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**

**Prof. Samuel Lebens**

**Shiur #31: The Mystical Tradition**

We have now completed our survey of medieval approaches to the election, stretching from Saadya Gaon to Rabbi Joseph Albo. As with our survey of Biblical and Rabbinic sources, we have had to be selective. Nevertheless, my hope is that I have covered the most distinctive schools of thought that emerged among the *Rishonim*. We saw how these schools sought to navigate their way through the Biblical and Rabbinic data about the election, in conformity with their respective underlying philosophical convictions.

Having promised to engage with these thinkers as philosophers, rather than as infallible conduits of God’s revealed word, I collected numerous philosophical objections against each one of the main medieval schools of thought. Saadya Gaon and Maimonides, I argued, were only compelled towards their very reductive treatment of earlier sources by an assumption about the nature of God that, centuries later, no longer seems so compelling. The expansionism of the Rihal, according to which the Jews were chosen because of their different and elevated nature, I argued, flowed from the same theological assumption that underwrote the reductivism of Saadya and the Rambam.

All of these thinkers assumed that God was too transcendent a being to have any personal properties – let alone to display a personal preference – or to make an arbitrary choice of one nation over another. The reductive school therefore denies that God really did make such a choice. The expansionist, unwilling to undermine the significance of the election but making the same assumption about God’s apersonalism, insists that the election was neither arbitrary nor personal, but must have reflected an inherent difference between Jews and gentiles.

On purely philosophical grounds, I argued that we should reject both of these schools as a consequence of rejecting their shared theological apersonalism.[[1]](#footnote-1) I also had an additional concern to level against the Rihal’s expansionism: that it is inconsistent with the narrative frame of the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, ethical and theological considerations as well conspire to create an expectation, at the very least, that any sort of racial supremacism can’t possibly be true.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We then explored the supra-rationalism of Rabbi Albo, which brought to fruition various intimations found in the writings of his teacher, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, and even in the work of Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda. This school of thought, in its purest form, isn’t wedded to a particularly apersonalist theology. Accordingly, it can allow that God might both have personal preferences and make arbitrary choices. But we found it hard to explain this view without rendering God either irrational, capricious, or simply unfair. Moreover, we discovered that the supra-rationalist account’s allegiance to the Bible’s Marriage Model of the election tends to sideline other equally important Biblical notions, such as the universalistic concerns expressed by the Bible’s narrative frame and the sense of mission communicated by the Genesis and Priesthood Models.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And yet, having provided philosophical reasons for rejecting, or at least having reservations about, each one of the medieval philosophies of the election, it’s important to reiterate my commitment to the ongoing nature of revelation in the Jewish tradition. To repeat what I said in lesson 23, as I began my survey of medieval thinkers:

I am committed to the notion that God gently guides the evolution (not merely of *halakha*, but also) of Jewish religious thought. Accordingly, where possible, and in addition to the fact that great minds always deserve respect, we have a *prima facie* motivation to salvage as much of what the giants of Jewish philosophy had to say, in our final theory, as we can.

With that in mind, it is worthwhile noting that the Rihal, Maimonides, and Crescas all agreed that, in some sense or other, all of humanity will one day be grafted into the chosen people. It’s likewise worth noting that the Rihal was an outlier in his view that only Jews can be the recipients of prophecy. In fact, Saadya Gaon, Ibn Pakuda, Rabbi Netanel al-Fayumi, and Rabbi Albo all accepted, at least in principle, that other nations might also receive their own divinely revealed legal systems (although Rabbi Albo thinks this possibility ended when God granted Moses’s request for Israel to be the exclusive recipients of prophecy[[4]](#footnote-4)). These thinkers all accepted the Talmudic consensus that righteous gentiles exist and that they receive eternal reward in heaven. What’s more, we’ve seen reason to believe that the reductivists and expansionists would have gladly abandoned their revisionism, if only they could find a philosophical justification for adopting a more personal theology.

In lesson 23, I said my survey of Jewish philosophy would proceed in roughly historical order. It was important to note the roughness of this order. For example, I wanted to group the medieval thinkers into three distinct schools. To do so, I had to disrupt the order in which some of the individual thinkers appeared upon the timeline. Another disruption to the historical order will take place this week, as I make something of a detour through the mystical Jewish tradition. Later lessons in this series will be dedicated to individual mystical thinkers, such as Rabbi Menachem Mendel Shneerson and Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook. But at this point, it’s important to say something about the mystical tradition as a whole, and about various thinkers who won’t be receiving individual treatment in this series.

