LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Vayishlah

Vol. 9, Issue 5 • 12 Kislev 5785 / December 13, 2024

Lehrhaus Over Shabbat for the month of Kislev is sponsored by Lauren and David Lunzer to commemorate the 18th yahrzeit of David's father.

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Autonomy Comes Apart, the Mesorah Cannot Hold: Rav Soloveitchik's Afterlife in the 21st Century

Levi Morrow is a teacher, writer, and translator, and he is currently writing his PhD dissertation on Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's political theology at Hebrew University.

Review of:

Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man: 40th Anniversary Edition*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Jewish Publication Society, 2023).

Daniel Ross Goodman, *Soloveitchik's Children: Irving Greenberg, David Hartman, Jonathan Sacks, and the Future of Jewish Theology in America* (University of Alabama Press, 2023).

Hershel Schachter, *Divrei Soferim: The Transmission of Torah Shebe'al Peh* (Maggid Books, 2024).

Yitzhak Twersky, *Perpetuating the Masorah: Halakhic, Ethical, and Experiential Dimensions* (Maggid Books, 2023).

When R. Joseph Soloveitchik began writing and teaching in the early decades of the 20th century, there was no way of imagining the influential figure he would become by the end of it. Even then, there was no way of foreseeing what his influence would look like in the 21st century, as more of his writings have been published and more of his students have taken their place on the stage of Jewish thought and history. The question, at this point, is not *whether* Rav Soloveitchik is

influential, but in what way. What does his influence look like at this point, and what might it continue to look like in the future?

Haviv Adam She-Nivra Be-Tzelem* (Avot 3:14)–*Halakhic Man* and *Soloveitchik's Children

Halakhic Man presents a particularly good example of the unexpected life of a published text. As Lawrence Kaplan, translator of *Halakhic Man* into English, diligently tracks in a preface to the new 40th anniversary edition of the book, *Halakhic Man*'s early reception reflected the way it was published: not as the slim English volume first published in 1983, but in 1944 as a Hebrew essay in the rabbinic periodical *Talpioth*.[1] Its immediate audience was rabbis and Jewish intellectuals who mostly engaged with it in a piecemeal fashion rather than grappling with the book's argument as a whole. This was due in part to the eclectic, elliptical style of the book, but also to the fact that rabbis and intellectuals have their own pressing theological concerns which shape how they engage with texts. As long as it remained a Hebrew-language essay, the book's reach was confined to, and defined by, that limited expanse.

Kaplan describes the year his translation was published as "a watershed year" (xl), and he is not wrong. While *Halakhic Man* was originally written in Hebrew, it has likely been more widely read and more influential in English translation than it ever was in the original. This is due in part to its much broader audience. *Talpioth*'s audience of Hebrew-reading intellectuals and rabbis has been replaced by a broad subset of Jews, Modern Orthodox and otherwise—and some non-Jews!—regardless of their level of education. Many of these readers are uncomfortable reading any sort of Hebrew, let alone Soloveitchik's idiosyncratic and poetic blend of early 20th century rabbinic and literary Hebrew, and Kaplan's translation made the text accessible to them. Moreover, as Kaplan notes, even readers comfortable in Hebrew, and who may even have first encountered the text in Hebrew, will often make use of the English translation (xlvi). Kaplan records how he sat with Soloveitchik for two separate weeks while he was working on the translation to review it together (lix), and the book's broad acceptance as a stand-in for the original certainly reflects that degree of authorial involvement.

Given the English book's much broader audience, two of Kaplan's other contributions are critical: explanatory annotations and an interpretive introduction. In the explanatory glosses, Kaplan defines terms, adds explanations and context, and even records some of Rav Soloveitchik's comments from their sessions together. For example, just a few pages into *Halakhic Man*, you find the following sentence: "The ontological dualism is a reflection of an ontic dualism." The average reader without any philosophical background may struggle to understand what Soloveitchik was trying to say. A reader with a philosophical background, however, may be

[1] I will alternatingly refer to *Halakhic Man* as an essay and a book, given that it was first published as the former but is certainly now experienced primarily as the latter.

caught in the opposite problem: assuming that Soloveitchik is wholesale adopting the meaning of the terms in modern philosophy, particularly as they were made popular by the Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger.[2] However, as Kaplan notes, Soloveitchik's usage of the terms in *Halakhic Man* "seems diametrically opposed to Heidegger's view" (170). In this and other notes, as well as in a thorough glossary of terms, Kaplan puts plainly what is often obscured in Soloveitchik's own particular language.

Kaplan's interpretive introduction to the book focuses on presenting "the fundamental problematic of the essay…—namely, the conflict between this worldliness and otherworldliness" (lxviii).[3] *Halakhic Man* can be a wandering and elliptical work, and the reader can often get lost in its "winding course" (cii). While the second part of the book is relatively focused on the theme of self-creation, the first part moves back and forth not just between characterizing three imagined ideal figures—cognitive man, *homo religiosus* (religious man), and the eponymous halakhic man—but also through a long list of topics—the nature of *halakhah*, Torah study, the fear of death, pluralistic vs. monistic ontologies, the reasons for the commandments, politics and ethics, the Haggadah, *halakhah* and science, and more—for a which a common theme can be hard to discern. Kaplan provides a compelling interpretation of the book, showing how the relationship between "worldliness" and "otherworldliness" is, as Soloveitchik says, the "central antinomy" of *Halakhic Man* (lxxv)—it is the contradiction which permeates the book's entire unified-if-convoluted structure. While the book's lay audience has presumably always been able to glean many key ideas from the book, Kaplan's preface shows how even Soloveitchik's original readers often missed the essay's central theme, and his interpretation will help many see the forest in the trees, as it were.

As Kaplan explains, halakhic man overcomes the tension between immanence and transcendence through autonomous creativity. This is the theme of the second part of the book, which describes how a person can, and must, create themselves as a prophetic figure—as Kaplan summarizes, "the man who has completed this process of self-creation turns out to be none other than halakhic man himself" (lxviii). Freedom is both the means and the ends of this process: "The goal of self-creation is individuality, autonomy, uniqueness, and freedom" (135). This free creativity is manifest in the first part of the book in both intellectual Torah study and the realization of *halakhah* in the world. In pursuing these twin aims, halakhic man ties the Torah and *halakhah*—into which God has

[2] See, for example, David Hyatt, "The Ontological Halakhic Man," available at https://www.academia.edu/38807611/The_Ontological_Halakhic_Man.

[3] I broadly agree with Kaplan's argument, though I find that the terms "worldliness" and "otherworldliness" in many ways obscure more than they illuminate. This is not a criticism of Kaplan, who takes them from the essay, but merely an observation. For a brief formulation of my understanding of the central theme of the book, translated into political theology's distinction between system and exception, see here.

self-contracted—together with the world in which human beings live their lives. As Kaplan puts it,

> [T]hanks to the "mystery of *tzimtzum*" God is never removed from His revealed word but is always to be found together with halakhic man in the revelational covenantal framework which He ordained for him. Therefore, since halakhic man perpetually experiences God as being present, or "contracted," in this framework, from the very beginning he is able to cleave to God and internalize His law. (cx)

Moreover, "that framework encourages and sustains freedom and creativity" (ibid.). As opposed to Soloveitchik's later works, which emphasize sacrifice and submission, *Halakhic Man* champions freedom and autonomy.[4] Soloveitchik never abandons either pole entirely in favor of the other, but the balance in *Halakhic Man* tilts clearly and heavily toward autonomy. It is this that makes *Halakhic Man* a paean to both modernity and Soloveitchik's traditional family background—they share common emphasis on intellectual autonomy.

