



What Is?

Rethinking Everything We Know about Our Universe

A NEW SIX-SESSION COURSE FROM THE ROHR JEWISH LEARNING INSTITUTE

Is the world real? What is time? Where does our sense of self come from? Why does evil exist? If G-d already knows what we will do tomorrow, is our "freedom of choice" nothing more than an illusion? Does the word "G-d" actually mean something, or is it just a way of referring to whatever it is that we cannot explain?

Imagine that we were able to rethink everything we know about the universe, the laws of nature, our own consciousness—even the very idea of existence and reality. Imagine the new insights we would gain, and the fresh perspective with which we would embark on the journey of life each morning.

What Is? does exactly that. Drawing on the wisdom of Chasidic teaching, the most basic building blocks of existence are reexamined from the bottom up, revolutionizing our understanding of life, reality, and our place in the world.

■ LESSON ONE

Is the World Real?

Everything that we experience, we experience inside our heads, leading to the intriguing question: Maybe there is no existence outside of our minds? But perhaps a more fundamental question would be: What practical difference does it make whether or not the world is real?

The kabbalists speak of two perspectives on reality: a Lower Mind, in which the universe is created as "something from nothing"; and a Higher Mind, in which the created existence is more aptly described as "nothing from something." Chasidic teaching, however, looks for the underlying singularity of the two "minds." The natural world, with its rules, conventions, and moral challenges, conceals and distorts the divine truth; yet it also communicates that very truth to us, in a much deeper way than an unfiltered revelation could possibly convey.

■ LESSON TWO

Is Time Real?

When we think about our relationship with time, it usually evokes feelings of helplessness, even despair. The future is impenetrable, the past is irretrievable, and the present moment seems too fleeting to meaningfully inhabit. What is time, anyway? Is it the engine that drives the whole of existence, or is it just a product of our subjective experience?

The doctrine of Perpetual Creation, expounded on by the Chasidic masters, posits that G-d's creation of the world was not a one-time event, but that the whole of Creation—including its entire past and future—is created anew out of absolute nothingness in every instant of time. This lesson explores the manifold ramifications of this revolutionary idea: The Baal Shem Tov's teaching of "particular divine providence"; the power of *teshuvah* ("return") to transform past errors and transgressions; and the potential of a single action to become a tipping point for global redemption.

■ LESSON THREE

Is G-d Real?

What are we talking about when we talk about G-d? Is "G-d" just a word we use when we are unable to explain something? If G-d cannot be explained or described, does this not render the concept of "belief in G-d" completely meaningless?

This lesson explores the kabbalistic concepts of *tzimtzum* (G-d's "contraction" of His infinite self-expression to allow for our existence as discrete beings), and the *seder hishtalshelut* (the chain of spiritual worlds that link our material reality to the initial act of creation). We discover that while G-d is neither logical nor real—indeed, G-d created both logic and reality—G-d has made Himself accessible to us by investing Himself in our reality, so that the more we understand our own reality, the more we understand G-d.

■ LESSON FOUR

Is Evil Real?

Why do bad things happen to good people? The question has been asked—and answered—for thousands of years. But even if we

understood the purpose of evil, would this make it more palatable and acceptable? Would it aid us in our efforts to fight evil?

This lesson examines many of the responses to this age-old query, from the biblical prophets to the sages of the Talmud, from the classical works of Jewish philosophy to contemporary Jewish thinkers, as well as those offered in the writings of the Chasidic masters. We discover that in order to even scratch the surface of the question, "Why evil?", we also need to ask, "What is evil?" Understanding the nature of evil's existence informs our responses to the devastation it wreaks, and provides us the tools with which to battle it and defeat it.

■ LESSON FIVE

Is the Self Real?

All injustice and strife, all spiritual obtuseness and personal unhappiness, can be traced to selfishness. Yet self-esteem is essential for a healthy psyche and a productive life. To navigate this paradox, we first need to unravel the mystery of self-awareness: Where does our sense of self come from?

Chasidic teaching maps the terrain of the human psyche, providing a framework in which everything that makes us human—instincts, strivings, emotions, intelligence, self-awareness, and altruism—can be understood in the context of our divine source and our purpose in life.

■ LESSON SIX

Is Choice Real?

If G-d already knows what we will do tomorrow, is our "free choice" nothing more than an illusion? And with so many powerful forces outside of our control—or even our awareness—influencing our choices, how "free" could our choices possibly be?

To wrap our minds around these paradoxes, the closing lesson of this course explores the dynamics of choice, the influences of nature and nurture, and the very root of desire in the human soul.