

## **Nondual Judaism 3 The “I” and the “Doer” Or Shalom Nov 4 2022**

*So if all is God, to whom does this arthritis belong?*

So goes one variation of the perennially popular piece of Jubu literature sometimes called “Haikus for Jews.”

If all is God, who or what am I exactly? And who is the agent of my actions, myself, or God? Is there free will? Is there a self?

In today’s class I want to look at these questions, building our discussion around the theologies of Rav Yehuda Ashlag (1885-1954), Rav Chaim of Volozhin (1749-1821), and our favorite heretical interlocutor, Spinoza (1632-1677).

### **Rav Ashlag**

Ashlag’s vision of the purpose of creation and the purpose of Judaism were united in one idea: that God had created the universe in order to have an *other* to give to (this idea had been expounded before him by Hesdai Crescas [1340-1411] and Moshe Chaim Luzzatto [1707-1746]).

What God wants to give is Godself, and God's way of doing so is to create a creature who—unlike God, the Giver— is inherently a Receiver. For Ashlag this functions much like Spinoza's conatus, by the way- the essence of the *guf*, the physical form, of a human being, is the desire to receive (or in Spinozist terms, to gain) life, pleasure, and power. For Ashlag the proper object of the desire to receive is not the finite goods of the world, but the infinite good of God (for my last comparison to Spinoza, I'll note that they both agree on this, though they conceive of what it means in different ways).

The Creature receives God by becoming like God, or in other words, becoming a Giver as well. This attainment of “affinity of form” between creature and Creator is what constitutes *d'vekut* (cleaving to God). For Ashlag, all creatures have been made ungodly so as to receive God, and hence fallible, mortal, capable of evil, and selfish. Through Torah and mitzvot humans develop the *will to give benefit* (*ratzon l'hashpia*), the desire to give to God and fellow human beings. Giving to God is doing the divine will (as revealed in the Torah) and giving to people is a matter more particularly of the mitzvot *bein adam chavero* (interpersonal mitzvot).

Humans evolve towards union with God in one of two ways: either on the basis of wisdom or the basis of suffering. In the end, believed Ashlag, all souls (Jewish and non-) will reincarnate until they have attained affinity of form with the Creator. The pinnacle of human development is when the human being receives the gifts of God only to give them away to others and back to God.

This is one vector of evolution; the other takes place on earth where human society, as he put it, “sluggishly and painfully evolves” until all of its relationships reflect love. The word “evolve” is

not chosen lightly. Evolution is central to Ashlag's thought. Also essential is the fact that for Ashlag evolution is not individual, it is communal. Ashlag is unusual in claiming that the mitzva of *v'ahavta l'reacha kamocha* (love your fellow as yourself) cannot be fulfilled except in a communitarian society where everyone's needs are met, thus allowing people to give selflessly because they live free from fear.

Whereas some individuals may be ahead of the curve, generally the individual and the world are interdependent. Pious individuals may uplift humanity, but humanity evolves together and no one is free of responsibility for the rectification of the world: "There is no difference between people, between the black and white and the yellow, between the wise and the foolish. They are all equal, and each is obligated (Ashlag, *Universal and Particular Religions*)."

Ashlag argued that humanity was evolving towards a society where serving the other would be the fundamental value and priority of culture and politics. Ashlag did not simply write about his ideas: he worked arduously to promote them. He met with prominent figures in Israel such as David Ben Gurion, Chaim Nachman Bialik, and Zalman Shazar. Ben Gurion wrote in his diaries that he met with the Baal HaSulam several times, and that he was surprised because "I wanted to talk to him about Kabbalah, and he, about socialism."

Ashlag argued that we are getting ever closer to the messianic society with its other-centered love ethic and wrote that the messianic society can be imagined and should be imitated now. Ashlag wrote that the messianic society would have at its core education towards other-centeredness, a kind of Levinas-ian education where the greatest human wisdom on

“sharing with the other ” would be housed in a vast library. The houses of justice do not give out punishments but rather rewards, and citizens wear badges showing their accomplishments in serving the community. The citizenry in fact compete in serving others, and even endanger themselves in feats of altruistic daring-do. Those who act in a merely self-interested manner lose social status, and if they do something concretely wrong they are sent to the house of justice. There they do not receive punishment, but some benefit that aims at healing and empowering them. “Every defendant comes out of the house of justice with some profit (Ashlag, *On World Peace*).” Justice is entirely restorative, and extreme cases are sent to houses of healing and treated with appropriate therapy. Everyone is assigned mandatory work hours based on their capacity, with the stronger working more: everyone is rewarded for their level of effort, not the quantity of their work. In addition to mandatory work, people are encourage to add volunteer work according to their taste and capacity. Ashlag also stressed that every ethnic group in the society must be treated equally to maintain peace, lest resentments lead to violence. This happens when those who profit from war play on the inequalities in society to foment conflict. Further, argued Ashlag, every nation must serve the whole world, since the wellbeing of world and nation are inescapably intertwined.