Halakhic man's "revelational covenantal framework…requires an initial act of submission to its authority, but there is never any moment of terror, necessity, or constraint" (ibid.). The necessity of revelation as the basis for autonomous study and action is present, but so downplayed that its most explicit appearance is confined to a footnote: "The freedom of the pure will in Kant's teaching refers essentially to the creation of the ethical norm. *The freedom of halakhic man refers not to the creation of the law itself, for it was given to him by the Almighty,* but to the realization of the norm in the concrete world" (153 n. 80, emphasis added). This is a key piece of the puzzle for understanding *Halakhic Man*, and its placement in a note instead of the body of the text speaks volumes. Revelation merely provides the background or the raw material for halakhic man's rugged intellectual autonomy. Kaplan highlights a dramatic line to this

[4] Kaplan notes the appearance of the theme of sacrifice in Soloveitchik's writings "from the 1960s and 1970s" in an erudite and informative gloss (187). I would push back on this slightly, in dialogue with another important contribution by Kaplan in this volume: his discussions of *The Emergence of Ethical Man* (Ktav Publishing House, 2005). *Emergence* is a fascinating and criminally under-discussed work by Soloveitchik, the date of composition of which is somewhat a mystery. The book's editors note in the introduction that Soloveitchik was interested in religious anthropology—a key theme of the beginning of the book—in the mid-to-late 1950s, so perhaps it was written then. Throughout his contributions to the new *Halakhic Man* volume, Kaplan notes similarities between *Emergence* and *Halakhic Man*, and on the basis of *Emergence*'s relationship with student notes from the late 1940s, asserts that "*The Emergence of Ethical Man* was written a few years after *Halakhic Man*" (cxv n. 138), potentially making their common themes a feature of Soloveitchik's early thought. This is certainly possible. However, it is worth noting that *Emergence* also contains one of Soloveitchik's strongest formulations of the theme of sacrifice, arguing that the Torah actually affirms the value of human (self-)sacrifice, prohibiting it only because of the ethical problems involved (*Emergence*, 43). This suggests either that a later dating for *Emergence* may be more appropriate, or that the theme of sacrifice—certainly more present in the later writings than in *Halakhic Man*—may exceed so narrow a chronological confinement.

effect from within *Halakhic Man*'s pages: "[Halakhic man] recognizes no authority other than the authority of the intellect (obviously in accordance with the principles of tradition)" (79). With tradition here standing in for revelation, the heteronomous element is confined to a parenthetical, secondary to the primary message: personal and intellectual autonomy.[5]

Halakhic Man's emphasis on autonomy is radicalized in the subjects of *Soloveitchik's Children: Irving Greenberg, David Hartman, Jonathan Sacks, and the Future of Jewish Theology in America*, by Daniel Ross Goodman.[6] Each in their own ways, these three figures all draw on Soloveitchik, and all emphasize autonomy while downplaying heteronomous elements.[7]

Of the three, Sacks has the least claim to the title of "Soloveitchik's child," and he perhaps would not have jumped to claim it. (Goodman argues only that his subjects all at least "implicitly" (3) claimed to be such). While Goodman documents the ways in which Soloveitchik's influence appears in Sacks' writings, his most consistent engagement with Soloveitchik's texts took the form of critiques. In fact, Sacks' first published article was a critique of *The Lonely Man of Faith* published in *Tradition*, arguing that the alienation at the heart of the book is a foreign and unnecessary element which Soloveitchik need not have introduced into his Jewish theology. As Kaplan notes (xxxiii-xxxvii), this critique is a consistent one. Not only does Sacks project it back into *Halakhic Man,* where it is certainly less fitting than in *The Lonely Man of Faith*—but it does not exhaust Sacks' critical relationship with Soloveitchik. Sacks also critiques *Halakhic Man*'s conception of *halakhah*, rightly claiming that it misses *halakhah*'s communal dimension—if Sacks himself misses the way *The Lonely Man of Faith* emphasizes this dimension (ibid.). If Sacks is "Soloveitchik's child," then their relationship is a fraught one, with Sacks' persistent critiques of Soloveitchik outpaced only by their shared affection for fusions of Torah and modernity. The persistence of this critique, however, highlights Sacks' own emphasis on human autonomy and the religious power it contains. Sacks' man of faith is not lonely, and

[5] A similar dynamic is at play in Soloveitchik's *And From There You Shall Seek* (Ktav Publishing House, 2008), which says that "Studying the Torah is a cognitive occupation like any other intellectual activity. The only authority is reason. The Halakhah expels from its realm all mysterious obscurity, whispers of intuition that are beyond rational cognition, and even supernatural revelations. A prophet who expresses his opinion on matters of Torah law in the form of a prophecy is punishable by death… The freedom of inquiry and investigation in the field of the Halakhah is enormous" (*AFTYSS*, 107), followed shortly by the claim that "Halakhic thought, rooted in a revelational foundation, cannot control its own postulates as does scientific thought. It has to accept them as they are" (*AFTYSS*, 110).

[6] The depiction here of Sacks, Hartman, and Greenberg is based on Goodman's depiction of them rather than based on an expansive analysis of their respective bodies of work. Nevertheless, it seems to me to capture the primary thrust of their theologies.

[7] Goodman candidly and forthrightly notes that Soloveitchik had many other heirs about whom full books—very different books—could be written (169 n. 4). Regarding two of those other heirs—R. Hershel Schachter and R. Yitzchak Twersky—see below. *Soloveitchik's Children* does include a fascinating discussion of Schachter's prolific and creative response to the COVID-19 pandemic in a section on "The Primacy of Life" (95-100, at 96-97). See below.

certainly does not locate religiosity in loneliness. All people coming together to build a better world—much as for Soloveitchik's Adam the first—may be Sacks' key religious vision.[8]

Hartman was, as a matter of plain fact, Soloveitchik's student, and he dedicated much of his writing and teaching to Soloveitchik's theology. One of his books, *Love and Terror in the God Encounter: The Theological Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, [9] is entirely dedicated to explorations of Soloveitchik's thought, and Soloveitchik appears throughout his other books as well. Much like Sacks, Hartman is frequently a critic of Soloveitchik, particularly when it comes to exactly the elements of passivity and alienation which Sacks critiqued. For Hartman, Soloveitchik is right to speak in terms of covenant (in *The Lonely Man of Faith*), but has it all backwards in saying that joining a covenant requires submission to and passive acceptance of the Divine. Covenant, for Hartman, is a category which celebrates human initiative, as people were invited to become God's partners in the labor of Torah, history, and building a better world. In a covenant, "the integrity of both partners is recognized and the human partner is enabled to feel personal dignity and to develop capabilities of responsibility." [10] For Hartman, autonomy and creativity are constitutive of the Jewish covenant with God.

Irving (Yitz) Greenberg also studied closely with Soloveitchik, and *Soloveitchik's Children* has much to say about what Greenberg learned from him. Greenberg is in many ways the primary subject of the book, perhaps simply because Soloveitchik was still alive and the author was able to sit in his classes and correspond with him about the issues involved in the book. The author has insight into subtle ideas which Greenberg learned from Soloveitchik, such as seeing overarching patterns in *halakhah* beyond its mere details (15-16, 19-20, 177 n. 41). Greenberg's perspective is also somewhat determinative of the structure of the book. Categories such as interfaith dialogue and interfaith relations may be common to all three figures, but "The Primacy of Life"—the title of a subsection in chapter 2 of the book—screams Greenberg more than it does Hartman or Sacks.[11] Similarly, only in the discussions of Greenberg do we find articulated most clearly what is perhaps the key axiom of the book: to be a "child" of Soloveitchik is to be loyal to his method more than his doctrines—a doctrinaire student of Soloveitchik would be no child of his. As Goodman notes, "Greenberg took Soloveitchik's big-picture ideas and methodologies and ran with them,

[8] Sacks' oeuvre is obviously much more complicated than this, and I am no expert. That being said, I think his statements on this count are both consistent and clear.

