

Reb Zalman was giving a talk at Shaarey Zedek Synagogue in Winnipeg in 2005, and I was present. A swami in the audience asked if a theological question challenging him about whether God was separate from him, was inside or outside of him. “*Atman is brahman,*” Reb Zalman said without missing a beat.

“You are a true teacher of all humanity!” the Swami replied ecstatically.

The phrase *atman is brahman* stems from the Upanishads, the “ear-whispered secrets” or “hidden connections” (depending on the translation) which were composed in the forests of India over two thousand years ago. The meaning is that the true self (atman) is identical with brahman (the power that animates all things; the ground of being, the ultimate divine reality). What is meant here is not that the “I” is brahman but rather that since the source and substance of one’s being is brahman, the deepest, truest identity, of oneself, is brahman.

This phrase is not so much meant as a perfect philosophical assertion so much as a “contemplative pointer”, a strange assertion meant to startle and redirect cognition. Taken as a philosophical statement it may generate more issues than it solves. If Atman is brahman, then why does it experience itself as a separate self? If it is already brahman, what does spiritual

realization change? If atman is brahman, and brahman is the totality of all things, then why can't I feed myself by putting bread in your mouth –to quote a Buddhist attack on this idea?

What is the (or a) Jewish answer to these problems?

Evolving Jewish Notions of The Self

The conceptualization of the self in the Tanakh is different, and stranger, than later traditions often assume.

In the Tanakh, the primordial image of the human is as an “earthling” (adam) made from earth (adamah). Formed of the earth, the earthling is animated by the breath of life gifted to it by the Creator. The words for the human body suggest a likeness to plants (also a common conceptualization in ancient China). The person is the “nefesh” a word which means desire, self and something like “animating soul.” Another word used for the innerness of a person is the “neshama” whose etymology is contested. Some relate it to breath, but others relate it to fire. The interesting argument for the latter is that YHVH dwells above the firmament in “shamayim” which is a world of light and fire. Celestial beings are conceived, in the earliest parts of the Tanakh, as beings of fire, vision, lightning, and light. The neshama blown into the human is, some scholars argue, actually a living flame, not mere breath. As King David will later write, *nishmat adam ner Hashem*. “The neshama of a human is the candle of YHVH.”

There is yet a third word used to describe the inward person: ruach. Ruach definitely means “wind, or spirit” and seems to describe what “inspires” the actions of a person. Thus one can be, like Samson and others, inspired by a “ruach Elohim” or divine wind/spirit which gives guidance or strength, and also be corrupted by a “ruach ra’ah” or evil wind/spirit, like King Saul. As we saw last class, the ruach of a person is sometimes thought of as the spiritual part that survives death: “Who knows if the ru’ach of the children of Adam, if she rises upward, and of the beast, if she descends below, to earth? (Ecclesiastes/Qehelot 3:21)

So the word to describe this whole picture is: unsystematic. The human being is made of earth. The person is a nefesh, a desiring, animate being, whose inner essence is sometimes conceived as spirit/wind (ruach) and sometimes as light/fire (neshama). At death, the nefesh is sometimes described positively as returning to one’s ancestors, but often conceived as “descending to she’ol” a shady, subterranean place of half-life where it is not possible to “live before YHVH” or “praise YHVH”, the god of life. On the other hand, when Samuel is called up from She’ol by King Saul and the Witch of Endor, he is unhappy to be disturbed and returned to earth. To complicate matters, Qehelot seems to think the human being’s ruach actually ascends to heaven, and Job seems to think that the neshama of the righteous rises to dwell with the stars.

To make some sense of this we can remember that many Indigenous people, and, for example, the ancient Chinese- imagined people to have more than one soul. The Chinese believed in five souls (*hun, shen, po, zhi* and *yi*). So the picture of the Tanakh may also suggest that there is more than one soul, with an aspect returning to the earth or to a subterranean realm, and another

aspect, at least for some people, ascending to the heavenly or celestial realms. Although this may seem bizarre, it is very similar to ancient Egyptian and Chinese beliefs, to cite two of other possible examples.

In terms of selfhood, the philosophical implication here is that humans are not unified selves, but are actually composites of different realms and substances which fragment again at death. This would soon change, though, as Jews combined the insights of our own prophets with the exposure to Zoroastrian and Graeco-Roman religions and philosophies.

