

A Tale of two Souls

A Comprehensive Guide to the Tanya

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Classes 1-2

Historical Overview:

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RABBI SCHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI

A leader who revolutionized the landscape of Jewish thought

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General Overview of the Tanya & the Title Page:

MAN IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY

Two souls on the battlefield of life

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A Tale of Two Souls

Class 1

Historical Overview:

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RABBI SCHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI

A leader who revolutionized the landscape of Jewish thought

Class Summary

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the Alter Rebbe (the elder Rebbe), founder of the Chabad movement, was born in Liozna (Belarus) to his father Rabbi Baruch and his mother Rebbetzin Rivkah on 19 Elul, 5505; September 15, 1745. As a young child he was recognized as a prodigy, with a mind of extraordinary brilliance and depth. At the age of 18, the Alter Rebbe mastered the entire Talmud, the works of Kabblah, Midrash, the biblical & Talmudic commentators, and the Halachic codifiers. He was also proficient in astronomy, mathematics, and many of the sciences. The Alter Rebbe was also a natural leader, a brilliant composer, a prolific writer and a spiritual giant.

In 1760 he married Rebbetzin Sterna Segal from Vitebsk (Belarus), where he settled. In 1764, at the age of twenty, he was faced with a choice to study in Vilnius, home to the famed Gaon of Vilna, or in Mezrich (Ukraine), the center of the Chassidic movement. He chose Mezrich. Although initially unimpressed, Rabbi Schnuer Zalman eventually stayed on and became an ardent follower of Rabbi Dov Ber, the Great Maggid (d. 1772), successor of the Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), founder of Chassidism. After completing eighteen months of intensive study, he returned home to Vitebsk, travelling back to Mezrich frequently.

- 1767** Rabbi Schnuer Zalman becomes a Maggid (spiritual teacher) in his hometown Liozna, where he would remain for thirty years.
- 1770** He is assigned the enormous task of writing a Shulchan Aruch, a Code of Jewish Law, an undertaking that gained him even greater admiration and reverence. This work is a timeless classic.
- 1772** He begins developing the Chabad school, the Chabad Philosophy.
19 Kislev 1772 his Rebbe the Maggid passes away and Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Horodok (author of Maor Einayim) assumes the mantle of leadership, until his move to the Holy Land in 1777. Following the move the Chassidim appoint Rabbi Schneur Zalman as Rebbe, although he would not officially accept that position until Reb Menachem Mendel passed away in 1788.

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1773-78 Rabbi Schnuer Zalman establishes a school of three divisions for elite students, teaching them his singular approach to Torah, synthesizing the rational, legal and mystical streams of Torah into a unified, comprehensive program for life.

1792 The manuscripts of the Tanya begin circulating, eventually prompting the author to send it to print.

1796 The first edition of Tanya is printed in the city of Slavita.

1798 The opposition of the Misnagdim (the opponents to Chassidim) reaches a peak; they inform on Rabbi Schnuer Zalman and he is imprisoned by the Czar on charges of treason.

19 Kislev 1798 Following a frightening ordeal and an intense trial, the Rebbe is liberated.

1800 The Alter Rebbe is arrested again by the Czar and liberated ten and a half months later. He relocates from Liozna to Liadi, on the border between Belarus and Russia. During the next years, his writings and teachings of Chassidus spread far and wide, attracting some of the great Jewish minds and hearts. His extraordinary leadership skills, his unparalleled scholarship and revolutionary approach to Torah, his profound spirituality and the magnitude of his personality attract thousands upon thousands of students and disciples.

1812 Napoleon invades Russia. The Rebbe escapes his advancing armies, and assists Russia in its war effort against France.

12 Teves 1812: The Alter Rebbe arrives in Piena, Kursk Province (Russia). A few days later he falls ill.

23 Teves 1812: The Alter Rebbe pens a profound letter of Chassidic thought.

Motzei Shabbos, 24 Teves 1812: The Alter Rebbe returns his soul to its maker and is interred in the city of Haditch (Ukraine).

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Class 2

General Overview of Tanya & the Title Page:

MAN IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY

Two souls on the battlefield of life

1. Class Summary

Every work needs a mission statement; an articulation of the void it is coming to fill. What is the objective of the Tanya? What would we be lacking without it?

The author states on the title page of his Tanya, that the objective of the book was to explain this verse in Torah: “This thing (Torah) is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it,” in the words of the Alter Rebbe, “to explain how it is close to you.” For it would seem that Torah is anything but close to us.

