

## **The Truth Beyond and Beyond Truth - Religious Truth in Teachings of the Breslav Tradition and their Contemporary Interreligious Application**

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The attitude to other religions is often seen as a competition between conflicting truths. Seen from this perspective, religions are commonly considered as deadlocked in a dispute over what are essentially conflicting truth claims. The challenge posed by a contemporary view of other religions is an internal challenge as well as an external one. In thinking of truth in an interreligious framework we are in fact called to consider conflicting internal understandings of truth, as well as the very meaning of truth in a religious context. What do we mean by truth and how do we access it? Thinking through what religious truth means in an interreligious context provides an opportunity for revisiting existing discussions within our tradition on the notion of truth and identifying them as resources for contemporary reflection. A primary means of exploring this question is by considering positions developed internally and how they might be broadened to a view of other religions. The advantage of this method is that it does not forsake the notion of truth on account of the interreligious encounter. Rather, it seeks to apply to the interreligious encounter classical views of religious truth, as these have been developed internally. Particularly relevant, in this context, are internal views of truth that relativize truth or our ability to access it. Most discussions of truth and falsehood assume a simple dichotomy between true and false. Consequently, religions may be classified as one or the other. Classically, 'we' have truth, or at least 'we' possess it fully, while 'they' have falsehood. A richer understanding of 'truth' yields more nuanced ways of describing relations between religions, while preserving the notion of truth. To do so, one must identify expressions of the internal relativization of the contents of religion.

One cannot assume that internal mechanisms for reflecting upon truth can always be exported to a religion's views of other religions. Certain perspectives and certain flexibilities may be the prerogative of the internal spiritual discourse. Yet to the extent that spiritual literature conditions our view of religion, we can require of it to extend beyond the boundaries of its normal application. If our theological challenge is how to deal with the consequences of applying the language of truth to our religious discourse, then identifying ways in which this very language has already been transmuted within tradition provides an important resource.<sup>1</sup>

The present essay explores the notion of religious truth from the perspective of one hassidic tradition, Breslav hassidism. It centers on two interrelated texts and seeks to make them talk to the

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<sup>1</sup>The ideas spelled out above have been articulated with various illustrations in my *Towards a Jewish Theology of World Religions: Framing the Issues*, *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, Littman Library, Oxford, 2012, pp. 20-33.

present interreligious situation and the theological challenges of a contemporary Jewish theology of religions. The two texts are by the master and by the disciple who elaborates and expands upon the master's teaching. The master is Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, the disciple is Rabbi Nathan of Breslav/Nemirov. The first text we will study is Likutey Moharan 51, where R. Nachman presents a nexus of ideas, within which the notion of religious truth may be appreciated. This text, along with an important midrashic text, provide the basis for an extensive discussion of truth and its axiological value by R. Nathan in his Likutey Halachot, a commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, based on the theological and mystical foundations of R. Nachman's teachings.<sup>2</sup> These two texts provide an opportunity to think through our views of truth, peace and tolerance and how they might apply within the present day interreligious context. Let us begin, then, by presenting the teaching of R. Nachman's that serves as the point of departure for the present study.

### **Likutey Moharan I, 51 - Truth: Returning from the Many to the One**

Rabbi Nachman opens his teaching with a discussion of how telling lies is harmful both physically and spiritually. The discussion is launched in a moral context, providing reasoning for why untruth is harmful. This practical-spiritual perspective leads to a broader reflection on truth in the metaphysical sense and how it relates to other core values:

The emergence of falsehood, which is evil, which is impurity, is due to the remove from the One. Because bad/evil<sup>3</sup> is opposition, for example: whatever is against a person's will is bad. And in the One there is no opposition, but all is good. As the rabbis taught (Pesachim 50), "On that day God will be one and His name one", that all will be for good.<sup>4</sup> Because in the one there is no evil/bad. And therefore in the future will be fulfilled the verse: The speech (or tongue) of truth will endure forever (Prov. 12, 19). Because then all will be One, all will be good.

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<sup>2</sup>On this work, see my essay 'The Halakha in Light of the Spiritual Life, *The Quest for Halacha*, ed. A. Berholz, Tel Aviv, 2003, Yediot Books, pp. 257-284 [Hebrew].

<sup>3</sup>Hebrew uses the same word for both, and the present discourse slips between both senses of the Hebrew *ra*.

<sup>4</sup>The talmudic interpretation argues that in the future even what we perceive as bad will be good. Accordingly, the benediction made in response to events will change. Whereas today we make one benediction upon hearing good news and another upon receiving bad news, in the future all will be *hatov vehametim*, affirmation of God's goodness. Even bad things will be considered good from the perspective of a future vision. Rabbi Nachman quotes the formula of this benediction as a description of the future state.

For truth is one. For example, if we take a silver dish, and say that it is a silver dish, it is the truth. But when we say it is a golden dish, it is a lie. So we see that truth is one, because the only truth one can say is that it is a silver dish, nothing else, but falsehood is manifold, because one could say it is a golden dish, a copper dish, and other names. So the lie is in the aspect of “they sought many intrigues” (Ecc. 7). And this is why in the world to come evil will be eliminated, as will contrariety and tears.<sup>5</sup> As it says, (Is. 11) “They will not cause any harm,” that is the elimination of evil. And it says (Isa. 11) “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the tiger with the goat”, this is elimination of opposition, and it says (Is. 25) “and God will wipe tears off every face,” this is the elimination of tears, that are the aspect of lying.<sup>6</sup>

For then God will be one and His name one, which is all good, all truth. And this is why in the world to come all impurity will be eliminated, as it says (Zach. 13) “I shall remove the spirit of impurity from the earth,” because then all will be one, as it says (Job 14), “who will produce the impure from the pure, is it not the move away from the One?”

The key to understanding this passage lies in the notion of unity and moving from the one to the many. The move from the one to the many is understood through a series of associations. It is also a move from the holy to the impure (purity being a means of restoring lost unity). Further, it is a move from good to evil. All these are born out by talmudic and midrashic associations. In context, Rabbi Nachman adds to this cluster of associations also the distinction between truth and falsehood. Thus, the move away from the one is a move away from Truth. Truth is only one, while untruth is manifold.

The association of truth, good and unity and their opposition as untruth, evil and multiplicity grounds the notion of truth in a very particular context. Truth is not necessarily cognitive, a statement to affirm or a proposition to which one must assent. Grounded in existence itself, truth is to be considered a metaphysical way of being, that has a moral and existential counterpart. Seen thus, truth is a total way of being. It is beyond the content of specific faith doctrines, though no doubt these too are implied by the notion of truth. It is, rather, a state of being, that can be variously described as true, holy, one, good. I am reminded of the vedantic attempt to speak of the ultimate *Brahman* by appeal to three primary characteristics, that are the only thing that may be affirmed of *Brahman - sat, chit, ananda*: truth-existence, consciousness, bliss. Thus, a compound of core attributes is suggested, wherein truth plays an important role. This compound expresses a core state of being. One of the ways of speaking of this being is truth, or perhaps we ought to say Being and Truth.

