

## *The Soul of a Jew and the Soul of a Non-Jew* *An Inconvenient Truth and the Search for an Alternative*

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*Holiness is not found in the human being in essence unless he sanctifies himself. According to his preparation for holiness, so the fullness comes upon him from on High. A person does not acquire holiness while inside his mother. He is not holy from the womb, but has to labor from the very day he comes into the air of the world.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction: The Soul of a Jew is Superior to that of a Non-Jew**

The view expressed in the above heading—as uncomfortable and racially charged as it may be in the minds of some—was undoubtedly, as we shall show, the prominent position maintained by authorities of Jewish thought throughout the ages, and continues to be so even today. While Jewish mysticism is the source and primary expositor of this theory, it has achieved a ubiquitous presence not only in the writings of Kabbalists,<sup>2</sup> but also in the works of thinkers found in the libraries of most observant Jews, who hardly consider themselves followers of Kabbalah. Clearly, for one committed to the Torah and its principles, it is not tenable to presume that so long as he is not a Kabbalist, such a belief need not be a part of his religious worldview.

Is there an alternative view that is an equally authentic representation of Jewish thought on the subject? In response to this question, we will

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<sup>1</sup> R. Simḥa Bunim of Przysukha, *Kol Simḥa, Parshat Miketz*, p. 47 and *Mesbaratan Eish Lohet*, p. 228, quoted in *Noam Siab*, p. 263. See Michael Rosen, *Quest for Authenticity* (Jerusalem, 2008), p. 211 & 382.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, the term “Kabbalists” will hereafter be used to refer to those who are general adherents of the teachings of Kabbalah—especially with relation to the particular topic under discussion—which was espoused as fundamental to Kabbalistic thought. The term is not intended to attest to a particular thinker’s active involvement in the religious mystical experience, nor does it necessarily reflect a thinker’s own self-perception or his specific choice of engagement with Jewish religious texts.

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devote the central portion of this study to the view of Maimonides, the major representative of the rationalist school of Jewish thought, and argue that he was committed to an approach wherein Jew and non-Jew occupy the same domain with relation to the soul, with no inherent superiority presumed in one over the other.<sup>3</sup> This view can be fully appreciated when it is studied not only in the independent context of Maimonides' legal and philosophical works, but also through the Talmudic sources with which he contended. We will focus on the Talmudic text that serves as a major source for the "distinction of souls"<sup>4</sup> and note the differing conclusions of the Kabbalists and Maimonides. It is my hope that the nuanced approach of the latter will inspire those in the category of "the perplexed" to once again turn to the greatest thinker of Jewish history for guidance. They may thereby discover renewed meaning in a path that differs from that which others have taken, but which leads no less legitimately to the personal and communal fulfillment of the Divine plan for human perfection.

## **The Superiority of the Jewish Soul: A Brief Survey**

### **The *Zohar***

The *Zohar*, the primary source of Jewish mystical thought,<sup>5</sup> firmly establishes the perspective distinguishing between the souls of Jews and non-

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<sup>3</sup> Menachem Kellner has repeatedly asserted this claim in his many writings on Maimonides and he has done groundbreaking work on the subject. See his *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany, 1996); *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford, 2006), ch. 7; *Science in the Bet Midrash* (Brighton, MA, 2009), chs. 16-17; and "We Are Not Alone," in *Radical Responsibility: Celebrating the Thought of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks* (Jerusalem, 2012), pp. 139–154. As Kellner has emphasized, Maimonides certainly believed that the Jewish people were chosen and that they were superior to other peoples in various realms of human endeavor. But this distinction was not presumed to be due to a pre-existing, primordial, or ontological quality. Rather, it was the result of an unrelenting emphasis upon values that were taught, lived, and passed down within the Jewish heritage.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this article, we will refer to our subject with this terminology.

<sup>5</sup> The dispute regarding the authorship and antiquity of the *Zohar* may be relevant to the present discussion, but we will not enter into it. This issue, while prominently debated in modern academic scholarship, was also discussed by the greatest sages of previous generations, some of whom questioned the traditional attribution to the Talmudic sage R. Shimon bar Yoḥai. See Moshe Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century," in Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (eds.), *Jewish Thought in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cambridge, 1987), esp. pp. 137–162, and Isadore Twersky, "Law and Spirituality in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century: A Case Study in R. Yair Ḥayyim Bacharach," *ibid.*, pp. 447–467. See also Marc