

## ***Squaring the Circle of Faith: The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Divine Masquerade of Otherness***

**By: ELI RUBIN**

*Identity and meaning hang upon the balance that must be struck between the two poles of unity and multiplicity. According to Isaiah Berlin, this existential dilemma lies at the heart of Tolstoy's great epic, "War and Peace." All people that are not superficial believe in some kind of cohesive vision. But when the threads of life start to unravel, even the wisest of men may be rendered mute. In "The Gate of Unity and Faith," Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi expands the quintessence of faith into the circle of reason, and fits the square of dissonance into the circle of life.*

### **Part One: The Wisdom of the Hedgehog**

In his famous essay, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*,<sup>1</sup> Isaiah Berlin set multiplicity and unity as the two poles between which the entire corpus of human knowledge can be strung. The world confronts us with a great multiplicity of things, which in relation to one another form complex webs of interconnected entities. But within this vast mosaic of confusion, we humans use philosophy, religion and science (not necessarily in that order) to find meaning, order and unity.

Some seek to cast light on a great many things with one all-encompassing theory or theme. Others deal with specific issues in relative isolation, without relating them to a broader vision of reality. "The fox," said the Greek poet Archilochus, "knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Accordingly, Berlin opines that "Plato, Lucretius,

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<sup>1</sup> First published in 1953, and later included in *Russian Thinkers* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978). All my references are to the revised and reset edition of *Russian Thinkers* (City of Westminster: Penguin Books, 2008).

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Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Proust are, in varying degrees, hedgehogs; Herodotus, Aristotle, Montaigne, Erasmus, Molière, Goethe, Pushkin, Balzac, Joyce are foxes.”<sup>2</sup>

Berlin admits that this is an “oversimple classification” but maintains that it offers “a starting point for genuine investigation.” His essay focuses specifically on our perception of history, but the same paradigm can be used to examine the ways in which we interact with many of the big questions that so obsess the inquisitive mind. Every field, whether it is mathematics, music, biology, literature, economics or religion—indeed all of human experience—may be stretched along the spectrum that lies between the proverbial wood and its trees. Or, in Berlin’s formulation, that which is known to the hedgehog and that which is known to the fox.

When it comes to the crisis of faith in the modern age, Berlin’s particular application of this classification is especially useful.<sup>3</sup> In *The Hedgehog and the Fox* he addresses himself to the philosophy of history espoused in Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, concluding that “Tolstoy was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog,”<sup>4</sup> “a fox bitterly intent upon seeing in the manner of a hedgehog.”<sup>5</sup> Here we are introduced to an existential paradox in which the two opposing poles of the spectrum coincide.

Tolstoy is almost entirely concerned with the experiences and passions of each of his individual characters, mere pawns who are swept up in the colossal Franco-Russian war of 1812. He utterly rejects any attempt to explain the broader scheme of events as being directed by the great figures who dominate the historical landscape. There are, he argues, too many factors to be considered for any sensible explanation to be formulated. But he also alludes to a far deeper truth that lies beneath this veneer

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<sup>2</sup> *Russian Thinkers*, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Berlin himself identified as a Jew, and was a descendent of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the Baal HaTanya, but he could hardly be called religious. His somewhat ambivalent attitude might best be summed up by the following exchange recalled by the outgoing chief rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks:

The first time he came to our house he said, “Chief Rabbi, whatever you do, don’t talk to me about religion; when it comes to G-d, I’m tone deaf.” Then he said, “What I don’t understand is how you who studied philosophy at Cambridge and Oxford can believe.” And I said, “Isaiah, if it helps, think of me as a lapsed heretic.” And he said, “Quite understand, dear boy, quite understand.” (“The Limits of Secularism,” *Standpoint Magazine*, January/February 2012)

“Isaiah,” Rabbi Sacks concludes, “may have been a secular Jew but he was a loyal Jew.” See also James Chappel, *Dignity is Everything: Isaiah Berlin and His Jewish Identity* (Senior Thesis, Haverford College, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

of impenetrable confusion, a unified vision which—if discovered—will bring illumination and meaning to everything.

According to Berlin, Tolstoy's devastating critique of all rationalizations lays bare the absolute futility of any attempt to cast scientific light on the seminal forces that shape the course of history. But he is yet torn by the abiding conviction that there is some essential simplicity that unites all things. The trees tell Tolstoy that there must be a wood, and those very same trees paradoxically obscure his vision, utterly obscuring the very belief that they themselves affirm.

