**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

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**Shiur *#*20*:*  Jews and Gentiles**

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The halakhic and aggadic traditions make clear that there is vast difference between the spiritual status of a Jew and that of a gentile. Halakhically, Jews are obligated in the six hundred and thirteen mitzvot of the Torah, while gentiles are obligated in a mere seven. In addition, our liturgy is replete with statements emphasizing the chosenness of the Jewish People. For example, "Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us;" "Who has chosen us from among all the nations and given us His Torah;" "Who chooses His nation Israel with love."

In this *shiur*, we will attempt to identify the source of this fundamental spiritual distinction. Is it essential and built-in to the very substance of the Jew or gentile from the moment of birth, or is it something acquired by means of education and training?

**Essential Distinction**

***Sefer Ha-Kuzari***

R. Yehuda Ha-Levi explains in the *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*[[1]](#footnote-2)that the difference between a Jew and a gentile is essential and vast. We mentioned in the previous *shiur* that R. Yehuda Ha-Levi maintains that the basis of faith is not abstract philosophical reasoning, but rather the experience of revelation at Sinai. This leads him to the conclusion that God did not give access to the truths of religion to the gentiles because He never intended the Torah and its spiritual agenda for all of humanity, but rather exclusively for the Jewish People. This is because Jews are essentially different from the gentiles; only the Jewish People have the potential to reach the spiritual heights that constitute the goal of Torah observance.

R. Yehuda Ha-Levi explains that just as plants are qualitatively greater that inanimate objects because they are living, and animals are qualitatively greater that plants because they have an animate soul, and humans are qualitatively greater than animals because they have an intellect, so are Jews qualitatively greater than gentiles because they have the quality of Godliness (*inyan Elohi*). Adam was created with this Godly quality, and he passed it on to the greatest of his descendants, and so on through Noach until Avraham. Avraham passed down that quality only to Yitzchak, and Yitzchak only to Yaakov, but Yaakov passed the *inyan Elohi* to all his descendants. Since then, the entire Jewish People has been characterized by this "spiritual DNA," which makes them essentially and fundamentally different from other human beings.

R. Yehuda Ha-Levi therefore concludes that just as a rock cannot become a plant, and a plant cannot become an animal, and an animal cannot become a human, so too a gentile is a fundamentally different type of creature than a Jew and can therefore never become a full-fledged Jew. A convert, according to R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, can become wise and pious and share in some part of the spiritual goodness bestowed upon the Jewish People, but he can never be fully equal to a Jew and can never achieve prophecy. He will always be lacking the *inyan Elohi*, because his essential nature can never be changed.

***Sefer Ha-Tanya***

R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, in the *Tanya,*[[2]](#footnote-3) draws an even more powerful distinction between the essential nature of a Jew and that of a gentile. He explains that a Jew has two souls – a Godly soul, which partakes in some fashion in the actual substance of God Himself, and an animalistic soul, which descends from *klipat noga*, the evil that contains within it an admixture of divine light. Therefore, he explains, any good character trait found in a Jew reflects the essential goodness found in his soul. The soul of a gentile, however, according to the *Tanya*, is purely animalistic and not Godly. It descends from the evil forces that have no potential for goodness in them whatsoever. Therefore, any good deeds performed by gentiles are done for ulterior motives and cannot possibly reflect essential goodness.

According to this philosophy, a gentile is not merely a lower form of life, but is essentially and irredeemably evil; his substance derives from the *sitra achra*, the evil forces that threaten all goodness and purity in the world.[[3]](#footnote-4) If so, the phenomenon of conversion is difficult to understand. If a gentile's soul is purely evil with no potential for Godliness, then how can that soul become a Jew?

Two answers to this conundrum are found in the writings of the *Tanya*'s descendant and eventual successor, R. Menachem Mendel Shneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe.

