

Adin Even-Israel
Steinsaltz

The Long Shorter Way

DISCOURSES ON
CHASIDIC THOUGHT

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Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Translator's Preface xiii

Introduction xv

Chapter One: The Vital Soul 1

Chapter Two: The Divine Soul 7

Chapter Three: The Primal Flash of Wisdom 13

Chapter Four: The Garments of the Soul 19

Chapter Five: The Way of Understanding 25

Chapter Six: Klipat Nogah, The Shell of Light 29

Chapter Seven: Levels of Repentance 37

Chapter Eight: Concerning the Permitted and the Forbidden 43

Chapter Nine: The Animal-Soul 51

Chapter Ten: Varieties of Sainthood 67

Chapter Eleven: The Wicked Man Who Prospers 77

Chapter Twelve: Limitations of the Benoni 83

Chapter Thirteen: Truth and Sincerity in Divine Service 87

Chapter Fourteen: The Struggle against Evil 93

Chapter Fifteen: The Need for Conflict 101

Chapter Sixteen: The Never-Ending Work of the Benoni 105

Contents

- Chapter Seventeen: Concerning the Intrinsic Love of God* 111
- Chapter Eighteen: On Faith and Martyrdom* 119
- Chapter Nineteen: On the Difference between
Holiness and the Other Side* 125
- Chapter Twenty: Concerning Divine Speech* 137
- Chapter Twenty-One: Hiddenness as a Part of Unity* 141
- Chapter Twenty-Two: Divine Word and Its Manifestation* 145
- Chapter Twenty-Three: Torah as God's Will* 149
- Chapter Twenty-Four: On Transgression* 161
- Chapter Twenty-Five: The Power to Do Good* 167
- Chapter Twenty-Six: The Meaning of Sadness* 173
- Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Need for Struggle* 185
- Chapter Twenty-Eight: Extraneous Thoughts* 191
- Chapter Twenty-Nine: Dullness of the Heart* 197
- Chapter Thirty: Critical Insight into Oneself* 205
- Chapter Thirty-One: Liberation of the Self* 211
- Chapter Thirty-Two: Love and Hate of One's Fellow* 215
- Chapter Thirty-Three: Gladness in the Presence of God* 223
- Chapter Thirty-Four: The Need for a Sanctuary* 233
- Chapter Thirty-Five: Problems of Receiving the Shechinah* 239
- Chapter Thirty-Six: God in the World* 251
- Chapter Thirty-Seven: On the Essence of Torah Study* 259
- Chapter Thirty-Eight: Intention* 267
- Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Dilemma of Habit* 271
- Chapter Forty: Torah for Its Own Sake* 277
- Chapter Forty-One: Awe and Fear of God* 285
- Chapter Forty-Two: The Higher Fear of God* 293
- Chapter Forty-Three: The Higher Fear and the Great Love* 297

Chapter Forty-Four: Two Ways of Loving God 303
Chapter Forty-Five: On Pity and Compassion 307
Chapter Forty-Six: The Need for Gratitude and Knowledge 313
Chapter Forty-Seven: Intimacy with God 319
Chapter Forty-Eight: Encompassing Light and Pervading Light 327
Chapter Forty-Nine: Man as the Purpose of Creation 331
Chapter Fifty: The Love That Excels 337
Chapter Fifty-One: The Soul Likened to the Shechinah 341
Chapter Fifty-Two: Descent of Divine Wisdom 345
Chapter Fifty-Three: The Candle of God 351

About the Author 359

Chapter One

The Vital Soul

It is written in the Kabbalah (*Etz Chaim* 50, 2) that in every Jew there are two souls, irrespective of the nature of the person. And the differences between people—in breadth of outlook or goodness of character—can perhaps be traced to the quality of one or another of these two souls. In any event, they are bound to one another and integral to every human being.

In order to better understand what is meant here by the word soul—and in Jewish tradition there are at least five different souls, all of them difficult to translate into other languages—let us define the present usage loosely as the spiritual entity that gives life to a person and of which the body is its material aspect. The two souls are the one that comes from the holy and the one that is derived from uncleanness; that is, the Divine Soul and the one belonging to the other side—the *Sitra Achra*. However, the one deriving from the unclean is merely the shell, the part of life which can be discarded after the fruit, which is the goodness, is extracted. This suggests that the shell also has a positive function, to protect the fruit while it is ripening, and only thereafter is it a hindrance and an obstacle.

