

SPARKS OF LIGHT

An Interview With Rabbi David Zeller

by Ray Hemachandra

What does Judaism have to offer all the world's peoples? I asked Rabbi David Zeller about the character of Judaism and the importance of remembering the Holocaust and respecting the varied religious and spiritual paths of humankind.

Zeller's grandparents were murdered in the Holocaust. His father, incredibly, was released from a concentration camp due to his mother's persistent efforts and assurances this Jewish family would leave Germany promptly. This miracle happened years before Zeller was even a twinkle in his parents' eyes.

Zeller was born in 1946 in Los Angeles, and he now lives in Jerusalem. He is the author of *The Soul of the Story: Meetings With Remarkable People* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006), a powerful collection of stories describing his experiences with spiritual teachers from many traditions around the globe. Zeller's deep and varied meetings and learnings — from Jewish rabbis, Indian sadhus, Taoists, Buddhists, American Indians, a Shinto priest, Alan Watts, Carlos Castaneda, Ram Dass, Kennett Roshi, and the Mother — ultimately led him to greater appreciation of his Jewish heritage and Judaism itself.

Zeller is a pioneering transpersonal psychologist. He helped create the first accredited B.A. and Ph.D. programs in transpersonal psychology at Johnston College in Redlands, Calif., where he served as a professor and associate director, and the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, Calif. He founded the Network of Conscious Judaism in 1981, shortly before he moved to Israel in 1985, and then directed Shevet: Center for Jewish Spirituality and Meditation in Jerusalem.

Zeller also teaches through song. He has created several beautiful CDs of healing and meditative songs, including one for children (www.newleaf-dist.com). He sings in Hebrew and English and includes many songs from one of his great teachers, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.

Zeller's spiritual teachings and life approach are informed by Eastern, Western, Jewish, and psychological perspectives. All of which makes his own perspective, I believe, inclusive, heart-centered, and radiant with the presence of God.

Learn more about Zeller at www.davidzeller.org.

Ray Hemachandra: Rabbi, do you think the world's varied religious traditions complement each other, all adding to the richness of human life, or do they compete for truth?



Rabbi David Zeller: All of the world's traditions are organs or systems — parts of the body — of humankind. A very important principle from Jewish mysticism, kabbalah, is if God creates the human being in his image, we also can say the whole world is mapped out in the image of God. All parts of the world are part of God.

So, each tradition is vital to the health, to the wholeness, of the total system.

Let's take that model and apply it to our own health. Some people are healthy, and their organs work wonderfully and cooperatively. Sadly enough, though, occasionally we have an organ break through its boundaries and try to overtake even other organs.

So, if my liver can convince the rest of my organs that being a liver is where it's really at, and everyone should become a liver, in the medical, biological system, we call that cancer.

To me, this is the problem. There are people in all of the wide variety of world traditions, religious and spiritual, who clearly are aware we are part of this greater whole. They are aware our working together and harmonizing is vital to the health of the body of humankind.

And there are people who have no regard for this perspective and insist, "This is the ultimate one," and, "We are the answer." From this insistence, most of the illnesses of our beloved planet are derived.

Hemachandra: For non-Jews, what does Judaism have to teach first and foremost? What is its most basic spiritual lesson, and what are its core ideas?

Zeller: My teacher Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach once said, "You know, our goal is not to make the whole world Jewish. Our goal is to let the whole world know there really is one God."

One of the primary special things about Judaism is this idea there is an over-all, unifying consciousness-being-loving-intention in the universe.

Like many other people, we are not missionary. Our self-esteem isn't based on whether we can convince everybody to be like us. We just want to serve God in the way we were put here to serve God.

I also think in Judaism, in particular, we are the guardians of sacred time. I wish Jews would meditate more! There are people all over the world who meditate. Yet we have a particular, actual mitzvah. The word gets translated badly as commandment but really means "that which joins you to," because these are actions we do that make us one with God. This mitzvah says, "I enjoin you, I command you, you *must* take time out."

I think mitzvah puts us in a special relationship with how to negotiate between temporal day-to-day life and the spiritual, eternal dimension. It's our *Chronicles of Narnia*. How do you negotiate beyond the limitations of this world of time and space and discover there is this whole other realm? I think the idea of that negotiation very much is one of our contributions.

The essence of Judaism? I always like to tell people — Jews, even more so than non-Jews, because we forget ourselves what some of the roots of our tradition are — that our first label was with Abraham 4,000 years ago being called a Hebrew. In Hebrew, the word Hebrew

really means, "He was crossing over."

