



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHEMOT > Shemot

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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January 5, 2013

Shemot

**Bicentennial of a Revolution:  
The True Father of Psychology**



## Meaningful Sermons

*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

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### ABSTRACT

Modern-day psychology believes that we humans are evolved beasts, driven by primal, narcissistic needs and feelings. What can we truly expect of such creatures who are obsessed with the survival of the fittest? What can we really look forward to when we consider the future of the human race? At best, not much, it would seem, and at worst, horror and destruction.

But is that the way it really is?

This sermon dissects our current view of the human psyche, and offers a fresh psychological model – a revolutionary way to think about ourselves and the world. In so doing, it examines the ground-breaking teachings of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, author of the Tanya and Shulchan Aruch.

As we honor the 200th anniversary of his passing this Motzei Shabbat, it is appropriate to recognize his pioneering approach to the human psyche. His teachings present a profound philosophy that plumbs the depths of Talmud and Kabbalah and integrate it all into a systematic lifestyle – joining ritual and spiritual in a seamless union.

The key is the cardinal mitzvah of the Torah: Love your neighbor as yourself.

The intimate appreciation of each soul’s divine nature fuels the drive to relate to all with unmatched warmth and without judgment. Eternal and humble respect for the mysterious journey of every unique soul, and the responsibility to do everything possible to actualize that soul’s potential, lies at the heart of the commitment to not just warm yourself in this cold universe but to warm all those around you.

Discover how the Alter Rebbe’s Chassidus empowers and changes lives.

## PSYCHOLOGY FOR TODAY, PSYCHOLOGY FOR TOMORROW: THE RADICAL IDEAS OF RABBI SCHNEUR ZALMAN

### 1. A Question of Recognition (Anecdote)

A Chassidic colleague of mine, an author of note, was speaking before a largely secular audience in Florida, when a woman brought the proceedings to a halt with this question:

“Do you recognize Conservative Judaism? Because if you do not, I don’t want to buy the book of a bigot.”

The entire auditorium fell silent.

He paused before he replied: “No, I don’t recognize its legitimacy.”

The audience became uncomfortably restless, until he continued: “But I also don’t recognize Orthodox Judaism, Ultra-orthodox, Reform, Conservadox and all the other combinations that have been and will be created. The reason being: Nowhere is mention made of these labels in the constitution of Judaism – the Torah.”

He then asked: “Was Moses Orthodox, Conservative or Reform?”

And he answered: “Anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of spirituality knows that one cannot stereotype and fit the soul into man-made labels and structures. The soul is not square, round, tall or short. Neither is it Orthodox, Conservative or Reform, any more than it is Republican or Democrat. The soul is a divine force in each of us, infusing us with an indispensable mission to fulfill in our lifetime.”

His audience enthusiastically responded to his answer.

But his answer was not really his own. It came from a long line of Chassidic Masters, which began with Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, also known as the Alter Rebbe, who started the Chabad Chassidic Movement in the 19th century.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812) – who is also known as the Alter Rebbe and Baal HaTanya – is the founder of the Chabad Chassidus and the author of *The Tanya* and the *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*. He was the youngest student of Rabbi Dovber of Mezeritch, who in turn was the student and successor of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, better known as the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the overall Chassidic Movement in 1734.

## 2. The Contribution of Chabad

The contribution of Rabbi Schneur Zalman and the Chabad Chassidic Movement can best be appreciated by placing it in a historical context.

The primary challenge facing the Jewish people following the Emancipation in the 18th century was: How to benefit from their newfound freedoms while not compromising the integrity of millennia-old Jewish tradition.

It was a hard task and many failed at it. Assimilation followed. Indeed, assimilation was born simply because people were unprepared for the challenges of accelerated Emancipation. This challenge would take on different forms in the subsequent years – the battle between religion and science, between church and state and between faith and reason. Some chose insulation to protect from these progressive forces; others compartmentalization, and yet others assimilation.

But Rabbi Schneur Zalman developed an eloquent and comprehensive system to bridge the schism between the material and the spiritual – offering a dynamic blueprint for Jewish life today, one that makes the spiritual journey personally relevant for contemporary times.