Today we often hear of the conflict between science and religion, between hard-headed reason and potent faith. And there are yet those who are bold enough to attempt a union of these two poles. A great many questions are raised: What is it about the modern scientific method that poses such a challenge to religion? What is the nature of faith? What is the secret of its obstinate power?

The existential dilemma expressed by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, and brought into sharper definition by Berlin in *The Hedgehog and The Fox*, opens up a doorway through which we can explore the broader crisis of faith in the modern age.

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I am not interested in the details of Tolstoy's specific beliefs, but rather in the general form of belief that he ascribes to those of his characters who have somehow fathomed the essential unity that illuminates everything. I am interested in the type of knowledge ascribed to those idealized hedgehogs whom Tolstoy himself so wished to emulate. How do they arrive at this knowledge? What makes it so unshakably compelling?

Over the course of several pages,<sup>6</sup> Berlin juxtaposes knowledge that is arrived at by "specific enquiry and discovery" with a type of "wisdom" or "awareness" that cannot be arrived at through objective study, but is rather a kind of intuitive "understanding" deriving from the very "flow of life" itself:

The world whose constituents "we can discover, classify and act upon by rational, scientific, deliberately planned methods" is sometimes mistaken as being all there really is. There is, however, a much more seminal component of human experience, which "enters too intimately into our experiences, is too closely interwoven with all that we are and do to be lifted out of the flow (it is the flow) and observed with scientific detachment..." It is this subjective medium that "determines our most perma-

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 79–87.

nent categories, our standards of truth and falsehood, of reality and appearance, of the good and the bad... hence neither these, nor any other explicitly conceived categories or concepts, can be applied to it..”

According to Berlin, the sum total of all our diverse experiences merge together in a single channel, and are seamlessly integrated into a single reservoir of integrated perspectives and understandings via which we approach each bend in the river of life. This is the power of the hedgehog’s wisdom. The hedgehog has simply achieved a better “awareness” of, or “sensitivity” to, the general “texture and direction” of this “submerged” aspect of life. The hedgehog’s knowledge is not something separate and objective that can be put up for debate, but is intrinsic to its very identity, and endows all its experiences with meaning.

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A recent talk by Professor Moshe Halbertal brought Berlin’s critique of the hedgehog into sharp focus.<sup>7</sup> Halbertal argued that at the most fundamental level, faith is not simply the “belief that” a particular proposition is true, or even a deeper kind of “belief (faith, or trust) in” something or somebody. Such a superficial perception, he argued, fails to account for the deep potency that we often encounter when such beliefs—whether economical, religious, environmental, moral, or political—are challenged on rational grounds.

Instead, Halbertal argues, we should view such beliefs as extending from the broader worldview of the individual, which in turn derives from the many layers of influences accumulated via education, social interactions, and other life experiences. These beliefs do not exist in isolation but are deeply related to the multifaceted identity of the individual, and so long as they are a part of the whole they cannot be dismantled individually. Accordingly, a rational counter-argument often carries little weight in the face of beliefs that are so intertwined with—and reinforced by—the integrated strands of subjective identity.

Nearly half a century before Isaiah Berlin applied this idea to Tolstoy’s philosophy of history, William James spoke of it in the context of religion:

If we look at man’s whole mental life as it exists... apart from their learning and science, and that they inwardly and privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial. It [rationalism] is the part that has the prestige undoubtedly, for... It can challenge you with proofs, and

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<sup>7</sup> The lecture, titled *Three Concepts of Faith*, can be watched here <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vx7sYd7o2as>>.

chop logic, and put you down with words. But it will fail to convince or convert you all the same...

If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely knows that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it.<sup>8</sup>

## **Part Two: The Cunning of the Fox**

In light of this deeper understanding of the nature of faith, Halbertal reexamines the particular condition of Jewish faith in our times. The traditional account, set forth by the leading historians of Jewish thought and religion in the twentieth century, is that the modern Jew is distinguished by the inability to retain the beliefs of his or her ancestors. Our ancestors were able to take the doctrine of Divine Revelation, Torah from Heaven, literally; we cannot. The whole system rests upon this foundational belief, but modern man—it is claimed—can no longer believe in it. Our knowledge of history, our examination of new archeological finds, internal contradictions, comparative textual readings and criticisms—it is said—have undermined the very basis of our belief in the Jewish tradition.