By the time of early Christian writings, Jews had embraced a clear dualism between body or flesh (guf) and spirit (neshama, ruach), and see the spirit as going on to other realms after the death of the body. The Jewish twist here is the belief that the God of Life (El Chai) will eventually resurrect the dead into a body which is either a spiritual body or a divinization of their previous earthly form (as some believed happened to Yeshua HaNotzri).

As the Kabbalah and Jewish philosophy developed, there was a growing desire to systematize Jewish doctrines of the self. At the same time they grew even more complex due to the visionary experiences of Kabbalists. One system arranged the previous ideas of soul into five levels of one soul: nefesh (physical vitality); ruach (emotional energy); neshama (the psychic soul); plus two levels from Kabbalists: chaya (the innermost spark of life which enlivens manifestation) and yechidah (the part of the soul always one with God).

In some systems, these soul levels also repeat in each of the four worlds of cosmic manifestation, so that each person has five levels of soul in each of the worlds of atzilut (nearness), beriah (creation), yetzirah (formation), and assiyah (action). Also in each of the five worlds the potentials of the soul mirror the ten sefirot, so that the person ends up becoming a Russian doll of nested soul layers and energies with only the lowest levels in this world, and many more higher levels in upper worlds. These higher levels can be called down, or ascended to, in mystical practice.

Rav Yehudah Ashlag, who we have already discussed, believed that the spiritual path of becoming more like God inherently involved a calling down of higher powers of soul from the upper worlds. He also believed that since the eventual perfection of the soul was guaranteed, it was possible to call down wisdom and strength from one's upper soul *as it will be in the future—united with God in eternity*.

To further complicate matters, Kabbalists came to believe that each Jewish soul was rooted in one of the 600,000 Jews who originally left Mizrayim for the promised Land. In turn each of these 600,000 was rooted in a letter of the Torah. Further, each soul is rooted in an aspect of Adam Kadmon, the primordial human who arose in the thought of God before creation. More than one soul can have the same shresh (root) so as opposed to simply reincarnating souls, it is more accurate to see reincarnating families rooted in a common soul. It should also be taken into consideration that souls may be rooted in the great soul of a tzaddik, or they may attach themselves to such a great soul, and tie their fate to his or hers.

It should also be remembered that each soul has two halves: the nefesh behemit, or selfish animal soul, which focuses on survival, pleasure, and power, and the nefesh elokit, or divine soul, which focuses on love of others and of God, and which in most people lies dormant.

Yet there's more. Sometimes a soul descends not to reincarnate, but to impregnate someone else's soul in order to offer guidance or accomplish a spiritual mission: this is called *ibbur*. One may or may not know one has an *ibbur*. It should also be born in mind that after death the soul can project a *guf dak*, or *double*, which traverses the spiritual realms. From all of this we can see that as Jewish thought developed, despite attempts at systematization, the multi-valent, complex, shifting, and communal nature of individuality did not decrease but, if anything, increased.

A Summary:

The Jewish self begins in the upper realms, as a soul in the upper garden of souls, formed with purpose by Hashem. When it is time to manifest in this realm, the soul emanates downward through the four worlds of formation, taking the shape of the five levels of soul and the ten sefirot in each realm as it descends. Finally in this world it enters into and unites with a *guf* by means of the nefesh, the lowest level of soul in *assiyah*. The person is animated, in most cases, by the nefesh behemit and remains on the lowest level of soul, which occasional glimmers of *ruach* and *neshama*. If a person draws down grace from above, however, they begin to access the higher levels of soul.

The soul has a higher root above, which may be its own or may be in a higher soul, as part of a soul family. Upon death every soul reincarnates until it achieves the end of its God-given mission and d'veykut with Hashem, a state which also includes the divinization of the earthly body in eternity.

So Who Am I?

The average *am ha'aretz* views themselves, one might say, like so: I am a mind inside a body. I choose my own beliefs, behaviors and actions, and am the master of my fate. My personality is my own, and I deserve credit for who I am and what I do. Blame is a more complex question, perhaps, but in my heart of hearts I blame myself for all of my deficiencies: my ugly body parts, my weaknesses, my embarrassing thoughts, my failures and crimes. I may, perhaps, blame the world for these things, and if I do I see myself as someone who could have been great, beautiful, powerful, if only I had not been so victimized, so let down, by the world.