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<sup>5</sup>A reference to the earlier part of the teaching where lies and tears were related.

<sup>6</sup>The association between between tears and lying was established earlier in the teaching.

It is interesting to note that none of the sources quoted by R. Nachman refer to truth. His sources speak only of good and evil, one and many, holy and impure. Reference to truth is thus imported by R. Nachman to this discussion. The import may be accounted for in light of the focus of this teaching, namely the avoidance of lies and the attempt to ground it in a broader metaphysical structure. It may also reflect his own intuitive understanding of how ultimate reality should be conceived of not only in moral but also in cognitive terms, hence the reference to truth.

Let us proceed further with the reading of teaching 51, as we seek to understand what truth means to R. Nachman.

Prior to the creation, when creation was still in potential, so to speak, before He actualized it, all was one, all truth, all goodness, all holiness. Even the designation “pure” was not applicable. This is because purity applies only when impurity is also possible, as it is written “You will be purified of all your impurity” (Ez. 36,25). But when all is one, the aspect of “many intrigues”, which is the essence of evil and impurity, as explained above, has no place. For purity is a mean between holiness and impurity, through which impurity is rectified, as in “you shall be purified of all your impurity”.

This is also the aspect of free choice, which is a mean between two things. And this cannot apply before creation, for then all was one, and in the one there is no choice, choice being an aspect of purity. And when God brought creation forth from potential into actuality, there were two things, the aspect of the One and creation. And then free choice applies, which is the aspect of purity, which is a mean between the one, for it is close to it, and has not yet come to the many intrigues, that are the evil and impurity. Nevertheless, it is an indicator and a sign of the devolvement, for it can devolve until it becomes bad and evil...and this is why it is possible to purify and to raise impurity to purity, for it devolved from purity, as it says “and you shall be purified of all your impurities”....

And all this..the aspect of purity, the aspect of free choice, from which comes the essential devolvement of impurity, which is evil and contrariety, the aspect of lies, all this comes from the aspect of “after creation”, after creation came forth from potential to actuality, for then there were, so to speak, two aspects, that is the One and creation. We see therefore that the essential hold of falsehood, which is impurity, is on account of its distance from the one, that is from the aspect of “after creation”.

The concept of truth is situated in this discourse within a cluster of ideas or values. Significantly, truth is not the starting point of this metaphysical presentation, grounded in the process of creation. Rather, the entire process is grounded in creation, in the act of becoming and in the move from the one to the many. This move is related to the move from holiness, through purity,

to impurity and also from the one truth to the many intrigues of falsehood. Truth is thus related to and grounded in existence itself in the most fundamental way. Accordingly, if we ask what religious truth is by this view, we would respond it is being grounded in the divine reality itself, a reality both distinct and prior to creation. Truth and unity are identified with the state of existence prior to creation. With creation comes multiplicity and the fall away from the one, true, pure and good state of being. Thus, attaining truth involves gaining a state of being that transcends the created order. For R. Nachman, as a mystic, such attainment seems possible, in that our consciousness can rise above the multiplicity of existence and regain a lost unity of being. Rising above creation to the One at its root allows us to enter a state of goodness and truth that is reserved for God alone. Thus, Truth is a sharing in God Himself. This is a significant insight, inasmuch as all truth would be grounded in God and an expression of having entered the divine life in some conscious way. This formulation would exclude identification of truth with a path, a teaching, even Torah itself. These could be considered part of the created order, or at least their lower expressions would be identified with it. Only the higher aspects of Torah and religion, such that are grounded in divine being itself, may be said to be “truth.”

Such an understanding is of course full of potential for interreligious relations. It suggests that religion, my religion, is not to be automatically identified with “the truth.” Rather, Truth is a particular high point of the spiritual life, only attained by those who have reached into the depths or height of the spiritual life, or divine reality itself. While nothing is stated in relation to other religions, grounding Truth in God, rather than in religion, does open up the possibility that this structure may be applied not only to Judaism, but to all religions. All religions could span the duality of God and creation, the choice between pure and impure, good and evil, that is fundamental to the spiritual life. As such, in their lower expressions, they are to identified with the process of purification, still removed from “truth” in its highest. Only as they make direct access to the higher reality of the One available can they be considered as “truth.” And precisely because all comes from the One, all religions may point to that same One, and provide access to it.

Reading on in R. Nachman’s teaching, we learn:

And through divine providence, even after the act, when God brought forth [creation] from potential to actuality, all things are united with Him. And evil draws its vitality from the residue of providence, that is from behind his shoulders, as is known,<sup>7</sup> and it is far from the One. And through truthfulness God’s providence is upon him (i.e. the truthful person), as it says “My eyes are upon the truthful” (Ps. 101,6). And through

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<sup>7</sup>Suggesting a backhanded dependence on divine life, as opposed to the direct reception of divine bounty. See Zohar 3 14a.

falsehood, which is evil, he removes God's providence from himself, as it says "He who speaks falsely will not be sustained before My eyes" (ibid.), and his vitality comes only from behind the shoulders.

We see therefore that when a person wants the state of after becoming and activity, when [God] brought potential into actuality, to be all one...as it was before, when all was in potential, he must keep himself from falsehood, and thereby God's providence is upon him, and then all is One.

The metaphysical description has direct moral consequences. Lying removes one from the unity of being and precludes providence, locking a person into the state of multiplicity associated with the becoming of creation. Telling truth evokes the primordial, pre-created state, where divine unity is identical with the Truth. This primordial unity can be evoked because there is a way of applying or drawing forth the state of unity, associated with God and with the pre-created state, within the order of creation and its multiplicity. This is attained through Providence. Providence, expressed through the metaphor of God's eyes, is a means of reconnecting with God. As God is the ground of the One, the Good and the True, so too He is the means of realizing them within the created order, through providence. This realization is achieved by bridging the metaphysical and the moral. The Hebrew *emet* expresses both "truth" and "truthfulness", the former a metaphysical state, the latter a mode of being, a moral virtue. The linguistic identification allows R. Nachman to make the move to the moral domain, affirming that truthfulness is a means to Truth. By telling truth in one's life, affirming the one message of truth applicable to a given situation, one is recalling the higher spiritual reality of the One, drawing forth Providence, and in some way undoing the harmful effects of creation. If creation meant a move away from the One, truth telling, much like purification, leads one back from the many to the One. To speak truth is thus to rise beyond creation, returning to the creator, identified with the One, drawing forth His providence, living in Him.

