

THE UNIQUE SELF AND NONDUAL HUMANISM

A Study in the Enlightened Teaching of Mordechai Lainer of Izbica

Marc Gafni

ABSTRACT This article outlines one of the key sources in the great traditions for the integral teaching of Unique Self. The Unique Self is rooted in what is termed as *nondual* or *acosmic humanism* of a particular strain in Hebrew mysticism, as expressed in the teachings of Hasidic master Mordechai Lainer of Izbica. After examining and challenging previous scholarship on Lainer, the article reconstructs a theory of individuality from Lainer's writings, which becomes the lodestone of his nondual humanism. In unpacking Lainer's metaphysics of individuality, his ontological understanding of will, Torah, name, and uniqueness, the framework of the Unique Self teaching become clear. The article then reconstructs two matrices of sources from the intellectual history of Kabbalah, which serve as possible precedents to Lainer's Unique Self teaching in the older traditions of Kabbalah. The article then outlines the seven core principles of acosmic humanism that are incarnate in the typology of Unique Self that appears in Lainer's writing (in what is termed *the Judah archetype*). Finally, Lainer's view is placed in a larger context even as it is distinguished from the intellectual zeitgeist of its time.

KEY WORDS enlightenment; Integral Theory; Kabbalah; Torah; Unique Self

The teaching of Unique Self, which I have been privileged to experience and give language to in recent years, is rooted in my lineage tradition of Kabbalah.¹ The Unique Self teaching is particularly inspired and guided by my chosen teacher, the mid-19th century Hasidic master Mordechai Lainer of Izbica. Lainer did not invent the Unique Self teaching; rather, he evolved and refined it as it was transmitted through Hebrew mystical lineage.² In this article I explore Lainer's enlightenment teaching and some of his sources in earlier masters that are part of this lineage.

I want to emphasize that Unique Self in Izbica's teaching is an enlightenment teaching. Contrary to some contemporary writers who claim that enlightenment is an imported conception from the East, it is clear that enlightenment, in various interpretations of the term, was a primary concern of many seminal teachers and schools of Kabbalah.³ A close reading of Mordechai Lainer of Izbica reveals that what he calls *he'arah*, literally and correctly translated as enlightenment, is specifically the level of consciousness attained by one who has realized their Unique Self.

The assumption of all Hebrew mystical teaching is that the desired endgame of personal spiritual evolution is enlightenment.⁴ This may be termed *nullification*, *redemption*, *enlightenment*, or a host of other terms.⁵ This is what is often referred to in classical mystical parlance as "the realization of your true nature" or "the enlightenment of True Self." The first movement toward enlightenment is the movement from experiencing oneself as a skin-encapsulated ego to realizing one's true nature. This movement from separate self to True Self is a movement beyond the personal—it is an evolution from the level of ego identification to an infinitely more profound identification with the impersonal essence of one's true nature.

The Unique Self enlightenment teaching of the Hebrew mystics radically re-envisioned what enlightenment actually means. In this teaching, True Self realization is essential but is only the first of two stages on the

Correspondence: Marc Gafni, 17 Ridge Road, Fairfax, CA 94030. E-mail: eytanyair@hushmail.com.

path to enlightenment. The second step, the emergence of the Unique Self, comes when one moves beyond identification with ego and clarifies their unique identity. *In the realization of Kabbalistic consciousness, your Unique Self is both the epistemological perspective of your True Self, the ontological source of your existence, and the teleological trajectory of your fully realized Being and Becoming.* In other words, the Unique Self births the individual. Once born, its realization becomes the purpose of life.

This is the essential meaning of the Kabbalistic “one-letter” teaching that is introduced below. The Unique Self is envisioned in this teaching as “your letter in the Torah.” The Torah in the Kabbalistic idealization is not a third-person text; it is rather the incarnation of the living, aware, and purposeful divine nature of all that is (Idel, 1981; Scholem, 1965a; Wolfson, 1989). “Your letter in the Torah” is therefore the unique personal incarnation of divinity that lives in you, as you, and through you. In Unique Self enlightenment, you realize your role in the seamless coat of the universe (i.e., you are infinitely interwoven with every manifest part of the universe). At the same time, you discover that even while the coat is seamless, it is not featureless. That is, you are the uniquely featured expression of the seamless coat and the obligation of your life is to realize and enact your uniqueness within the seamlessness (to live your letter in the Torah).

It is worth noting at this point the split between the absolute and the relative—a common duality in much of contemporary spiritual discourse—is sharply attenuated in Hebrew mystical realization. While Kabbalah abounds with testimonies discerning between *Ein Sof* (“the limitless”), the infinite absolute which is undifferentiated ineffable divinity, and the *Sefirot*, which are the ten qualified emanations of divinity each expressing a different face of the divine essence, the unity, even non-difference of *Ein Sof* and the *Sefirot* is paradoxically affirmed even as they are distinguished (Idel, 1981).⁶ So while the distinction between the absolute and the relative is clearly articulated in Kabbalah, it is often paradoxically effaced in favor of the absolute nondual unity and identity of all that is. From this perspective, Unique Self is an expression of the ultimate identity between the relative and absolute dimensions of the divine, with both aspects of divinity ultimately incarnate in one’s letter in the Torah (Idel, 1981).⁷

The Unique Self teaching holds that there are four basic stages in the evolution toward authentic personhood.⁸ In the first stage, we evolve from the pre-personal to the personal; in the second stage, the personal or egoic personality is clarified and integrated; in the third stage, the personal is transcended and the impersonal True Self, which we all share, is realized; and in the fourth stage, the supra-personal comes online and the Unique Self, which is True Self + Perspective, is realized. One might say that at that level of Unique Self the personal comes back into the picture, clarified of its narrowness and grasping by the illumination of the True Self realization. At the level of Unique Self, the human begins to fully express and incarnate their personalized expression of being and essence. Unique Self is both the source and quality of one’s being as well as the uniquely textured trajectory of one’s becoming.