Drawing from the vast corpus of mystical and Talmudic teachings, his brainchild known as Chabad – an acronym for *Chochma* (wisdom), *Binah* (understanding) and *Daat* (knowledge) – teaches that within all of matter lies potent spiritual energy. Each of us is charged with the mission of discovering the divine “sparks” allocated to us in our respective corner of the world and sphere of influence.

We relieve the tension between matter and spirit by spiritualizing the material, releasing the divine energy embedded in every person, object and experience.

Most importantly, recognizing the divine soul in each person naturally leads to a loving attitude toward every individual, regardless of background or persuasion.

### 3. Profound Philosophy

Rabbi Schneur Zalman's profound philosophy plumbs the depths of Talmud and Kabbalah and integrates it all into a systematic lifestyle, based on the cardinal mitzvah of the Torah: Love your neighbor as yourself.

The intimate appreciation of each soul's dignity – regardless of background, education or experience – drives us to relate to all with unmatched warmth and without judgment. Eternal and humble respect for the mysterious journey of every unique soul, and the responsibility to do everything possible to actualize that soul's potential, lies at the heart of the commitment to not just warm yourself in this cold universe but to warm all those around you.

Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, unaffiliated ... is not the way Rabbi Schnuer Zalman of Liadi would have ever looked at a Jew. Because he saw every Jew's divine soul. Speaking of all Jews, he wrote:

“Who can know their greatness and excellence of their root and source in the living God ... all Jews are called real brothers.”<sup>2</sup>

In so doing, Rabbi Schneur Zalman introduced into the world a novel approach to psychology – and this even before the discipline of psychology came into being.

His teachings offered the most sophisticated and comprehensive view on the nature of the human psyche and its struggles. And since this Sunday we mark the 200th anniversary of his passing, it is appropriate to be reminded of his immense contribution.

That contribution can be appreciated by contrasting it with the prevalent view of the psyche.

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<sup>2</sup> The Tanya, chapter 32.

## 4. Modern Psychology

It is commonly accepted that the age of modern psychology began at the end of the 19th century, or about a century after Rabbi Schneur Zalman unveiled his novel ideas.

The way we understand ourselves today is very much defined by the thinking of Sigmund Freud, whom some call the Father of Psychology, followed by Carl Jung, BF Skinner and other great psychologists of the 20th century.

They said – in a nutshell – that each one of us is at war with our many needs and desires. On the bottom is our selfish need to survive and experience pleasure. Next up is our practical need to co-exist, to love and be loved, and to live productive lives. Then we have our ethical values and our conscience. And finally, our higher, spiritual and transcendental dimensions.

Human anxiety is the result of our conflicting voices. How we treat and mistreat others is determined by which force controls our behavior.

Vulnerable and impressionable children, of course, are the first to suffer the consequences and are hurt the worst by their parents' clashing drives colliding with each other. And we all begin our lives as children. Then, we grow up and have to pick up the pieces, try to heal from the wounds and rebuild our lives.

The rest is history – your history and mine – the history of every person alive today struggling with the disparate forces that shape our personalities and define our life choices. A vicious cycle indeed.

## 5. The Million Dollar Question

But here is the million-dollar question: Who is the real you? Or more precisely: Which of your drives is the most powerful one? Which is most dominant?

The prevalent theory – which can be coined the Darwinian-Freudian model – argues that the most powerful and most basic human drive is selfish survival.

This model says that we humans are fundamentally no different than other creatures, and that, indeed, we have evolved from the same ancestors. According to Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection, survival or extinction of each organism is determined by that organism's ability to adapt to its environment. Another name Darwin gave Natural Selection is – and I quote – “the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life.”

Of course, Darwin did not speak in psychological terms. He actually avoided applying his theory to the social and religious arena. It was apparently the 19th century British philosopher Herbert Spencer who first used the term “survival of the fittest” as a central tenet of what became known as “Social Darwinism.” He applied – or some say misapplied – Darwin's idea of natural selection to justify European domination and colonization of much of the rest of the world, and to defend the unequal distribution of wealth and power in Europe and North America at the time.

Poor and politically powerless people were thought to have been failures in the natural competition for survival. Subsequently, helping them was seen as a waste of time and counter to nature. Rich and powerful people did not need to feel ashamed of their advantages because their success was proof that they were the most fit in this competition.

