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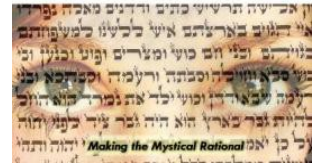
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The Myth of the “Jewish Soul”

by Ariel B Tzadok

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For many centuries numerous rabbis had to contend with the troubling reality of extensive Jewish persecution at the hands of Christian, and Muslim persecutors.

Rather than address the actual political and polemic causes of persecution, which could have been dangerous, some rabbis chose instead to spiritualize the conflict, and created the myth of the separate Jewish soul.

By concocting this myth, the rabbis who embraced it used this myth to explain why Jewish individuals were subject to so much persecution. It was their destiny, they were told, because they had “Jewish souls” and that “Jewish souls” were more special, and closer to God than “Gentile souls.” This myth created within the persecuted a sense of specialty, and even superiority, which gave them comfort, and relief through very trying times.



One cannot blame the rabbis who created this myth for promoting it. Under times of crises, it is the obligation of communal leaders to see to all the needs of their flocks, including their spiritual needs. The persecuted Jews living under the replacement theologies of the Christians and Muslims, needed to be uplifted, and spiritually supported. Otherwise, entire communities could have sunk into melancholy and become lost.

Worse than lost, when communities become lost, and individuals find no purpose in their lives, they often become self-destructive. Indeed, if there was no spiritual respite for persecuted Jews, they may have indeed submitted to their Christian, and Muslim overlords, and converted to those respective religions. But what kind of converts do melancholy, embittered souls make? Indeed, their joining those other religious communities would have been detrimental for all involved. Although the rabbis created a myth, the myth served a positive function, and for this reason alone, it can be condoned.

The time for past myths, however, has come to an end. Now the perpetration of the myth only serves to fuel the fires of racism, chauvinism, and undeserved elitism. While Israel is God's chosen people according to the Bible, the nature of being chosen never meant to be superior in any size, shape or form.

Superiority, for a human being, is completely defined by personal behavior. Only if every individual of the nation of Israel were to behave in accordance to the high morals demanded by Torah, would the nation then be considered a morally superior nation. When however, in the course of human event, individuals do not rise up to behave as is morally appropriate, (or demanded by Torah Law), then the nation as a whole has no right to claim moral superiority. Moral superiority belongs to the individual, not to the collective, and then only by choice behavior, and never by mere proclamation.

Israel was chosen by God to serve as a nation of priests. The priesthood, by nature, stands out not due to any superiority of person, but rather due to the burden of priestly servitude. In other words, priests are not supposed to be like other people, they are supposed to be better. A priest is supposed to as a role model for a higher standard of living. The layman has no obligation to live by the code of the priest, but should nevertheless respect the priest for living a code of higher morality. This relationship of priest and layman was true between the Kohen sons of Aharon, and Israel, and between the nation of Israel, and the nations of the world. The two relationships reflect one another.

No Jew in his/her right mind would proclaim that a Kohen priest, son of Aharon, had a higher level soul than any other Jewish individual. So too no one of Israel, a nation of priests, should consider themselves as having a soul any different from the layman nations of the world that they serve. The concept is as ridiculous as it is foolish.

In Kabbalistic literature there is talk of the superior soul of the "Israelite." Yet, almost everyone reading these Kabbalistic teachings pay little, to no attention, to the factors that define the "Israelite" level of soul. Certainly the "Israelite" level of soul is

not synonymous with being Jewish. It also has no relationship to the mythological “Jewish” soul. The level of the 'Israelite” soul according to the Kabbalists is reserved for those who have achieved perfected levels of moral, and intellectual attainments.

Reviewing the Kabbalistic teachings on this subject, one can recognize an earlier influence therein. All too often Kabbalists embraced many of the teachings of the Greek philosophers, and sciences. The Greeks spoke of the “Philosopher's” soul. The Kabbalists adopted the idea, and its exact meaning, and applied it within a cultural Jewish (Kabbalistic) context.

This superior soul, call it the Philosopher's soul or the Israelite soul, was never the exclusive domain of one people, or one nation. Rather, it was a level of moral, intellectual, and spiritual accomplishment that could be achieved by anyone. Essentially, throughout history, we have had numerous individuals, men and women, from almost every nation on Earth who achieved this level of Philosopher/Israelite soul. And it certainly has nothing to do with being either Greek or Jewish! Psychological development is an equal opportunity for all humanity to embrace.