In other words, the “other side” is not necessarily evil. This does not mean that it is neutral, somewhere between the holy and the unholy.

Because things must be either one or the other; either holy or unholy—there is no in-between. There is a difference, however, between the unclean or the unholy that can be corrected by Tikun and the unholy that is beyond repair.

True, in the halachic code of law there are things that are indifferent or neutral, belonging neither to the commanded nor the forbidden; but, fundamentally, these permitted areas outside the fold of the mitzvah may be seen to belong to the Sitra Achra (the other side) and not to the Sitra DiKedusha (the side of holiness).

There seems to be a more profoundly incisive question behind all this, as Moses put it (Exodus 32:26): Who is for the Lord? And whosoever is not for Him is neither neutral nor hesitant nor for anything else; he is against Him. But how much? Can anyone be totally against God?

This leads us to the difference between the “shell” and the “Sitra Achra”—for they are not merely two terms for the same thing. The Sitra Achra is that which defines the world as having two sides: one belonging to God and all that recognize His sovereignty, and the other side, Sitra Achra—all the rest. Whereas the term “shell” does not merely point to the two aspects of existence, it denotes something of the relations between them as well, outer and inner, darkness and light. Although, as previously said, there cannot be any in-between state. Things are either darkness or light; and though there may be more or less light, there cannot be anything that is neither one nor the other.

A shell is a concentric structure in space, the holiness being contained within the outer covering. The meaning of the distinction between shell and Sitra Achra is that one can pass through the shell to the holiness. And there are even certain sanctities that can be obtained only by piercing the shell. The point here is that, as we shall see later in practical ethics, one can scarcely achieve any light by breaking or piercing the darkness; the darkness can yield nothing but darkness; the negative cannot produce the positive. However, when one puts the matter in terms of the shell, it makes it possible to break through to reach the fruit. Of course there may be ways, as described elsewhere, of pounding the darkness with such force and persistency that it is ground into something else. However, within the context of ordinary life, light and darkness are different, each with its own functions and tasks.

It is written that the soul clothes itself in the blood of the man. The concept of a garment or clothing in Jewish wisdom is intended to indicate that which serves both to cover or hide and to manifest or reveal. It is the way in which a person is concealed and protected from the outer world and the way in which he is seen and apprehended by the world. It may also be—to get beyond physical terms—the relation between speech and thought, for example. Thought clothes itself in speech, with speech revealing thought, serving as its vehicle of expression, and yet at the same time, hiding the thought, unable to transmit it completely, and thus becoming its substitute. Hence, the soul that clothes itself in the blood of the man is to be understood as the animal-soul, the blood being the symbol of the natural, the vital aspect, of creaturely existence.

The statement (to which we are referring) goes on to say that this animal-soul which envelops us as a garment is the source of the negative qualities in us which may be divided into four main categories. The division corresponds to the ancient world's straightforward grasp of things as solid, liquid, gas, and fire (energy) and provides a corresponding framework for moral categories. Thus, there are bad qualities that, having the attributes of fire, always tend to rise. Anger and pride, for example, which are connected in some way, veer upwards. Moreover, unlike other qualities, they increase the more they are stirred up and the more they are interfered with. Other qualities will tend to diminish as one gets more involved with them, not so anger and pride. In Hebrew, this redundancy is indicated by using the reflexive tense, *mitragez* and *mitgaeh*, to define such a state. The appetite for pleasure corresponds to the element of Water, frivolity and boasting to the element of Air, and sloth and melancholy to the element of Earth.

What is important to realize in this division is the view that bad qualities are not necessarily of one sort; they are not absolute qualities of the soul itself. They are more in the nature of modes of expression. For instance, there is a general consensus of opinion among moralists that whereas depression is evil, a little melancholy is a good thing; that while joy is certainly positive, an excess of good spirits is rather dangerous, and so forth. The emphasis is not on specific qualities, but on right measure, on the correctness of application. Even love and compassion

can be bad when exercised without discrimination. God made both the light and the darkness, the good and the evil.