The Tanya is coming to address a dilemma that plagued the pupils of the Alter Rebbe, as it still perturbs us today. In the timeless human search to make sense of life there is one question that trumps all others. Who is man? Torn between the polarities of selfishness and selflessness; egotism and idealism; between that which he knows and that which he feels – we ponder the true nature of our reality. What is real in life? Our tendency towards self-indulgence, so natural to our chemistry, or our aspiration to soar beyond ourselves and touch the Divine? Is man essentially an animal, only capable of celestial illusions, or is he, indeed, a creature of a higher plane, a mirror of the Divine image?

At the core, what is the quintessence of my reality? Is the force in me that loves truth the real me, or are the cravings for material vanity the real me? Are the times that I yearn for meaning reflective of my true essence, or are the beastly lusts and desires my defining experiences?

And how are we to understand the truths the Torah impresses upon our lives? Are these a set of premises and rules, superimposed upon us, subjugating our identities to an alien doctrine, or are they expressions of our true selves? Does the Torah demand from the Jewish individual to deny his intrinsic characteristics, to repress his natural disposition, to ignore his innermost passions?

Often we feel that our physical and selfish nature constitutes the entire “I” of the person; it is far more real and obvious than one’s yearning to spiritual truth and to serve

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G-d. This feeling can make us feel that our entire experience of Jewishness, our entire Divine service, is completely superimposed and not natural and “real.” If we are to be honest with our true reality we must conclude that we are material earthy creatures, we merely train ourselves to follow the script of the Torah.

To answer such monumental, timeless and defining questions an book is needed. A short and inspiring anecdote or insight would provide merely momentary and shallow inspiration without properly addressing the issue. The human who is dealing with these questions is looking for a holistic and authentic direction in his or her life.

In an attempt to deal with these questions in a comprehensive manner, the author invites us, in his Tanya, to take a journey into the very core of our selves; into the heart of the cosmic reality; into the nature of our relationship with our creator; into the essence of the Torah and its mitzvos, as he finally arrives at a new definition of the human being’s role on earth. In prolific prose, contained passion, and stunning depth, Rabbi Schneur Zalman shares with us the Chassidic version of the story of our lives, described in the Tanya as “A Tale of Two Souls.”

The Alter Rebbe establishes in the Tanya three fundamental doctrines:

1. A Jew is a “two-souled” human being, possessing an inherent duality between two layers of consciousness. One is an “animal soul,” or a “biological soul” (“*nefesh habahamis*” or “*nefesh hacheyunis*”), with an egocentric conscious which focuses on the self, its quest is for self preservation and gratification. The second one is a “Divine soul” (“*nefesh haelokis*”) it is a “fragment of G-d,” which yearns for transcendence and oneness with the core and truth of all existence, G-d. Each of us, then, operates on two different levels of consciousness: an animal consciousness and a Divine one. This dichotomy is inherent to our chemistry, and there is an ongoing battle between the two souls, each one seeking to dominate our life. Only when we excavate the divine soul within us, can we feel that our spiritual life and our relationship with G-d constitutes our truest and most natural experience of the self.

2. This duality is purposely created by G-d. He so desired that man’s journey be fraught with an ongoing battle between these two identities and states of consciousness. The conflict is not a mistake or a tragedy; it is essential to the purpose of our creation. we

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are charged with the mission of subduing and ultimately educating and refining the animal within us, which is capable of refinement and sublimation.

3. The Jew was granted the power to, at any given time, remain loyal to his or her true identity, his divine soul.

Speaking in loose terms, we might say, that point number one is the primary theme of chapters 1-9 of the Tanya. Point number three is the central theme of chapters 10 through 34. Point number 2 is the thread behind chapters 35 through 53.

In describing the battle raging in the human psyche, the author offers a completely new approach, different from the perspectives articulated till day. The battle in the human heart is not between conventional religious good and evil, but between two distinct identities in the human psyche: the G-dly soul and the animal soul, between a soul which aspires to become Divine and a soul which craves self preservation and gratification.

The hero of the Tanya is the individual who is incapable of obliterating the dichotomy, but who discovers harmony within his internal fragmentation; the Jew whose entire life is a perpetual battle between two souls for the sake of the Divine. By making him the hero of the book, the Tanya opened the door for every person, regardless his or her spiritual status, to find their path toward G-d without self-delusion and hypocrisy.