[9] Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001. The first printing of this book actually marked it as "Volume 1." No further volumes ever materialized, however, and subsequent printings dropped the notation.

[10] David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism*, (The Free Press, 1997), 6.

[11] "Life" is a theme throughout Greenberg's career, but note should be made of the title of his most recent book, *The Triumph of Life: A Narrative Theology of Judaism* (Jewish Publication Society, 2024).

further than his teacher was comfortable with" (20). Similarly, Goodman says of Hartman that

> Hartman chose to not simply repeat Soloveitchik's lessons verbatim, as did many of Soloveitchik's other students; instead, he chose to interpret the implications of what he had received from Soloveitchik—most significantly in the areas of pluralism and interfaith theology—and thereby revealed, as did Greenberg, his status as a true and mature disciple of Soloveitchik… He did not passively accept the instruction of his teacher. In the spirit of Soloveitchik's teachings on creativity, Hartman interpreted and realized the training of Soloveitchik in his own dynamic, creative manner—in ways that may have departed from the letter of Soloveitchik's instruction but in so doing were fulfillments of its spirit. (93)

There is a dialectical point here, emerging out of a modern, Promethean understanding of the creation of the new bound up with the destruction of the old. Soloveitchik himself was radically creative, breaking (in some ways) with the traditions he inherited from the "halakhic men" of his family heritage, and Soloveitchik's "children" are loyal to him by similarly breaking with his own example. As Goodman puts it, "They are independent of their teacher, but it is through their very independence—their thinking religiously and theologically for themselves, and even through their pointed disagreements with Rav Soloveitchik—that their status as veritable philosophical spiritual children of the Rav is affirmed" (158). If creativity and autonomy are the central religious values at stake, then they are made most visible when breaking with existing conventions rather than when simply innovating in continuity with the past.

All three subjects of *Soloveitchik's Children* celebrate autonomy at the expense of a passive loyalty to tradition. It is unquestionable that they could have found such a value in Soloveitchik, and, particularly for Hartman and Greenberg, there is every reason to think that they learned that value from Soloveitchik. However, Soloveitchik was never so one-sided as these three figures appear from their depiction in *Soloveitchik's Children*. *Soloveitchik's Children*, by my count, contains exactly one instance where one of its subjects avers any discomfort with human power and autonomy. Citing *The Lonely Man of Faith*'s vision of humanity's world-shaping capacities, Greenberg notes that "There is no power without responsibility," and conditions human reach on carefully shaping our grasp in environmentally-sensitive and responsible ways. He critiques the passage from *The Lonely Man of Faith*, saying that "if taken the wrong way—and if taken too far—this position can have dangerous consequences" (31). But again, this is the sole pushback against Greenberg, Hartman, and Sacks' general championing of human initiative, and it is not even

the only interpretation of *The Lonely Man of Faith* presented in the book: "Hartman, however, cites this passage from *The Lonely Man of Faith* in a more approving fashion" (ibid.).

Soloveitchik's Children's has a story it wants to tell—as its subtitle declares, the book is about "the future of Jewish theology in America." The future of Jewish theology as depicted in its pages is a deeply modern, humanist project. It is a Jewish theology which believes in the human capacity to remake the world in its own image—and to reflect the divine in doing so. But the divine image always threatens to become an idol, and this was in fact one of Soloveitchik's great worries. As he would have it, the refusal to recognize and accept limits on human autonomy is exactly the idolatry most characteristic of modernity. Humans cannot be fully autonomous and self-sufficient, and also tend naturally toward denying that fact. However, as we shall see, it would be wrong to view this as the only dangerous possibility. For Soloveitchik, it would be just as idolatrous to swing too far in the other direction.

Havivin Divrei Soferim* (Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2) – *Divrei Soferim* and *Perpetuating the MasorahR. Herschel Schachter's *Divrei Soferim: The Transmission of Torah Shebe'al Peh* is a forthrightly partisan work. Before the content of the book proper even begins, the Introduction makes this clear. The Introduction is dedicated to showing the importance and centrality of the Oral Torah, and it does so by focusing on sectarian controversies (xv-xxi). The Oral Torah has always been a cause for conflict, it would seem. Schachter slides seamlessly between the Sadducees and Boethusians in the Second Temple era and the Karaites in the Middle Ages—any historical differences between these groups paling in the face of one overwhelming similarity: they rejected the Oral Torah. Schachter rehearses a host of issues which became the site of debates between partisans of the Oral Torah (rabbinic Jews) and their opponents, from the meaning of "the day after the Shabbat" in Vayikra 23:15 to whether or not food put on a heat source before Shabbat could be eaten on Shabbat—*cholent* as a signifier of sectarian identity.

Schachter even makes the striking suggestion that the sectarian controversy around the Oral Torah led to the creation of a blessing:

> Historians claim that this *berakhah* may actually have been introduced in the days of the *Geonim* as part of their battle with the *Kara'im*, who forbade such lighting. The *berakhah* was enacted to show that not only is it not prohibited to have kindled lights on the *Shabbos*, it is a mitzvah, worthy of a *berakhah*, to kindle these lights before the Shabbos. In fact, R. Ovadia Yosef cites a custom to recite a *berakhah* only prior to *hadlakas neiros* on *erev Shabbos*, not *erev Yom Tov*; this may stem from the fact that there was never a dispute with the *Kara'im* regarding *Yom Tov* lights. (xix)

According to this suggestion, the reason rabbinic Jews say a blessing before lighting candles on the eve of Shabbat is because the status of that ritual—as a rabbinic commandment—was subject to sectarian controversy. Correspondingly, an opinion exists that Jews *don't* say a blessing before the same ritual lighting on the eve of Yom Tov, because no such controversy obtained. Notably, the claim is not that the status of the ritual as a rabbinic commandment dictates that a blessing be recited; it is that the controversy with the Karaites led to the establishment of the blessing. While the Introduction—and the book more broadly—has much to say about the value and importance of the Oral Torah, the element of sectarianism, of us/them controversy, is constitutive of the significance—one even wants to say "sanctity"—of the Oral Torah and its place in Jewish life. The heresy makes the doctrine, as it were.

Notably, Schachter's heresiological argument for the importance of the Oral Torah comes in place of a plausible alternative beginning for any book about the Oral Torah: arguments and proofs that the Oral Torah logically must exist and is not a fabrication.[12] In fitting with the book's partisan posture, Schachter does no such thing. Instead, he takes its existence as a given—a fact all the more striking in light of the history of sectarian controversies he narrates. The Oral Torah has apparently always been challenged, but it does not need defending. Instead, one either believes in the Oral Torah or one doesn't—in or out, us or them.