Not just that he crossed over the river from one place to another, but he saw in life we have to go beyond where we are. We have to see beyond the outer appearance of things.

Things look separate, outer, superficial, and material, but there is a unifying, Godly life force that gives existence to everything and that unites. What it really meant to be a Hebrew was to be a person committed to this constant journey to keep crossing over.

Later on, we became called Jews from Abraham's great-grandchildren. One of them carried the name Jehuda. Of all the tribes, this was the one that in the long run became the identity for all of the Hebrew people, all the children of Israel — that is why we are called Jews.

Jehuda means to give thanks. We carry this name that means to give thanks. I'm an observant Jew, so I keep as many of the commandments as I can. But to me the core essence is to be a Jehudi.

What does it mean to give thanks? It means I have to be conscious of, I have to acknowledge, there is someone to thank. Whether it is my friend, my spouse, my partner, my child, my parent; whether it is God; whether it is the beauty of the tree I am sitting under or walking by, it means to have an attitude that reminds me I am not the center of the universe. There are others around me, and there is the all-encompassing one.

Constantly lifting my awareness to have the highest attitude of thanksgiving and of gratitude is an essential thing to Judaism.

Another thing very deep in Judaism is seeing God in everyone and everything, always. It is a primary verse from Psalms: "I see God before me always."

That is understood in the mystical tradition to mean not, "I'm thinking of God all the time — I'm so holy that I have God in my mind and God is in front of me always," but, rather, "I see God equally in everyone and in everything that is before me, that even is opposite me, that even is against me."

Can I see God equally in everything? I feel that is a major challenge and an ideal that Judaism strives for, because that is the gateway to compassion — to caring deeply and passionately for all life. Caring not just for Jews, not just for people, but caring for all of life throughout the whole universe. The Psalms reflect praise of the sun, the moon, and the stars, and we really extend out as far as our mind allows us to.

Hemachandra: Many people who reject organized religions embrace the idea of a personal spirituality. I wonder, Rabbi, do you distinguish between spirituality and religion?

Does spirituality reside within organized religions? Or does it do so only when an individual chooses to look for it there? Is the distinction real or spurious?

Zeller: Let's start in this way: Religion, at its best, embraces and is ultimately one of the finest vessels for whole human-and-beyond spirituality. So, to me, the two together make the finest combination.

I have many friends and relatives who are very spiritual people,

and they are not particularly religious, including Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and American Indians.

I don't feel that people choosing not to be religious is wrong, but I think they're missing something. I think a spirituality without the religious framework sometimes can get too loose. The religion without the spirituality can be too rigid and shut down, and spirituality without religion can sometimes be like water without a container

maps — maps of being, maps of consciousness, maps of Godliness. These maps are very beneficial and very important, and I think all people can learn from them. You don't have to be a Jew to study kabbalah.

On the other hand, Huston Smith, who wrote the classic book on comparative religions, *The World's Religions*, and studied in depth all the traditions, at some point said something like, "Gee, all of my

***"Spirituality without religion can sometimes be like water
without a container to hold it in. It just spills out."
— Rabbi David Zeller***

to hold it in. It just spills out.

I believe very much in holistic health, but I also embrace much of traditional Western medicine. They have the diagnostics and various things that can be very helpful. So, ideally, I try and tread as much as I can in both worlds for my maximum health.

I have found in my own life and search that when I was able to put the religion and spirituality together in a way that the religion was not strangling or suffocating me, the exact opposite became true — religion became that alchemical vessel in which I could pour my spirituality and it could really cook.

I find something similar psychologically, in confronting the ego. It's easy to say, "I'll do what I want when it feels good to me." In Judaism, we have Shabbat. A person might say, "I'll do Shabbat when I feel like it. I'll go into Shabbat when I'm ready. I'm not going to be bound because the clock says when the sun goes down this and that need to happen."

But, aside from religious concerns, isn't that also an ego issue and a control issue? Maybe there is something about submitting and saying, "You know what? Whether I like it or not, I have to let go now."

Shabbat is an example of what I call that alchemical vessel. I may have to struggle with certain boundaries imposed, but I do it in as fully spiritual, as alive, as conscious, as joyous a way as possible. It's that kind of interaction between the religious and the spiritual I seek.

Hemachandra: Non-Jews, including many in the New Age community, who explore alternative paths are more likely to investigate kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, rather than what they see as traditional, mainstream Judaism, aren't they?

Zeller: Yes, definitely.