## 6. Freud's Theories

In the psychological realm, Freud posited that the most basic of all human instincts is the Id, the primal, unconscious source for satisfying all mans' basic needs and desires. The Id has only one rule, known as the "pleasure principle," which says: "I want it and I want it all now." The Id wants whatever feels good at the time, with no consideration for the reality of the situation or the good of others.

Then there is the Ego, the rational part of the mind that relates to the real world and operates via the "reality principle," recognizing that you can't always get what you want. The Ego realizes the need for compromise and negotiates between the Id and the Superego, which might be called the moral part of the mind. The Ego's job is to get the pleasures that the Id wants but to be reasonable about it.

When laying all this out, Freud described the human personality as being basically a battlefield. Clinical psychologist, Don Bannister, summed it up thus:

He [the personality] is a dark-cellar in which a well-bred spinster lady (the Superego) and a sex-crazed monkey (the Id) are forever engaged in mortal combat, the struggle being refereed by a rather nervous bank clerk (the Ego).<sup>3</sup>

## 7. The Parallels

Though Freud may not have directly correlated his theories to Darwin's, one can't avoid the parallels, and how each complements the other.

If we humans are merely "billion-year-old bacteria" and essentially no different than any other animal fighting for survival, then it would make absolute sense that our most dominant drive is fixation on our own needs and pleasure, even at the expense of others.

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<sup>3</sup> See: [http://changingminds.org/explanations/personality/freud\\_personality.htm](http://changingminds.org/explanations/personality/freud_personality.htm)



One of the sad consequences of this viewpoint is the lack of expectation we can have of each other. If our most natural self is the need to survive and the narcissistic pursuit of pleasure, then what can we really expect of people?!

Can we really be disappointed if someone ends up hurting us or others in his or her own pursuit of pleasure? Can we even blame the person? After all, we are sophisticated “bacteria” just trying to survive in a hostile environment.

Yes, we can expect of humans to create superimposed rules, like “red lights” and “green lights” so that we can coexist and not destroy each other. But that is a superimposed state, not our natural state.

If we apply this to law and order, justice is not a noble idea but just a way of making sure that we don’t self-destruct. Without it, anarchy would prevail. So we need laws to maintain order.

No wonder fear is the most commonly used tool in education, and punishment is the most popular deterrent to crime. Since people are essentially animals, with an ominous Id lurking within, they cannot be trusted to do the “right thing” and “rise to the occasion.”

That sure sounds harsh, doesn’t it?! Can it really be true?

## 8. Dark Perspective

No doubt that many of you here are repulsed by this dark perspective on human nature. You are surely wondering: What about the soul? What about the beautiful acts of nobility and heroism we witness time and again? What about all those people who laid down their lives for their beliefs and in order to protect others?

How does all human virtue and dignity fit into the Darwinian-Freudian model?

And what about the inner voice that resonates so deeply in most people that good must prevail? And the disturbing feelings we feel when innocent people are hurt? Is all that yet another evolutionary quirk that is inconsistent with the cardinal law of “survival of the fittest”?!

Or could it be the other way around? Might the good in humanity be the dominant force, even if it is often drowned out in our material world?

These are excellent questions. Indeed, they compel us to recognize that there is a serious gaping hole in the Darwinian-Freudian model.

After all, no one has ever seen the human psyche. By definition the *unconscious* defies *conscious* human observation. And so does the soul. This means that, basically, all theories about the psyche are as subjective as the people positing these theories.

I am not blaming Freud or any of the other psychologists. All they really could offer us is based on their personal experiences. Had they truly experienced the selflessness of the soul, they may have come up with totally different theories ... like those of Rabbi Schneur Zalman.

## 9. Rabbi Schneur Zalman's Model

Rabbi Schneur Zalman's psychological model is dramatically different. It is defined by the revolutionary principle that the essence of a human being is good and divine.

He says that a person carries within him two voices, two souls: the animal soul and the divine one. They are in constant struggle, with the animal soul seeking instant gratification and pleasure (like the Id), and the divine soul seeking transcendence and unity. The animal spirit wants to be “more animal,” or more selfish. The divine spirit wants to be “more divine,” more selfless.