As our analysis suggests, the governing notion of the metaphysical discussion is unity and its devolvement into multiplicity. This engenders purity, choice and the move to falsehood. Truth is thus derivative of unity. Why then does R. Nachman place an accent on truth, especially given that his sources give much greater prominence to notions of evil, impurity and multiplicity than to the concerns of truth and falsehood? The answer seems to be twofold. In terms of his work as a commentator, R. Nachman is commenting upon a famous mystical passage that speaks of the harmful consequences of telling lies to the mystical quest. In the famous story of the four who entered paradise, as it is narrated in Bavli Chagiga 14b, R. Akiva warns the other three sages not to tell untruths, for the one who speaks falsehood cannot remain in God's presence. The latter-day mystic is thus invited to reflect on the relationship between telling falsehood and "getting it wrong" in mystical terms. R. Nachman's mysticism is based on the experience or reality of return to the

One, beyond evil, multiplicity. To this cluster it is easy to add truth and falsehood and to suggest that the moral dimension of *emet* excludes one from its metaphysical counterpart. Thus, one reason for why R. Nachman may push truth telling as central to the mystical process may be hermeneutical, his dependence on a text that ties the two together. If so, his primary concern for “truth” is less for truth in the abstract, theoretical (and we may add philosophical, dogmatic) sense, than with its applied sense. We know what truth is in daily life and are required to practice it. Its benefits are the return to the reality of God, itself understood as Truth. Truth then is not some independent value, but simply a way of saying “God”. Where truth takes on specific contours is in the moral domain, in the act of telling the truth.

There may be another reason why R. Nachman offers us such a moral conceptualization of truth in mystical and metaphysical terms. He may simply wish to illustrate the fruits of proper moral behavior in the spiritual life. His work as a spiritual teacher indeed spans the range of the greatest spiritual heights and their grounding in everyday moral life. If so, it is all the more the case that what matters most about truth is not its abstract formulation. Rather, truth is to be appreciated in daily life through truthful living. Its metaphysical fruits are in the return to union with God, who is Truth. At either end, daily truthfulness and divine unity, “truth” is not some abstract value one must uphold, a statement, an affirmation, but rather reality itself lived properly. Living reality properly by telling truth grounds one in reality itself, in the “truest” sense, in God Himself.

All this is, of course, highly relevant to how “truth” is to be approached in the dialogue, or even competition, between religions. Truth, in this view, is not the primary value; reality is. The value of truth is not to be sought by affirmations, declarations and formulations. Rather, it is to be tested through living and practicing truthfulness, and remaining united to God. Truth is in reality, not in the mind, or in the proper formulation. And while R. Nachman may have never been challenged to articulate things in this way,<sup>8</sup> in fact this formulation removes truth from the field of discussion between religions. If one practices truth, one is in the Truth. This is the message of grounding the metaphysical in the moral. It is as applicable to one religion as to the other, thereby eliminating competition over “truth.”

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<sup>8</sup>R. Nachman is one of the most outspoken authors on matters of universalism and a universalistic mission of Judaism and the spiritual life in relation to non Jews. The only song he composed, which is printed at the opening of *Likutey Moharan* under the title *Shir Na'im* incorporates elements of a Jewish view of other religions. In it he distinguishes clearly between the value of Judaism and other religions and from a common perspective he would certainly not consider them as possessing equal value. Nevertheless, the metaphysical perspective of reference to absolute truth, as expounded in Torah 51, makes it possible to consider relativizing all religions, including Judaism, in relation to pre-created reality.

## **R. Nathan of Breslav - The Impossibility of Religious Truth**

This teaching of R. Nachman's provides the foundation for a lengthy exposition by R. Nathan in *Likutey Halachot*, Hilchot Ribit 5. R. Nachman's discussion provides the theoretical framework for a lengthy discussion of internal Jewish pluralism that explores the relative values of truth and peace, and that provides us with one philosophical and textual strategy for relativizing religious truth. As we noted in the discussion of R. Nachman's text, R. Nachman's use of "truth" did not include reference to the content of truth, in the form of specific beliefs, positions, dogmas etc. R. Nachman avoided the aspect of "truth" that is typically the focus of discussions of religious truth. It is R. Nathan who introduces this aspect of "religious truth" into the discussion. He does so by constructing an entire theoretical edifice on the foundations of Teaching 51, quoted above. In the process he comments not only on R. Nachman's teaching, but also on a foundational midrashic text, that allows him to work through the value of religious truth and to relativize it. Therefore, before turning to R. Nathan's discussion, let us first consider the rabbinic commentary on Gen. 1,26, found in Genesis Rabba 8,5:

R. Simon said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties, some of them saying, 'Let him be created,' while others urged, 'let him not be created.' As it is written, "Lovingkindness and truth met, justice and peace kissed." (Psalms 85:11): Lovingkindness said, 'Let him be created, because he will dispense acts of lovingkindness'; Truth said, 'Let him not be created, because he is full of lies'; Justice said, 'Let him be created, because he will perform acts of justice'; Peace said, 'Let him not be created, because he is full of strife.'" What did God do? God held Truth and cast it to the ground, as it is written, "and truth will be cast to the earth." The ministering angels said before the Holy One, "Sovereign of the Universe! Why do you despise Thy seal? Let Truth arise from the earth!" Hence it is written, "Let truth spring up from the earth." (Psalms 85:12)

This midrash expresses the complexity of the human person, reflected through an angelic dispute as to whether man should be created. The angels are consulted by God, a rabbinic strategy for making sense of the plural form of "Let **us** make Adam" in Gen. 1,26. The consultation yields conflicting opinions, reflecting the complexity of the human person. In terms of both truth and peace, man is judged as deficient and not worthy of being created. Truth and peace are the two values in which the human person is lacking. The angels are locked in what seems like a tie, with each side citing two qualities to support its view. The tie is broken by a surprising act of God, who moves from a position of taking advice to a position of taking action. God casts truth to the ground, thereby expressing his own preference for the creation of man, even at the cost of sacrificing truth.

Lest we think that truth is of little value, the text goes on to affirm it is God's seal, thereby making God's choice all the more pronounced.

This midrash is read by R. Nathan with in great detail. In what follows, I shall present excerpts from R. Nathan's reading, too long to be translated in full, and explore their implications for the notion of religious truth as such, and in particular for a contemporary view of religious truth in an interreligious context.

In analyzing this midrash, R. Nathan begins by posing the question of how truth could contradict God. Recalling the association of God and truth, as we encountered it in R. Nachman's teaching, the question is all the more relevant. The core strategy that will serve R. Nathan in making sense of this midrash, thereby introducing a Jewish theory of pluralism, is a theory of layered truth, whereby truth is appreciated in or through multiple levels, with clear hierarchy between them. The hierarchy is reflected in the choice of heroes of this midrash. The midrash juxtaposes God and the angels with reference to man. Students of rabbinic thought are familiar with the prominent motif of the superiority of the human person to angels. When God seeks to create the man he is, in fact, creating a being that is superior to the angels, and whose true value eludes the angels. Truth, in this midrash, is a class of angels. Man may be untruthful, but his value transcends that of the angels, who can only judge from their perspective. God sees things differently, so to speak beyond truth itself.

