

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים הַגֵּד אֲנֹכִי בְּאֵל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם וְאָמְרוּ־לִי מִה־שְּׁמוֹ
מָה אֵמַר אֲלֵהֶם:

Moses said to God, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors’ has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is [God’s] name?’ what shall I say to them?”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲהִיָּה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם:

And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh,” continuing, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh’ sent me to you.”

וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כֹּה־תֹאמַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁלַחְנִי
אֵלֵיכֶם זֶה־שְּׁמִי לְעֹלָם וְזֶה זְכָרִי לְדֹר דָּר:

And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you speak to the Israelites, יהוה the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you:

This shall be My name for all time,

This is my remembrance from generation to generation.

The above is a justly famous passage from the Torah. Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), the Indian sage who was probably the most influential teacher of nonduality in the 20th century, once said the most perfect expression of the nondual divine reality was not in Hindu scriptures but was in

the Bible, when God self-identifies as “I am that I am” (one possible translation of Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh).

The phrase is translated most often as “I am what I am” but might more accurately be translated as “I will be what I will be,” the first being preferred by many mystics but the second probably more literally correct. Either way, the point seems to be that God is self-sufficient Being (or Becoming), answerable to none but Godself, dependent on no one, self-generating and self-willing. What is interesting is that when Moses asks “Who shall I say sent me?”

The first answer is not to give a name but to describe Godself- the answer seems to be saying, I am not just a “god”, I am Godness itself, I am self-generating Being, I am utter power and becoming. God then comes down a level and gives a name- YHVH, and a history of relationship with the ancestors of Israel. It’s interesting, then, that this passage seems to support the later mystical distinction between the named and the nameless God expressed in the Zohar:

“In the beginning —Genesis 1:1

At the head of potency of the King He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed from the head of Infinity, a cluster of vapor forming in formlessness, thrust in a ring, not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all. As a cord surveyed, it yielded radiant colors. Deep within the spark gushed a flow, splaying colors below, concealed within the concealed of the mystery of Ein Sof. It split and did not split its aura, was not known at all until, under the impact of splitting, a single, concealed, supernal point shone. Beyond that point, nothing is known, so it is called Beginning, first command of all.

The enlightened will shine like the zohar of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, too, like the stars forever and ever (Daniel 12:3). Radiance! Concealed of concealed struck its aura, which touched and did not touch this point. Then this beginning expanded, building itself a palace worthy of glorious praise. There it sowed seed to give birth, availing worlds. Radiance! Sowing seed for its glory, like the seed of fine purple silk wrapping itself within, weaving itself a palace, constituting its praise, availing all. With this beginning the unknown concealed one created the palace. This palace is called God.

The secret is: With beginning, —— created God (Genesis 1:1).”

Radical Nondual Judaism Class Two

Or Shalom Oct 2022

Matthew Gindin

Master of the Universe, who is near to those who call out to Him in truth, grant us the merit to know that You exist always, at all times, in each person and in every place. Even in the most hidden depths of concealment You are to be found there. For You, in Your essence, are hidden among all concealed things in the world.... You are to be found there, for there is no place where You are absent.... Without You there is no life in anything in the world. Even all the Shells [Kelipot], all the impurities in the world, all of the Other Side [Sitra Achra] and all the concealing forces in the world which mask Your divinity, all of them only have the life and power which they receive from Your essence... Grant me the merit to reveal that which is concealed within concealment and to transform it into knowledge, so that from concealment the holy Torah will be made. The hidden holy Torah will be revealed there in the midst of that which is concealed within concealment. We should have the merit to reveal the secrets of the Torah. [That is] to understand and grasp the mysteries of the Torah until we reach the point that we hear the

great proclaiming voice of the holy Torah, which cries out and calls continuously with a powerful voice: 'How long will you foolish ones love foolishness.' Through our great sins, however, we do not hear the voice of this call....

Reb Nosson of Nemirov

As we have already begun to see, there are different ways of squaring the experience- or intellectual recognition, depending on the speaker- of God's nonduality, and the values, practices and emotional textures of religious Jewish life. In today's class I want to look at four different responses. These will set the scene for future classes where we zoom in to look at particular issues in more detail.

Spinoza

Spinoza argued that the universe was God God-ing. God unfolds on the basis of its inherent intelligent and intelligible structure, and is not a person with goals or emotions, but simply the totality of all that is, endlessly unfolding. For Spinoza this has specific, concrete results in the realm of religion and ethics.