**The *Zohar***

Any discussion of the Jewish mystical tradition regarding the election must begin with the *Zohar*,perhaps the most central text of the Kabbala. Mystical tradition contends that the work faithfully preserves the writings of its 2nd-century author, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Be that as it may, the text itself only became publicly disseminated in the 13th century, through the efforts of Rabbi Moshe de Leon. For that reason, the *Zohar* had no discernible influence upon any of the thinkers that we’ve cited until now, apart from Rabbis Crescas and Albo, who lived in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Skepticism about the antiquity of the *Zohar* stretches back all the way to its dissemination in the thirteenth century. Rabbi Yitzchak ben Shmuel, a kabbalist and contemporary of Rabbi Moshe de Leon, wrote in his memoir about conversations he had with Moshe de Leon’s widow and daughter. Both women – he alleges – confirmed that the Rabbi had written the *Zohar* himself and tried to pass it off as the ancient work of Shimon bar Yochai.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Years later, the great Talmudist and halakhic authority, Rabbi Yaakov Emden, who was also a kabbalist, came to the conclusion – after a systematic study of the issue – that much of the *Zohar* had been written in the thirteenth century but that it was written around a truly ancient core.[[6]](#footnote-6) The contemporary academic consensus, based upon the painstaking research of Gershom Scholem and his students, Isaiah Tishby and Yehuda Liebes, is that the *Zohar* was written in its entirety in the thirteenth century, either by Rabbi Moshe de Leon alone or with help from a close network of associates.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Irrespective of its true origins, the fact is that the *Zohar* became the foundational text for the kabbalistic tradition that followed in its wake. It was central to the kabbalistic innovations of Rabbi Isaac Luria, and continued to inform the Kabbalistic traditions in all corners of the Jewish world. It’s no wonder therefore that the accusation that it was a forgery can seem like an attack on the entire edifice of the Kabbala as it has developed over time. Indeed, this accusation is sometimes made explicitly for that purpose.[[8]](#footnote-8) Having said that, though, I don’t think the integrity of the kabbalistic tradition relies upon its having been written earlier than the thirteenth century, nor do I think that its being a pseudepigraphic work should undermine its authority. Two considerations work in tandem to bring me to this conclusion. I turn to them now.

**Impact vs. Origin: Two Considerations**

First, I would argue that the Jewish tradition – given its enthusiastic adoption of the *Zohar* and of the central role it came to play in later kabbalistic work – has crowned this text with an authority that doesn’t depend upon the circumstances of its origin. Irrespective of who wrote it, the *Zohar*’s very acceptance into the warp and woof of Jewish thought constitutes a grafting into the unfolding canon of Jewish texts through which, in the view of those who share the theory of revelation that I sketched in lesson 1, God is continually speaking to us. On that theology, one could even make the claim that the *Zohar* has, to some extent, been appropriated by God.

This consideration might not be decisive. I have conceded that it is possible for the trajectory of Jewish tradition to take wrong turns over time that must be corrected later. But there’s also a second consideration to take into account. Namely: the quality of the text itself, and the fact that it was so clearly written by people (be it one or many) with encyclopedic knowledge of the Jewish tradition and of the various intellectual trends that animated kabbalistic thought in the years before its composition. Despite its many innovations, the *Zohar* doesn’t read like an alien insertion into the body of Jewish literature. In fact, irrespective of who wrote it, it reads like a work of inspired religious genius.

In this vein, Daniel Matt is happy to accept the *Zohar* as a work of Rabbi Moshe de Leon, and yet to champion the work as a majestic contribution to Jewish literature, rather than a sinister forgery. Its author was clearly absorbed in all sorts of ancient wisdom, such that whenever it was written, it was articulating something eternal. Matt writes:

As a kabbalist, Moses de Leon was communicating this ancient wisdom. His style could be biblical or mythological, rabbinic or medieval; the essence was eternal. As one link in the chain of Kabbalah, he was transmitting something beyond himself and felt free to cite the sages who inhabited his imagination.[[9]](#footnote-9)