Hemachandra: And perhaps that likelihood is because of the perceptual difference between religion and spirituality?

Zeller: Yes.

Hemachandra: Rabbi, what are such spiritual seekers missing out on when they bypass mainstream Judaism? And can you understand kabbalah deeply without engaging Judaism more broadly?

Zeller: There is a universal kabbalah that has some very important

teachers I learned from, they all practice their tradition very deeply. They didn't study all traditions. And out of that depth they would come out with the most universal understanding. I need to really go into something deeply."

Smith talked about the cut-flower syndrome. We say, "Oh, I love this Buddhist meditation," or, "I love this Hindu chanting," or, "I love this Jewish thing," or, "I love this Christian thing." We see this beautiful rose, and we cut it and put it in a vase. But the problem, he said, is we've cut it off from its roots.

He said the full power of a Buddhist practice is going to come when you are completely plugged into the totality of the Buddhist system, and likewise with all the different religions. So, the real power of kabbalah is going to flow when you are plugged into the full Jewish system.

I am not a great kabbalistic master by any stretch of the imagination. I teach kabbalah to many people who are not Jewish, and I teach to many Jews who are not religious, and I will continue to teach them what I know of kabbalah.

Yet, I will say to people that one of the deepest ways to access the spirituality is to start observing the Jewish holidays that take in the cycles of the day, the week, the month, and the year.

We have practices of prayer three times a day tuned into the ragas of morning, afternoon, and evening. We have this cycle every week of the Shabbat — of moving toward it, going into it, and then coming out of it. So many things are implied with living a life revolving around this weekly cycle of entering into the timeless dimension of Shabbat.

We have our moon cycles. Every month we have various things we do that tune into the recognition of the new moon and other things that affect our ritual and our prayer.

We have the cycle of the holidays through the year. We have the cycle of ceremonies in a lifetime, from birth and bar and bat mitzvah to marriage and so on. All of these cycles create the totality.

But, again, the issue of the religious and the spiritual: We can do a spiritual thing. The question is: Is it planted as deeply, rooted as much, as it can be?

I can't really answer that authoritatively. I guess I should. If I'm

a good rabbi, I have to say, “Yes, you must do this.” But I can only say, from an almost romantic place in my heart, I believe if a relationship is going to work, you really have to give it everything that you have.

Hemachandra: So, what is your goal when you teach kabbalah to non-Jews or nonreligious Jews?



*“I want to go beyond the limitations to where my mind and my awareness can melt away to really understand this dimension of Godliness.”
— Rabbi David Zeller*

Zeller: There have been people who, when I’ve taught my version of kabbalah — of Jewish spirituality and consciousness — it has helped them deepen in whatever tradition they were coming from. In that I’m very happy. Again, my goal isn’t in saying, “Ah! I’ll hook them with kabbalah, and they’ll become Jewish.”

I want them to come to God.

One of our archetypal images in Judaism is that we were slaves in Egypt and then God brought us out. In the mystical tradition, we ask, “What is Egypt? What does it mean or represent?” Its importance is not as a geographical or political entity or as a country. At its deepest level, it represents a state of consciousness.

Let’s put it this way: According to kabbalah and the Hasidic tradition, Egypt represents slavery. So, the story is not about Egypt. It’s about being a slave. The ultimate definition of slavery in Judaism is to be unconscious. Slavery means unconsciousness.

And Judaism and the mystical tradition take the idea further. Many in the New Age and psychological communities would say, “Yes, this is it! We want to be aware and do awareness meditations, therapeutic work, and all the various things that increase consciousness.” But in the mystical tradition in Judaism, we don’t *just* mean being conscious.

We mean being conscious of God. There’s a big difference between consciousness and consciousness of God.

Some Buddhist practices have mindfulness as the ultimate goal. When I parallel those practices, I call it God-fullness. I want to go beyond the limitations to where my mind and my awareness can melt away to really understand this dimension of Godliness.

To me, that is the goal of kabbalah, ultimately: to bring people

to a God-consciousness, a God-fullness.

Still, there are depths within the simplest practices in Judaism, if we only knew them and could access them, that I think would enrich lives in many ways. For people who are not Jewish, I think there are many important teachings and practices.

Ten or 20 years ago, we used to use the word “sexy” a lot. Kab-

balah is sexy. It’s fun. It feels good. It’s exciting. But, depending on how you approach it, it doesn’t necessarily say, “Listen, there is work — deep, deep work — to be done. Work on yourself.” Sometimes people miss that.

