



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון  
INSTITUTE שלום הרטמן

## Inside Out: Self Knowledge in Our Understanding of Israel

**Rabbi Justin Pines**

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**The Shalom Hartman Institute** is a leading center of Jewish thought and education, serving Israel and North America. Our mission is to strengthen Jewish peoplehood, identity, and pluralism; to enhance the Jewish and democratic character of Israel; and to ensure that Judaism is a compelling force for good in the 21st century.

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## I. Where Do We Want To Go?

### 1. Yehuda Kurtzer, *Liberal Zionism and the Idea of the Idea, Sources, Fall 2002*

There was a time not that long ago—in the half-century or so preceding the creation of the State of Israel in 1948—when Zionism was widely understood to be audacious, taking on the project of no less than repairing the condition of the Jewish people; it was plural, encompassing a variety of competing ideas, and aspirational, dreaming of a different and often utopian future. The annual Zionist congresses were not, as they often are today, pep rallies; they were contests between different visions for the future of the Jewish people. The only thing that bound these Zionisms together was that they were rooted in dreaming and imagining that future as dramatically different from and better than the Jewish present.

Zionism's audacity and its diversity were not only valuable in bringing about the State of Israel; they also served a valuable organizing function for the Jewish people as a whole... I want to argue that the very act of trying to provide constructive and even radical responses to our existential fears has powerful psychological and spiritual effects in mobilizing a people into the project of remedying its condition, rather than languishing in its limitations...

Zionism's transformation from an ideological movement into a political reality came at the cost of the core aspirational idea that motivated Zionism to begin with, and increasingly comes at the cost of its own accountability to some important moral aspects of its original vision for itself. Its primary success, self-determination and sovereignty, should have been treated as prerequisite for realizing its moral aspirations—and not the end goal. The Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz claimed that Zionism was rooted in the need to not “be ruled by *goyim*.” But this should be the floor, never the ceiling.

## 2. David Hartman, "Auschwitz or Sinai," 1982

One of the fundamental issues facing the new spirit of maturity in Israel is: Should Auschwitz or Sinai be the orienting category shaping our understanding of the rebirth of the State of Israel?...

Israel is not only a response to modern anti-Semitism, but is above all a modern expression of the eternal Sinai covenant that has shaped Jewish consciousness throughout the millennia...

The model of Sinai awakens the Jewish people to the awesome responsibility of becoming a holy people. At Sinai, we discover the absolute demand of God; we discover who we are by what we do. Sinai calls us to action, to moral awakening, to living constantly with challenges of building a moral and just society which mirrors the kingdom of God in history...

Sinai does not tell us about the moral purity of the Jewish nation, but about the significance of aspiring to live by the commandments. Sinai permanently exposes the Jewish people to prophetic aspirations and judgments...

Sinai requires of the Jew that he believe in the possibility of integrating the moral seriousness of the prophet with the realism and political judgment of the statesman. Politics and morality were united when Israel was born as a nation at Sinai. Sinai prohibits the Jewish people from ever abandoning the effort of creating a shared moral language with the nations of the world.

The rebirth of Israel can be viewed as a return to the fullness of the Sinai covenant – to Judaism as a way of life.

## 3. Genesis 1:27

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ : זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם.

And God created the human in the Divine image, in the image of God God created the human; male and female God created them.

#### 4. Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

For this reason, Adam was created as a singular individual to teach you that:

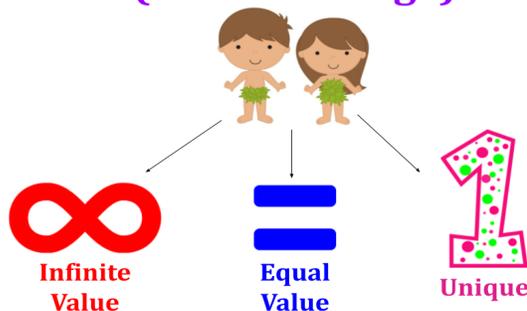
[1] whoever destroys a single soul, Scripture imputes [guilt] to that person as though they destroyed a complete world; and whoever preserves a single soul, Scripture ascribes [merit] to that person as though he or she had preserved a complete world.

[2] Furthermore, [humanity was created singly] for the sake of peace among people, that one might not say to another, my ancestor was greater than yours, and that the *minim* might not say, there are many ruling powers in heaven;

[3] And, to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed Be God: for if a human strikes many coins from one mold they all [come out] identical to one another, but the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, fashioned every person in the mold of the first human, and yet not one of them resembles another. Therefore, every single person is obliged to say: The world was created for my sake.