The average nondualist comes along and quarrels with this picture extensively. First off, they often say, you are neither your body or your mind. The body and mind function automatically and of themselves, and they are always changing. You cannot control them, and they cannot be an unchanging identity for you, so they are not a self and not who you are. You are, some say instead, the unchanging awareness that witnesses these things. Is this not the only part of you that never changes? Is this not the one thing about you that, if it vanished, *you* would not be *you*?

Imagine it: lose a leg, lose an arm, lose your face, change your race (ial identification?) and you are still you. But without awareness what would you be? Nothing. You are not, in fact, a mind in a body as you naively believe: you are in fact a body in a mind.

Some go farther and argue that to say you are awareness while rejecting the objects of awareness as you is an incomplete picture. Rather, they say, awareness and its objects are forever united in a pulsating dance: you are in fact the unity of awareness and energy, or awareness and objectified energy. There is no boundary to either awareness or energy, so you are in fact all things: you are the totality. The whole world appears in awareness, yes, and it is in fact one with that awareness: the ultimate reality is aware energy dancing in and with itself. What you normally call your mind, your body, your choices, are just pulsations of awareness/energy arising and interacting in a boundless cosmic sea of interconnected pulsation and change with no controller. There is no separate “you” to control the body and mind, and there is no real boundary between “your” body/mind and that of others, or of the totality. Recognize your true identity as the Totality, and be free of struggle, praise, blame, fear of death, and other egoic fixations and illusions!

How, if at all, does the Jewish picture fit into this?

Spinozists, and neo-Spinozist Jews, can assent to much of this picture. They will call this totality “God” and probably shy away from saying “this is what you are!” The assertion that one’s true identity is the Totality, or God, is indeed a source of linguistic and philosophical problems. It cannot mean that I have the powers, freedom, or knowledge of the Totality, or that I am aware of all of it. What it is really saying is important but less exciting: the true source and substance of

my identity, individuality, and actions is the Totality, or God. On this both Neo-Spinozist and Classical Jews can readily agree.

Spinoza's preferred way of saying this is to assert that you and I are "finite modes" of God. We are expressions, or transformations, of God. Spinoza would say that it does not appear this way to us because of the finite nature of our intellect, which tends to misperceive ourselves as separate from God, and as the cause of our own behaviours, because of the limitedness of its scope. Only by means of reason, and also the somewhat mysterious "higher intuition" Spinoza speaks of, can one perceive that one is a finite mode of God and experience all things as flowing from and in God. It is interesting to note that this picture dovetails with that of Ashlag's in surprising ways: Ashlag would agree that the person is a mode of God, and that our separation and our actions are not truly our own, but rather only appear so because of the "difference of form" between us and God, i.e. the limited nature of our being, experience and perception.

A Jew, then, following classical Jewish theology, will not seek to abolish the experience of themselves as a limited, individuated self. Rather they will seek to experience how this limited self is rooted in the Totality, and how the Totality gives this self to itself constantly as gift. *Elohai neshama sh'netata bi....* God, the neshama you have given me.... Jewish mysticism and theology are pervaded by the sense that the universe, and the self, are the good gifts of YHVH.

The early Hasidim sought the experience of "bittul ha-yesh" (nullification of being) in absorption in the Ein Sof (limitless Godhead), but this was always understood to be a temporary state whose purpose was not to escape the *yesh* but to inform it: what was really sought, as Rebbe Nachman

said, are the “traces” (reshimu) of this experience as they inform one’s incarnate actions. Understanding of the mystery of YHVH can always grow, and so does transformation of the heart, but, contra Aristotle and Shankara, in the end the goal is not *gnosis*– a certain state of experience or knowledge– but *avodah*– divine service, action. This is so because even though the world is in some senses a comedy or an illusion– as Rebbe Nachman said– it is not meaningless, purposeless, or unreal. The ultimate stakes lie in knowing YHVH and loving both the divine and the human in knowledge, heart, and action. Whereas for the Buddha the goal is not *gnosis* either, but is freedom from suffering- *gnosis* of nirvana being instrumental to that- for classical Jewish mysticism, the goal, at the end of the day, is the divinely informed action- the *mitzvah*.

Meditation