One answer, based on the *Zohar*,[[4]](#footnote-5) is that while a gentile soul can never become Jewish, a gentile who converts receives an entirely new soul from Heaven; his previous identity is replaced by a holy Jewish soul. This corresponds to the halakhic principle that a convert has the status of a newborn baby. According to this theory, it is logical that a convert acquires a new halakhic identity, because he is actually a different person than he was before his conversion. The Zohar adds, however, that while the new soul received by a convert descends from the Divine, it is nonetheless not equivalent to the soul of a born Jew.[[5]](#footnote-6)

A second explanation offered by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, based on the writings of the *Chida,*[[6]](#footnote-7)is that a true gentile can never convert, because there is no potential for goodness in his soul. Rather, a convert represents a Godly spark that for some reason descended into a gentile body instead of a Jewish body, and finally converts in order to reveal and realize its true essence.[[7]](#footnote-8)

**Rambam: Non-Essential Difference**

What the *Kuzari* and the *Tanya* have in common is the perspective that at a Jew and a gentile are different from birth and that this difference lies in the essential substance of their being. The Rambam, however, has a very different approach to understanding the uniqueness of the Jewish People.

In a letter to his student, the convert Ovadya, the Rambam responds to Ovadya's query as to whether it would be appropriate for him to recite the standard liturgy, including phrases such as "our God and the God of our forefathers," "Who chose us from among the nations," and "Who bequeathed the land to our forefathers," given that these phrases refer to the ancestors of the Jewish People, and not to Ovadya's gentile ancestors. The Rambam responds, based on the Talmud Yerushalmi,[[8]](#footnote-9) that a convert should recite the same liturgical formulations as a born Jew. He explains that Avraham Avinu was called "the father of many nations" (*Bereishit* 17:5) because all converts throughout the generations are considered children of Avraham Avinu.

The true meaning of fatherhood, according to the Rambam, is not the passing on of DNA or any other type of essential nature, but rather education and instruction. A father is one who teaches and passes down an intellectual heritage, and a child is a student who receives that tradition. Avraham Avinu is thus our ancestor not because we are biologically descended from him, but because he taught the belief in monotheism and the lifestyle of Godliness, and we learned that philosophy from a chain of tradition that leads back to him.

According to the Rambam, the difference between a Jew and a gentile derives not from how one was created, but from one’s beliefs and the philosophical tradition by which he lives his life. Therefore, a convert who learns the Torah is just as much a descendant of the Patriarchs as a born Jew who learns the Torah.

Rambam therefore holds that even a gentile who has not converted has a potential for goodness that is essentially similar to that of a Jew. Any human being has the potential to use his free will to perfect his character traits and to be as righteous as Moshe Rabbeinu.[[9]](#footnote-10) Of course, the Rambam admits that the character traits of the Jews are significantly more refined than those of the gentiles. However, that is due not to any essential difference in their souls, but rather to the educational effects of the Torah. The Rambam emphasizes:

Cruelty and brazenness are found only among idol-worshipping gentiles, while the descendants of Avraham Avinu, the Jews who have been graced with the goodness of the Torah and its righteous laws and statutes, are merciful to all.[[10]](#footnote-11)

This formulation implies that the merciful character of a Jew stems from the moral influence of the Torah and its laws, and the cruelty of a gentile is due to the culture of idol worship.

Just as the Rambam does not restrict the potential for moral perfection to Jews alone, he does not limit the capacity for spiritual achievement to the Jewish People. In a famous passage at the end of the book of *Zera’im* of the *Mishneh Torah*, the Rambam teaches that not only the tribe of Levi receives a stipend from God in order to support their spiritual endeavors; rather, any individual in the entire world, if his spirit motivates him and his intellect guides him to dedicate his life to the service of God, will be sanctified with exalted holiness, and God will provide for him just as he provided for the *Kohanim* and *Levi’im* in the Torah. It is noteworthy that the Rambam does not restrict this idealistic lifestyle and intense Divine Providence to Jews alone, but explicitly includes every human being in the world in this ambitious proposition. It is likely that he was inspired by the *gemara*, which states that even a gentile who learns Torah is equivalent to a *Kohen Gadol*.[[11]](#footnote-12) It seems clear from this passage that any human being, whether Jew or gentile, can achieve the highest heights of spirituality.