Ashlag felt that revolutionary changes should be made slowly and without violence, and with the attitude of taking what is in the world and refining it, rather than destroying things. He criticised “false repairers of the world” for this destructive attitude, arguing that everything in both nature and human culture has a divinely ordained value and simply needs to be refined; “it is well known that in the beginning God did not finish Creation but left it for us to perfect.” Ashlag critiqued the forceful elimination of private property (though he called the abandonment of

private property “our most exalted concept”). He also supported the maintenance of national and ethnic identities, and offered the interesting halachic midrash that “every country has its own ideas and ancestral heritage, some important and some less, and the prohibition against murder applies to all of them” (i.e. ethnocide, the destruction of a culture, is halachically forbidden as a violation of the commandment against murder). Although Ashlag argued that Utopia would need to ground its values in religion to succeed, and envisioned the whole world ultimately adopting a purified Judaism, he also argued against eliminating other religions through any means whatsoever: “God allows every nation to keep its religious customs that were received by its sages; each people according to its preferences and spirit.”

For Ashlag, the Jewish people had been given the Torah in order to create a society based entirely on other-regarding love for people and God. This love would then emanate outward to the Nations and repair the world, bringing all souls closer to affinity of form with God in the process.

Interestingly, considering the above, Ashlag’s vision of the universe was both non dualist and deterministic. To begin with the first claim, for Ashlag, as for most Kabbalists and all Hasids, God is the reality and substance of everything. How, then, asks Ashlag, is it possible for God to have created separate souls? Ashlag explains, in his *Introduction To The Zohar*, that souls are like stones quarried from a mountain- they are made of the mountain. But what separates them from the mountain? It is not a difference in substance, has v’shalom, nor is it a physical or real (absolute difference). Rather souls are separated through “difference of form.” Ashlag explains that this is what separates two things: a table and a chair are ultimately made of the same

substance, but their form is different. The more similar to a table you make a chair the less separated they are, and if you could make them united in form in every single scientific way (including location in space/time) there would not be two objects but one. Thus souls are separated from God because they are mortal, corruptible, finite, etc. Yet there is no true separation: in truth the soul is part of God, and from God's perspective there is no separation between them. Only from the soul's limited, finite, and ignorant perspective does there appear to be separation.

As the soul becomes more like God (and therefore less different in form from God) so the soul comes to perceive itself more and more as non-separate from God.

So Rav Ashlag's answer to the nature of the self differs from that of some non-Jewish nondualists. Some would argue that in this life we should realize that we are nothing but God, that any sense of individuality is an illusion to be cast off. At death the ignorant drive to assert ourselves as individuals will be gone (due to our liberation) and we will dissolve back into the One, free from any further individual becoming. There are some logical issues with this presentation which I won't dwell on here (non-existent individuals merging back into a oneness they were never separate from, etc.)

In Ashlag's version, the soul is not separate from God, but every soul is a real entity which has been formed to experience itself as separate so as to experience the bliss of becoming God-like. The soul never dissolves completely into God, but rather transforms into a pure receiver of God and God-like giver. In other words, the soul is given God so that it can experience the pleasure of, in a limited way, being God-like. Ashlag affirmed the traditional Jewish belief in the

resurrection of the dead, and believed that when the soul had completed its journey to perfection it's body would share in the bliss, becoming divinized as an eternal form for the soul, now in a blissful, eternal dance of giving and taking with God and all other perfected souls.

Where does determinism come into this? Ashlag asserted that the entire universe arose effortlessly out of the thought, or will/desire (*ratzon*) of God. God's desire is to give Godself to all souls, *and God will succeed*. End of story. Ashlag accepted traditional teachings on gehennom as a realm for purification, but rejected the idea that any soul would be lost, annihilated, or punished eternally. All souls will finally achieve "affinity of form" with YHVH.

From this it follows that the scope for free will is limited. God gives souls an ability to choose their actions, but which actions they choose is restrained by God's overall design leading all souls to bliss. The particularities of history are all *logical consequences of God's desire and the means necessary for its fulfillment*. Thus the moment God decided to create, the entire history of the universe— from creation to ultimate redemption of all souls—came into being, and in a sense everything that will ever happen has already happened. There are echoes of Spinoza here (though Ashlag is very unlikely to have read him) and also of "block universe theory" and the philosophy of Emanuele Severino.