To understand what makes the human person more than the angels we must return to the very foundations of creation. Creation was made so that God may be known. But how is God known? The path of humans to knowledge of God passes through the complexities of choices, engendered by the duality of good and evil. It involves descent into the material world. It involves a strenuous process, the fruits of which are qualitatively different than the knowledge of God that those who do not go through such confrontations, that is the angels, can attain. Therefore, only humans, who experience the choice of good and evil, can know God truly and therefore humans represent the pinnacle of creation, viewed from its ultimate *telos*, the knowledge of God.<sup>9</sup>

In developing a layered notion of truth, R. Nathan formulates the distinction between *emet*, truth, and *emet la'amito*, best translated as ultimate truth, even though its literal rendering is something akin to truth in its truthfulness, or truly true. The very notion of a layered truth would seem to go against the principle that R. Nachman had enunciated that truth is one. Let us see how R. Nathan works around this tension:

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<sup>9</sup>The conceptual matrix plays humans and angels against each other, as does our very foundational midrash. Note, however, that in R. Nathan's discourse "Israel" substitutes "humans". The universal applicability of this theory of truth to interreligious relations, returning to its original conceptual framework, referring to humans rather than to Israel, will be the subject of discussion below.

There are several aspects concerning truth, for truth is one...but one requires great effort to attain ultimate truth in its ultimacy. Even in wisdoms of this world it is hard to attain the truth, as scholars who seek to understand through their wisdom recognize, where no wisdom is really fully known (except for mathematics and algebra), all the more so in the wisdom of the knowledge of God, that cannot be attained through any wisdom and mental attainment, except through efforts and the labors of the true righteous, who withstand temptation and are purified of all earthly desires. Only they attain in truth the knowledge of God, to the degree that their knowledge, in the world to come, will be the source of the angels' knowledge of God. (subsection 16)

Affirmation of truth's unity is now focused on ultimate truth, which is the only real truth, though relative truth is still recognized as truth, though on a lower level. Note how experiential and grounded in life truth is. It must grow from experience, not from speculation, or mental formulation. And it is only the experience of free choice and confronting evil that provides access to truth. If, for R. Nachman, free choice was a sign of falling away from the One, for R. Nathan free choice, associated with the human person, is the only means of attaining the ultimate truth. This is a reversal of the process from metaphysics to spirituality. From the perspective of metaphysics, choice is a descent from ultimate truth. From the perspective of human experience, choice is the only means of purification, through which one attains the ultimate truth.

A closer comparison of the teachings of the master and the reworking of his disciple shows the originality of the latter, who almost stands the thought structure of the teacher on its head. Unlike R. Nachman, for whom truth was part of a cluster, that included the values of the good, holy etc., R. Nathan's discussion revolves exclusively around truth. The move from the one to the many, from God to creation, from truth to untruth, is actually not a move away from the truth but the means of attaining the truth absolute of *emet la'amita*. What characterizes ultimate truth is that it can only be known through human experience, not angelic. And human experience, by definition, is founded on the move from the one to the many, on entering into life on the earth plane, characterized as it is by conflict, the challenges of impurity and multiplicity of opinion. What for R. Nachman was a fall away from truth, is for R. Nathan the necessary and exclusive means for attaining the higher divine truth. By going through the trials and tribulations of an earthly life a higher kind of truth can be discovered, a truth unknown to the angels. Thus, the truth that God desires is a truth that grows out of multiplicity, conflict, contrast, the move away from the one, pure, the true.

In this light us revisit the description of God casting truth to the ground. If, on first examination, this description was an expression of rejection of truth's counsel and an indication of God's desire in the creation of the man, R. Nathan's reading suggests more specific meaning to the act of casting to the ground.

Ultimate truth can only be attained in this world, by passing through trials. And this is why God took truth and threw it to the ground, removing it from himself. Because God does not chose such a truth, even though its intention is, in truth, well received, yet it has not yet attained the truth of God's knowledge, not having been in this world of free choice and not having been purified and refined in the multiplicity and untruth [through which] truth can be ascertained from multiplicity and untruth. This is why [God] decreed to cast truth to the earth, for this itself is the rectification and working out of truth, by throwing truth to the ground...through this very means truth will be worked out and purified, through the truly righteous, and only then clear truth will be revealed, so that one can attain the knowledge of His truth, in a way that would have never been possible to attain when truth was above in the supernal worlds, where there is no untruth.(subsection 19)

To cast to the ground is thus to point to an alternative truth, a higher truth in fact, one that rises from the ground, tested through plurality of opinions, and the multitude of temptations that make up our life.

In the move from the one truth that represents the state of the world before creation to truth as it is known here below one must not seek to replicate truth as one, unique and exclusive, as indeed truth ultimately is. Rather, the move to multiplicity within creation means that truth in its unique sense cannot be known in our common reality. Metaphysical multiplicity translates into ideological pluralism. This does not mean renouncing the uniqueness of ultimate truth, but it does make it far less accessible. Ultimate truth becomes accessible only to those who successfully traverse the multiplicity of reality, with its attendant imperfections and impurities. It thus becomes the lot of a very narrow group of individuals, zaddikim, those masters who successfully traverse the multiplicity of reality discovering its deeper unifying power within.

R. Nathan does not tell us in what such truth consists and how it is different, but there are several keys that allow us to suggest that it is precisely its composite, synthetic nature, grounded in the plurality of opinion that makes it richer and somehow more authentic than angelic truth.

One of the keys is the view of Messiah as the one who is able to reconcile and harmonize all forms of truth into a greater whole, from which the fullness of divine truth emerges. Messiah comes at the height of multiplicity, when the world has been greatly filled by people.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>In one wording R. Nathan speaks of the numerical increase of Israel (subsection 17). In another he simply refers to population explosion and its attendant pluralistic explosion of opinions (subsection 18). Even if R. Nathan does not extend his thought so far, the thought structure of multiplicity leading to messianic revelation invites broadening to include all peoples and opinions,

The core revelation of truth in its fullness will be through our righteous Messiah, who will come at the end of these days, when the world has become increasingly populated. And the multiplicity is primarily a multiplicity of opinions, that there is great divergence of opinions....and Messiah, in the fullness of his righteousness, will attain the absolute truth and reveal the truth in the world, and then redemption will be complete and the purpose of creation will have been fully realized. (subsection 18)

Messiah, so it seems, does not simply affirm one truth over another. Nor is he presented as simply withstanding temptation or the confusion generated by the multiplicity of opinions, affirming one particular worldview. Rather, I would suggest Messiah has the capacity to integrate and accommodate the plurality of competing views into a synthetic, composite or otherwise fully realized view of the truth.<sup>11</sup> This understanding is corroborated later in the teaching, when R. Nathan speaks of the changes that occur in the world and how one must discover the truth through these various changes. In this context, R. Nathan says the following of Messiah:

Messiah, through whom is the essential revelation of truth in the entire world, will come at the end of days precisely after time has been extended and gone on for long, from the creation of the world till the time Messiah will come. And so there will [already] be many people and many opinions and wisdoms, which is the essence of multiplicity and changes, on account of which untruth has taken a hold leading God to cast truth to the ground...it is precisely then that the great rank of the Messiah will be seen, as he reveals the truth then out of so many changes”(subsection 49).

To speak of truth as being revealed out of many changes seems to be more than affirmation of the ability to uphold one truth despite many challenges to it. Rather, the one truth seems to grow out of these changes, transcending them and pointing beyond to a truth that integrates, synthesizes and harmonizes these various changes into a greater understanding of Truth.