The domain of the animal manifests in the impulsive emotions, while the domain of the divine spirit rests in the reflective mind, which can control and temper impulsive reactions. A young child, for instance, is controlled entirely by emotion, and yells out “I want it and I want it all now.” Similarly the animal within us selfishly barks “give, give.” As our minds develop we gain the ability to reflect, repress, temper or channel our impulses.

The question, of course is, as mentioned earlier, which is our most dominant force?

Rabbi Schneur Zalman answers unequivocally: the divine soul.

The inner good in man is the most dominant force in our lives, but it is locked in battle with the animal soul. Yet, we have the freedom and the ability to overcome any temptation, if we so wish, through self control.

An argument can be made that self-control is an acquired skill that comes later in life, and is superimposed over the inherent impulses of the heart. But Rabbi Schneur Zalman categorically rejects that argument, and unequivocally states that the power of self-control is natural and inherent to the human being. We are born with that quality. But like other talents, it takes time for it to emerge in our lives.

## 10. Divine Image

So, while it is true that we have an impulsive animal spirit, it is not more powerful than the Divine Image in which every human being was created.

And, while it is true that we have an inherent primal, unconscious force that shapes all our behavior, the *deepest* force within us is not the Id, but the Yid – the *pintele* Yid, the Divine spark we embody. And we can bring it to the fore by internal work, which in turn will change our behavior.

Thus we see that all of the basic ideas in contemporary psychology about the struggle between different forces within us are included in Rabbi Schneur Zalman's model (which predated Freud by some hundred years). But with a critical difference – the additional dimension of the inherent divine spirit within man. It is this divine spirit that accounts for man's sublime nature, and thus radically alters the way we look at a human being and his or her potential.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman also recognized human inherent selfishness (the Id). But he didn't stop there. He saw deeper dimensions even beyond that. Rabbi Schneur Zalman's picture is simply a bigger and more encompassing one.

## 11. Divine Choreography

Perhaps divine choreography arranged that Rabbi Schneur Zalman's model be introduced at the end of the 18th century (1796 to be exact), as a type of "cure preceding the illness" phenomenon. His model served as a pre-emptive prelude to the psychological and scientific revolution that would rock the world and our notion of human nature.

All systems of knowledge evolve. As new discoveries are made, arguments and counterarguments serve the role of crystallizing ideas. Through trial and error, and the sincere search for truth, every theory undergoes refinement, a "reality check" and a "market correction." Certain details may be discarded in the process, as the idea matures into fruition.

Freud and the other thinkers of the 19th and 20th century opened many new doors of inquiry and deserve the credit for recognizing deeper truths about the human condition. Rejecting any of their conclusions in no way rejects their contributions.

It's ironic that the Enlightenment and the psychological/scientific advances in the last few centuries were followed by the most blood-shedding century in history – the two world wars.

The turmoil of the last hundred years and the upheaval today, both on the individual and global level, provide us with a unique opportunity to revisit the psychological models we take for granted. With the unprecedented dysfunctionality in family life and in religious life, we need to learn much about how to define, or not to define, the very nature of what it means to be human.

Two centuries ago, Rabbi Schneur Zalman presented us with an invaluable perspective on life that can be appreciated now more than ever. It would be wise to explore his teachings, which provide us with a most comprehensive blueprint for uniting faith and reason, and spirit and matter.

Freud and his colleagues may be the fathers of psychology today. But the Alter Rebbe is the true father of the psychology of tomorrow.

## 12. The Alter Rebbe Today

To honor the 200th yearzeit of this great luminary and in appreciation of his great contributions to Jewish thought and the human condition, I suggest that each of us resolve to begin studying (or increase in our study of) the Alter Rebbe's teachings and committing in action to intensify our love for one another and the other directives that the Alter Rebbe so passionately advocated.

Study is always best to schedule in a consistent manner. Thus, it would be a good idea to designate the study of his teachings once a week or at another appropriate interval.

In addition to study, let us also resolve to increase in charity in a denomination of 200.

As with all good things, it is also advisable if each of us would influence a friend or two in this same regard.

In the merit of our commitment may the *zechus* of the Alter Rebbe bring blessings to everyone, in all areas of life, material and spiritual, for us and our families, all in good health.

And may we merit speedily to the coming of Moshiach, who assured that he will arrive when the wellspring of Chassidus will spread outward. Amen.