I was in India back in 1971 and 1972, and I spent some time with the Mother at the Sri Aurobindo ashram. Everybody was running to surrender to gurus at that time.

I attribute this to the Mother, even though I’ve learned it from many teachers in many traditions: Somebody came to her, bowed down, and said, “Mother, I surrender to you. I realized in a dream you are my guru. I sold everything, I flew to India, and I surrender to you.”

The Mother said, “Thank you. I accept your 3 percent.” And this guy peeled himself up off the floor and said, “What do you mean 3 percent? I just surrendered completely to you! I gave up everything!”

And the Mother said, “Let’s be honest. How much of you do you really have control of? How much of you do you really have the ability to surrender?”

“So, listen, 3 percent’s not bad. I’ll take your 3 percent. Now go work on yourself. Work *deeply* on yourself. And bring another couple of percentages.”

We can take kabbalah just in its variety of exercises, myths, and outer accoutrements. On the other hand, kabbalah really is talking about a life and a life’s work, a whole lifestyle change. And there are gradations of the process, too, depending on the individual and what the goal is.

I think there are teachings and practices of kabbalah that are re-

ally wonderful, and I must say I think there are some that are being misused and mishandled. That's of concern to me, as the mishandling of teachings from any spiritual tradition is of concern to me.

Hemachandra: You mentioned the Mother and, of course, in your book you describe experiences you have had with many traditions. What do you think has created and informed your attitude and approach that makes you open to learning from so many different paths — Hopi, Shinto, Hindu, Buddhist, to name a few? And, second, do you think you are coming from a particularly safe place in doing so because of your strong Jewish identity — culturally, ethnically, and then religiously, too? That is, others who feel less safe, less anchored, may feel more anxious in exploration.

Zeller: Hmm. I think that's a good point. I remember when I was in India somebody said to me, "How could you let this teacher tell you what to do? I thought you were stronger than that."

I said, "The fact is I think I have a very strong ego — a strong sense of identity and confidence in myself." This was before I was rooted in Judaism per se. Judaism was an important part of me, yes, but I wasn't yet religious. In no way was the way I was living in India connected to anything in Judaism.

My father was a Jungian therapist. My Jungian upbringing and training, I think, were very helpful in my understanding of the relationship between ego and self.

There are ways for the ego to facilitate the self and the soul. I never felt I had to annihilate the ego. I don't feel that is the goal in any true religion or spiritual practice. I think it's a gross misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

The ego is the visibility of the soul in time and space. It is a vital part of who we are. But it can take over, and then it is destructive. It denies the soul its ability to shine through.

So, I had a whole psychological grounding and, from there, I could move into Judaism.

Also, whereas many people come to any spiritual tradition from a very intellectual kind of place, for me, I danced into it. I had very wonderful experiences, first with Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, although I didn't even think that it was a Jewish experience. It was a spiritual experience. It just happened that the person who facilitated it was Jewish.

I still explored all the many world traditions and had powerful experiences in them and outside them, too, just in sitting and meditating by a waterfall, sitting in this place or that place.

The experiential was very important to me. It just said, "This is so real."

Some of my experiences were very strongly Jewish, even as the experiences were totally universal, and I think that did give me a confidence in explorations, too.

I think a big part of my ability to move in and out is that I have sense of humor. That's not to say I don't take any and all teachers and traditions, my own life, and my own journey seriously. But I think the ability to risk a little bit of humor, to take a step back, and to see things in context is also an important piece for me.

I just have always felt very natural and very comfortable around many different traditions. I am not comfortable when I feel any of those traditions is trying to bring everyone around to their point of view. That is something I will stand up to in all traditions, including my own.

Hemachandra: Your grandparents died in the Holocaust, and your father — miraculously, and you tell the story in your book — left a camp due to your mother's efforts.

The phrase "never forget" carried such weight for generations, but is humanity now forgetting? Anti-Semitism clearly is on the rise in parts of the world, including in Europe, the seat of the Holocaust. Horrific genocidal slaughters take place, and the world talks, fidgets, and often ultimately does nothing.

First, what does it mean to remember the Holocaust? Second, is humanity remembering? And, finally, in the context of this interview between us, what are the spiritual lessons of the Holocaust?

Zeller: Wow — OK.

I think that on the largest scale the real importance of remembering is in order to comprehend the capacity that the human being has to forget all love and all compassion and to enter into the deepest places of cruelty.

It's important to remember that the Holocaust happened not 3,000 years ago, or 2,000 years ago, or in some primitive or paganistic place. It happened in one of the most civilized places in the history of the world, with the most civilized and cultured music, art, and religion.