Another suggestive way of thinking of the truth that is attained through the process of struggling to attain truth in the midst of multiplicity on the earth plane grows directly from the image of truth being cast to the ground and the prooftext from Ps. 85,12 truth will spring up from the earth. Casting truth to the earth is read by R. Nathan in analogy to the sowing of a seed in the

both in view of the expanse of the human family and in view of the universal mission of the Messiah.

<sup>11</sup>Such a view is, of course, the messianic view of Rav Kook. I believe I am not simply reading Rav Kook into R. Nathan. Rather, R. Nathan's thought structure leads to this point, though he himself never articulates the full meaning of this thought structure. His concerns were different, contained within a more limited social framework. That he did not spell out the full implications of his thought structure does not take away from their potential. The continuation of the present paragraph lends further support to this reading.

earth.<sup>12</sup> For a seed to give life, it must first rot, thereby giving life to a higher or fuller form of being. Similarly, the narrower understanding of truth, angelic truth, identified with a particular viewpoint, must give way to the fuller divine truth, ultimate truth. And just as sowing requires human effort, so the attainment of truth requires the efforts of the righteous who seek to realize truth in its purity. This analogy does not make clear in what way the new truth is different from the truth that had to rot. One way of making sense of it could be that it is precisely the letting go of the narrow confines of one single perspective that enables a new growth that gives life by its very situatedness in earth and in a fullness and totality that it provides, as it sustains all that grows on it.

For R. Nachman, truth belongs to the realm of “before creation”. The created order, characterized by multiplicity, is the realm of untruth. The two are bridged through truthfulness, a moral virtue, that evokes divine providence. What R. Nachman does not discuss is the status of conceptual truth, the very subject of our discussion of religious truth, as conventionally understood. Into this gap steps R. Nathan, who claims that indeed one cannot refer to the ordinary sense of religious truth as a series of propositions, views, declarations, statements etc., within the created order. Any attempt to grasp the one truth within the multiple reality is doomed to failure, that is except for those who have gone beyond its multiplicity and impurity and been successfully tested. But in the conventional sense religious truth is meaningless and impossible to attain. The angels are correct, but not because man is a liar but because untruth is fundamental to the act of creation and as such is desired by God, for purposes higher than those known to the angles. Let us hear R. Nathan on this:

The essence of free choice touches upon the matter of truth and falsehood, as we learn from Torah [51]. For falsehood is evil, impurity that attaches itself to the remove away from the One. For as soon as creation came forth from potential to actuality there were two things, and choice [became possible]. So we see that the essential hold of untruth is in the aspect of multiplicity through removal from the One. And the greater the removal from the One, and the greater the multiplicity, so untruth becomes more prominent. As we see that as soon as Eve was created and there were two people in the world, they caused harm and ate from the fruit of good and evil and brought about death for generations... And so later when Cain and Abel were born and people started multiplying there was conflict between them till Cain killed Abel, and so all that went wrong was a consequence of multiplicity increasing. As it says, “When human beings began to increase in number on the earth....The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become” (Gen. 6)...

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<sup>12</sup>See subsection 22.

However, in truth, the essential value of truth and its perfection is precisely where one seeks out and reveals ultimate truth in the place of multiplicity. And the greater the multiplicity, and the more untruth has its hold there, when one attains the realization and revelation of truth there, that is the very worth of truth and its perfection, and this is the purpose of all of creation, from beginning to end...

And so the zaddikim (righteous ones) achieve the purpose of creation by withstanding the trial and being purified, uncovering the ultimate truth from the multiplicity to which untruth attaches itself. (subsection 17).

What all this means is that in the here and now, in the realm of opinions, social relations and competing worldviews, no one, that is except for a very rare and narrow class of individuals, can really access truth.

Because it is hard to attain ultimate truth therefore controversy is multiplied. And controversy is caused by truth itself, where everyone considers truth rests with him. Because with regard to truth and falsehood there are many nuances. There is a great liar...and there is also the case of someone who is not a liar, but because he is not sufficiently pure in his deeds his thought is misguided from one error to another till truth is reversed for him, to the point that he calls good evil and evil good thinking that is the truth... And there is someone whose error is refined, and someone whose error is the finest of the fine, as in the case of some great masters who erred in a law or in a certain matter, even though their intention was desired by heaven. And especially with regard to controversy...for in this world truth has fallen so that even great saints and true sages cannot attain ultimate truth (subsection 16).

Note the reference to intentionality. As part of a thick application of a notion of truth, R. Nathan introduces a further dimension to the concept of truth - intention.<sup>13</sup> Thus, one must distinguish between the substance or essence of truth and the intentionality to attain truth. Religious life involves both intentionality and attainment. True intention proffers validity and meaning to positions that may be faulty in terms of their substance. Such a notion of intention parallels, in some ways, R. Nachman's own reference to speaking truth. Both are ways of realizing truth within the order of multiplicity and the falsehood associated with it. Within the reality of multiplicity intention provides a way of referring to the truth, even if it is not attained and even if it must be distinguished from ultimate truth.

As R. Nathan states further along:

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<sup>13</sup>For a rabbinic precedent for such usage, see Tosefta Yevamot 1,3. The intentionality of Bet Shamai and Bet Hillel is the grounds for applying to them a verse that describes their positions in terms of truth.

There are two kinds of truth. There is ultimate truth, when one attains and knows the matter as it is and there is another truth, where his intention is truly desirable, though one is mistaken. (subsection 20)

In fact, the angel of truth himself should be considered as “truth” only in that sense. He intended to speak the truth, except that truth was spoken only according to his perspective, distinct from God’s higher view of truth.

This is a very rich notion, particularly within an interreligious context. Once it is recognized that all truth escapes us and that really within the realm of multiplicity one cannot, with rare exceptions, attain truth, then intention functions as a primary means of validation that provides meaning to one’s quest for truth. It is much easier to recognize the honest intentions of members of other faiths than it is to admit the truth of their faith claims. A notion of truth that highlights intentionality is thus one that fills the void created by the affirmation that we cannot access truth. It makes it possible to recognize proper intentionality, and hence some dimension of truth in another religion.

### **Truth and Spiritual Virtues: Faith, Humility, Peace and Compassion**

Looking at R. Nathan’s conceptual edifice, one realizes that ultimately truth is beyond our reach. In the same way that the angels could not grasp truth, so too no human person (except for outstanding spiritual masters) can access truth. What we know is only that we do not know, and the consequence of that is the privileging of faith over truth.