So, to summarize, Rav Ashlag taught a bold synthesis of Zoharic, Lurian, and Hasidic Kabbalah and took them all a step further. Ashlag taught that God created souls which are not separate from God, but whose forms create an experience for them which differs radically from God's. This allows God to give the highest possible good- Godself— to them, in a process whose

unfolding is the universe itself. God's desire will be fulfilled, and the working out of the universe from creation to redemption is all already determined. In a sense, then, our sense that we are separate selves, and our sense that we are acting with free will, are in a sense both illusions which facilitate the grand drama of our coming into being and living the difficult, but ultimately blissful, narrative of receiving God's gift and becoming God-like. In the end, though, there is only one reality- God; and only one ultimate actor in the drama- God. In Ashlag's vision, though, souls will always retain a degree of the experience of individuality so as to enjoy both receiving and giving bliss.

### **Rav Chaim of Volozhin**

“What is the purpose of life?...To be the eyes and ears and conscience of the Creator of the Universe, you fool!”

*-Kurt Vonnegut, Breakfast of Champions*

Chaim of Volozhin (January 21, 1749 – June 14, 1821) was a Talmudist, theologian and ethicist. Popularly known as "Reb Chaim Volozhiner " or simply as "Reb Chaim", he was born in Volozhin when it was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. At 25 he was drawn to the famed Lithuanian genius the Vilna Gaon (Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, 1720-1797), and he became one of his most prominent disciples. His major work is the “Nefesh Ha-Chaim”, which has a double meaning: “the soul of life” (we will explain the meaning of this concept for the Volozhiner) and “Chaim's soul.” This sefer is sometimes seen as a “response” to Hasidus in the

sense of a rejoinder. Other say that this is not true, as the Volozhiner was more friendly with Hasidim and the sefer is only occasionally arguing against some interpretations of Hasidus.

### **The Nature of the Human Being**

“It is written (B’reishit 1:27) “Elohim created Adam with b’tzellem (in the image)...”

“The use of the words “tzellem” (image) and “d’moot” (likeness) are not per their simple meanings, for it is explicitly written (Y’shaya 40:18): ‘And what likeness will you compare unto Him?’ Rather, their meanings imply a similarity in some feature, as in (T’hillim 102:7): “I am like a desert pelican.” It is not that he was given wings and a beak...but rather he is described by his actions, that he wandered from place to place like a desert pelican....”

“However, to understand why He specifically stated, “in the image of *Elohim*”, and not some other (divine) name, it is because the meaning of the word Elohim, as is well understood, is that He (blessed be His name) is the “Master of All Powers”, as explained by the Tur (Yaakov ben Asher, author of the Shulchan Aruch).

Rav Chaim goes on to explain that while a human builder makes a structure out of existing materials and then leaves, the Holy One (blessed be He) is different: He makes a structure out of nothing, and He sustains it after that moment to moment, and if He removed His influence for even one moment it would revert to nothingness. Hashem has created the human being in the image of this dependency, making all the worlds radically dependent on human behaviour.

“According to this model, He (blessed be He) as it were, created the human and appointed him to rule over the multitude of powers and numberless worlds, and assigned them to him so that he would be their spokesman and govern them all via the minute details of his actions, speech, thoughts, and the larger aspects of his behaviour, whether for good or (heaven forbid) for the opposite.”

“And from this we will understand what is written (B’reishit 2:7) “And God formed the human from the dust...and blew into their nostrils the neshama of life, and human became a living nefesh (soul)”...however, the text does not say, “and it was in the human” but rather, “it was the human”. [I.e., it is not that the human has a living soul, but is a living soul. The living soul of what, though?- M.] For this reason there is room to explain it as we did, that the human with the living neshama within him, she *becomes a living nefesh for a multitude of worlds without number.*”

“There is something else here that should make one tremble. For one’s body is a small-scale counterpart of all the forces and worlds in existence, which are concentrated in the heavenly Bet Hamikdash [Temple]. The heart, the center of the body, corresponds to the Holy of Holies, the seat of the shesiah stone, which is the source of all kedushah [holiness]...Therefore, when an indecent thought enters one’s mind, he is in effect bringing a harlot into the Holy of Holies of the celestial worlds.”