Believing in the Oral Torah, in this case, does not mean believing that Moses was given two corpuses, one written and one oral, each of which was passed down faithfully over time. Schachter painstakingly delineates the meaning of different categories from the Oral Torah—from laws passed down by Moses at Sinai to rabbinic enactments—and the preponderance of the categories are described as the latter, as creative rabbinic interpretations and enactments, rather than laws of Mosaic origin. To what degree the rabbis were merely faithfully transmitting what was transmitted to them versus engaging in a creative legal and religious project is a traditionally debated topic, and Schachter comes down firmly on the side of emphasizing creative interpretation. "Any *talmid chakham*" can make use of the rules for interpreting the Torah, and all Jews "are obligated to follow the interpretations of the *talmidei chakhamim* of that generation, even when it is in disagreement with the accepted opinion of greater *talmidei chakhamim* of an earlier generation" (42, 43). Notably, Schachter cites some of the exact same talmudic stories as David Hartman—with both of them citing the

[12] On heresy as a critical category in Schachter's writings, see Adam S. Ferziger, "Feminism and Heresy: The Construction of a Jewish Metanarrative," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 494-546, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfp044; Zev Eleff and Seth Farber, "Antimodernism and Orthodox Judaism's Heretical Imperative: An American Religious Counterpoint," *Religion and American Culture* 30, no. 2 (July 2020): 237-72, https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2020.8; Rachel Adler, "Innovation and Authority: A Feminist Reading of the 'Women's Minyan' Responsum," in *Gender Issues in Jewish Law: Essays and Responsa*, eds. Moshe Zemer and Walter Jacob (Berghahn Books, 2001), 3.

stories in order to champion creative interpretation of the Torah.[13] As a theological backstop, however, Schachter adds that when an "honest" rabbi rules, they certainly receive divine guidance, with providence ensuring the correct final outcome (72-78).

This affirmation of autonomous creativity paired with conservative conditions on that creativity is a recurring motif. Schachter's legitimation of creative rabbinic interpretation generates the anxiety which threads its way through the book. The book's ideal readers are partisans of the Oral Torah; they believe in the power and authority of rabbis to creatively interpret the Torah and make rabbinic enactments. But in an age of intellectual autonomy, this may create just as big a problem as it solves. Widespread intellectual freedom invites the risk—perhaps even the inevitability—that different rabbis will interpret the Torah differently or make differing enactments. In its most dramatic form, internal difference threatens to split or even dissolve the community. When the community sees its norms as reflecting God's laws, then disagreements take on additional theological severity.

Schachter is therefore at pains to make clear that affirming the rabbinic powers of interpretation and enactment does not mean believing that *every* rabbi can make legitimate use of these powers. Determining which rabbis are authoritative and which are not is an urgent matter. Innovating in Torah cannot be inherently wrong (all partisans of the Oral Torah embrace innovation), but "Some may innovate in the wrong direction, advancing practices that are not in the spirit of Torah" (35). Again, this is anxiety-inducing. If innovation is permitted, sometimes even necessary and good (146), but also can be bad and against the spirit of the Torah, how is a Jew supposed to know what to do?

His simple answer is "Ask the *talmidei chakhamim*, who are fully knowledgeable in *kol haTorah kulah*" (35), but that just shifts the problem. "How is a Jew supposed to know what to do?" becomes "How is a Jew supposed to know which rabbis to trust?" Here, Schachter gives us a variety of conditions which might help narrow it down. It might differ from person to person; Schachter suggests that there is a particular obligation for a person to follow their close *rebbe* (51). Discussing rabbis differing with rabbis of previous generations, Schachter states that "A *talmid chakham* who is entitled to an opinion is permitted and obligated to express his honest to goodness opinion" (46), implying that there is a category of rabbis who are, in fact, not entitled to have an opinion, for whatever reason. In a discussion of the category of the "rebellious elder," he suggests that being "entitled to an opinion" is the same as being a "*chakham shehigia lehora'ah*," literally, "a scholar who has reached [the level of] instruction" (13-14). Reaching this level, Schachter says, is necessary for weighing in

[13] Schachter discusses the story of the oven of Akhnai, wherein R. Yehoshua declares of the Torah that "It is not in Heaven!" (48), and the story of Moses visiting the classroom of R. Akiva, where interpretations Moses does not recognize are said to be "Laws of Moses from Sinai" (54-55), both of which are discussed in ch. 1 of Hartman, *A Living Covenant*.

on halakhic matters, though "at times, people have incorrectly decided on their own that they have attained such status" (56 n. 61). This is quite radical: not only can a lay person not know which experts to trust, experts can't even know if they can trust themselves!

As the book progresses, the question of which rabbis are authoritative shifts from the areas of personal connection or halakhic knowledge to questions of values. "There are certain *hashkafos* [worldviews] and attitudes that are part of the *Torah Shebe'al Peh*, which must be transmitted by tradition and which affect rabbinic interpretation as well," he says, and any new rabbinic interpretations " must also be correct according to the traditions of attitudes" in addition to those of law and interpretation (66). This is meant to head off his "concern regarding *talmidei chakhamim* introducing secular attitudes and foreign concepts into the Torah that reflect their personal agenda," though he also notes that such rabbis should not properly be considered *talmidei chakhamim* (67). When a real Torah scholar rules and innovates, however, one "must" believe that they are doing so free of bias or exterior, foreign values (68). This is where the true significance of the student-teacher relationship emerges, as it is the vehicle by which true Torah values are said to be inculcated (68, 97). Recognizing that interpretation is never just a matter of what a text says, that values are always involved, makes this absolutely critical. Much as one must be a partisan of the Oral Torah, one must have internalized the values of the Torah—one must have "a Torah personality" (97)—in order to legitimately interpret the Torah.

It is thus no surprise that the topic of the student-teacher relationship, on the scale of "the *masorah*" as a whole, returns in the final appendix of the book, titled "Innovation and Change in Halakhah." The book, broadly an exploration of the contents which make up the corpus we call "The Oral Torah," is bookended by its heresiologies—the legitimacy of creative interpretation at the beginning and the legitimate authority to interpret at the end. With the category of "the *masorah*," Schachter provides a narrow resolution of the question of whom to trust. As he states earlier in the book, a personal *rebbe*, the teacher who imbues a person with a Torah personality, must be obeyed. However, he now adds, the "*gadol hador*" (literally, "the great of the generation") has the same status and must also be obeyed (149). This category enables Schachter to draw a straight, continuous line from the centralized authority of the rabbinic high court in antiquity to the leaders of Jewish communities today. Insisting on holding together the claim that this idea of the *masorah* allows for change, with the assertion that not all changes are permissible, he raises the question directly: "Who Is Authorized to Institute Change?" (151). Here, he ties together all the themes we have seen so far. The authorized person must have "a broad knowledge and a deep understanding of the corpus of halakhah," be familiar with "the spirit of the law," and have "mastery of both the rules and the attitudes of the *Masorah*" (ibid). Only thus will

they "be able to consider new practices based solely on values internal to the *Masorah*, removing external influences from the deliberation" (ibid.).

The partisan celebration of creative intellectual autonomy with which the book opened—and which so mirrored what we saw in *Halakhic Man* and *Soloveitchik's Children*—has been supplanted by a clear hierarchy of authoritative interpreters. The anxiety of authenticity and continuity requires narrowing the field of who can be truly autonomous—who can legislate the law for themselves (*auto-nomos*)—and who must follow the law legislated by others. Innovation is necessitated by the vicissitudes of time, but an authority who can declare that "[t]he threshold of historical necessity has indeed been reached" is required.

The same dynamic is on display in Yitzhak Twersky's *Perpetuating the Masorah*. The book is a collection of sermons delivered in memory of Rav Soloveitchik, his teacher and father-in-law. These speeches, chock full of interesting explorations of rabbinic texts, are also focused on Soloveitchik's stature, both as an intellectual hero and as a teacher.[14] If he was the implicit subject of Schachter's discussions of the teacher who shapes the student, who both embodies and transmits the *Masorah*, here it is quite explicit. Even when he goes sometimes unmentioned in the text itself, he is always there in the background. The teacher and the Torah are, as Twersky expounds, often inextricably linked.