In this world the perfection of truth is in faith, for the principle of truth is to know that one cannot attain the essence of truth, for the essence of truth is God alone as it says “and the truth (of/is) God forever” (Ps. 117,2). And this cannot be attained. So the principle of truth is to know that one cannot attain the essence of truth, in the aspect of the proverb stating “the goal of knowledge is to realize we do not know”.<sup>14</sup> Therefore the essential perfection of truth is in faith”. (subsection 21)

The emphasis on faith, rather than truth, is a hallmark of R. Nathan’s thought. In my view, if there is one single contribution and emphasis by means of which we can appreciate R. Nathan in relation to, but also in contrast to, R. Nachman, it relates to this emphasis on faith. R. Nathan converts large portions of R. Nachman’s thought, based as it was on mystical insight and on the centrality of understanding and recognition, into the domain of faith. This move is representative of his position as the disciple who sees himself as secondary to the great master and his direct insights. It is also a position that serves a pedagogical function. It presents a virtue that an entire community

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<sup>14</sup>A common Breslav paraphrase of a maimonidean saying.

can practice, even when they cannot attain the rare heights witnessed in the scriptures, that reflect R. Nachman's own experiences. Thus, if R. Nachman's teaching, presented above, assumed truth was within reach and that one could somehow attain the pre-created state, either by mystical experience (implicit in his presentation) or by proper moral conduct and truth telling (explicit), this emphasis gives way to the recognition that truth, in its higher sense of ultimate truth, is beyond us. All we can hold on to is faith.

Affirmation of faith over and against truth is ultimately founded on a humility, that recognizes our moral, spiritual and epistemological limitations. This humility is a stance that provides the psychological ground for the practical pluralism advocated by R. Nathan. Because we cannot attain truth, we must adopt a pluralistic approach to the multiplicity of opinions by which we are surrounded. This leads us, then, to R. Nathan's emphasis on tolerance and peace as core virtues that in practical terms should prevail over truth. Even if in a purely theoretical way truth is recognized as the ultimate virtue, its theoretical inaccessibility is matched by the moral and social teaching that privileges peace and tolerance over truth.

As R. Nathan formulates it, the greatest obstacle to absolute truth is truth itself.<sup>15</sup> This recognition orients both a psychological approach to oneself and a social approach to the reality of controversy. Psychologically, it provides an orientating principle for someone who is facing challenges to his spiritual path in the name of truth, something R. Nathan himself suffered from greatly, as he was drawn into the hassidic movement and in particular into the special relationship he had with R. Nachman. The way to deal with opposition is to constantly distinguish between the levels of truth. Seeking the point of truth in one's heart, one must ask, in the face of competing truths, what is the ultimate truth. Needless to say, R. Nathan assumes one can reach that point, at least with the aid of great spiritual masters.

The tension between truth and ultimate truth has further consequences to personal psychology. Truth can actually be a very destructive force in terms of a person's evaluation of himself and an obstacle to progress in the spiritual life. Consider the following - a truthful assessment of oneself would expose one's sinfulness, leading a person to despair.

All moving away from the spiritual life and internal despair come from truth, because a person recognizes in himself the truth of what defects and harm he has caused [through his sins]. And even now he is as he is (i.e. imperfect). And so he says to himself - after all, I know the truth concerning myself, how profound the harm I have caused is, and thereby he despairs and moves away from the spiritual life. So his moving away and his fall are all through truth. But in truth one must remove oneself from such truth.

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<sup>15</sup>Subsection 20.

Because this is not really truth. Rather, we must know that we do not really know. And even though we have not yet come to that degree wherein the goal of knowledge is that we know nothing at all, which is a deep and hidden recognition, nevertheless, in the most basic sense we do not really know how things are. The only thing we really do know is that God is true and His Torah is true, and He revealed to us, through his true zaddikim (righteous masters), the depth of his grace and compassion that is limitless. An this is the core of truth...and His thoughts are deep and He knows how we have been created from dust, and every movement and transformation, no matter how slight, that a person manages to achieve in this world, drawing himself to God in this material world, is very precious to Him...as it comes from a distant place. And this is the essential truth, a truth that comes from the earth, that is specifically from the [physical] earth plane. (subsection 24)

So, self critical truth is contrasted with ultimate truth with reference to one's personal spiritual standing. A limited sense of truth is judgmental, condemning the person, leading him to despair. Divine truth, by contrast, is full of compassion, appreciating that which is positive and honoring every small step taken, precisely as it is taken in a physical environment. The truth of God's compassion is far greater, and more ultimate and absolute, than a self-judging truth. Truth can thus become an obstacle and a source of downfall in the individual spiritual life.

Even more dominant is R. Nathan's application of this core insight to contemporary social relations and the disputes that arise over issues of truth. The practical consequences of this approach to truth are in the realm of pluralism. R. Nathan spends significant attention on the controversy between hassidim and mitnagdim. Each group considers it possesses the truth. It is truth that led to controversies and disputes that sundered apart families and the entire society.<sup>16</sup> The angelic counsel against the creation of man remains a driving force of history. It is a judgement, a *kitrug*, that is sounded constantly, wherever a truth-based criticism of the other occurs. Such criticism is never false; it is only partial. Yet, its partiality makes such truth dangerous and destructive.

R. Nathan critiques ideological controversy, based as it is on the supposed quest for truth, as a social vice that is of no benefit.

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<sup>16</sup>Note, however, that R. Nathan's work contain a healthy dose of attack against the reformers and enlightenment forces. R. Nathan never considers broadening his line of reasoning to forces that undermine his own understanding of the fundamentals of religion. It is left to us to consider whether a different historical vantage point might justify such application. Even more radical is the application of his principle of tolerance to other religions. Of course, in some way they might be considered as less threatening than internal forces, by the very fact that they are situated outside, as well as in view of existing precedents that legitimate other religions.

Every person must know this so that he is spared the pitfalls that come precisely through truth that has not been properly clarified. This [recognition] will save him from the fire of controversy and opposition that uproots those who engage in dispute from both worlds unnecessarily. For this quality is the worst of all bad qualities in the world. For other qualities and desires are at least somehow necessary, though one must deal with them according to the Torah, even when they are permitted, so as to not engage in them too much. Still, they are needed for human existence, as in the case of eating and drinking and similar activities. But the matter of controversy is completely unneeded for a person. It destroys him and uproots him from both worlds more than all desire...and the controversy concerning the service of God, which is the controversy between the hassidim and the learners, or within the different camps of hassidim and learners - this controversy is worse than anything and destroys much and prevents redemption more than all sins of the Torah. And this controversy is simply unnecessary hate,<sup>17</sup> and all this on account of truth, that everyone considers that truth is with him. But in truth, if he looks to the ultimate truth and does not mislead himself, he will certainly avoid controversy. For he will look at himself [and ask] maybe he is misleading himself. And even if he is not mistaken, he will recognize that you cannot achieve anything through controversy....especially during these generations, when Israel are in a lowly state and we have no political power, how can one rectify what requires rectification, all the more so by means of controversy? Because in rectifying the world and drawing the entire world to the service of God can only be attained by means of peace...and this is why Elijah and the Messiah, who are the instruments for the world's fundamental rectification, will engage only in peacemaking...and therefore if truth incites him to engage in controversy, one must throw such truth away from oneself, casting it to the ground, for God does not desire such truth.(subsection 23)

Truth can guide the individual aspirant towards making the best spiritual choices for herself. But once the truth becomes a social force, it must be controlled. The point of control is where it is associated with controversy. In the axiological confrontation between truth and peace, peace wins hands down.

