener Rebbe, 1889-1943), *B'nei Mahshavah Tovah*

Bereishit **Meditation**

David Chaim Smith, in his book *The Kabbaliatic Mirror of Genesis*, devotes an entire book to a Nondual interpretation of the first three chapters of B'ereshit.

Tonight we'll do a meditation based on his interpretation of the first word, *B'reshit*.

Bibliography

Nefesh haChaim
Rav Chaim of Volozhin

From Tiberias, With Love (the teachings of the Vitebsker Rebbe- M.)
Glazer and Polen

Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition
Arthur Green

A Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism Reader
Daniel M. Horowitz

The Soul Of The Stranger
Joy Ladin

Everything Is God
Jay Michaelson

Likutey Moharan
Rebbe Nachman of Breslov

Me, Myself and God
Jeff Roth

Kabbalistic Panpsychism
Hyman M. Schipper

True Existence
R' Shmuel Scheerson of Lubavitch

Practical Tanya
The Alter Rebbe; Chaim Miller

Open Secrets
Rami Shapiro

The Kabbalistic Mirror of Genesis: Commentary On The First Three Chapters
David Chaim Smith

Ethics (Proved With the Geometrical Method)
Baruch Spinoza

The Kabbalistic Tradition
Alan Unterman