This literary feature of the book nicely realizes one of its repeated theological claims: that a person who studies Torah internalizes it and gains some degree of identity with it, even mastery over it. It goes from being "God's Torah" to being "the scholar's Torah" (based on *Avodah Zarah* 19a). Here, Twersky rehearses some of the same themes as Schachter advances in his discussion of the close teacher (*rav muvhak*) and the obligations which devolve upon the student from that status (43-49), in contrast with the normal obligations of any Jew toward any Torah scholar. A student has additional requirements to honor his teacher (*kavod*)—requirements the teacher can renounce—but all Jews must respect (*hiddur*) Torah scholars as figures who represent the Torah—and therefore the scholar cannot renounce this respect, which they receive by virtue of their identification with the Torah (46-47).

Where Soloveitchik takes center stage—and the essay most relevant for our purposes—is the final chapter of the book, titled simply "The Rov" (how Soloveitchik was and is known to his students and followers).[15] Here we find Twersky's most robust

[14] On Soloveitchik as a "hero," see David Hartman, "The Halakhic Hero: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man," *Modern Judaism* 9 (1989): 249-73.

[15] Originally published in *Tradition*. While the other chapters in the book originated as lectures given in Soloveitchik's memory, this chapter is directly dedicated to discussing him.

discussion of the *masorah*, alongside other themes from Schachter such as the question of which rabbis are qualified to innovate. Tying the two together, Twersky notes that "It is self-evident that not everyone is qualified or licensed to submit novellae, and not every *hiddush* ["innovation" –LM] will be absorbed into the mainstream of our *masorah*" (136). Notably, Twersky ties together the creativity of "*hakhmei hamasorah*," the Torah scholars who "advance the authoritative *masorah*" (137), with moments of crisis (151-152). Soloveitchik's stature is not merely a feature of his erudition and pedagogy, but of his meeting the moment (156-158)—specifically, the transition of Orthodox life from Europe to Israel and America before, during, and after the World Wars. "*Hakhmei hamasorah*" don't just "advance the *masorah* by creative interpretation and innovation, but also by serving as sources of stability and continuity exactly when those elements seem most lacking. By virtue of their personality traits (Twersky mentions generosity and leadership, among others) as well as their authoritative positions, the scholars of the *masorah* help the community maintain its identity and keep from coming apart as it is rocked by change.

A recent moment of crisis provides an excellent demonstration of some of the unintuitive dynamics of autonomy and authority. The COVID-19 pandemic rocked the entire world, but the stress placed on the social fabric of the United States around the questions of "How do we know what is true?" and "How do we act based on what we know to be true?" was immense. Which sources of information were to be trusted as authoritative? What kinds of data should dictate behavior? These are questions we generally do not need to ask, and they were suddenly quite urgent. Notably, popular culture-war discourse typically associates trust in existing institutions with "the right" and critical-thinking and independence with "the left," but, during the worst moments of the pandemic, we were more likely to hear about "doing your own research" and "deciding for yourself" from figures on "the right," and more likely to hear about trusting leaders and institutions from people on "the left." Schachter actually took a central role in providing guidance to wide swaths of Orthodox Jewry in the US, using his authority to navigate the burning, often controversial, questions of the moment. While liberal perspectives often denigrate authority, it is clear that autonomy without authority can reach toxic, even conspiratorial extremes, and submission to authority can lead to rapid, directed communal action—though neither result is guaranteed.

Two Forms of Idolatry The picture that emerges from the four books discussed here is one of a cord unraveling. Solovetchik's writings are rife with tensions and contradictions, and in fact he celebrated this, preferring struggle to comfort and uncomfortable truths to false resolutions. *Halakhic Man* may read as if it has managed to find a resolution, but the careful reader will notice the tensions which persist. While the book broadly champions intellectual autonomy, Twersky celebrates its fifth footnote, which insists that faith must be unshakeable, and that questions

may not be asked, until one already has the answers (146-148; *Halakhic Man*, 143 n. 5). Like *Halakhic Man* itself, the four books I have reviewed here can be mapped roughly onto the two contradictory themes which make up the fabric of Soloveitchik's corpus: the "majesty" and "humility" of humanity—intellectual autonomy and existential creativity—on the one hand, and passivity and receptivity on the other. Among Soloveitchik's inheritors, these tensions have come apart, as each pole of Soloveitchik's thought is held in increasing isolation from the other. The subjects of *Soloveitchik's Children* champion autonomy and leave no space for passive acceptance. Schachter and Twersky, meanwhile, work in a model which circumscribes intellectual autonomy to the *hakhmei hamasorah* alone—they could never see as universal *Halakhic Man's* statement that "[Halakhic man] recognizes no authority other than the authority of the intellect (obviously in accordance with the principles of tradition)" (79). The phrase "principles of tradition" does not nearly suffice to capture the broad sense of intellectual hierarchy and self-abnegation captured by the idea of "*the masorah*," an abstraction which always inheres in concrete individual rabbinic authorities.

Soloveitchik's writings are marked by the conscious attempt to hold together two clusters of polarized concepts: intellectual freedom vs. submission, universal rationality vs. particular commitments, human grandeur and human frailty, etc. *Halakhic Man* may be his least representative work in this respect, with one of the poles consigned almost entirely to the footnotes. In the rest of his oeuvre, however, Soloveitchik is much more insistent on foregrounding the tension between the poles, disallowing any restful resolution. In fact, he says, to embrace one pole—*either pole*—at the expense of the other would be tantamount to idolatry. Embracing power and autonomy, he says, is the fundamental idolatry of modernity, reenacting the sin of Adam who defied the divine command in favor of his own moral reasoning. Just as idolatrous, however, is exclusive self-abnegation—repeating the sin of the Golden Calf, an idol made by Jews who felt lost in the absence of a human authority figure.[16]

In the work of Soloveitchik's students, the poles of his theology have begun to come apart. One set of Soloveitchik's inheritors has taken up the mantle of intellectual autonomy. They insist on both the freedom and responsibility of interpretation. Importantly, there is a moral claim here. Not only *can* we interpret the Torah freely, they say, but we *should* or even *must*. In contrast with Soloveitchik's emphasis on a "covenant" as a type of social bond created by mutual self-restraint, Hartman argues that covenants are about mutual activity and responsibility, Greenberg famously argues that we are in the era of "The Third Covenant," a "voluntary covenant" constituted by human activity and divine absence, and Sacks

[16] See Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Golden Calf and the Roots of Idolatry," in *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses* (Ktav Publishing, 2010), 129-141.

describes covenants as bonds of "mutual responsibility" and says that the key feature of the Jewish-divine covenant is that it foregrounds the dignity and equality of all Jews.[17] These thinkers de-emphasize the role of submission and sacrifice which Soloveitchik saw as critical, not just for the religious personality but also for society and politics. Uncritically affirming autonomy risks exactly that: being *uncritical*—missing our own ideological blind spots and then taking other people to be involved in conspiracy when they disagree with us.