He did all of this with great creativity and wisdom, producing a work that deserves to be a central link in the unfolding canon of Jewish holy literature even without having been written by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. In fact, according to Matt, and far from sullying its value, the fact that the *Zohar* is a piece of pseudepigrapha is what makes the text so vital. Matt compares the texts that Rabbi Moshe de Leon wrote under his own name with those he allegedly wrote in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. The ideas he communicated under his own name may have been indistinguishable from some of those to be found in the *Zohar*, but according to Matt, much of the splendor and vitality, and many of the boldest ideas, are missing – which means that:

The pseudepigraphic venture has succeeded. By surrendering his identity to Rabbi Shim’on and company, by adopting a talmudic alter ego, Moses de Leon has been liberated. Relieved of the burden of self-consciousness, he is free to plumb the depths of his soul and soar to timeless dimensions. Released from the constraints of acknowledged authorship, he can record his own ecstasy and pathos. The personality of Rabbi Shim’on makes him immune from criticism and enables him to publish all secrets.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Moreover, somebody truly committed to the mystical tradition should be open to the idea that a mystical initiate in the thirteenth century might be able to channel, in some supernatural manner, the ideas, thoughts, and personality of people who lived long before them. Indeed, the practice of “automatic writing,” in which a person writes while under some sort of trance, is “well attested in the history of mystical literature.”[[11]](#footnote-11) For this reason, Matt takes seriously the claim that parts of the *Zohar* may have been written in such a trance. Admittedly, this was explicitly denied by Rabbi Joseph Abulafia, who was a friend of Rabbi Moshe de Leon. He claimed that Rabbi Moshe transcribed the text of the *Zohar* from an ancient manuscript. Unconvinced by Rabbi Abulafia’s insistence, Matt contends that:

At times Moses de Leon is an inspired scribe recording the wisdom of Kabbalah as it courses through him, a vessel channeling the kabbalistic collective unconscious. The fact that the Zohar is suffused with thirteenth-century Kabbalah does not invalidate such a hypothesis; automatic writing may correspond [in addition to any other influence] to the agent’s normal mental content.

And thus, the *Zohar*’s central position in the Jewish tradition, and its claim to being an essential step in the unfolding of God’s revelation, shouldn’t depend upon whether it was written by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai or Rabbi Moshe de Leon. Whoever its author may have been, the project with which I’m engaged – trying to articulate a doctrine of the election that is philosophically reputable and that can also claim to chart a course of best fit through all of the relevant texts and traditions that constitute the unfolding canon of the Jewish religion – cannot afford to ignore the *Zohar* or the schools of thought it inspired.

**The *Zohar* and the Election: The Non-Jewish Soul**

In its commentary on the first chapter of Genesis, specifically the verse that describes the creation of insects – “every living soul that creeps”[[12]](#footnote-12) – the *Zohar* states that “these are Israel, since they are surely *soul*; since they are living, and they are called one nation in the land.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This is clearly meant as a compliment, although it’s somewhat surprising to build a compliment upon a comparison to insects! But then we read the following, which focuses in on the words “living soul”:

Rabbi Abba says, [regarding the phrase] “living soul” – they are Israel, because they are children of the Holy one Blessed be He. And their holy souls come from Him. The souls of the rest of the nations, worshipers of stars and constellations, from which place are they? Rabbi Elazar says from those left sides, which are impure to those that have souls. And because of this they are all impure, and they render impure he who becomes close with them.[[14]](#footnote-14)

This passage then continues to distinguish between the people of Israel, who possess “a living, holy, and elevated soul” – *nefesh chaya kadisha ila’a* – and the gentiles, “worshipers of stars and constellations,” who allegedly lack this Divine soul and possess only an animal soul.[[15]](#footnote-15) This is the first time we find such a stark and essential difference, said to be written into the fabric of the universe from the very beginning of creation, between Jews and gentiles.

Admittedly, these passages only explicitly relate to two categories – the Jews, and those gentiles who worship idols. What are we to make of the fact that gentiles who *don’t* worship idols are not mentioned?

One answer would assume that, according to the *Zohar*, *all* gentiles are idolaters. But this answer wouldn’t be easy to maintain, given Jewish attitudes to Islam, for example. An alternative answer would maintain that the *Zohar* is simply silent here about the souls of those gentiles who don’t worship idols. We know nothing of their nature and have no reason to assume anything negative about them. But this reading gives rise to a slew of awkward questions. For example:

* Are idol-worshiping gentiles *fated* to worship idols by dint of their soul?
* Are other gentiles fated *not* to do so by dint of their having some *different* sort of soul?
* Is the soul of a gentile replaced by a different soul if they transition from being an idolater to being a non-idolatrous monotheist, or vice versa?
* And why the silence about non-idolatrous non-Jews in the context of a seemingly systematic taxonomy of souls?