Not only do individual Jews have nothing to boast about in the intrinsic nature of their souls, there are even numerous Gentiles who have achieved the Israelite level of soul, when many Jews have not. So, while the identity of who is a Jew is not in question, the identity of who is a true “spiritual” Israelite (Philosopher) is indeed an open question.

We must also address the Biblical commandment for the Jews to be a holy nation. Yet, one must first properly understand the definition of holiness in order to ascertain how the commandment is to be fulfilled, and then who indeed is, and is not holy.

Holiness is not a matter of moral, or intellectual accomplishment. Holiness is associated with the ritual observance of the commandments. Whenever a Jew performs a ritual commandment, he/she prefaces the performance with a prayer (Berakha) of thanks to God. The language of the prayer includes these words, “who makes us holy through the performance of His commandment,” (*Asher Kid'shanu B'Mitzvotaw*).

The purpose of the commandments of the Torah is to enable the practitioner to experience deeper intent, and meaning through the archetypal ritual acts. The commandments are a means to an end, and not an end unto themselves. When a Jew performs the commandments, with proper practice, and intent, the performance creates the possibility for transcendental changes in the life of the practitioner. This change is what the Torah refers to as holiness.

Holiness applies to all of the Biblical commandment. However certain commandments are more focused on holiness than are others. The two areas of specific focus are the sexual, and dietary restrictions. These specific observances help purify the human body physiologically, and psychologically help bring balance to the human mind.

One who restricts one's sexuality within the context of Biblical guidelines is said to be holy. Also one who keep the dietary laws equally achieves this state of inner equilibrium, which we call holiness. It is also important to point out that numerous spiritual disciplines around the world take upon themselves restrictions within the realms of sexuality, and diet. In doing so, they accomplish the same levels of inner equilibrium that Jews who observe the commandments can accomplish.

It may be right to say that many spiritual Gentiles around the world from numerous cultures and religions achieve a level of holiness that individual Jews who do not observe the commandments fail to achieve.

There are opinions in Torah theology that state that Jewish holiness is inherent, and can never be lost. This point, like any other in theology, can be debated endlessly. Holiness should rightly be compared to an ember; unless one keeps the flame lit, it has the possibility to be extinguished. Regardless of theological claims, we should never allow religious polemics to blind the eye to the realities on the ground. Metaphors aside, we see numerous Jews who are the farthest thing from being holy individuals. For them, the question whether Jewish holiness is, or is not, inherent seems to be answered.

The Bible is clear that God chose the Children of Israel to serve as His "Nation of Priests." Yet, this term merely defines Israel as being the tool through which the Divine would act to serve humanity. Israel too is a means to an end; the end being the spiritual evolution, and elevation of all humanity.

Israel consists of twelve tribes, all of which are God's tools. Today, we can only identify the single tribe called Jews (from Judea/Judah). The identity of the other tribes have been lost to us. Lost to us, yes, but not lost to God! God still works through those who He knows to be His people, whether or not they themselves are aware of their ancestral heritage, or their inherent Divine mission. Maybe this explains why peoples all over the world have suffered the same fate as have the Jews. Maybe we are all lost kin?

Theologically, some Jewish thinkers reject this idea out of hand. Once one is no longer Jewish, they say, then they are no longer holy. However, these same Jewish

thinkers contradict themselves when they say that secular Jews remain holy regardless of their assimilation. One cannot have it both ways. Whether or not the lost Tribes of Israel remain active in the Divine plan is a matter known only in Heaven. Maybe in the distant messianic future we will have this question answered, but for now there can only be debate, but no answer.

What we must conclude is this: Israel was chosen by God to serve Him. Serving God means to serve as God's tool for the redemption of all humanity. This obligation is a burden, and some consider it a privilege. However, in no way does it make such an individual in any way to be better than anyone else.

We must dismiss the myth of the special "Jewish soul" out of hand, and instead strive to live a Torah life, and earn the recognition of accomplishing an Israelite/Philosopher soul. And this path is open to all who wish to walk it.

The KosherTorah School



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