We have to remember that it happens in our own home. Amidst our own day-to-day, seemingly wonderful lives, full of values and so on, come moments of hatred and of violence. It's very, very real.

In the 1950s, Denis de Rougemont wrote a book called *The Devil's Share*. He said that if we think in defeating the Nazi armies we have defeated evil, we are in for a tremendous problem in the years to come, because we haven't begun to look within ourselves at the root of evil — a root that exists within everyone.

Jung said the same thing in his own way. Until human beings begin to confront the shadow, the evil, this dark side within ourselves, we will never begin to approach a place where we can eradicate these feelings in order to foster love and coexistence.

Remember, to me, means all of that. And, yes, for us as Jewish people, it means remember that this was done to a particular people because of their particular religious beliefs.

Those are the issues that the Holocaust brings up. It was in a modern time in civilized, cultured society. And it turned upon a people who never tried to dominate the world, never tried to force their way on anyone. They just said, "Just leave us to do our own thing."

Because of the number of people murdered, it was so important. That's not to say there haven't been horrible things done to others. Things that America, in its development, did to the Indians. Things that happened to the Armenian people. That happened in Rwanda. That happened long before the Holocaust to people other people thought were primitives and things that happened afterward.

We always have a justification. And we have to remember that, for most of it, the whole world stood by because it was *only* the Jews. Like, it was *only* some blacks in Africa.

So, remember! Remember, you can actually stand by and allow something to happen and somehow say, “That’s OK,” or, “It’s not so bad,” or, “Well, who are they anyway?”

The issue today: Have people remembered?

No. They really haven’t.

***“If we could just empower people to find and walk their sacred path and their sacred tradition, if we could just reveal that hidden essence, it would be the greatest service to all of us.”
— Rabbi David Zeller***

Did we learn anything from the Holocaust?

Basically, almost nothing. (Long pause.)

Which isn’t to say there aren’t people who learned tremendously from it. The Holocaust changed their lives and made them more compassionate and caring. They are on those watchdog committees and organizations. They try to recognize when it’s happening to other people around the world and where it’s still continuing to happen in various ways to Jews.

But overall, it seems that so much is forgotten. We have not begun to confront the cruelty, the anger, the darkness in our own soul, and so it will continue to come out in these very harmful and hateful and destructive and murderous ways.

Hemachandra: You live in Israel now. I’m 40 years old, and in North America, it seems to me, in each decade even the pretense of remembering the Holocaust seems to recede. It disappears from the language and the conversation more and more.

Zeller: Yes.

Hemachandra: While acknowledging that sad state of affairs, Rabbi, spiritually, what lessons should we learn from the Holocaust?

Zeller: (Long pause and deep breath.)

The hardest thing, in a way, is that we have to first and foremost say, “I don’t know. I don’t understand.” It almost is incomprehensible that something like this can happen.

We can come up with a thousand theories to explain how it could happen, why it did happen, how people could do this, how they could act like this, how they could have been so lied to that they actually thought they were dealing not with humans but only with animals.

All of that experience does need to humble us tremendously — us

being all of humanity. And then it’s very important, as hard as it is, to somehow say that this was part of God’s plan.

Not that, “Ah, God was punishing them for this or that,” even though people will look for cause and effect. Rather, this was a major, cosmic production that we will never fully understand.

How could God put on such a play on the world’s stage with such suffering and such cruelty? Somewhere, you have to say, “I don’t know. I don’t understand. And I have to somewhere hold onto and believe that God is in all this.”

It’s a very dangerous line. Because then we say, well, so the people were *meant* to die to bring people to this. And what happened to people in Rwanda, to these people here or those people there — all of it was meant to happen. It’s all God, or it’s all karma, so everything is just fine.

And, no, that’s not the point. The point is still to say, “I don’t understand.”

I can see there is hunger in the world. And someone might say, “Obviously, that’s God’s will.” Well, it might be that it’s God’s will that there is hunger in order to bring *me* to a place of doing everything I can do to eradicate hunger.

So, do we thank God for hunger? Do we say it’s so good we have poor people we can give to? It’s a very, very fine line.

I think the Holocaust should, in that sense, never let us sleep complacently that we understand God and that we understand our human nature that God planted and buried in us and hid from us.

Hemachandra: In your “Essay on the Tree of Life,” which is posted on your website, you write:

Perhaps more than anything else, surviving the experience of the Holocaust left the heart teachings of Judaism forgotten and almost inaccessible.