The most plausible answer is that the *Zohar* isn’t using its description of gentiles as idol worshipers as a qualification to exclude those gentiles who don’t, but as a derogatory description of gentile-kind in light of the behavior of their idolaters. Indeed, this reading seems to be standard, in that most post-Zoharic mystics tend to think that all gentiles carry a different, and lesser, soul than do the Jews.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The Rihal, despite drawing an essential metaphysical distinction between Jews and gentiles in terms of their receptivity to prophecy, was quite willing to recognize that there are righteous gentiles who earn an eternal place in heaven. The *Zohar* seems to make no room for such a concession. The Jews are the holy children of God. The gentiles are not. Their souls hail from the dark side. On the Zohar’s understanding, it isn’t quite true to say that all humans are created in the image of God. Only the Jews can say that without qualification. The non-Jews are the image of “the other side.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The *Zohar Ha-Chadash* (a later addition to the *Zohar*) goes so far as to deny outright that gentiles have a share in eternal life. The Jews, who toiled in Torah, will live forever with God, while those who do not engage in Torah – i.e., the non-Jewish nations – will, it says, decay with the animals.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In the previous section, I argued that the *Zohar* should be accepted as a crucial link in the chain of Jewish tradition. It is. And yet, because no text other than the Written Torah is infallible, and since the Oral Torah contains numerous debates and controversies, there is no obligation upon a Jew to accept every word uttered by every Rabbi in every text of the Oral Tradition – including the *Zohar*. In fact, I think we can make a religiously compelling argument that this particular innovation of the *Zohar* should be rejected with both hands. The argument has three prongs, any one of which would be sufficient, on its own, to leave any apparent kabbalistic xenophobia behind.

**A Three-Pronged Argument**

The first element of my argument against this Zoharic attitude to non-Jewish souls is simply the observation that it conflicts with the Biblical and Rabbinic consensus that preceded it, and it conflicts in such a way as to make it inadmissible as a new direction in which Jewish thought can be allowed to evolve.

As we’ve seen, from the opening of the book of Genesis, with its contention that God created all of humanity in His image (with no distinction between Jew and gentile) through the entire narrative frame of the Bible, which makes it abundantly clear that God’s interest is in the welfare of all mankind, all the way through to the Talmud, with its concern for the welfare of non-Jews – there was never any indication that Jews or gentiles were to be thought of as radically different in kind. No such distinction entered into the mainstream of Judaism before the Rihal.

Even then, the Rihal’s supremacism was restricted to prophetic ability, and his thought was that one day, all people will be grafted into the Jewish people and will come to inherit that ability too. The *Zohar*’s contention that there exists a more fundamental distinction between Jews and gentiles, and that gentiles should be thought of as impure beings who emerge from the dark side of reality, is entirely out of kilter with previous Jewish tradition, as is the notion that only the Jews will experience an afterlife.

Of course, it’s not enough to establish that the Zoharic conception of the non-Jewish soul is completely new, or even that it is at odds with all that came before it. If we allow that Jewish thought can unfold and evolve over time, such that later developments can be viewed as a new chapter in God’s revelation to Israel, we open the door to the suggestion that the *Zohar*’s conception of the non-Jewish soul should be accepted as something of a corrective to the false inferences that one might have made from earlier texts. But, as I said in lesson 17, the process of the unfolding of the revelation can only proceed with certain checks and balances.

The ancient Rabbis were well aware that they didn’t have the authority to innovate anything that would undermine the values implicit in the central narrative thrust of the Bible. Indeed, as the Netziv points out, the sages call Genesis “*The Book of Uprightness*” because the examples it contains of our forefathers acting with kindness and concern towards idolaters is to serve as a corrective against any impulse to the contrary. An opinion that tells us that the souls of gentiles are like the souls of animals, that they spring from the dark side of reality and are destined to return entirely to dust, is an opinion that cannot be admitted into the body of the Torah. We can accept the importance and the wisdom of the *Zohar*, and of the *Zohar Ha-Chadash,* but not of these particular passages.