Things don't fare much better with the other pole. While Soloveitchik isn't quite as worried about the socio-political consequences of submitting to authority, he does still consider it idolatrous. As the anarchist Mihkail Bakunin noted, "whoever says revelation says revealers, messiahs, prophets, priests, and legislators inspired by God himself; and these, once recognized as the representatives of divinity on earth…necessarily exercise absolute power."[18] If authority figures are made into the arbiters of values and of the very details of *halakhah*—of God's presence in the life of an Orthodox Jew—then we risk those authority figures taking the place of God. If Soloveitchik averred that, in the interpretation of Torah, "The only authority is reason. The Halakhah expels from its realm all mysterious obscurity, whispers of intuition that are beyond rational cognition, and even supernatural revelations,"[19] Schachter argued that the only authority is the "*baalei masorah*" or the "*chakhmei masorah*," who reign and innovate by virtue of their correct intuitions (how this is ascertained is not clear, but it is in contrast to those rabbis with intuitions and agendas most foreign) and whose rulings are vouchsafed by the promise of divine providence.

It is impossible to know how Soloveitchik would have evaluated his student's understanding of the idea of "*masorah*"—though notably Schachter derives much of his understanding directly from his understanding of Soloveitchik[20]—but two risks involved in unchecked submission are relatively clear: First, it threatens to put an end to all the projects Soloveitchik championed under the rubric of human autonomy. *Ba'alei masorah* never put a man on the moon, as it were. Second—and here we return to the themes and arguments from Hartman, et al.—if sacrifice is the only value, then we lose any ability to reflect morally on our actions beyond that factor. Asserting that an action is

[17] On Hartman, see *A Living Covenant*, throughout; Goodman, *Soloveitchik's Children*, 33. For Greenberg, see Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, "The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History," in *Perspectives* (CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, 1987); idem, *The Triumph of Life*, 236-241 . For Sacks, see Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (Continuum, 2003), 115, 133-135. Sacks uses the term "covenant" for a broad set of relationship types, roughly any and all relationships that are not "transactional." See ibid., 148-151.

[18] Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), 24.

[19] See footnote 5 above.

[20] Herschel Schachter, *Nefesh Harav* (Reshit Publishing, 1994), 34-58; and see Lawrence Kaplan, "The Multi-Faceted Legacy of the Rav: A Critical Analysis of R. Hershel Schachter's *Nefesh ha-Rav*," *B.D.D. – Bekhol Derakhekha Daehu: Journal of Torah and Scholarship* 7 (1998): 51-85.

good if it involves sacrifice, and bad if it doesn't, provides a rather shallow metric for evaluating issues as complicated as right and wrong, good and bad. Sacrificing for one's people or country can certainly be noble or heroic, but it can simultaneously be an act of great violence directed toward the entirely undeserving. To put it differently: that an authority tells you to do something does not make that thing right or good. Resisting that trap requires dipping into the sin of Adam—partaking in the very sort of moral and intellectual autonomy that becomes idolatrous when made the sole principle of human life.

Soloveitchik's various "children" are veering apart, heading as groups toward one of two distinct forms of "idolatry," represented for Soloveitchik by the sin of Adam—arrogant autonomy—and the sin of the Golden Calf—exaggerated and unnecessary submissiveness. [21] Beyond the religious values at play here, Soloveitchik also saw each pole as providing checks against the other, and it seems that those checks are disappearing. This widening gyre might be fruitfully mapped onto the sociological shift known as "Orthodox Judaism's Slide to the Right."[22] As Orthodoxy shifts rightward, on this reading, it gives up on autonomy and embraces the risk of excessive submission—the devil it knows. Autonomy-first thinkers, who might have seen themselves as Orthodox, may suddenly have found themselves part of more liberal Jewish spaces (for is autonomy not a key liberal value?). This is an anti-idealist perspective—theology as a superstructure with sociology at its base. Another possible read is biographical: perhaps the ability to hold these two ideas together has less to do with the ideas and more to do with Soloveitchik himself, who may have been naturally inclined toward such tensions and contradictions. If this is true, then it is not surprising that Soloveitchik lamented his inability to pass the entirety of his religious life onto his students—perhaps it could never have been any other way. [23]

Modern Orthodox Theology in a Post-Soloveitchik World

David Fried is an editor at The Lehrhaus and teaches Judaics at Ramaz Upper School.

Review of Daniel Ross Goodman, *Soloveitchik's Children: Irving Greenberg, David Hartman, Jonathan Sacks, and the Future of Jewish*

[21] Soloveitchik, "The Golden Calf and the Roots of Idolatry."

[22] See Samuel C. Heilman, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (University of California Press, 2006).

[23] See Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Love of Torah and the Redemption of the Soul of the Generation," in *In Aloneness, In Togetherness*, ed. Pinchas Peli (Daf-Chen, 1976), 420-421; Schachter, *Nefesh Harav*, 39 n. 5; Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Rav at Jubilee," *Tradition*: *A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 30, No. 4 (1996): 54-55.

***Theology in America*, (University of Alabama Press, 2023).**[1]

Introduction

Scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy are fond of pointing out that Maimonides fundamentally reshaped the contours of the field. Following him, all medieval Jewish philosophy is a response to him. People may agree or disagree, but no one can ignore. So it is with R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik ("the Rav") and Modern Orthodox theology. If you want to write Modern Orthodox theology, you do so on the Rav's playing field, even when you disagree. R. Dr. Daniel Ross Goodman's work, based on his doctoral research at the Jewish Theological Seminary, explores three prominent theologians from the generation following the Rav. Two of them, Irving (Yitz) Greenberg and David Hartman, had close personal relationships with the Rav. The third, Jonathan Sacks, only briefly met the Rav, but was clearly deeply influenced by his writings. At the same time, all three disagreed with the Rav in key ways that the book does not shy away from discussing.

It is worth noting that, despite the title "Soloveitchik's Children," the book does not claim to present the totality of the Rav's Torah legacy. Goodman is interested in the theological legacy, and therefore acknowledges upfront (17) that the book will not deal with the many students the Rav had who were interested primarily in his Talmud and not his theology. This is not in any way intended as a criticism of those students, Goodman points out. They are merely not the subject of this volume.

Goodman is also upfront that the book is not meant to be purely a dispassionate academic work. He is open (4) that part of his agenda (although he discusses it explicitly only in the Introduction and the Conclusion) is to argue that, despite their differences, all three thinkers show sufficient continuity with the Rav to be considered legitimate expressions of Modern Orthodox theology. To this end, when he discusses Greenberg and Hartman, generally considered the more radical of the three, he consistently emphasizes their similarities with the Rav's thought (without hiding the differences). When it comes to Sacks, who is considered the more traditional one, he goes out of his way to highlight where he differed with the Rav. This makes the case that, at least sociologically, Modern Orthodox Jews will tolerate differences with the Rav in a thinker that they consider unassailably Orthodox.

Methodology of Orthodox Theology

Before discussing specific theological doctrines, the book briefly discusses (14) methodology of Orthodox theology. At the end of *The Halakhic Mind*, the Rav calls for our worldview to be formulated out of the sources of *halakhah*.[2] While it is not clear to what degree the Rav even follows his own mandate in his later theological writing (36), Goodman begins by assessing the extent to which each of the three thinkers under study in the book follows it. Ironically, it is Hartman, who is

[1] All page numbers, unless noted otherwise, refer to this volume.

[2] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind*, (Free Press, 1986), 102.

most likely to disagree with the Rav in substance, who most consistently builds his argument from halakhic sources. Sacks, by contrast, is the least likely to stray from the Rav in substance, and also the least likely to quote from halakhic sources, his work having occasionally been criticized for its overreliance on biblical sources rather than rabbinic ones.