I lay out the wider and deeper contours of the Unique Self teaching in a separate article in this issue (2011) and in a forthcoming book (In press b). At this point, I turn to the teachings of Mordechai Lainer of Izbica, which inspired, formed, and continue to inform the Unique Self teaching.

Part 1: The Individual

Uniqueness and Individuality in the School of Izbica

Lainer was an important Hasidic master who taught in Eastern Europe in the mid-19th century. He emerged from the lineage of the Hasidism founder, Israel Baal Shem Tov,⁹ and was a close friend and primary student of Menachem Mendel of Kotz and the founder of his own highly significant enlightenment lineage.¹⁰ The notion of Unique Self as advanced by Mordechai Lainer of Izbica is a radical one. I use the word *radical* because, as outlined below, Lainer believes—against the weight of virtually the entire classical Jewish tradition—that the individual has the ability to access and incarnate an unmediated revelation of divinity that

overrides the binding normative character of the national revelation at Sinai. The individual in effect becomes Torah.¹¹ Since the Torah is identical with the divine in Kabbalistic understanding, what Lainer is in effect claiming is that the individual incarnates divinity. Moreover, both the portal for this incarnational revelatory experience, as well as its manifestation, according to Lainer, come not from the effacement of the self but rather from the identification and intensification of the person's unique post-egoic individuality. What is nullified is not the ego, but the exclusive identification with the ego,¹² and what becomes available is a sense of one's unique relationship to—and unique participation in—the living and commanding ground of reality by which every being is personally addressed.¹³ This is the realization of Unique Self.

The focus in this article will be on the book *Mei Hashiloach* (1995), the primary source for all of Mordechai Lainer's teachings. In the initial analysis I will ignore the Jewish and European context of those teachings, although I will return to both. It is worth noting here, however, that Lainer's individualism was primarily one version of the Romantic variety and not of the rational Enlightenment variety. The entire intellectual project of the Enlightenment was to assert that the individual per se was a sufficient locus of authority and dignity, and therefore not inexorably bound to the larger organizing systems of religion or state. By contrast, the Romantic notion of individuality suggested that it was, paradoxically, in the revelation of the unique individual that the cosmic spirit of the divine—the God within, the natural divine—was also revealed.

The essence of my argument in reading Lainer revolves around rethinking what an enlightened master might mean when he proclaims, "All is God." It might mean: since all is God, there is essentially no room for humans—the human being is effaced in front of an overpowering divine force. Or, one might interpret the same texts very differently: if all is God, then the human being is God as well. In the spirit of the Romantic zeitgeist in which Lainer wrote—and following the thrust of important Kabbalistic traditions upon which he creatively draws—"All is God" can be a highly empowering notion in which the lines between God and humans significantly blur, with more than provocative implications for normative behavior and psychology.

I suggest the term *nondual humanism* or *nondual acosmic humanism* for this theological position. It is important to recognize at the outset that Lainer's acosmism is not unique. He merely adopts, in extreme form, the classic nondual acosmic position of many Kabbalists who followed the teaching of Isaac Luria, including most of the major Hasidic masters, most notably Schneur Zalman of Liadi (Pachter, 1989; Ross, 1982a, pp. 109-112; Ross, 1982b, pp. 153-155). By *acosmism* I mean there is no independent existence to the cosmos outside of the divine ground of being; I do not mean to suggest that there is no cosmos which might be a different reading of the term.

Yet his interpretation of acosmism is very different from that of Lainer's predecessors or contemporaries, yielding surprising corollaries, including the Unique Self teaching of radical individualism that is the focus of this essay. This radical individualism, which permeates the entire *Mei Hashiloach* (*MHs*), is a powerful and poignant expression of Lainer's anthropocentric focus, manifesting the unique human dimension of his nondual realization and acosmism. Lainer's radical concept of uniqueness is rooted in ontology and finds expression in his reading of sacred texts, psychology, ritual, study, and religious anthropology.

Prior Scholarship on Izbica

Lainer's concept of individualism has largely been ignored or glossed over by scholars as not integral to his system. This, in my view, is a fundamental misreading of *MHs*. The reason for this mistake lies primarily in the claim first put forth by Joseph Weiss as to the radically theocentric nature of *MHs*. In Weiss' (1985) reading of Lainer, the human being is but a "passive instrument" of the divine. Weiss further characterizes a major thrust of Lainer's thought as establishing the "insignificance of human action...[or] its complete nullification." Weiss (1985) writes:

The religious anarchy of Mordechai Joseph is not based on the concept of individu-