The relationship between peace and truth is spelled out explicitly by R. Nathan, who revisits the rabbinic midrash, posing the following question:

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<sup>17</sup>*Sinat chinam*, the talmudic expression for the worst kind of hate, said to be the cause of the destruction of the Second Temple.

When God cast truth down to the ground, for finding fault in the creation of the human person, why did God not take Peace to task? After all, Peace too found fault in the creation of man...[the answer is] that peace found fault in man who is full of fighting. But in truth all the fights and the controversies are due to the truth that is not purified and properly worked out, so every one considers truth is with him, thereby increasing fights and controversies in the world.... Therefore God only took peace to task, casting it to the ground...because by casting truth to the ground the finding fault by Peace is already addressed, because by casting truth to the ground there are no more fights and there is peace....because all controversies arise from too much truth.

And this is why one is permitted to change the truth for the sake of peace. For the sake of peace one must change and remove truth, for this is the core truth that God desires, to change truth for peace, for this is the aspect of God casting truth, that found fault in man's creation, teaching us thereby that one must throw and remove such truth from which fault finding and controversies arise.(subsection 36)

R. Nathan has a wonderful expression here - too much truth. Partial truth is not too little (absolute) truth. Rather it is too much truth, relative to the measure of truth we really need to live our spiritual lives properly. Truth should guide us, but not lead us to disputes with others. He also appeals to the halachic precedent allowing one to change the truth.<sup>18</sup> Here the halacha provides him with a clear axiological hierarchy where peace is to be preferred to truth. Truth, in this practical halachic instruction, refers to the dimension of truth addressed by R. Nachman, telling the truth in situations of daily living. R. Nathan extends this halachic principle from truth telling to the theoretical concerns of religious truth. Thus, the quest for peace serves as the over arching value that supports pluralism at the cost of truth.

Compared with R. Nachman's existential-metaphysical view of truth, a state to be attained, R. Nathan provides us with a view of truth that is theoretical, inasmuch as it is largely renounced in favor of another religious reality - faith, supported by peace and humility. Compared with the possibility of attaining a mystical realization of divine being prior to creation, expressed as truth, R. Nathan offers us a vision of religious humility, that foregoes truth in favor of a humble, peaceful and accommodating faith. Rather than a virtue, grounded in the highest metaphysical view, truth becomes a religious menace, an angelic vice, a temptation that can distract one from true spiritual life to the violent expressions of narrow egoistic views. While never completely renouncing the concept of truth, R. Nathan limits it to great masters, the kind who can live the teaching of R.

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<sup>18</sup>Whether this is really telling untruths or only slightly modifying the truth, a concern of later halachic discussion, is secondary to present concerns.

Nachman, thereby redefining what truth is for the common faithful. Ultimately, not only is religious truth beyond our reach; it is more of a vice than a virtue.

### **Moving Outwards - Religious Truth and Interreligious Relations**

What are the implications of R. Nathan's views on religious truth for interreligious relations? R. Nathan himself might have never considered applying these ideas beyond the confines of internal Jewish disputes. His key example are the conflicts of hassidim and mitnagdim. However, the structure of his thought invites or at least permits such expansion and several suggestive readings offered by R. Nathan lend such a reading further credence.

Perhaps most importantly, the entire discussion is grounded in the midrashic tale of the creation of man, even if R. Nathan immediately limits it to Israel. From the perspective of the human person, dynamics of truth, peace and transcending conflict are universal, grounded in an understanding of the human person, both as an individual and as a member of society. In terms of the philosophical grounding of his argument, it relies on the core dynamic of approaching truth between the one and the many. This dynamic is obviously relevant to the entire realm of phenomenal existence, caught between the one and the many. But it has special relevance to a consideration of multiple religions. These are at one and the same time expressions of the many, but they also point to the One and provide access to it. If our core attitude is epistemological humility and recognition that divine truth transcends the boundaries of our understanding, should not this view also include the fact that multiple religious traditions point to the one ultimate reality? Our association of exclusive truth with one religion only may be an angelic drive, that has to be transcended in favor of a divine view of reality. Finally, if axiological priority is given to peace over truth, is not peace between religions a primary expression of this axiological priority?

There are some specific references within R. Nathan's teaching that provide further insight to a discussion of "truth and peace" between religions. In a gorgeous hermeneutical moment, R. Nathan reads the story of the breaking of the tablets of the Covenant by Moses, following the act of the golden calf, in light of the dynamics of this teaching.

Moses saw the great destruction, brought about by the sin of Israel, having transgressed the entire Torah and serving idols, so that according to the law of truth of the Torah Israel should have been distanced [from God] and destroyed...therefore Moses had the wisdom to throw the tablets of the Law to the ground, which is the aspect of "and you have thrown truth to the ground", as God cast truth to the ground after finding fault in the creation of man. So did Moses do, and attached himself to God, and threw the tablets of the Covenant, that are the aspect of truth, the aspect of the Torah of truth, and cast them to the ground. By so doing he taught that even though they are Torah of truth, nevertheless if one considers that on their account one has lost hope and one can

no longer pray for Israel, they must be cast to the ground and [he] removed them from himself and strengthened himself to believe that one cannot attain the depth of the divine mind at all, till he recognized that despite the sin God wants [Moses] to pray for them (Israel). And therefore he prayed much for them, till he achieved through his prayer God's pardon. (subsection 28)

Moses repeats the primordial act of divine casting down of truth, preferring man, or Israel, over truth. It is R. Nathan's genius to identify the common gesture in both stories and to attribute to it the same significance. Now, here what is cast down is not truth as something abstract. Rather it is the Torah itself, almost at the very moment of its revelation, that is cast to the ground. The Torah is truth, and it must be cast to the ground in favor of a higher principle. The two principles that we have identified are compassion and truth. Divine compassion allows the individual to remain in God's sight and not to lose hope. Peace allows society to remain intact and not to become undone through conflict and controversy. If the Torah itself is sacrificed in the act for the sake of compassion or peace, this suggests there is something beyond religion itself. It is God. God is beyond religion, which would then correspond to truth, and be susceptible to the faults and errors of the angelic perfection, exercised in relation to religion. If one can paraphrase R. Nathan by saying that God transcends religion and that religion itself, truth, Torah, must be cast to the ground for the sake of peace and God's compassion, does this principle not invite application beyond a specific religion, Judaism and its Torah? Could this not provide guidelines to what should be the attitude of all religions to truth, and therefore to each other? If so, religions should see each other in the eyes of God, through peace and compassion, casting aside concerns for truth, that is ultimately beyond the reach of almost all believers.

Revisiting the notion of truth that is discovered through plurality could provide us with further indication of the applicability of R. Nathan's teaching beyond the internal Jewish context. As we suggested above, the truth that is attained through the earthbound orientation of multiplicity and plurality should be considered a synthetic truth, that encompasses varying perspectives within a broader unitive framework. If so, it is worth noting that R. Nathan's reference to truth emerging from multiplicity extends beyond internal parameters and reaches out to the seventy nations, the archetypical representation of all that is not Jewish. R. Nathan applies the principles of this teaching to the festival cycle of the month of Tishrei, understood as revealing truth through varying circumstances, even circumstances that are far from what is usually considered the core of truth. Following reference to Sukkot as an expression of unifying internal diversity, R. Nathan refers to Shemini Atzeret as a time of unifying diversity without.