You might resist this conclusion and insist that our duties to be kind to gentiles, and to be concerned for their welfare, are not undermined by kabbalistic claims about their metaphysical origins. Indeed, I’m sure that some kabbalists are truly committed to kindness and care towards gentiles while also believing them to have impure souls that sprang from the dark side. But it’s not clear to me that this position is ultimately consistent. An association between gentile souls, impurity, and the dark side of reality surely seems to imply, at the very least, that we shouldn’t involve ourselves with the concerns of gentiles, or even interact with them at all. Indeed, the *Zohar* seems to endorse this implication when it insists that a Jew shouldn’t physically approach a non-Jew, for fear of being contaminated by their impurity.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The second prong of the argument is to note the tension between strict monotheism and the notion that only *some* souls come from God. The whole Zoharic conception that there is a light side of reality, which comes from God, and a dark side of reality that is somehow separate from, or even in tension with, the light of God – like a shadow cast by God’s creation – comes dangerously close to the heresy of dualism: that instead of being the product of one creative power, the world is host to two equal and opposite powers, the light and the dark.

I have said that the Rihal was the first thinker in mainstream Judaism to make an *essential* distinction between Jews and gentiles. But there were ancient Jews *beyond* the mainstream who did the same. Rabbi Sacks documents the fact that:

Among the Qumran scrolls [dating back to second-Temple times] is one describing a war between the Children of Light (the Israelites or such of them as remained after their various defeats and exiles) and the Children of Darkness, the Ammonites, Moabites, Amalekites, Philistines and their allies. The Children of Light would be victorious, darkness would be vanquished, and peace would reign for ever.[[20]](#footnote-20)

These texts manifest clear influence from Zoroastrianism, the ancient Babylonian faith that divided the world into two kingdoms: the forces of light, governed by Mazda, the god of light; and the forces of darkness, governed by Ahriman, the god of darkness. But the Rabbinic mainstream always rejected this dualism, which they called the doctrine of *shtei reshuyot* – two domains. Rabbi Sacks explains:

They chose the single most emphatic rejection of dualism in the Bible, Isaiah’s statement, “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace and create evil” (Isa. 45:7). Out of delicacy they substituted ‘all things’ for ‘evil’. They then set these words as the opening line of the daily Morning Prayer, where they stand to this day. So whoever prayed in the synagogue denied dualism. It soon disappeared from the Jewish mainstream, surfacing from time to time only in esoteric mystical texts.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Mainstream Judaism is built upon the denial of there being two domains – a domain of light, and a separate domain of darkness from whence the gentiles emerged. This gives us a very strong reason against attributing any authority to those elements of the *Zohar* that would seek to rehabilitate dualism against the words of Isaiah and against the will of the Rabbis.

In fact, Rabbi Sacks is keen to point out the cost of collapsing into dualistic modes of thought. Even in its weakest forms, it is antithetical to true monotheism. At its most extreme, it becomes a form of pathology:

Pathological dualism does three things. It makes you dehumanise and demonise your enemies. It leads you to see yourself as a victim. And it allows you to commit altruistic evil, killing in the name of the God of life, hating in the name of the God of love and practising cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.

It is a virus that attacks the moral sense. Dehumanisation destroys empathy and sympathy. It shuts down the emotions that prevent us from doing harm. Victimhood deflects moral responsibility. It leads people to say: It wasn’t our fault, it was theirs. Altruistic evil recruits good people to a bad cause. It turns ordinary human beings into murderers in the name of high ideals.[[22]](#footnote-22)

This leads us to the third prong of my argument. Given that the second prong points to the evils of dualism, the third prong of my argument is simply to note that the *Zohar* is generally committed to a radical monism itself.[[23]](#footnote-23) Monism is the view that, in some sense or other, all things are one. In kabbalistic terms, it means that all distinctions are somehow illusory, or at the very least transient and emergent, because, at the fundamental level of reality, there is only one simple being; that being is God and is wholly good.[[24]](#footnote-24) Accordingly, even the *Zohar*, by its own lights, cannot truly accept, in the final analysis, that anything exists that doesn’t come from God and depend upon Him for its being.[[25]](#footnote-25) That is to say, on the third prong, we can accept that at some level of analysis, Jews and gentiles do have different souls – but we would also have to say that that level of analysis isn’t truly ultimate.