Like the high priest who couldn’t serve God in the Holy Temple if he had come in contact with death, because death darkens, saddens, or angers us, and in that frame of mind one can’t serve God with truth, light, and joy, similarly we today, having been touched by six million dead, can’t serve God in our teaching and learning.

The words come out, the information is passed on or over, but the light, the truth, and the joy within are lost. Our greatest task today is purifying ourselves to serve God, truth, and joy, once again. To rediscover, regain, and restore access to our soul and to God.

I found that passage very powerful. It gets at the beginning of our conversation, too, about spirituality — the light within religion — and how after the Holocaust, for many, religion became form rather than substance.

So, again, the question arises: How do we get back to the substance?

Zeller: Yes, that is the ultimate goal. I think that religion — true religion and true spirituality — needs to clear continually the clouded, dirty window of our mind that continually is going to places of judgment, of difference, of other, of separation, of blame,

of superiority — of all these things.

It is deep, deep work that penetrates through the darkness and helps us to find that Godly life force within us and to see it equally in everyone around us.

We need to come back around to that and just hope and pray that we can go beyond our complacent ego. The ego can so fool us into thinking we are doing whatever we want to think we are doing.

Again, like I said before, I am not putting the ego down. But when that mask takes over and everything becomes maskmanship, we just come full circle.

What is the work we have to do individually, in our families, in our communities, and in the world to recognize the differences of people, religions, and cultures and to honor them and foster them to reach that place of unity in diversity that is the foundation of both the health of our individual body and the health of the body of humankind?

I'm reminded of a bumper sticker I produced some 30 years ago. It said, "Put the elf back in self," which is, again, my sense of humor regarding trying to see something else within.

I now think we have to try and put the kind back in humankind. We really have to put every ounce of our effort and strength and very life force into becoming more kind, loving, and caring to ourselves, to everyone around us, and to God.

We have to really begin to try and feel God's love and God's kindness for all of creation and for all sentient beings.

Hemachandra: I want to ask you questions similar to ones I recently asked Sakyong Mipham, the leader of Shambhala Buddhism, and ask them now about Judaism:

What is the most common misconception about Judaism among non-Jews? And what is the most common misconception about Judaism among Jews?

Zeller: I would say among both Jews and non-Jews there is a tremendous misunderstanding about what keeps getting put on us as the chosen people. It's tremendously misunderstood by Jews and non-Jews alike.

The way I understand it is, yes, we're chosen by God to do the particular thing that God has chosen us to do. And you — whoever the you is — have been chosen to do the particular thing you have been chosen to do, again going back to that model of all parts of the body of humankind.

People say that we make ourselves different, and that gets interpreted as better, when all it is is different. As my kidneys are different from my lungs are different from my liver is different from my heart and so on.

Yet the world points the finger at us as trying to be exclusive and goes out to do whatever against us. It's many of the other world religions that are saying, "This is the only way, and everybody has got to become like us." So, then, why are you pointing the finger at the Jews, when we're not insisting anyone be like us?

We're saying, "This is what we have to do for our part of maintaining the balance of the totality of humankind." We're just hoping

everybody else will get about the business of doing their thing.

That's a big misconception: With chosenness people think we're "better than." Chosenness just is saying we have this work to do.

Hemachandra: What are your best hopes for this time in the world, Rabbi?

Zeller: For me, my plea as a Jew to the world, my plea to everyone, as my American Indian and other teachers from different traditions have said, please let us all go about doing the work that we're here to do for the betterment of all of life.

We need to help each other to feel good about who we are and what our traditions are, so we can discover the real essence and truth and the very highest and finest of what those teachings are.

If the world would empower Jews to be the best Jews possible, and if the world would empower Christians to be the very best and the essence of what Christianity is, and of what Islam is, and of the many large, well-identified traditions and the smaller traditions — the large billions of numbers of people in certain traditions and the very small and delicate numbers in others — if we could just empower people to find and walk their sacred path and their sacred tradition, if we could just reveal that hidden essence, it would be the greatest service to all of us.

We only benefit ourselves by strengthening the other.

This approach by the world also is what we desperately need ourselves as the Jewish people, who have been through such opposition. We hope we can contribute to others finding their way and finding the beauty, the pride, the essence, the praise, and, most importantly, the compassion and thankfulness that we all need to manifest more and more.

NAR

Ray Hemachandra is a contributor to *New Age Retailer*.

Photos of Rabbi Zeller courtesy of Yehoshua HaLevy.