Halbertal argues that this narrative offers a very unsatisfactory account of the modern crisis of faith. It is the great myth of our times that the scientific study of religion has led to new discoveries that entail the rejection of the most essential tenets of Jewish faith. The problems cited in the previous paragraph as undermining Jewish faith did not suddenly surface in the modern period. They have long been part and parcel of the very tradition that they are purported to undermine. Yes, Biblical literature is filled with difficult passages and apparent contradictions. But the tradition includes an immense body of Biblical commentary attesting that this is hardly news.

For thousands of years, scholars of great ability and erudition studied these texts, debated these complexities, and founded their lives on the meaning and enduring relevance drawn from such engagement. Scholars such as Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, Maimonides, and Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, *et al.*, were fully aware of many difficulties raised by the Biblical account,

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<sup>8</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture III (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2004), 74.

including the problem of Revelation. Were they less intelligent, sophisticated or aware than such modern “intellectuals” as Guttman, Strauss and Scholem? Of course not. Yet they found no reason to reject the tradition of their ancestors.

In the past, innovative intellectual engagement with the intricacies of Jewish law and thought did not undermine the tradition. On the contrary, it was this ongoing enquiry and conversation that endowed our faith with meaning, vibrancy, depth and relevance. The oft repeated phrase “There are seventy facets to the Torah”<sup>9</sup> testifies that the multiple methods of interpretation only served to amplify the compelling breadth of Judaism’s scope. The tension between Revelation and rationalism, between tradition and innovation, was itself the vivifying life-blood that perpetuated Jewish faith and practice throughout the ages.

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In his recently published collection, *The Significance of Religious Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2012), Howard Wettstein uses the example of mathematics to point out that “there are intellectual arenas in which we get along quite well in the absence of settled doctrines about the fundamentals.”<sup>10</sup> For philosophers, questions about the existence and status of mathematical entities like numbers and sets remain open. But in the real world, no one would question the integrity of mathematical practice just because its epistemological and metaphysical foundations are not entirely understood. We have complete confidence in mathematical practice for the simple reason that it provides a unified system that demonstrably enables us to engage the world in a meaningful way. Imagine the folly, says Wettstein, of arguing that mathematical work and practice should await the conclusive establishment of its philosophical underpinnings.<sup>11</sup>

If we can have such faith in mathematics, why must we hold off religious practice and faith until philosophers arrive at conclusive knowledge of its foundations? Religious life demonstrably enables us to engage the world in a cohesively meaningful way. It is the all-embracing illumination that it brings to life that inspires us with the confidence to take it seriously.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson illustrated the point with a similar comparison to the practice of medication. Most laypeople follow the

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<sup>9</sup> The first instance of this formulation appears in Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra’s “Introduction” to his commentary on the Torah.

<sup>10</sup> *The Significance of Religious Experience*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

advice of their doctors, not because they understand why and how a particular treatment will cure them, but because experience tells them that medical practice is successful and beneficial to people's health. "The same applies to Torah and the commandments: the main thing is not understanding, but practice and the surety that it works..."<sup>12</sup>

This in no way mitigates the central importance of foundational beliefs and their role in religious life. Core beliefs remain the focal point, drawing all the peripheral elements of religious engagement together. They must themselves be affirmed as axiomatic in order for the religious way of life to have meaning. Numbers are axiomatic to mathematics. G-d is axiomatic to religion. But we do not need to establish clear and conclusive knowledge of the true nature of numbers in order to practice mathematics. Neither do we need to gain clear and conclusive knowledge of the true nature of G-d in order to practice religion. As the Talmudic sages put it, "it is not inquiry that is fundamental, it is action."<sup>13</sup>

Anyone who has experienced some kind of religious change will attest that the factors that lead in and out of faith are indeed far more complex than the simple affirmation or negation of a foundational belief. Such beliefs do not appear or disappear in a vacuum. It is the totality of the Jewish tradition—its beliefs and its ideals as they are lived by Jews in the real world—that makes Judaism compelling. It is the unraveling of this integral cohesion that makes faith fall apart.

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If faith is—as Halbertal puts it—"who you are," rather than "a proposition that you assert," we can no longer attribute what we call "the modern crisis of faith" to some kind of rational awakening. Rationalism is as much a factor in belief as it is in disbelief, and it is usually not the primary factor in either of them. What then is the crucial element that leads the foundation of faith to unravel and give way to disbelief?