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2. Sources

2. מקורות

<p><u>Deuteronomy</u> 30: 11-14 For this commandment which I command you this day, is not concealed from you, nor is it far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?" Rather, this thing is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it.</p>	<p><u>פרשת נצבים</u> ל, יא-יד פי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצווה היום לא נפלאה היא ממך ולא רחקה היא. לא בשמים היא לאמר מי יעלה לנו השמימה ויקחה לנו וישמענו אתה ונעשה. ולא מעבר לים היא לאמר מי יעבר לנו אל עבר הים ויקחה לנו וישמענו אתה ונעשה. פי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשתו¹.</p>
<p><u>Talmud Eruvin</u> 53b Rabbi Yehoshua the son Chananiah remarked: No one has ever had the better of me except a woman, a little boy and a little girl... What was the incident with the little boy? I was once on a journey when I noticed a little boy sitting at a cross-road. 'By what road do we go to the town?', I asked him, 'This one,' he replied: 'is short but long and that one is long but short'. I proceeded along the 'short but long' road. When I approached the town I discovered that it was closed in by gardens and orchards. Turning back I said to him, 'My son, did you not tell me that this road was short?' — 'And', he replied: 'did I not also tell you: But it's long?' I kissed him upon his head and said to him, 'Graced are you, Israel, you are all wise, both young and old'!</p>	<p><u>מסכת עירובין</u> נג, ב אמר רבי יהושע בן חנניה מימי לא נצחני אדם חוץ מאשה תינוק ותינוקת... תינוק מאי היא? פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך וראיתי תינוק יושב על פרשת דרכים ואמרת לו באיזה דרך נלך לעיר? אמר לי זו קצרה וארוכה וזו ארוכה וקצרה. והלכתי בקצרה וארוכה. כיון שהגעתי לעיר מצאתי שמקיפין אותה גנות ופרדיסין. חזרתי לאחורי אמרתי לו בני הלא אמרת לי קצרה? אמר לי ולא אמרתי לך ארוכה! נשקתיו על ראשו ואמרת לי אשריכם ישראל שכולכם חכמים גדולים אתם מגדולכם ועד קטנכם.</p>

¹ ברמב"ן פירש שפסוק זה קאי על מצות תשובה, ובכלי יקר פי' שמדובר על מצות לימוד התורה (ממדרש רבה דברים פ"ה פ"ז), ולא נקט כן רבינו הזקן, אלא בפשטות שהיא מודעה כוללת על כל המצות שבכל התורה כולה.

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3. Questions and exercises:

1. Why did the Alter Rebbe write the Tanya? What would be lacking without it?
2. Do you feel that your Judaism is mechanical, or passionate? Why?
3. Do you feel that Torah is a reflection of your true and natural essence? Or does it demand of you to be “not true to yourself?” Why?
4. What’s the difference between the short and long way and the long and short way? Why does the Alter Rebbe choose the long and short path?
5. Why did the Alter Rebbe call his book, “Sefer Shel Banunim?” What is the novelty in this name and in this approach?
6. Do you generally choose in life the “short long path” or the “long short path?” Give two examples from your life.

4. Reflections

1. How is it קרוב מאד if it’s a “Long Way”?
2. Is "דרך ארוכה וקצרה" one way? Or is it 2 paths one long and one short?
(לקוטי שיחות חל"ד עמוד 173)
3. Why did the Alter Rebbe seek the approbation of Reb Zusia and Reb Yehuda Leib Hacoheh for the Tanya?
4. Point out the differences in titles attributed to the Alter Rebbe by his three sons. Why?
(שיעורים בספר התניא)

5. Text of Tanya (Lessons In Tanya)

TITLE PAGE

The title page written by the Alter Rebbe reads as follows:

ספר

לקוטי אמרים

חלק ראשון

הנקרא בשם

ספר של בינונים

מלוקט מפי ספרים ומפי סופרים קדושי עליון נ"ע
מיוסד על פסוק כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפך ובלבבך לעשותו
לבאר היטב איך הוא קרוב מאד בדרך ארוכה וקצרה בעזה"י

SEFER

LIKUTEI AMARIM ("A Compilation of Teachings")

PART ONE

ENTITLED

SEFER SHEL BEINONIM ("The Book of the Intermediates")

Compiled from sacred books and from teachers of heavenly saintliness, whose souls are in Eden; based upon the verse, "For this thing is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it"; explaining clearly how it is exceedingly near, in both a lengthy and a short way, with the aid of the Holy One, blessed be He.