#### 5. The Three Dignities of Being Created in God's Image

### 3 Dignities of Being Created בצלם אלוקים / b'Tzelem Elokim (in God's image)



#### II. Where Are We Now?

##### A. The Individual

**6. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Mesilat Yesharim*, ch. 1, Amsterdam, 1738**

The foundation of piety and the root of the complete service is that a person should clarify and make real to themselves what is *their* obligation in *their* world, and toward which ends they should place their [long-term] vision and [practical] approach in all that they toil all the days of their life.

**7. Rav Shlomo Wolbe, *Mitzvos Hashekulos (second edition)*, ch. 12**

The Tosafos Yom Tov comments [on the Mishnah in Sanhedrin]: “This means that I am as important as an entire world. I will not have myself ejected from the world with a single sin.”

These words [are meant to be understood] according to their simple meaning: when Hashem created the world, Hashem had in mind in Hashem’s Creation every single individual that would come to be created, and Hashem created specifically for each and every person a sun, a moon, stars, planet Earth, and everything in it.

That Adam was created alone is not just a description of the [historical] fact that no one else was created with him, but is rather an intrinsic aspect of the individuality [that human beings possess]. This reality was not lost. Every person in every generation, in being a true individual—no one is similar to that person—not only in that generation, but in all the generations before them and after them, there is no one like that individual.

This uniqueness places an awesome obligation on the shoulders of every individual, to know that the world was truly created for them, and to know what their unique obligation is in the world, which Hashem created especially for them...Woe to them if they do not build up their unique individuality to be of an “entire world” nature, and how decisive will the verdict be if we are not able to become true individuals like Avraham Avinu, peace be upon him.

**8. Rav Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth! Volume II, on the Torah Portion of Lech Lecha* (Gateshead, England, 1943)**

*The Primary Strengths*

There are three fundamental powers found within a person, through which one can reach the ultimate good. Each one differs from the other in its root and character. These strengths are:

1. *Chessed* [Giving - Abraham] – through it one places their primary interest in others and tries to do good for others and influence them...
2. *Yirat Shamayim* [Awe of the Heavens - Isaac] – in contrast to *Chessed* whose main focus is outward, *Yirat Shamayim* is a trait through which a person turns inward into themselves in their concern for the consequences of their actions.
3. *Emet* [Truth - Jacob] – the power of demanding the truth clarifies the correct path in service of Hashem without veering right or left – either toward the side of excessive *Chessed*, or towards the side of excessive self-criticism, diminishing the good deeds one can perform.

We normally find that the unique nature of a person is based principally on one of these three primary traits mentioned above. Generally, one of these three traits creates in them their unique spiritual nature through which all of their thoughts and actions are influenced and directed...

The beginning of a person's service of Hashem is that they will [1] recognize and reveal this dominant quality of theirs. They should then [2] develop it [3] to its perfection using Torah guidelines and approaches, and [4] remain faithful to it.

[5] However, they should not be satisfied with just this, for other attributes are also included within their personal obligation and in order to reach their personal completion, it is incumbent upon them to develop these as well and bring the seed implanted within them to its fruition.

...We can also see that these three qualities correspond to the “three things on which the world stands: Torah, the Temple service, and deeds of love.”<sup>1</sup> Torah corresponds to truth; the Temple service corresponds to sacrifice, negation of self, fear of God; and deeds of love are, of course *hessed*. The three character traits which “banish humanity from the world”<sup>2</sup> are the opposite of these. Jealousy is the opposite of *hessed*, lust is the opposite of [*yir’ah*] (which, in essence is the conquest of the evil inclination), while *kavod* (prestige-seeking) is the opposite of truth, for it is well-known that all the honor and prestige of the world is falsehood and bluff.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 1:2:

Shimon the Righteous was one of the last of the men of the great assembly. He used to say: the world stands upon three things: the Torah, the Temple service, and the practice of acts of piety.

שִׁמְעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הָיָה מִשְׁגֵּרֵי כְּנִסֵּת הַגְּדוֹלָה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הַעֲבוֹדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת הַסְּדִים :

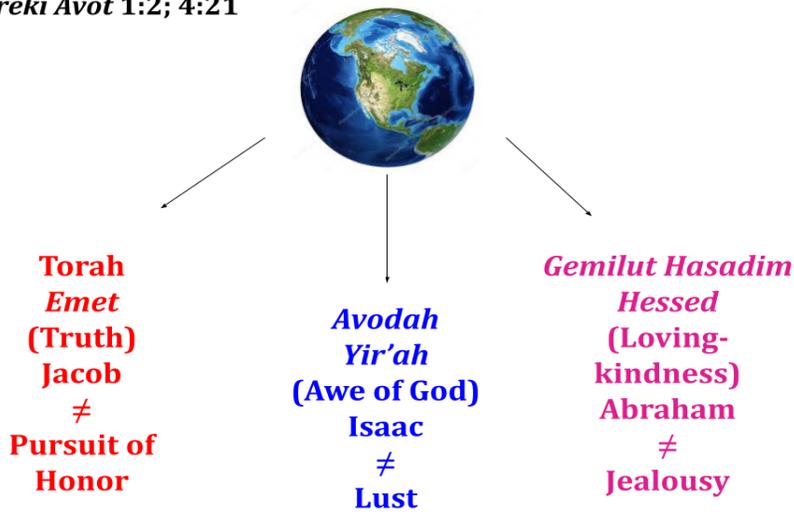
<sup>2</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 4:21:

Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar said: envy, lust and [the desire for] honor remove a person from the world.

רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר הַקַּפָּר אוֹמֵר, הַסְּנֵאָה וְהַתְּאֻנָּה וְהַכְּבוֹד, מוֹצִיאִין אֶת הָאָדָם מִן הָעוֹלָם :

9. The Big 3

*Pireki Avot 1:2; 4:21*



10. The Role of Nurture



B. The Individual as Part of the Greater Whole

11. **Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Mesilat Yesharim*, ch. 22 - The Virtue of Humility, Amsterdam, 1738**

“Any virtue that one acquires is nothing less than a Divine act of benevolence... One who is very wise has a responsibility to impart their wisdom to those who are in need of it... [Similarly,] one who is wealthy may rejoice in their lot. [Yet] it is their responsibility to

assist those who are in need. [Similarly,] if they are strong it is their responsibility to assist those who falter and to protect the oppressed. This is comparable to the servants of a household in which each [servant] is assigned a different task and must fulfill his appointed job if all the household duties and requirements are to be completed. [Looked at] objectively, there is no place for haughtiness here... When all of the above becomes clear to them, they can truly be called a humble person, one whose humility is internalized in their heart..."

**12. Rabbis Yosef Lynn and Jack Cohen, Nurture Their Nature: The Torah's Essential Guidance for Parents and Teachers, p2-3, 2021.**

*If He would have brought us close to Mount Sinai, but not given us the Torah,  
dayeinu—it would have been sufficient for us.*

אלו קרבנו לפני הר סיני, ולא נתן לנו את התורה, דיינו

...After weeks of trekking through the desert, still reeling from a terrifying attack by the army of Amalek, facing the almost absolute unknown ahead of us, our fears and anxieties gave way to arguments and divisiveness between us. Without a vision of what our national destiny looked like, leaders rose and factions formed. Each one claimed to know the way forward — pretending they knew exactly what Klal Yisrael was meant to look like.

All of this changed as we came through a clearing and raised our eyes to see that the place that Hashem had chosen to reveal His path for us was a small, unimposing mountain whose unique beauty was precisely in its not eclipsing any of the other mountains around it. One might have expected that the Glory of Hashem would descend on one of the more dramatic and imposing peaks in that vast wilderness. But as it dawned on us that His Presence was pointing to this modest mountain, we collectively breathed a sigh of relief. Just as this unassuming mountain did not pretend to be any more or any less than what it was, we realized that we could do the same. All we had to do in life was rise to the challenge of being ourselves. Simultaneous to feeling relief, we were uplifted

with exhilaration at its sight. All of sudden, “being part of the Jewish People” took on new meaning. We set up camp with a newfound sense of unity “opposite the mountain.”

Perhaps for the first time in our lives up until that point, we felt that each of us had a place in this grandest of projects called “the Jewish People” upon which we were about to embark. Additionally, any sense of competition or jealousy toward the people on either side of us melted away with the knowledge that they too had their own places, which in no way threatened ours. With this outlook, a spirit of peace like none other descended upon us. We had discovered a vista of life that was a prerequisite to our keeping the Torah and its mitzvos. Our identity was revealed to be a nation of individuals who work in harmony, united in our relationship with Hashem. For this awesome revelation, in and of itself, we say “Dayeinu.”

### 13. “Israel” - An Amalgamation of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs

י - יצחק, יעקב

ש - שרה

ר - רבקה, רחל

א - אברהם

ל - לאה

### 14. Sanhedrin 98b

מה שמו [של משיח]?

דבי רבי שילא אמרי: שילה שמו...

דבי רבי ינאי אמרי: ינון שמו...

דבי רבי חנינה אמרי: חנינה שמו...

What is the name [of Messiah]?

The beit midrash [house of study] of Rabbi Shila said: “Shiloh” is the name of Messiah...

The beit midrash of Rabbi Yannai said: "Yinon" is the name of Messiah ...

The beit midrash of Rabbi Chaninah said: "Chaninah" is the name of Messiah ...