Indeed, according to those who believe that a gentile is fundamentally incapable of spiritual achievement, how are we to interpret the comparison between a Torah-learning gentile and a *Kohen Gadol*? The Zohar[[12]](#footnote-13) explains this passage based on another Talmudic statement that teaches that a bastard *talmid chakham* is preferable to an ignorant (*am ha'aretz*) *Kohen Gadol*. The Zohar, connecting these two passages, explains that a gentile who learns Torah was not compared to a regular *Kohen Gadol*, but rather to the aforementioned ignorant *Kohen Gadol*, whose Temple service is invalid and ultimately worthless. The true intention of the *gemara* is to teach that the Torah learned by a gentile is considered worthless, because a gentile is incapable of achieving true spirituality.

**Beloved is Man**

Another passage that is interpreted differently by the thinkers on the two sides of this debate is a *mishna* in *Avot*,[[13]](#footnote-14) which states: “Beloved is man (*Adam*), for he was created in the image of God.” The simple meaning of this *mishna* is apparent from the contrast with the following *mishna*, which states: “Beloved is Israel, for they are called children of God.” If the following *mishna* deals specifically with the Jewish People, then this *mishna*, which takes pains to discuss "man," certainly refers to all of mankind. So concludes the Tosafot Yom Tov,[[14]](#footnote-15) who expresses wonderment that anyone would attempt to interpret this *mishna* differently. However, R. Chaim Vital[[15]](#footnote-16) held that this *mishna* refers only to Jews and not to gentiles, relying on the opinion of R. Shimon in the context of the *halakhot* of the impurity of a corpse, that only Jews are called *Adam* (man).[[16]](#footnote-17)

**Marrying a Convert**

This fundamental debate affects not only one's view of the spiritual status of gentiles, but the practical question of the status of converts as well. The obligation to love and protect a convert is explicated many times in the Torah. One might conclude, as the Rambam did, that a convert is considered equal to a born Jew in all respects, and that we should relate to him no differently than we relate to any other Jew.[[17]](#footnote-18) In this vein, R. Moshe Sternbuch, when asked about the advisability of marrying a convert, responded that each convert should be judged based on her individual spiritual level; one should not turn down a proper marriage partner simply because of his or her lineage.[[18]](#footnote-19)

R. Menashe Klein, however, based on the opinion that the soul of a convert is of fundamentally lower status than a born Jew, rules that while one is obligated to love a convert, it is certainly improper to marry one or to advise any other Jew to do so. He goes so far as to warn that if one does marry a convert, his children will not succeed religiously because they will inherit an essential spiritual impurity that impedes Torah learning and religious growth.[[19]](#footnote-20)

**Status of Non-Religious Jews**

These different understandings of Jewish chosenness also affect our view of non-religious Jews. The Rambam, who attributes the entirety of the difference between Jew and gentile to education, concludes that just as a gentile who learns and follows the Torah is the equivalent of a Jew, a Jew who does not believe in the Torah is the equivalent of a gentile. In the aforementioned letter to the convert, R. Ovadya, the Rambam stated explicitly that Avraham Avinu is the father of “his righteous descendants who follow in his path and all his students and future converts.” The clear implication is that a born Jew who does not follow the path of Avraham Avinu cannot trace his lineage to the Jewish patriarchs.

More explicitly, in his commentary to the Mishna,[[20]](#footnote-21) after listing the thirteen principles of Jewish belief, the Rambam states explicitly that only one who believes these thirteen principles is considered part of the Jewish People. One who doubts these principles, however, is not considered part of the Jewish collective and receives neither a portion in the World to Come nor brotherly love from his fellow Jews in this world.