Therefore, the holiness and the shell cannot be distinguished as clearly as we would wish. It all depends on the use made of them, on the relationships with everything else, not on anything intrinsic, like poisons, which when used in certain doses become medicines, and vice versa. As someone once remarked of a certain Chasid: "He was untainted by sin only because of his pride; he wouldn't let himself be shamed into committing a misdemeanor."

The question is asked, therefore, whether it is permissible to make judgments. And the answer is that one does have to judge things all the time. It is forbidden to accept things en bloc without investigating deeply into each matter specifically. Every person and situation has to be examined in the context of a surrounding reality and adjudged good or bad.

As for the nature of man, it should be remembered that there are also good qualities in the shell which seem to belong to the body itself, without second thoughts or self-awareness. Lust, anger and the like are part of the animal-soul structure of man; they belong to the life force itself. And they make a man what he is without any consideration of good or evil. But so too does philosophy belong to this same category of the animal-soul. For the mental is no indication of holiness in man; it too belongs to what is closer to his biological aspect.

We have said that everything has its life force expressed as the animal-soul which animates it. Each such soul in man is extremely complex and made up of thoughts and fine emotions as well as instinctual drives. The vital, animal-soul of Israel, in this respect, is rather special, just as the souls of Tzadikim within Israel are special. This means that there is a genealogical factor; just as a person is born a Jew, so is a Tzadik born with the potential to be a saint. To be sure, education is a decisive factor. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that certain qualities are given at birth, and there is no need for education to do more than restrain them or develop them somewhat.

A person of Israel is said to be born with three such basic qualities: pity, shyness, and kindness. And it cannot be explained by comparing greater or lesser individuals or even by pointing to generations of teaching; it is something that every Jew has, a character structure

which belongs to the paradigm of Israel. Thus, a person who does not exhibit these qualities is said to be not of the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—even though he may be a proper Jew in the sense that he performs the mitzvot (commandments).

There is a story in the Talmud of someone who went to Babylon and asked for help; and the Jews there did not come to his assistance, either with money or anything else, and he wrote saying that these were evidently not Jews, but a mongrel community, because they failed to show kindness. He did not inquire whether they prayed or put on *tefillin* or wore *tzitzit*; the fact that they did not act naturally and spontaneously with kindness was decisive.

It is not that the Jew is a better person or that he may be necessarily characterized as a good person; it is rather that the qualities of pity and shyness and kindheartedness are an intrinsic part of him: they may even be considered his weaknesses. Just as some people have a sensitive, musical ear, others have a “weakness” for other modes of experience.

This may be explained by the nature of the vital soul of Israel which is of the Nogah Shell, containing a mixture of good and evil. Actually, everything has some good in it—otherwise, it could not be said to exist. The question is: how much good, or rather, what proportion of good to evil, and what is the capacity to release the good? Because certain things can release positive qualities while others cannot. As, for instance, in chemistry, the element aluminum, which is one of the commonest components in earth and clay, can be extracted only with the greatest difficulty and then only from bauxite which is relatively rare. Bauxite will release the aluminum while other substances will not.

The difference between the Nogah Shell and other shells is that the others do not readily release the good in them. The Nogah Shell is more ready and open to the influence that engenders such a release. In this sense, the vital soul of Israel is a Nogah Shell which is not holy but contains certain elements of good natural to it that can be released by exerting the right kind of pressure. The point is that a Jew does certain things, not necessarily because he chooses the good and recoils from evil, but because they are natural or almost instinctive to him. In the soul of the other nations, this is not as pronounced—which does not mean that a non-Jew cannot be compassionate, shy, and kindly. In the

same way, there are qualities which are a function of one's relation to God, like a certain kind of joy (on the Sabbath), or humility (on the Day of Atonement) which do not come naturally. They are not a part of the vital soul of the Jew, and he can choose to be one thing or another in this respect. However, no matter how much a Jew will surrender to his passion and lower instincts and neglect his duties to holiness, he will still tend to manifest a clear inclination towards pity, shyness, and kindness.

Of course, every people may be said to have its weaknesses as well as its strengths. There are also characteristics which are of a double quality and may be a failing as well as an advantage, depending on the way they are expressed; for example, pride and generosity. And since, as it has been said that the Jews are like unto the heart of the world, they will tend to absorb and express the negative qualities of mankind as well as their own. Thus, a Jew dwelling among a nation of gentiles will be inclined to imbibe the failings as well as the good qualities of that nation.