Halbertal only touches on this question, suggesting that the crisis of identity and faith begins when this subjective view is brought into discourse with various elements and perspectives that stand in opposition to it. He leaves any further elaboration to ourselves.

In the modern age, advances in technology have allowed people to travel and communicate with increasing frequency among opposing cultures and perspectives. Some of these new ideas are rejected, but others are assimilated and one's original perspective is gradually eroded. Slowly

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<sup>12</sup> *Igrot Kodesh*, Vol. 5 (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1988), pp. 183–5.

<sup>13</sup> Mishnah, *Avot* 1:17.

you become aware that you no longer identify with all the beliefs and ideals you have previously accepted, and that there are others that seem to resonate more. Previously your entire life was endowed with unified meaning. But now the different threads seem to be leading in different directions, and you are no longer sure in which direction you wish to be led.

If we follow this line of thinking to its logical conclusion, it becomes clear that meaning is forged by unity. When all the strands of life correspond with and reflect a unified identity—when they can all be seen as the refractions of a single prism—meaning is found and faith is born. “The hedgehog knows one big thing,” and usually that unity is enough to defeat the wily schemes plotted by the fox. But if the fox can succeed in confusing the hedgehog, if the fox can lead it away from the “one big thing,” then the hedgehog is lost. It is disunity and dissonance that makes faith fall apart.

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This kind of crisis is not at all particular to the modern age. This kind of crisis is common to anyone engaged in the open-minded pursuit of knowledge. The process of learning is such that when you encounter a new piece of information—whether by sight, sound or intellectual enquiry—it needs to be assessed and processed in the context of the subjective worldview that you had previously formed. For the new information (the object) to be accepted as true, one of two things—or a combination thereof—needs to happen. Either the object must be reframed to conform to your earlier conception, or your subjective worldview must be reshaped so that it can conform to the newly accepted proposition.

Of course, some discoveries are more earth-shattering than others. But by its very nature the learning process entails that you constantly be open to expand your view, and sometimes dramatically rethink previous perspectives. To study is to weave new influences into the fabric of your life. To learn is to engage in the reshaping of your identity. The broader and deeper you allow yourself to think, the deeper you commit yourself to the crisis of identity. And the deeper you commit yourself to the crisis of identity, the deeper you commit yourself to the crisis of faith.

Whether we like it or not, the subjective perspective—a patchwork of impressions derived from the meandering flow of life—is all that we have, our only window on the world. But if we wish to pursue objective truth, then we must submit to the daunting possibility that the very ground of our knowledge may be swept from under our feet.



This is not a new problem; this is a problem that has confronted every thinking person in the history of the world. Anyone who lives a meaningful life lives a life of faith. As Berlin wrote, those who chose to ignore the primacy of the non-rational medium “are rightly called superficial.” Few, however, have the hedgehog’s gift of uncomplicated certainty. Most of us are somewhere along the spectrum between the hedgehog and the fox, and our vague awareness of a subconscious truth is hardly coherent enough to stand up in the face of what James called “logic-chopping rationalistic talk.” In the game of rhetoric, clever eloquence may render the wise man mute.

### **Part Three: The Circle of Reason**

In response to the question “What makes a good philosopher?” the philosopher Hilary Putnam explained that “philosophy needs vision and arguments... There is something disappointing about a philosophical work that contains arguments, however good, which are not inspired by some genuine vision, and something disappointing about philosophical work that contains a vision, however inspiring, which is unsupported by arguments.”<sup>14</sup>

As human beings we engage an objective reality from a subjective viewpoint. To ignore either one of these integral components of our psyche would be to jettison a part of our humanity. The ideal way to think about things is neither as a hedgehog nor as a fox, but as a combination of both. A seamless vision is only potent when articulated with the coherent rigor of scientific argument. Coherent rhetoric is only compelling if it expresses visionary inspiration.

We tend to think of subjective vision and objective reason as being at polar ends of a linear spectrum. But according to Rabbi Yechezkel Feigin, a prominent prewar scholar of Chabad thought, it is better to think of objectivity as a circle extending outwards from a center of subjectivity. We begin from a point of absolute intimacy—the unspoken knowledge that permeates the entire flow of our lives—and we use the tools of argument to expand that vision into the circle of reason.

