

# Hermann Cohen and Chassidic Thought

By Rabbi Dovid Markel

Hermann Cohen (1842 – 1918) was the preeminent neo-Kantian philosopher and founder of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism.

He had a fascinating relationship with religion; although at one point in his life he seems to have doubted its importance, his world view shifted towards the end of his life and he authored a work on the importance of religion.

When he was a young man, he left rabbinical school and his plans for the pulpit to pursue a career in philosophy. He was extremely successful in this—receiving a full professorship in Germany during a time that it was almost never awarded to unconverted Jews.

During that time, his concept of G-d was so ethereal that once, after a lecture of his, describing G-d's relationship with the world, a Galician Jew remarked to him: “Professor Cohen, it's all beautifully elegant, but where is the *Ribono Shel Olam* (G-d) in all of this?!”

In 1912 though, after he had officially retired, he began teaching at the Academy of Jewish Sciences, a rabbinical seminary in Berlin. During that period, he authored a work entitled *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, which sought to explain the importance of religion when one already has Universal Kantian Ethics and philosophy.

Although not all of his ideas of Ethical Monotheism and Religion of Reason are in line with traditional, Torah-true Judaism, there are important elements that he mentions, which, upon reflecting on them, one realizes that these ideas were already expressed in *Tanya* by the first Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi.

In this work, he breaks from his previous Kantian Universalism towards a Religious Individualism. He points out, that in philosophy there is no “I” or “Thou”—there is only “It.” There is no me, there is no other, there is no G-d—there is only a universal truth that we strive to reach.

This truth does not give any meaning to man, as in reality, he is of no consequence, he must rather dutifully fulfill the obligations that truth thrusts upon him. In actuality—philosophically speaking—there is no intrinsic value or significance to man. He is only one miniscule element of global consciousness.

Only in religion however, can there be this “I – Thou” relationship. A reality where one's value and import is not relative to the world around him, but where G-d turns to him and tells him that he, as an individual, is important.

Of all the chapters of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's magnum opus—*Tanya*—there is one section, that more than any other, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, encouraged individuals to read and take to heart. For a myriad of emotional and religious impasses, the Rebbe suggested the meditation on the first seventeen lines of the forty-first chapter of *Tanya*.

It is the radical expression of both sides of this equation that are especially pronounced in the chapter.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman begins by writing that man should realize his nothingness, saying:

He should at least contemplate in his thought on the greatness of the blessed *En Sof*, and on His Kingship, which extends to all worlds, both higher and lower, and that "He fills all worlds and encompasses all worlds," as is written: "Do I not fill heaven and earth?"

When a person contemplates G-d's awesome greatness, he is bound to feel his own insignificance. In a reality where G-d's overwhelming magnitude encompasses all that is, a person will surely be aware of his infinitesimal nothingness.

Yet, notwithstanding man's seeming lack of objective self-worth, we are told that G-d turns to man, recognizing his otherness and valuing him. Not only does G-d value the mass of humanity but He turns to each singular entity—recognizing and valuing his identity and contribution.

*Tanya* explains:

Yet He leaves both the higher and lower [worlds] and uniquely bestows His Kingdom upon His people Israel, in general, and upon him in particular, as, indeed, a man is obliged to say: 'For my sake was the world created.'

G-d himself turns to man—benevolently extending infinite value to an otherwise valueless entity. It is this most awesome thought which perhaps encapsulates one of Chassidic philosophy's most important teaching. For, one is to realize not merely one's insignificance in context of an infinite G-d, but rather the reverse—the tremendous value that G-d magnanimously imposes upon him, in His turning to him and telling man that he truly matters.

Man is to reciprocate in this "I – Thou" relationship. Man responds to G-d's turning to him as an individual worthy of a relationship and responds in kind. He too relates to G-d not only as the pantheistic sum of all that is, or as a G-d that transcends the universe, making it impossible to truly serve Him, but instead serves G-d as one would serve a king.

*Tanya* states:

And on his part, he accepts His Kingdom upon himself, that He be King over him, to serve Him and do His will in all kinds of servile work. 'And, behold, G-d stands over him,' and 'The whole world is full of His glory,' and He looks upon him and "Searches his reins and heart" [to see] if he is serving Him as is fitting. Therefore he must serve in His presence with awe and fear like one standing before the king.

In truth, there can be nothing more valuable than the above meditations. For the existential question that we repeatedly ask ourselves of, "Do we really matter?"—it is ultimately this meditation that imparts to us that we truly are significant in the most profound manner. Not only do we have a finite value in the scheme of world events, but G-d Himself looks upon our every action and cares about the minute events that take place in our heart of hearts.

What can be more comforting than that?!