Tzelem Elokim

Following this brief methodological discussion, the book looks at a few select doctrines of each of the three thinkers, highlighting similarities with, and differences from, the Rav. All three were deeply influenced by the Rav's understanding of *tzelem Elokim* (the image of God). Prior to the Rav, interpreting that phrase was primarily a question of *parshanut* (biblical exegesis). The Rav elevated it into a central theological tenet, particularly by connecting it with the *mitzvah* of *ve-halakhta bi-derakhav* (*imitatio dei*). Additionally the Rav was the first (to the best of my knowledge) to make creativity a religious value, by describing it as a fulfillment of *imitatio dei*. It seems obvious, in retrospect, seeing as creation is literally the first thing God is described as doing in the Torah (Genesis 1:1). Nevertheless, previous discussions of *imitatio dei* focused almost exclusively on the ethical attributes mentioned in talmudic discussion of the *mitzvah* (*Shabbat* 133b and *Sotah* 14a). Following the Rav's lead, *tzelem Elokim* was a central theological tenet for all three of the thinkers under discussion, and Greenberg and Hartman both cite the Rav's valuation of creativity as justification for their own theological creativity. Indeed, both cite the Rav directly as having encouraged their creativity, even when they disagreed with him. *Tzelem Elokim* was perhaps most significant to Greenberg's thought, as he meticulously tried to explain detail upon detail of *hilkhot Shabbat* on its basis. It is unlikely that the Rav would have agreed with all of the details here; he was not known to like reducing complex systems to a single idea. At the same time, it is unlikely that the Rav would have found anything particularly objectionable about this aspect of Greenberg's philosophy either.

As Goodman points out (62), Sacks' conception of *tzelem Elokim* is remarkably similar to that of Greenberg, and both of them markedly different from the Rav. While both of them mention imitating God through creativity, the central theme of *tzelem Elokim*, for both Greenberg and Sacks, is not any particular ability we have or action we do. It is the fact that *everyone* is created *be-tzelem Elokim*, that all human beings have equal value. Goodman tries (44, 61-62) to connect this back to the Rav's clear assertion that *tzelem Elokim* applies equally to men and women, and Jews and non-Jews, alike. I believe Goodman somewhat overstates the innovativeness of this position of the Rav. It is certainly true that the position that non-Jews were less *be-tzelem Elokim* than Jews had been the more popular one for 500 years prior to the Rav, but it is without a doubt against the plain sense of both biblical and rabbinic thought. Adam, after all, is created *be-tzelem Elokim* before there were Jews or non-Jews in the world. The Mishnah in *Avot* (3:14) specifically contrasts *tzelem Elokim*, which applies to "Adam," with being "children of God," which

applies only to Jews. It is those who want to maintain a difference between Jews and non-Jews with regard to *tzelem Elokim* who must be on the defensive when it comes to explaining these sources.[3] Furthermore, while one might find a source or two that say such a thing, I am not aware of the distinction between men and women with regard to *tzelem Elokim* ever being a prominent theological position.

I would like to suggest an alternative source for Greenberg's and Sacks' conception of *tzelem Elokim* that, to the best of my knowledge, no one has suggested previously. The Rav's brother, R. Ahron Soloveichik, connects the idea of *tzelem Elokim* with the halakhic principle of *kevod ha-beriyyot* (human dignity), and uses this as his basis for a Torah imperative to support the Civil Rights movement.[4] Greenberg's and Sacks' conceptions seem to bear far more in common with this approach than with that of the Rav, and further research is warranted into the influence of R. Ahron Soloveichik on their thought.

Submission as a Religious Value

Despite the strong influence of Adam I (the creative one) from the Rav's *The Lonely Man of Faith* on each of these figures, none of them were particularly enamored with Adam II, the more submissive, contemplative type. One of Sacks' earliest, and less-well-known, writings was a critique of *The Lonely Man of Faith* (33-34). In it, he argues for a more harmonious religious personality, rather than living in constant tension between the Adam I and Adam II parts. Greenberg and Hartman take the critique a step further, each (but especially Hartman) expressing deep discomfort with submissiveness as a religious virtue. Along these lines, Hartman offers an extensive critique of the role of the *akeidah* in the Rav's thought, decrying the valorization of submission to an inscrutable God. In Hartman's view, our commitment to the Torah must exist in harmony with our ethical sensibilities, and the former should never demand that we sacrifice the latter.

It is worth pointing out that the Rav's *akeidah* is not Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical." Never once does the Rav suggest that he believes in a God who might genuinely command the unethical. Rather, it is about trusting that God has better judgment of what is ethical in any given situation than we do. Indeed, within *The Lonely Man of Faith*, it is Adam II, the submissive personality, who has the ethical sensibilities, and

[3] See, for instance, Maharal, *Tiferet Yisrael*, Chapter 1.

[4] Ahron Soloveichik, "Civil Rights and the Dignity of Man," in *Logic of the Heart, Logic of the Mind* (Genesis Jerusalem Press, 1991), 61-68. While the article was first published in 1991, many years after Greenberg published his ideas, it has its roots in a speech Soloveichik delivered to the National Council of Young Israel conference in 1964, which certainly could have influenced Greenberg. My thanks to Alan Brill for bringing this speech to my attention.

Adam I, the more active one, who does not. For the Rav, submission to the Torah was identical with submission to ethics.[5]

Sacks, for his part (39-40), criticized Hartman and Greenberg not for demanding harmony between *halakhah* and ethics, but for what he perceived as their unquestioning acceptance of certain key modern values in how they evaluated the ethical. It is worth pointing out that, buried in a footnote (190, n. 160), Goodman acknowledges that he shares this judgment (at least with respect to Hartman). Despite being buried in a footnote, this really is a crucial point. Goodman is no liberal politically. He is a regular writer at several right-leaning publications. His passionate defense of Greenberg's and Hartman's Orthodoxy should not be taken as agreement with their politics, and is all the more admirable (whether or not one agrees with his conclusion) knowing that he does not agree.

Dialectical Thinking

The eschewing of Adam II by all three of these figures points to another key difference between them and the Rav, which Goodman discusses (81-87). Dialectical thinking, or the ability to hold seemingly contradictory ideas, like the need to be both active and passive in one's religiosity, was a key part of the Rav's thought. To some degree (Sacks the most and Hartman the least, with Greenberg somewhere in the middle), each of these thinkers engages this as well. However, a great number of their disagreements with the Rav can be summed up as only liking one side of the Rav's dialectic. Additionally, especially with Sacks, his dialectics are often a stepping stone towards some grand synthesis. His signature "Torah and *Chochmah*," for instance, was about creating a harmonious religious personality (as he had argued for in his critique of *The Lonely Man of Faith*) that incorporated the two, not about living in constant tension between the two along "a narrow, twisting footway that threads its course along the steep mountain slope, as the terrible abyss yawns at [one's] feet."[6] This explains why, to greater or lesser degrees, Hartman, Greenberg, and Sacks had more popular appeal than the Rav did.[7] A life of constant tension might work for a small cadre of intellectual elite, but it simply won't sell to the masses.

Interfaith Dialogue

The book devotes a whole chapter to interfaith dialogue, an area where all three disagreed with at least the prima facie view of the Rav. In his famous essay, "Confrontation," the Rav laid out a policy, which the Rabbinical Council of America

[5] See, however, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Morality*, (Maggid, 2017), 181-191, where the Rav does make a clear distinction between objective halakhic law and subjective halakhic morality. As this was a posthumously published manuscript, it obviously would not have figured into Greenberg, Hartman, or Sacks' understanding of the Rav's theology, although it is possible that he expressed some of the ideas orally in his lifetime.

[6] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 142 n. 4.