In any case, just as every person has a vital soul, a life force, which is connected with his being human, a Jew has certain qualities connected with his being Jewish.

Chapter Two

The Divine Soul

In addition to the vital soul, every person of Israel has a Divine Soul that can be considered a part of God. Furthermore, there are many thousands of levels of Divine Souls, from the generation of the Patriarchs to the fallen generations preceding the Messiah.

Within each generation, there are also many gradations of soul; and within every person, there are different categories of this spiritual core of existence. The true heads of a generation are not necessarily recognized leaders, but they are the highest and most spiritual souls who may or may not be known, but they are connected to the rest of the souls of Israel like the head to the body.

Besides the simple division of this Divine element in man into Nefesh (Vital Soul), Ruach (Spirit), and Neshamah (Divine Soul), there is the division into many personal souls within a vast range of levels. Yet, all of them are derived from God, just as children of unlike nature can come from the same father. Each person can thus be said to be made up of three aspects: that which comes from the physical mother, that which is derived from the physical father, and that which comes from God.

In the language of the *Tanya*, which is very austere, every word has significance, and when it says that something is actually true, the

intention is that it is not symbolic or allegorical or approximate, but is precisely what it says. So when the author writes that the soul of man is bound up in actual truth with the Divine through the Higher Wisdom, it is not a farfetched image, but is like the link between the mind of a human father (source of the “drop” of semen) and the nails of the feet of the son. There is only an apparent gap—the connection is very real and direct. When a person, in his ignorance and boorishness, denies his Father who is in Heaven, it does not alter the fact itself, it merely indicates something about the person; the fatherhood is not a matter of opinion.

The whole of Israel is an entity, with feet and toenails, chest and head, and soul—all drawing upon a source of life and power. To a degree, the rest of the body receives this life and power from the consciousness in the head. And the heads of Israel, as stated, are the souls of men like Tzadikim, who are able to be in some kind of contact with both God and with the people. As it was said of a famous Chasid, if a woman was in labor within 500 miles of him, he was unable to sleep because of the pain. Can a head be real if it does not sense every ache of the body? The connection is also mutual. Even Moses is not the great prophet without the people whom he has to feed like a baby.

Every individual, thus, has a definite function within the people, just as every limb or organ has its function in the body, and one of the chief problems a person has to solve for himself is to know what his function is. There is the story of the Tzadik who said to a rich, if somewhat stingy, disciple of his entourage: “You’re in great danger.” “Why?” asked the disciple. “Because,” said the Tzadik, “every army is composed of many units—regiments, platoons, and so forth—and if a person takes upon himself to move from one unit to another, he is liable to be punished as a deserter. And you, who were supposed to belong to the brigade of philanthropists and givers of charity, have deserted to the brigade of Torah scholars.”

In many respects a person may be convinced of doing the right thing, but it may not be the right thing for him. Although each soul is a part of the Divine, it is also a wholeness in itself; and there is nothing that a person can reasonably avoid by saying, “I am no more than a limb or a part of mankind.” And there is a whole order of things that he must

do in their entirety, at a specific point and place in the social system, as well as within the world which is his own personal self.

From this, one may also comprehend the purpose of the injunction to love and respect devoted students of the Torah. It is important, especially for those simple persons whose own souls are relatively hidden from sight, to establish an inner relation to the true heads of the people, the highest and most spiritual souls, and in this way receive life force from the source. As for those who are even less able to establish such a connection—and no one is totally unable to do so—life force is received from “behind,” unconsciously. The meaning of this odd expression, “from behind,” lies in the idea of God’s omnipresence. He is everywhere. And the only reason for a person’s inability to establish a connection with the Divine, even in terms of relating to saintly persons around him, is that he has turned his back on God. Therefore, the life force that God in His mercy wishes to bestow on him has to be given from “behind,” without that person’s conscious knowledge. Repentance (Teshuvah) is thus not really a “Return” in that one goes a long way back; it is rather a simple change of direction, a turning about to receive the Divine plenty face to face.