With regards to religion, Spinoza felt that at best religion represented "philosophical truths" (assertions reached by way of reason alone) in imaginative form. God's oneness and power were

represented in imaginative form in the Hebrew Bible in a way which entailed some distortion of reality, but which was and is useful for inspiring the average nonphilosopher to engage in virtue, or for the sake of political unity. Spinoza viewed much of the Hebrew Bible as a fiction which was useful for creating and strengthening the ancient Israeli state. What was timeless and universal in it is the ethical teachings of the prophets, who grasped philosophical truths by way of their imaginations.

What is ethics and virtue for Spinoza? Spinoza argued that all beings are in essence something called *conatus*, or the striving to exist and flourish. To flourish is to increase one's power to act, or in other words one's vitality, skill and ability.

This is as true for a rose as it is for a human. Yet a human being strives to fulfill their *conatus rationally*, i.e. through self-conscious rational thought, as opposed to a cat or stone. Thus ethics is the guide to how to empower one's *conatus* in a rational manner. The more one understands reality (which is God) the more one empowers one's rational *conatus*, so the rational knowledge of God/Nature/Reality is priority #1.

How though, will one act? Well, for Spinoza one will strive to increase one's joy and wisdom. One will seek to be one's own source of joy, as opposed to relying on externals, though one will make use of external things in ways that holistically nurture the mind and body (such as music, laughter, good food and drink, and entertainment).

A key insight in Spinoza is that negative emotions are all irrational and make one a slave to externals, and positive emotions are either irrational and healthy (if they are reliant on things like status, sensual pleasures or states of affairs) or, at best, rational and healthy (when they result from an autonomous increase in wisdom and power). If they are in this last category, they lead to

what he called “freedom and blessedness.” A second assertion Spinoza argues for is that the wise person will cultivate rational friendships with others (i.e. relationships that increase one’s joy and power) and seek to collaborate in the sharing of all (rationally good) resources.

It follows from the above that emotions like anger, ambition and melancholy are vices, and emotions like benevolent love, joy in one’s power and wisdom, and tranquility are virtues.

Spinoza argues that the rational person will always return love for hatred and non-violence for violence, will be generous with others, and will not be ambitious for fame, status, or the regard of others. These virtues can be cultivated through understanding the way human and social psychology works and through cultivating surrender to, and love for, God- which here, again, means surrender to, and love for, Reality itself.

It is interesting to note how similar Spinoza’s rational ethics are to the ethics of Judaism. The Rabbis counsel against anger, ambition, and melancholy and advocate joy, generosity, and pro-social virtues. They put a prime on community and rational study, and value sharing wisdom and all other resources intensively. Whether Spinoza’s rational virtues are inspired by his Jewish youth, or whether Judaism supplies an imaginary, religious argument for virtues which are in fact rational, is an interesting question- no doubt Spinoza would argue the latter.

We should also note that Spinoza rejected three virtues Judaism traditionally embraces: empathetic suffering, repentance and humility. Spinoza rejected empathetic suffering because it reduces one’s conatus (it is a “sad passion”) and he rejected the other two as irrational. Humility is not a virtue, accurate self-perception is. Spinoza argued that humility was most often merely “a cloak for ambition.” He rejected repentance because it was based on the delusion that one could have acted differently: in fact all of one’s actions naturally unfold from the being of God, and

one can never act differently than one actually does. (We'll return to this issue next class). Furthermore, repentance makes one feel bad- it too is a sad passion which weakens one's conatus. Spinoza did, however, admit that all three of these qualities can be useful, and though they fall short of rational virtue, they are better, for most people, than their absence.

Spinoza's Heirs

Spinoza's views were and are too radical for most Jewish theologians, as have seen, and most have taken other paths, two of which we'll examine shortly. Three modern Jewish teachers have attempted what amount to quasi-Spinozist Judaisms, though: Jay Michaelson, Arthur Green, and Rami Shapiro. Here we're going to look at Jay Michaelson and Rami Shapiro, both of whom were students of Reb Zalman, z"l.

Michaelson

In *Everything Is God*, Michaelson writes, "In my own life, both nonduality and Judaism have been deeply transformative, and correspond roughly to absolute and relative, universal and particular, head and heart. As we will see, there is little separating the nondualistic philosophies of Judaism from those of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other traditions—not nothing, but little. Nonduality, if true, is necessarily a universal truth, and all schools and teachers are but skillful means of apprehending it. However, as we will also see, nonduality does not erase the world in a hazy cloud of oneness. All is zero (ayin), and all is one—but one manifests as two. The general takes the form of the particular; the One wears the drag of the many."