And thus, to the extent that we don’t altogether reject the *Zohar*’s conception of the non-Jewish soul, we have to recognize that – even according to the Zohar – the distinction between Jew and gentile represents an *appearance* rather than a deep reality. Indeed, if you lived under the Hadrianic persecutions of 2nd-century Israel (as did Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai), or under the religious repression of 13th-century Spain (as did Rabbi Moshe de Leon), it would be difficult to blame a Jew for failing to see the humanity in their many gentile oppressors. The appearance of gentile inhumanity would have been particularly strong at those times. But the underlying mysticism of the *Zohar* would ultimately have us recognize that this really is just an appearance.

To summarize: the first two prongs of my argument would have us outright reject any opinion in the tradition according to which the gentile soul is somehow inferior to the Jewish one. This option is perfectly legitimate from the perspective of Orthodox Judaism; we have already explored the medieval consensus upon which you could rely. The third prong would be ever so slightly more concessive; it would seek to understand these xenophobic pronouncements as giving weight to nothing more than a very real *appearance* in the experience of Jewish life and history, an appearance that has to be transcended in the ultimate monism of one’s mysticism.

**Post-Zoharic Mysticism**[[26]](#footnote-26)

The Maharal of Prague (1520–1609) inherits from the *Zohar* the notion that Jewish people possess an elevated sort of soul. This is a doctrine he repeatedly promotes in his own writings.[[27]](#footnote-27) Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1558-1628), in his *Shnei Luchot Ha-brit,* follows the *Zohar* in watering down the extent to which gentiles can be said to reflect the image of God.[[28]](#footnote-28) Rabbi Chaim Vital (1543-1620), the primary student of Rabbi Isaac Luria and the author most responsible for promulgating the key ideas of Lurianic Kabbala, develops the suggestion of the *Zohar* to arrive at the innovative claim that every Jew possesses *two* souls. The first soul is animalistic and is what we have in common with all of humanity. The second soul is uniquely Jewish, and Divine.[[29]](#footnote-29)

In fact, in Rabbi Vital’s presentation, even the animalistic souls of Jews and gentiles were said to differ in some respects. The souls of the nations, apparently, come from “wind, cloud, and fire, all of them evil.”[[30]](#footnote-30) This, they have in common with the unkosher animals. The animal soul of the Jew, by contrast, like the soul of a kosher animal, is said to come from *klipat noga*.[[31]](#footnote-31) A *klipa* is literally a shell or husk. It refers to some coarse reality that serves to obscure God’s light in the world. The *klipat noga* is said to be the least coarse of these shells. That’s where the *Jewish* animal soul comes from.

The great kabbalist, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707–1746), known as the Ramchal, adopts the essentialism of the *Zohar* regarding Jewish and non-Jewish souls, and tries to reconcile its claim that non-Jews have *no* share in the afterlife with the clear Talmudic statement to the contrary. He writes about the afterlife:

Only Israel will be found there, while the righteous of the nations will be given their reality only by virtue of their attachment to them [i.e., to the Jews]. They will be subordinate to Israel as clothes are subordinate to the body. In this way they will acquire whatever good is due to them, but they are unable to acquire anything whatsoever beyond this.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In other words, righteous gentiles have some sort of derivative existence in the afterlife. They get access to the afterlife on the coattails of the Jews.

Perhaps the most famous source of the doctrine of two souls, according to which Jews have an extra heavenly soul in addition to their human soul, is due to the founder of Chabad (Lubavitch) Hasidism, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1815), also known as the Alter Rebbe. We shall be exploring his views much more carefully in the lesson dedicated to the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994). But this much we can say already: like Rabbi Chaim Vital, the Alter Rebbe asserts that the Jewish soul is literally a part of God (although this raises the thorny issue of how a simple being like God, who cannot be divided, can, at the same time, have so many parts). He also shared Rabbi Vital’s conviction that even the animal soul of the Jew is elevated above the animal soul of the gentile, since the former is rooted in *klipat noga*, while the latter is rooted in a coarser level of reality.

Disturbing though I find these sources, since they all push in the direction of the very sort of supremacism that I’ve been arguing against from the outset of this series, it seems that my three-pronged argument of the last section applies equally well here.

The first two prongs would insist that however central these thinkers and texts might be to the Jewish tradition, these particular ideas simply cannot be admitted by Orthodox Judaism, and can be rejected on the grounds that (a) they conflict with the key messages of the narrative of the Bible, and with the Rabbinic and Jewish philosophical consensus, and that (b) they constitute a resurfacing of the dualistic tendency that the Rabbinic movement stood against.