In an editorial published in the *Hatamim* journal,<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Feigin responded to readers who saw the intellectual probing of faith issues—sometimes without resolution—as potentially subversive. Rabbi Feigin

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<sup>14</sup> *Key Philosophers in Conversation* (Routledge, 1999), p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> *Hatamim* was a periodical published in prewar Poland, which functioned in part as a forum for the in-depth study and discussion of Chabad Chassidic teachings.

countered that such probing could not pose a threat to faith because rational analysis is not the foundation of faith, but a tool that enables us to examine and articulate what we already believe.

If first a circle is drawn and you then attempt to find its central point, success will be achieved only with difficulty, and it is likely that the result will be imprecise. But if you first establish the central point it is then easier to establish the circumference of the expanded circle with precision. Even if you do not achieve success in this, you nevertheless retain knowledge of the central point.

This brings me to the crux of my argument. The modern crisis of faith extends from a mistaken understanding of the relationship between subjective intuition and objective reasoning. By reframing the latter as an attempt to articulate the former, rather than its polar opposite, the Chassidic philosophy effectively circumvents the crisis. In the words of Rabbi Feigin, “The teachings of Chassidism begin from the quintessence of faith (*nequdat ha-emunah*) broadening and expanding into natural reason.” Such reason, he concludes, cannot undermine faith “because the quintessence safeguards the expansion.”<sup>16</sup>

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According to Chassidic teachings, this quintessence runs far deeper than the type of faith described by James, Berlin and Halbertal. For them, faith and identity are actually very similar to more rational forms of knowledge; ultimately, they too are derived from influences outside of one’s own self. In Chassidic thought, however, the “quintessence of faith” does not simply derive from “the flow of life” experienced in the physical realm, but is synonymous with the very being of one’s soul, which is “truly a part of G-d above.”<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the soul’s faith is not superimposed, but transcends all external experiences.

Vested in a physical body, however, and surrounded by mundane distractions, the soul might lose touch with its true identity. Subjective intuition might be a more receptive medium for the expression of this quintessential faith, but it can better survive the clash of cultures if expressed in terms that are more universally coherent and compelling. Reason, therefore, is an important tool for the expression, defense, perpetuation and even deepening of faith. But it is not the foundation upon which faith stands or falls.

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<sup>16</sup> *Hatamim*, Issue #5 (Warsaw, 1936), pp. 66–7 [490-7 in the new pagination].

<sup>17</sup> *Tanya*, Chapter 2.

Earlier I argued that the foundation of faith is unity; it is striking that in Chassidic thought the quintessence of faith coincides with the quintessence of the soul, and the quintessence of the soul is unity (*yechidab*).<sup>18</sup> The project of Chabad philosophy—as first taught by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi—is not to establish a rational foundation for belief, but rather to amplify the unified core of axiomatic faith; to awaken everyone to the wisdom that lies deep within their very own hearts; to penetrate the unified core of this deep-set intimacy and draw it forth into open view.<sup>19</sup> Eloquence becomes a bridge, enabling the articulation of unity in a diverse context, and bringing a deeply personal vision into the circle of reason and universal meaning.

It is no accident, therefore, that the entire corpus of Chabad thought is devoted to the articulation of a radical conception of Divine unity: “The central object of my father’s teachings,” wrote Rabbi DovBer Schneuri of Lubavitch, son and successor of Rabbi Schneur Zalman, “was to fix the simple unity of G-d—that is the essence of the infinite—in the mind and heart of each individual according to what they can conceive, each according to their ability...”<sup>20</sup>

A momentary glimpse of a transcendent vision is not enough. Fleeting transcendence is easily swept away in the tumult of competing realities, and soon buried beneath the more tangible impressions of the concrete realm. The contours of unity must constantly be reconsidered, contemplated and crystallized, so that faith can be coherently expressed, and successfully perpetuated, even in the context of diversity.

#### **Part Four: The Masquerade of Otherness**

*The Gate of Unity and Faith* (שער היחוד והאמונה) is the second section of Rabbi Schneur Zalman’s magnum opus, the *Tanya*.<sup>21</sup> In the twelve chapters of this treatise he articulates a vision of Divine unity that allows a

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<sup>18</sup> See *Midrash Rabbah*, 14:11; Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, “*Inyanah Shel Torat Ha-chasidut*” in *Sefer ha-Erechim Chabad* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1970), p. 757.