This is the aspect of the four species (taken on Sukkot) that are inclusive of the various classes of Israel, those who learn Torah etc.,<sup>19</sup> so that even the willow is bound with the other species, representing those who are far removed, and who have neither taste nor smell. For through truth one reveals that also from them God receives pleasure and in them He takes pride, through any true movement that is found in them, by means of which they draw themselves to God.

And this is the aspect of Simchat Torah and Shmini Atzeret. Atzeret refers to gathering, for it gathers and contains everything, bringing all close to God, even those who are very far removed, through the Sukkah of peace in which we sat, for then (during Sukkot) we offered sacrifices even for the seventy nations,<sup>20</sup> to draw them all close to God, in the aspect of “then I will restore to the peoples a pure language so that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve Him with one accord” (Zeph. 3,9). (subsection 27)

It is noteworthy that the harmonious inclusion of all is a consequence of the peace associated with the Sukkah. Thus, peace prevails and redefines the meaning of truth, so that the seventy nations are included in it and subsumed under the broader notion of truth. If so, it does not seem like a stretch to include their respective truths as part of the broader quest for truth, reconciled, harmonized and synthesized in the being of Messiah, who fulfills the purpose of multiplicity by discovering the unity of truth in the greatest diversity of religious opinion.

Both R. Nachman and R. Nathan provide us with approaches that can be translated to the concerns of truth and the interreligious situation. For R. Nachman truth is grounded in the order beyond creation. As such it transcends all multiplicity, including the multiplicity of religions. Where through reflection and mystical experience one can rediscover this higher metaphysical ground is where religions can meet. For the rest, concerns for the content of belief captured as religious truth should be cast aside in favor of the concern for truthful living in daily relations.

R. Nathan offers us another lesson. For R. Nathan it is not the quest for the highest truth - the Truth beyond - that could provide the formula for interreligious harmony. Rather, it is the recognition that truth cannot be attained and that other values are superior to truth - beyond truth. It is God's will that we live in peace and compassion with one another and focusing on truth

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<sup>19</sup>A reference to the midrash that draws a correspondence between the four species and adherence or lack thereof to either Torah study or fulfillment of the mitzvot. See *Vayikra Rabba* 30,12.

<sup>20</sup>It is worth noting that in other contexts R. Nathan offers a non-inclusive reading of the meaning of offering sacrifices on behalf of the seventy nations. See for example *Hilchot Rosh Hashana* 4,8, and many other similar occurrences. In the present context, he offers an inclusive reading, seeing the nations as incorporated in the higher reality, characterized by truth.

ultimately goes against the very foundations that make it possible for humanity to exist, imperfect as it is. God does not will truth, nor can we attain it. God's highest purpose, the ultimate truth, points to compassion and peace as the guiding values of life, and consequently these should also govern interreligious relations.

While R. Nathan addresses Israel as the subject of his discussion, there is further ground in his teaching to legitimate extending this teaching also to other religions. This may be suggested by closer consideration of whom R. Nathan himself explicitly excludes from the mandate of harmonious validation, in the name of peace and at the expense of truth. Farther along, R. Nathan's discussion examines the laws of idol worshipers, referring specifically to various superstitions that are typical of idol worshipers. In this discussion he offers us a portrait of where truth can go wrong and of the limits of recognition.

The essential truth of the majority of people is to know that one cannot attain consciously the essence of truth, therefore one has to become strong in faith, which is dependent on truth...but whoever does not attain ultimate truth, but only misleads himself as though he seeks truth, but his intention is for his own sake, such as honor and other desires, he can be greatly misled through his truth...not only can he be misled through his truth to confused ways, he can also come to false beliefs, through his confused faith, which is the aspect of all the superstitions of idol worshipers, who are very strong in their faith, and nevertheless all is untruth and falsehood, because their faith extends from desires and the search for honor...and whoever is removed from truth to superstitions, it is very hard to bring him back to truth...because someone who is mistaken with regard to truth, even though it is very hard to bring him back to ultimate truth, there is nevertheless hope that he can be brought back, because one can prove to him that truth is not as he considers, even though it requires great efforts. But someone who has strayed from the truth till he came through a confused truth to superstitions it is very hard to bring him back to truth and straight faith, because faith is something that has no reasoning, because when one understand the reason of faith it is not faith...because even if one proves conclusively that the matter is not so, he will say I forgo my understanding and believe in this with full faith, with no reason, because this is how faith works, and for this reason it is hard to find truth in the world. (subsection 43)

This section seems to suggest that R. Nathan might not go along with us in the application of his teachings to the attitude to other religions. Are these not mistaken faiths, affirmations that are made regardless of reason, in the name of pure faith? Actually, it seems to me the passage can be

read to the contrary. R. Nathan's view of superstitions growing out of idolatry - and it almost does not matter if he also viewed contemporary Christianity in such terms or not<sup>21</sup> - is that these are founded on impure motivations. Desires and the search for fame and recognition are the motivating factors that corrupt one's thinking, eventually leading the impure believer into a set of capricious beliefs one cannot successfully engage. If so, it would be very unfair to approach other religions as we know them today from such a perspective. If purification of desire and purity of motive serve as yardsticks, then there is a moral control to the entire discussion, one that precedes the discussion of substantive faith and the particularities of truths held by different religions. If so, intellectual honesty - our own truth prerequisite, requires us to recognize that the religions we encounter in the present encounter with other religions, share the premise and prerequisite of seeking to transcend human weakness and to live a life in true service of God (or truth). If so, their beliefs cannot be dismissed as irrational nonsense, fortified in the name of faith. Tertullian's famous maxim of belief because something is absurd would be irrelevant to an interreligious exchange. What is reasonable or not reasonable, what is subject to discussion and what is beyond discussion, would be conditioned by a prior investigation of the moral quality of life and the deeper intentions that inform the religious life of members of another religion, certainly of their finest and most sincere practitioners. If so, the same principles that apply to internal differences concerning truth should also apply to competing truth claims between different religions. We recall that one of the dimensions of truth that R. Nathan recognized was intention for truth. In members of other religions we should be able to identify at least that level of sincerity of quest for truth, supported by a moral life and intention to reach the divine, that would allow us to apply to them the same principles that we are asked to apply to internal difference. If so, R. Nathan's great lesson is that one must cast aside all arguments of truth. We must consider the human person, even as God did at the very moment of creation. We should not judge like the angles, but practice a higher level of truth, associated with God Himself. This will lead us to prefer peace and compassion, under all circumstances, to the particularities of the beliefs we hold as true. A life of faith, lived humbly in relation to God, bearing the fruits of peace and compassion is the ultimate proof of the truth of our beliefs. This can be recognized across religions, suggesting a higher harmony and pointing to a future messianic peace.

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<sup>21</sup>The halachic context upon which he is commenting is not contemporary, but addresses the superstitious beliefs of religions of old.