Michaelson articulates why he incorporates devotion, ritual practice and ethics into his practice of nondual Judaism: “The nondual, itself, demands no response, no action, no community at all. One might even argue that, following today’s neo-atheists, by causing us to think that certain ceremonies, rituals, and mind states are closer to Goodness than others, religion in particular is actively unhelpful. Beliefs in rites and rituals are for intellectual children, they say; when we grow up, we leave such childish things behind. Many contemporary nondualists agree, though for a slightly different reason: because neither the dogmas of religion nor the beloved mind states of spirituality are any closer to the Infinite than the greatest of heresies. The more you think there is something you have to do to be enlightened—keep kosher, be compassionate, make money, whatever—the less enlightened you are. And yet, the heart knows two even when the mind knows one. We are Ein Sof, but we are also the sefirot, also human, also animals. My theology is nondual, but I am not so “advanced” as not to be moved by a sunset. And so, following my heart and my Jewish karma, I choose to address Being not only as It but also as You; not only as Ein Sof but also as God. “You” is to the heart as “Is” is to the mind. When there is no sense of the self, then religion is of no purpose; but when there is, and when there arises the need to love and be loved, then religion becomes relevant again. And because the religious response is voluntary, and because it springs from the yearning of the heart, being religious, in the sense that I understand the term, is not a matter of opinion. It is a matter of love.”

Further, he writes, “... Judaism does differ in one important respect from other nondual paths. Whereas most traditions regard the knowledge of nonduality as the ultimate wisdom—the last stop on the road, so to speak; the final teaching—in the Jewish mystical tradition, nonduality is

the beginning rather than the end of wisdom. Jewish mystics begin with the shocking, and proceed to the ordinary. Thus Kabbalah begins, rather than ends, with the Ein Sof, and devotes most of its attention to the finite, to the sefirot and their qualities, to the world and its demands. And the Jewish contemplative spends less time establishing nonduality than asking how best to live in its light.”

Rami Shapiro takes a similar position.

“I want you to remember two important words: Yesh and Ayn, form and emptiness,” he writes in the guise of the imaginary Rabbi Yerachmiel in *Open Secrets*, a series of fictional letters between an old world Hasidic nondualist and his America-bound descendant, “Yesh refers to the seeming separateness of things, each thing having its own form, its own boundary, its own separate existence. Ayn refers to the emptiness of things, to the fact that forms and boundaries are not real in and of themselves, but rather useful constructions of the mind. To feed myself I must be able to separate my mouth from your mouth. This ability creates the world of Yesh. But to love my neighbor as myself (Leviticus 19:18) I must be able to transcend that distinction and recognize a greater unity without form. This is Ayn. And which is God, Yesh or Ayn? Both and neither!”

“Do not imagine God as a separate being apart from Creation who decides to create. God does not decide as we decide. God’s will is only to fulfill God’s nature. And God’s nature is to manifest Yesh and Ayn. This is God’s nature, this is what God is: The source and substance of all and nothing.”

Rami explains, on his website, that:

The Judaism I teach rests on two pillars: teshuvah, returning you to your true nature as a manifesting of Aliveness (Genesis 1:26), and tikkun, repairing the world through Rabbi Hillel's Golden Rule: "What is hateful to you do not do to another" (Talmud, Shabbat 31a).

The Judaism I teach is free from chosenness, xenophobia and ethno-nationalism.

The Judaism I teach envisions a fearless world without war (Micah 4:3-4) where people eat simply, drink moderately, work joyously, and love freely (Ecclesiastes 2:24; 4:8-12).

The Judaism I teach is rooted in the iconoclasm of lech lecha, freeing you from everything that keeps you from being a blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:1-3).

The Judaism I teach affirms machlochet l'shem shamayyim and eilu v'eilu: honoring argument, doubt and critical thinking over intellectual passivity, spiritual conformity, and manufactured consent (Talmud, Eruvin 13b).

The Judaism I teach highlights eight mitzvot: Shabbat, reclaiming the dignity of all beings; kashrut, ethical and sustainable manufacturing and consuming; tzedakah, just use of finances; gemilut chasadim, acts of lovingkindness; shmirat halashon, cleansing your speech of gossip, slander, falsehood, and distortion; limmud, turning Torah in search of wisdom; brachot,

cultivating gratitude through blessing; and hitbodedut, inquiring into self (mochin d'katnut, narrow mind) and awakening as Self (mochin d'gadlut, spacious mind).