### III. How Do We Close the Gap?

#### 15. Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Fathers), 4:1

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם...

Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? One who learns from every person.

#### 16. Bartenura Commentary on Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Fathers), 4:1

*One who learns from every person* – Even though the other is of lesser stature. Since they are not concerned for their own honor and are willing to learn from those of lesser stature, it is evident that the wisdom they acquire is for the sake of heaven and not simply for them to show off and aggrandize themselves through it.

#### 17. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe - Alei Shur Volume II, p.194

We must discover a path in our practice [of self-improvement] which will not cause arrogance.... With *hitlamdut* there is no place for arrogance. If I do some good action, I am likely to feel arrogant about it; but if I practice doing some good action - behold I have not done anything to be arrogant about, because I am only practicing with the intent of learning how to improve.

...And if *hitlamdut* becomes a way of life for me, and in all my issues I am "only" doing *hitlamdut*, and I always see room for improvement and greater perfection - I will never come to egotism because of the things I do.

Someone who wants to "work on himself" must understand well the depth of these matters...that in all his matters he will only *mitlameid*, and this literally until his last day. Even when he reaches his day of death he won't die - he will *mitlameid* how to die.

**18. Genesis Rabba 65:9 (Translation: Rabbi Aryeh Carmel)**

Rabbi Yehuda the Son of Simon said: Avraham asked for [the signs of] old age. He spoke before God: Lord of the Universe! A man and his son enter a place together and no one knows to whom honor is due. If You were to adorn him with signs of old age, this problem would be solved. God replied to him: By your life! You have asked for a good thing, and it shall commence with you. From the beginning of the book [*Breishit*] until now old age is not mentioned. When Avraham arose, he was given old age: "And Avraham was old" [Genesis 24:1].

Yitzhak asked for suffering. He spoke before God: Lord of the Universe! If a person has never suffered during their life, how will they face the attribute of justice? By your life! You have asked for a good thing, and it shall commence with you. When Yitzhak our father rose, sufferings were given to him, as it says "When Yitzhak became old, [his eyes became dim and he could not see]" [ibid 27:1].

Ya'akov asked for illness. He spoke before God: Lord of the Universe! If a person does not fall ill a short time before their death, how will they be able to arrange matters between their children? If they are ill for two or three days, this problem is solved. God replied to him: By your life! You have asked for a good thing, and it shall commence with you, as it says, "Yosef was told that his father was sick" [ibid. 48:1].

**19. Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld, Forward to "Nurture Their Nature: The Torah's Essential Guidance for Parents and Teachers," by Rabbis Yosef Lynn and Jack Cohen (2021)**

...when experiencing the presence of a large multitude of people, the Talmud (*Berachos* 58a) directs us to become aware of the "secrets" hidden in the array of individuals we are beholding by reciting a blessing: "בְּרַחֵם הַרְבֵּי יָמִים ... בְּרַחֵם" - Blessed is God, the Wise [Knower] of secrets." The Talmud explains this unexpected response to experiencing a group of people by noting that when we examine the crowd before us, we will find that "their faces are not similar to one another, neither are their personalities similar to one another." Thus, the blessing directs us to view and appreciate the crowd as a tapestry of unique individual secrets that are at first hidden, but with effort and wisdom can be understood and inspiring.

Instinctively, primitively, we perceive crowds simply as large aggregates of undifferentiated, uniform, repetitive human beings. However, God's unique greatness is that God understands, appreciates and grasps the unique riddle and secret of each individual in the mass. From God's view, there are no interchangeable parts, but rather a multitude of unique bright sparks to be appreciated with wisdom and sensitivity. A Divine perspective does not lose sight of the trees in the forest; neither should a human perspective. Experiencing an anonymous throng of people should not lead to fears of fights with an "us versus them" attitude, or the boredom of experiencing a monotonous, uniform, mundane human mass, but rather to a profound experience that creates personal growth and appreciation of a special beauty that requires a blessing. The joys of life, and our growth in life, are to be found in our grappling with and decrypting the riddle of discovering our individual uniqueness and our individual strengths.

This profound insight is embedded in the etymology of the word "secret" selected by the Sages in the blessing they enacted upon the occasion of experiencing a mass of people. In Hebrew, the word "secret - סֵּוֹמֵר" is spelled with the two letters *reish* (ר) and *zayin* (ז). When we look at ourselves and others correctly, we should see secrets and riddles to explore and understand. However, if we have an improper perspective, we see the letters in the reverse order, *zayin reish*, or זר, which means strange and foreign (*Shemos Rabbah* 34:2). God's perspective must inspire our perspective, and we need to see ourselves and our relationships as "Secrets" that need to be discovered, appreciated, and expressed - not as "foreigners" who are bizarre and strange.



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