Indeed, one might even go so far as to say that, given my understanding of the commandment to annihilate Amalek,[[33]](#footnote-33) we are called upon, in every generation, to face up to the negative views that sometimes surface in our own holy community and in the words of our own holy teachers, and to cleanse ourselves of them.[[34]](#footnote-34)

One might be dissatisfied with the first two prongs for any number of reasons. Indeed, they’re only really consistent with my own theory of revelation if you accept that there are certain checks and balances in place that work to rule out the emergence, or later acceptance, of certain views, and if you accept that those checks and balances really have been violated by the mystical traditions in question. Accordingly, for those who remain unsatisfied, we have a third prong to consider.

The third prong suggests that we not take these isolated comments out of context. It might turn out that many of them can be preserved in a system that recognizes them as nothing more than a complex *appearance* that emerges at one level of reality, an appearance that has to be penetrated before we come to understand the deeper and hidden unity and holiness of all things. In fact, a tradition that is able to absorb these negative attitudes and then to transcend them might be a greater and richer tradition than one in which such attitudes are never expressed – since otherwise these attitudes, which form a basic part of the human psyche, may be suppressed and never dealt with, only to come out in violent ways.

Indeed, as we come, later in this series, to examine the thoughts of the last Lubavitcher Rebbe and of Rabbi A. Y. Kook, we will come to witness thinkers who are at once deeply loyal to the Zoharic and Lurianic tradition and also animated by the holiness, and the potential, that they see in all of humanity, and in all of God’s creation.

Moreover, even to the extent that one prefers to heed the first two prongs of my argument than to adopt the more nuanced response of the third prong, there will be no reason to abandon the mystical tradition in its entirely. Indeed, when I finally come to articulate my own conception of the election, I hope to demonstrate that one can entirely ignore the xenophobic aspects of the mystical tradition, while using its many other aspects to come to a deeper appreciation as to what the doctrine of the election might really mean.

1. See lessons 27 and 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I made this argument in lesson 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I made these arguments in lesson 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim* 3:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rabbi Yitzchak’s memoir, *Divrei Ha-Yamim*,has been lost, but the relevant passage is quoted in Avraham Zacuto’s *Sefer Yuchasin,* first published in 1556. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These findings are recorded in his work, *Mitpachat Sefarim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example: Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken; Reissue edition, 1995); Isaiah Tishby’s Introduction to *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts* (volume 1) (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1991); and Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar* (New York: Suny Press, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example Yeshayahu Leibowtiz, *Ratziti Lishol Otkha Prof. Leibowitz: Michtavim El Yeshayhu Leibowitz U’mimeno* (Jerusalem: Keter), pp. 59–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Daniel Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Genesis 1:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Zohar,* I.169. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Although we shall see, in our lesson on the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, an opinion that the souls of particularly righteous gentiles have a different nature from regular gentile souls. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Zohar* III.104b. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Zohar Ha-Chadash, Bereishit*, 407-412. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Zohar* I.220a. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (Jerusalem: Maggid Press, 2016), p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., pp. 57-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This appeal to the monism of the Kabbala is also made by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein in chapter 16 of his forthcoming book, *Engaging the Essence: The Torah Philosophy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This monism can take a number of different forms. In the most radical, there exists only one being. In other versions, the exists only one being who is fundamental. For my own take on these matters, see Samuel Lebens, “Nothing Else,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 11/2 (2019): 91-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This is the great mystery revealed in *Zohar*, II.237b. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The whistle-stop survey of views presented in this section is indebted to an article by Hanan Balk, “The Soul of a Jew and the Soul of a Non-Jew:An Inconvenient Truth and the Search for an Alternative,” *Hakirah, the Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought,* 16 (2013): 47-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Tiferet Yisrael* Chapter 1, 9; *Chiddushei Aggadot* to *Sanhedrin* 59a and *Avoda Zara* 3a; *Netzach Yisrael*, Ch.1, pp. 66, 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Shnei Luchot Ha-brit, Toldot Adam, Beit Yisrael*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Etz Chaim* 48:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 49:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ramchal, *Derekh Hashem* 4:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. As developed in lessons 5 and 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I want to be especially clear here. This reference to Amalek, despite any appearance to the contrary, isn’t intended to denigrate the great Rabbis of the past, God forbid. Instead, it flows from the view of Amalek that I explored in lesson 5. According to that view, all of us, including the very greatest, have a war to wage, in every generation, against even the smallest vestige of the “Amalek” that dwells within us. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)