Rav Chaim goes on to explain that it is not that man is literally the soul of the higher worlds in the sense that a soul inhabits a body. When man acts, it does not directly effect the higher worlds, but rather indirectly. Each part of a man corresponds to a mitzvah, and when he acts, he causes a spiritual reaction in the part of the upper worlds that corresponds to that aspect, increasing its kedusha, which then flows back to the part of the human that did that action.

King David put it like this, “God is your shadow at your right hand (Tehillim 121:5). Just as one’s shadow mimics every motion one makes, so does God guide the higher worlds according to one’s actions. The Zohar explains, “If a person smiles, Heaven smiles at him, if he is sad and depressed, Heaven judges him with strictness. And so it says, ‘Serve Hashem with gladness’ (Tehillim 100:2), for a joyful person draws down joy from above.”

Tzimtzum is the heart of Rav Chaim’s theology: its two wings are divine omnipresence and tzimtzum. The heart of his anthropology is that God has radically relinquished power over the cosmos, ceding it to human beings. The mitzvot are, here, essentially “theurgic”, i.e. they are magical tools for affecting the cosmos (this is not a view unique to him, but he gave it a systematic, metaphysically complete explanation). The contrast with Ashlag here is interesting: for Ashlag the purpose of the mitzvot is to bring down grace/higher light into the soul and to train in being other-regarding. For this reason he took the highly unusual position (for an Orthodox Rabbi) of asserting that the interpersonal mitzvot are more important than the ritual mitzvot (eg. being kind is more important than keeping kosher) since they are effective at training people in becoming givers, i.e. God-like, and thus accomplish the purpose of the Torah more effectively.

Rav Chaim, in contrast, though he certainly was concerned with ethics and attitude, sees the mitzvot— all of them— as having inherent theurgic power to heal the cosmos. It is better to say your prayers in the halachically correct way and at the right time (thus activating the corresponding metaphysical structures of those mitzvahs and bringing blessing) but without feeling and proper attention, than it is to say them incorrectly yet with proper heart (this is the opposite of Hasidic teaching).

In any case, for Rav Chaim, although all is God and is sustained by God at every moment, the universe is a grand act of self-emptying humility for God. The universe is God relinquishing power and giving it to humans, and the fate of the cosmos and ourselves is in our hands. At every moment God, like a self-effacing King, empties itself out in giving power and control to us. Jews are the priests of the universe's salvation, who have our hands on the theurgic means to heal the cosmos.

### **Can Spinoza Help Us?**

If we accept Rav Chaim's theology- and many in the Jewish world, outside of Hasidic and neo-Hasidic circles, accept its basic thrust, even if they have not studied him- then the answer to the tension between seeing God as the sole actor in the universe and the appearance of human freedom is explained by tzimtzum. God could intervene, but doesn't, or does so in a very limited

way. God's providential relationship to human action is generally one of withdrawal- of allowing human choice and surrendering power.

On Ashlag's theology, God is ultimately in control, and in fact since God has set the universe in motion towards and inescapable goal, and designed all of its details, God's providence is active and absolute- the universe could be no other way, and must be the way for the sake of God's happy ending, not matter how much suffering occurs along the way. So who chooses a human action, then, humans or God?

Although Spinoza does not share Ashlag's vision of a happy ending for the cosmos, or of a benevolent divine will, they are otherwise in agreement about many things. Spinoza also asserts that the free, wise human has brought their finite mind into harmony with God's infinite mind and has become God-like in a limited way. His path also aims at joy. For our purposes here, though, the most important similarity is that both agree that the unfolding of the universe could be no other way and unfolds relentlessly and logically from the very nature of God. Both also nevertheless counsel an intensely sapiential and proactive approach to life, one that not only seeks to attain the highest individual human perfection, but one that seeks to collaborate with others and to uplift the human community.

How does that make sense? Shouldn't we all just "let go and let God?" I think the Spinozist answer is that by our very nature we are not free to stop acting or to stop either improving our ideas or degrading their quality. We have no choice but to continue choosing. The correct approach, from Spinoza's point of view, is to seek the highest understanding and the best

choices, while having equanimous acceptance about the choices one has actually made, since one could not have acted otherwise.

There is a resonance here with a teaching of the Mei Hashiloach (Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza, 1800-1854). The Mei Hashiloach, a Hasidic Rebbe, taught that one should strive to do one's best, and if one fails, one should see it as God's will, since God would not permit one who is trying one's best to fail unless it was part of the plan. This obviously resonates with Ashlag more than Spinoza, yet Spinoza might say, in a more impersonal way, that if one is trying to do well and fails that was indeed the will of God.

## **Meditation**