**R. Kook: Role of Jews in the World**

R. Kook believes, even more radically than the R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, that the difference between the soul of a Jew and a gentile is even greater than the difference between the soul of a human and a beast.[[21]](#footnote-22) The Jews were supernaturally graced with a spiritual perfection that transcends the bounds of human nature.[[22]](#footnote-23) Based on this, one could easily conclude that the gentile nations exist only to serve the Jews and help them realize their exalted spiritual agenda, just as the animals and plants were created for the benefit of the humans who rule over them. R. Kook, however, reaches the diametrically opposite conclusion. God chose the Jews and sanctified them in order to serve all the nations of the world. In order to bestow goodness and spirituality on the entire world, God appointed the Jewish People as his emissaries, his “kingdom of priests” (*Shemot* 19:6) to minister to all of mankind.[[23]](#footnote-24)

In order to accomplish this goal, the Jews must take pride in their uniqueness and appreciate the power of their exalted spirituality, because only thus can they bring their unique and powerful influence to bear on all of humanity. The ultimate goal is not their own spiritual advancement, but the perfection of the entire world, and the righteous cannot possibly limit their love and concern to one nation or race.[[24]](#footnote-25) The truly righteous do not discriminate between Jew and gentile; they view the gentile sage as a colleague.[[25]](#footnote-26)

R. Yehuda Amital found a precedent to this insight in the language of R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, who compared the relationship between the Jews and gentiles to the relationship between the heart and the rest of the body.[[26]](#footnote-27) The heart is clearly superior to the other organs, but a crucial element of that superiority is that the heart pumps the blood and sustains all the other organs and limbs, while they do not directly sustain it. The greater power of the heart carries with it the greater responsibility of giving life to the rest of the body, just as the exalted spiritual state of the Jews expresses itself in a mission to the entire world.

**Summary**

We have seen two very different conceptions of the difference between Jews and gentiles. The *Sefer HaKuzari* and the *Tanya* see an essential difference between Jew and gentile, expressed as qualitative superiority by the *Kuzari* and as the contrast between good and evil by the *Tanya.* The Rambam, whose view resonates with contemporary sensibilities, understood that all human beings are essentially alike and that the exalted nature of the Jewish soul results from the educational influence of Torah and *mitzvot.* This dispute affects the way we view and relate to gentiles, converts, and renegade Jews. We concluded with R. Kook’s observation that even if we take the perspective of essential Jewish superiority, the conclusion should not be that the gentiles exist only to serve the Jews, but rather that the Jews were chosen in order to bring Godliness and spirituality to the entire human race.

1. R. Yehuda Ha-Levi (Spain, 1075-1141), *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* 1: 26-43, 95-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. R. Shneur Zalman of Liady (the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Lithuania, 1745-1812), *Likutei Amarim* (also known as *Tanya),* chs. 1–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This idea has its roots in the *Zohar*, introduction, p. 13a. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Introduction, p. 13a. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. R. Menachem, Mendel Shneerson (Brooklyn, 1902-1994), *Igrot Kodesh,* volume 9 section 2666. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai (1724-1806)*, Midbar Kedeimot*, part 3, section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *Torat Menachem*, volume 22 pp. 61-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *Yerushalmi*, *Massekhet Bikkurim* 1:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. *Hilkhot Avadim* 9:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. *Bava Kama* 38a, *Sanhedrin* 59a, *Avoda Zara* 3a. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. *Zohar Chadash*, *Rut*, p. 37b. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. *Avot* 3:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Rav Chaim Vital (Tzfat, 1542-1620, foremost student of R. Yitzchak Luria, the Ari Ha-Kadosh), quoted by the *Midrash* *Shmuel* on the *mishna*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. *Yevamot* 61a, *Bava Metzia* 114b, *Keritot* 6b. The Maharal, in his commentary *Derekh Ha-Chaim* to this *mishna*, take a middle approach, explaining that the Divine image is found in all of mankind, but finds its full expression only in the Jewish People.  [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. R. Soloveitchik writes explicitly that a convert possesses the same sanctity as a born Jew (*On Repentance,* pp. 236-237). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. R. Moshe Sternbuch (Johannesburg and Jerusalem, 1928-present), Responsa *Teshuvot Ve-Hanhagot* 1:728; 2:623. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. R. Menashe Klein (Brooklyn, 1924-2011), Responsa *Mishneh Halakhot* 9:236-237; 10:239. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. *Sanhedrin* 10:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. *Orot, Orot Yisrael* 5:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. *Midbar Shur,* ch. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. *Orot, Orot Yisrael* 8:5; *Orot Ha-Kodesh*,vol. 3, p. 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. *Iggerot Ha-Ra’ayah,* ch. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* 2:36. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)