Rami's reason for involvement with Judaism in particular is incidental; he was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family and it's the community he has made his home in. As he writes: "Religions are like languages: no language is true or false; all languages are of human origin; each language reflects and shapes the civilization that speaks it; there are things you can say in one language that you cannot say or say as well in another; and the more languages you speak, the more nuanced your understanding of life becomes."

Both Shapiro and Michaelson reject free will. Shapiro has written a book about the lack of free will and addiction recovery called *Surrendered*, and it is more prominently a part of his teachings than that of Michaelson's. We'll return to the issue of freewill in depth next class.

Chabad

The Tanya is one of the few written works of early Hasidic masters, and it was written down by the first Rebbe of Chabad, the Alter Rebbe (R' Schneur Zalman of Liadi, 1745-1812) as a guide to the increasingly far flung groups of his disciples, who were inundating him with letters seeking guidance. Rabbi Schneur Zalman writes, "every created, activated thing looks to us like something [yesh] and real because we cannot understand or see with our fleshly eyes the power of God and 'Breath of His Mouth' that is within it." The Rebbe's metaphor for this, still popular in Chabad circles, is a ray of light, which appears to us as something, but "in its own place," that is, the sun, it is "naught and complete nothingness [ayin v'efes mamash], for it is absolutely

nullified in relation to the body of the sphere of the sun which is the source of this light and radiance.” A ray of sunlight is utterly dependent on the sun, inseparable from it, pervaded by its power, and ontologically null before it.

Rav Aharon of Staroselye, a particularly radical Chabad teacher of the early generations, puts this even more strongly: “God before the world and God after the world is the same: alone. Just as God was in Godself before the creation of the worlds, so the Blessed One is alone [l’vado] after the creation of the worlds, and all the worlds do not add to God (may he be blessed) anything that would divide God’s essence (God forbid), and God does not change and does not multiply in them, and the worlds (God forbid) do not add anything additional to God.”

The second part of the Tanya is called the *Shaar HaYichud v’HaEmunah*, “The Gate of Unity and Faith.” It is structured around the Zohar’s claim that the first line of the Shema (“Hear O Israel, YHVH is God, YHVH is One”) is “higher unity” and the second line (“Blessed be the name of God’s kavod malchut [glorious kingdom] forever”) is “lower unity.” The Tanya’s explanation is that the first is the unity of the transcendent One, and the second is the union of that unity with the multiplicity of manifestation.

The Tanya understands *tzimtzum* as allowing for the appearance of multiplicity. The Tanya identifies with the world of plurality with the Divine name “Elohim,” which is numerically equivalent to *hateva*, or Nature. Nature—the laws of nature, the structure of the universe, all the principles of cosmology—is that which conceals, and yet also reveals, the Divine, YHVH.

The Alter Rebbe argues that YHVH and Elohim are two aspects of the same Unity: that YHVH is Elohim. One does need to recognize YHVH “behind” Elohim but unlike in some forms of nonduality this is the primary, not the final, step. The ultimate understanding is seeing the infinite in the finite; “Being dancing as world, God donning the drag of us” in Michaelson’s words. This is the meaning of the upper and lower unity of the Shema. The upper unity, the Tanya explains, is YHVH, the first line of the Shema, Oneness of God from the Maimonidean perspective. Here God is totally one, perfect, and changeless: There is no change at all: just as God was alone before the creation of the world, so God is alone after it was created. And so it is written, “You were the same before the world was created; You have been the same” without any change in God’s essence or knowledge, for by knowing Godself, God knows all created things, that are from God and nullified in God’s essence from God’s point of view. The lower unity, however, is the union of YHVH with the immanent. This is the distinction between the highs of peak experience and the sanctification of the everyday.

Rav Aharon of Staroselye again, as quoted by Michaelson, says, *In truth the power of concealment is as Divine as the power of revelation, as it is written “And I have hidden my face . . .” (Isaiah 8:17) . . . The power of concealment and limitation are as Divine as the power of boundlessness, as it is written in the Avodat Hakodesh, that if you were to say that Godliness is a limitless power, but without the power to limit, you have detracted from its wholeness.*

So to summarize: YHVH has both infinite and finite aspects. In the upper unity, YHVH corresponds to the God of Jewish philosophers: absolutely one, pure Being knowing itself. YHVH gives rise to Elohim, which is the world of nature. Nature obscures the absolute Being of

YHVH, and the fact that it's true being is YHVH, but Elohim also reveals YHVH, and in the final analysis, Elohim is YHVH.

Meditation