<sup>19</sup> Due the nature of the Chabad intellectual project, I have long hesitated to use the term “Chabad Philosophy.” But in the light of Putnam’s suggestion that vision is as important to philosophy as argument, I think that “Chabad philosophy” may indeed be an accurate designation.

<sup>20</sup> Introduction to *Imrei Binah*.

<sup>21</sup> Although it was published as the second section of *Tanya*, there is evidence that it was initially written as the first section. It might be suggested that this change reflects our broader thesis about the nature of faith. The first section of *Tanya*

unified worldview to remain coherent in the face of unresolved anomalies. Central to this paradigm is the notion that revelation and concealment are equally valid manifestations of Divine being, and equal partners in the creation of physical reality. Accordingly, we may view the entire mosaic of disparate reality as the refractions of a single prism; the Divine Self discloses its being in the form of darkness as well as light.

The foundational statement of Jewish belief, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is one,” is usually taken as declaration of monotheism. For Rabbi Schneur Zalman, however, this is a statement of utter monism. Rather than “one big thing,” G-d is the one and *only* “thing”; the one aside from whom there is nothing (אין עוד מלבדו). Furthermore, Rabbi Schneur Zalman taught, it is not enough to be a hedgehog; one must also be a fox—clever enough to understand how the one might be manifest as many. His express purpose in this treatise is to explain how all that exists is absorbed within the all-encompassing oneness of the Divine self (יהודה עילאה — “higher level unity”), and how that oneness is found within all the diverse aspects of existence (יהודה תתאה — “lower level unity”).<sup>22</sup>

We usually think of being as the assertion of presence. If something’s existence is not asserted—whether spatially, conceptually or otherwise—it cannot be said to exist. This axiom is usually applied to our conception of G-d’s being, too, and things that do not manifestly assert the existence of G-d, are taken to be entities other than G-d. But Rabbi Schneur Zalman asserts that this is a misapplication. When it comes to G-d, an entirely different modality of thought is required.

The essential core of Divinity is entirely transcendent of any conception. To conceive of the Divine *only* as the Creator or Source of all existence would be a mistake. G-d is not the infinite but “the essence of the infinite.” The term “infinite” refers to the assertion of infinite capacity, but the Divine self transcends such self-assertion just as it does any other description. There is no concept that can truly describe G-d’s being, not even the concept of being itself. Divine non-contingency is such that G-d’s presence is not dependent on the manifest assertion of that presence. Concealment may therefore be just as valid an expression of Divine being as revelation.

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discusses the practicalities of serving G-d, while *The Gate of Unity and Faith* deals with the metaphysical fundamentals of belief. However integral such fundamental beliefs are to Jewish faith, knowledge of them is ultimately less essential than the actual practice of Jewish life and ethics.

<sup>22</sup> See the introductory statement that precedes *The Gate of Unity and Faith*, chapter 1. See also *ibid.*, chapter 7. Thanks goes to Rabbi Tzvi Freeman for this formulation of the concept.

The Divine capacity to be present without manifestly asserting presence is expressed in the creation of things that do not overtly express G-d's presence. While the act of Creation is an assertive demonstration of Divine capacity, it also entails an element of concealment. Otherness is an essential ingredient in the creative process. Without it, the very notion of a created realm that is distinct from its Creator would be impossible. In the act of Creation, Divine being is consequently expressed in two opposing modes—one transparent and revealing, the other opaque and concealing. The veil of otherness and disparity that envelopes physical reality is actually a manifestation G-d's own unified selfhood; oneness masquerading as multiplicity, light masquerading as darkness.<sup>23</sup>

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The title of this work—*The Gate of Unity and Faith*—suggests that the conceptual foundations here articulated are as relevant to faith as they are to unity. Indeed, in the preface to this treatise, Rabbi Schneur Zalman examines the factors that lead in and out of faith, and argues that faith can be perpetuated in the face of crisis only if an eloquent vision of Divine unity is first established.

“Seven times,” said King Solomon, “does the righteous man fall and yet rise up.”<sup>24</sup> The “fall” of the righteous man, explains Rabbi Schneur Zalman, is a necessary step along the path of spiritual ascent. “Man is progressive, not stationary. He must proceed from one station to the next, and cannot stand at one point forever.” But the path of growth does not lack pitfalls; “between one station and the next, before reaching the higher plane, you fall from your earlier stand.”