Moreover, concerning this intrinsic nearness of God, there can be no difference between classes of people, like the learned and unlearned. Every human being is born into the world as a free and independent soul clothed in a body. The parents determine the physical vehicle; they give the child their own physical characteristics, but they do not give him his soul. That is given by God. To be sure, the physical garment of the soul is extremely important. The special way a child makes his appearance in life is usually decisive. And even many of the spiritual aspects of personality are largely inherited from parents—a mitzvah is not performed in a vacuum. Modes of behavior and habits of spiritual expression are taught. The soul, of itself, cannot perform any action at all; it has to use whatever means are available to contact holiness. Thus, the garment of the soul is of decisive importance, even though it does not activate the soul or diminish its independence.

In most cases, a great soul does have to be born of parents who are holy. And even then there is usually a constant struggle to overcome the disturbances and the obstacles caused by the inherited garment.

To be sure, there may also be an instance of a small soul born to parents of great spirituality, in which case, it is easier to achieve certain things. This is perhaps a justification for the whole tradition of aristocracy or congenital superiority. Even though the soul itself is not inherited, its garment is passed on, and when this includes higher qualities of mind and body, it becomes an important factor for the expression of the soul.

The “garment” may also be called the personality of the individual, that is to say, it is not only a matter of physical characteristics. For the essential quality of a person as parent can be meaningful in many ways when considering what is transmitted to his offspring. There are the stories told of the Rabbi of Ziditzov describing how both he and his mother before him used to wake the children, even the little ones, for the Tikun Chatzot (midnight prayers for spiritual rectification), and how all five of the children turned out to be especially gifted visionaries. Which is to intimate that the more whole and holy the garment of the parents, the easier for the children to be spiritually conscious. It is also true that the same holy garment of the parents can serve as a very serious obstacle to anyone who seeks to live an unclean life; sin becomes not only an anguish of betrayal, but even the very simplicity of an unthinking act becomes impossible. Indeed, there are many people in our generation who, because of their heritage, cannot be entirely at ease with their unbelief or freedom of thought, much less with dubious political action.

On the other hand, there is the frequent birth of a great soul from unworthy parents or degrading situations. And according to the Kabbalistic writings of the School of the Ari, certain exceptional souls cannot come into the world any other way. The development of such a major personality as Rabbi Meir, whose genealogical connections with the royal family of Rome were hardly a sufficient basis for sanctity in the Jewish sense, could be explained by the fact that this particular soul belonged to the root of Esau and had to be born this way. Another example is Rabbi Akiva, who, although he came from a family of proselytes, of very plain and simple stock, had to come into the world the way he did in order to rise, to be “like unto Moses.” Even Moses himself, it is said, was born of a questionable marriage. Most conspicuous in this respect is the line

of the Messiah, which is certainly problematic—when we consider the instances of Judah and Tamar, Boaz and Ruth, David and Bathsheba, Solomon and Naama, and so on. One may begin to wonder, then, about the way truly great souls emerge, as it is written, from “captivity,” and how, in order to do so, they have to slip across the border between the holy and the unclean.

The garment of the great soul is what disturbs it, of course, and therefore, the need for a father and mother is of itself a source of trouble. As Psalm 51 puts it: “Behold, I was shaped in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” Any soul born of gross or unworthy parents has much pain and many difficulties to overcome; how much more so an unusually great soul. All this clearly confirms that the parents do not determine the soul, no matter whether it is large or small, holy or base. They provide the garment, that is, the body, the personality, even the character traits, and no more. As it is well known, parents are usually not consulted about what they get: A saintly son can be as much a cause of dissatisfaction to certain parents as a vicious son to others. All folklore has a version of the story of the hen sitting patiently on what she believes to be her own eggs, only to hatch a gosling.

From this, it may be gathered that all Jews, no matter who they are—sinners with great souls capable of the noblest of deeds as well as of the basest, or people with small souls incapable of rising above themselves even in piety—are each and all a part of the Divine reality. And at some ultimate point in life, there is no difference between the large and small souls, the good and the bad Jews, they are all equal before God. It is not, of course, a matter of democratic equality; the differences remain, but they are differences between brothers and sisters in the same family. There are more successful and less successful brothers, but the fact that they are sons of the same father is not subject to any influence or change.