Such a “fall” must occur in every intellectual arena; an altogether greater and deeper understanding is only attained when a new and difficult concept entirely confuses your earlier perspective, and opens up an entirely new set of possibilities.<sup>25</sup> The implications of such a realization are not immediately grasped. The concept must be engaged deeply before it can be fully understood, assimilated and emotionally integrated. But in the first moment that it impresses itself upon your consciousness you know that your previous perspective was either too narrow or too shallow.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See *The Gate of Unity and Faith*, especially chapters 4, 6 and 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Proverbs* 24:16.

<sup>25</sup> See comments to Rabbi Shneur Zalman's “preface” by Rabbi Hillel HaLevi of Paritch, *Pelech ha-Rimon*, Vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1954), p. 302.

<sup>26</sup> See comments to Rabbi Shneur Zalman's “preface” by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, Vol. 14, 458. See also Talmud Bavli, *Bava Metz'ia* 85a, and Rashi's commentary to *Chullin* 122a.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman acknowledges that the vacuum created by a radical new idea is not total; past knowledge and experience is not lost or rendered invalid. But a new piece has been added to the puzzle of identity, which does not yet fit; one's self-image is distorted; the mosaic of meaning and faith is shadowed with uncertainty.

The notion of Divine unity set forth by Rabbi Schneur Zalman, however, provides a perspective broad enough to bring the very threat of dissonance within the fold of cohesive meaning. The idea that overt concealment of G-d's existence is itself an embodiment of Divine presence carries a preemptive defense against any objection; any ostensible refutation of this principle is retroactively reframed as another act in the Divine masquerade of otherness.

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Rabbi Schneur Zalman is certainly not advocating a simple one-size-fits-all answer to every possible challenge to faith. Anything that does not overtly express Divine unity cannot simply be written off as an illusion meant to test our faith. Instead, he describes an underlying framework that allows for a whole range of complexities to function in tandem.

Elsewhere, Rabbi Schneur Zalman discusses the various ways that the Torah classifies different categories of phenomena, describing how opaque or transparent to divinity they might be, and what their general roles are in the broader scheme of things. Some things play a role that is irredeemably "otherly." Other things can overtly serve the Divine purpose and become transparent to Divinity if used correctly.<sup>27</sup>

Each element in the mosaic of life must be understood both in its own local terms and also as a piece in a much bigger puzzle. The masquerade of otherness is multilayered and multifaceted, and some acts are more transparent to the underlying unity than others. If there is a particular issue that we have struggled with and cannot resolve, we can put it aside, delve deeper into another aspect of faith and then return to our earlier problem with more context to work with. On the basis of the established vision of Divine unity, we may be confident that each component does have a role to play in the greater picture of reality.

This unified vision does not profess to resolve the specific problem posed by every possible anomaly, nor does it ignore objective realities that appear to undermine the quintessence of faith. Instead it empowers us to confront such anomalies without allowing the rest of our lives to fall apart.

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<sup>27</sup> See *Tanya - Sefer Shel Beinonim*, chapters 6, 7 and 8, for a discussion of various degrees of "otherness." See also *ibid.*, chapters 22 and 37, *Tanya - Igeret Ha-kodesh*, chapter 25, and *Kuntras Acharon*, chapter 4.

Correctly viewed, a subversive idea is actually a whole new avenue of enlightenment waiting to be discovered; concealment too is a medium via which we are informed. Even before that enlightenment is found, while the details might remain mysterious, the elegant coherence of the greater whole need not be disrupted.

*The Gate of Unity and Faith* expands the quintessence of faith into the circle of reason, and fits the square of dissonance into the circle of life. On those rare and precious occasions when you are suddenly exposed to a completely new perspective, when in one moment all your previous ideas are somehow rendered insufficient, all is not lost. As the Psalmist said, “Though you may fall you shall not be utterly cast down.”<sup>28</sup> You may not always be able to draw the circle’s circumference with precision, but the quintessential foundation of faith will not be lost. Armed with the knowledge that concealment is actually a masquerade of opaque revelation—a veiled disclosure of an altogether deeper truth—the framework of your previous view is already wide enough to square this circle too.



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<sup>28</sup> *Psalms*, 37:24. The verse is cited in this context by Rabbi Schneur Zalman.