[7] Acknowledging, of course, that Sacks was the only one of the three with widespread popular appeal within the mainstream Orthodox world.

subsequently adopted as normative, of restricting interfaith dialogue to areas of social or humanitarian concern, excluding discussion of theology or doctrine (109-110).[8] Despite this, Hartman, Greenberg, and Sacks all engaged in interfaith dialogue of a theological nature. Notwithstanding the apparent conflict with "Confrontation," none of the three saw their participation as representing a major break with the Rav. Hartman and Greenberg describe taking a "do as I did, not as I wrote" (115) approach to the Rav's view on interfaith dialogue. The Rav's writings are, after all, filled with substantive engagement with Christian theologians, and each of the three described learning to appreciate Christian theologians from the Rav. By participating in interfaith theological dialogue, they were merely continuing in person what the Rav began in print. Again, despite what he wrote in "Confrontation," it is not even clear that the Rav himself believed that interfaith theological dialogue was truly forbidden. As Goodman points out (114), the Rav initially presented *The Lonely Man of Faith* as a lecture to St. John's Catholic Seminary in Brighton, MA. Perhaps the greatest irony, though, as Goodman quotes from David Shatz (114), is that much of the content of "Confrontation" itself is borrowed from Christian theologian Karl Barth.

While Goodman does a good job showing that the Rav was not categorically opposed to interfaith theological dialogue, despite what he wrote in "Confrontation," he could have gone a step further. A close reading will reveal that "Confrontation" itself may be the best source from the Rav for Hartman, Greenberg, and Sacks' moderate religious pluralism. The first thing that must be pointed out is what "Confrontation" does not say. If one were looking to forbid interfaith theological dialogue, it would not be very difficult. One need only cite Deuteronomy 12:30, "Beware of being lured into their ways after they have been wiped out before you! Do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did those nations worship their gods? I too will follow those practices.'" Learning the "wrong" theologies of other religions bears the risk of corrupting our "correct" theology, and therefore must be forbidden. This is likely the sensibility of the Rav's more right-wing students who latched on to an interpretation of "Confrontation" that absolutely forbade interfaith theological dialogue. It is thus extremely notable that "Confrontation" does not, at any point, quote this verse. Nor does the Rav, at any point, refer to Jewish theology as "correct" or to other religions' theology as "incorrect."[9] Let us start by looking at the excerpt that Goodman presents:

> The word, in which the multifarious religious experience is expressed does not lend itself to standardization or universalization. The word of faith reflects the

[8] It should be pointed out that even permitting dialogue around social and humanitarian concerns was groundbreaking compared with positions that had been taken by more right-wing Orthodox groups.

[9] This was first pointed out to me by Maharat Rori Picker Neiss, c. 2011.

> intimate, the private, the paradoxically inexpressible cravings of the individual for and his linking up with his Maker. It reflects the numinous character and the strangeness of the act of faith of a particular community which is totally incomprehensible to the man of faith community. Hence it is important that the religious or theological *logos* should not be employed as the medium of communication between two faith communities whose modes of expression are as unique as their apocalyptic experiences. The confrontation should occur not at a theological, but at a mundane human level. There all of us speak the universal language of modern man. (109-110)

The Rav's primary concern here is about the incommunicability of the faith experience between one faith community and another. He does not fear Jews being corrupted by the theology of other religions, but expresses concern for each religion's uniqueness being respected. Indeed, he appeals not to any biblical verse to justify his prescriptions but to ideals of "religious democracy and liberalism."[10]

It is difficult to read "Confrontation" as expressing a halakhic prohibition on interfaith theological dialogue. The entire first section of the essay,[11] before the Rav even mentions interfaith dialogue, is an extended analogy setting up his discussion. He compares the incommunicability of the religious experience between members of different faith communities with the incommunicability of the subjective experience between any two human beings, even close friends or a husband and wife. I can hardly imagine that the Rav would prohibit a husband and wife from trying to communicate their experiences with each other because they will never be able to fully appreciate them. Indeed, he calls for communication to take place in a manner that respects the otherness of the other rather than objectifying the other by trying to assimilate their experiences into terms that relate to mine. Taking the analogy to its logical conclusion, it would seem that interfaith theological dialogue should not be problematic either, provided it takes place on these terms. His concerns seem to lie more in theological debate, with one religion making arguments for what another religion should believe, than with theological dialogue, where we simply listen to one another, respecting their subjective otherness. Historically, we know that the Rav was particularly concerned with Jewish participation in the Second Vatican Council, not wanting Jews to tell Catholics how to practice Catholicism any more than we would want

[10] "Confrontation," 23.

[11] Ibid., 5-17.

Catholics telling us how to practice Judaism (107-109).

Taking a step deeper into the theology of "Confrontation," there are two primary schools of thought when it comes to the phenomenology of religious experiences: perennialism and constructivism. Perennialism was popularized in William James' classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.[12] The basic idea is that there are certain core religious experiences that can be studied cross-culturally and exist independent of the particular religious dogmas of the individual practitioner. The constructivist critique of this idea is that it papers over real and significant differences between religions in trying to find their commonality. Instead, constructivism argues that religious experiences are constructed out of our unique social-cultural setting and theological commitments. The religious experiences of two people with different dogmas are therefore fundamentally different. The Rav strikes a clear constructivist tone in "Confrontation."[13] Constructivism has its roots in a soft postmodernism that views all human experiences as fundamentally culturally constructed.[14] I would never claim that the Rav was a postmodernist, but, of all his writings, "Confrontation" appears to me the one where he most flirts with it.[15] Thus, the religious pluralism, or even the soft postmodernism, of Hartman, Greenberg, and Sacks, may paradoxically actually find their greatest support from the Rav in the underlying theology of "Confrontation," even if they disagreed with its normative conclusion.

Post-Holocaust Theology

The final chapter of the book (prior to the Conclusion) is dedicated to post-Holocaust theology, home to what is arguably Greenberg's most controversial idea: voluntary covenant. He argues that the Holocaust severed the original covenant between God and the Jewish people, as nothing we could have done could have possibly justified that level of horror and suffering. Thus, our choice to remain committed to the covenant is voluntary. He strongly encourages us to make that commitment, as he believes it will strengthen

[12] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (Modern Library, 1902).

[13] I am at a loss to explain the Rav's familiarity with constructivism at this time, as the primary works on religious constructivism were published at least a decade after "Confrontation." Nevertheless, I have learned over the years that the Rav read a lot more than I did, and there must have been works laying the groundwork for religious constructivism that he was able to read already in 1964.

[14] The hard postmodernist would extend this to all truth claims as well, but one need not go this far in order to believe in religious constructivism.

[15] There is also a strange postmodernism in the Rav's tendency to describe personality types (Halakhic Man, Homo Religiosus, Man of Faith, etc.) rather than offering arguments for why one ought to or ought not to be one or the other of the personality types. R. Assaf Bednarsh pointed out to me that the Rav did for philosophy what his grandfather, Rav Chaim, did for Talmud: shifting the question from trying to prove who's right to merely describing the assumptions underlying each position. Years ago, when we were both students in Yeshivat Har Etzion together, R. Ben Greenfield said he wanted to write an article on the unconscious postmodernism of Brisker *lomdus*. Ben, if you're reading this, I still look forward to reading that article.

our relationship with God, but he will pass no moral judgment over those who choose not to. Goodman readily acknowledges (133) that there is no way the Rav would have agreed with this idea. Nonetheless, he demonstrates that Greenberg's ideas were still fundamentally built upon those that the Rav laid out in *Kol Dodi Dofek*. Prior to the Holocaust, the standard Jewish response to national tragedy could best be summarized by the *Musaf shel Yom Tov* service: "*U-mipenei hata'einu galinu me-artzeinu*, (because of our sins, we were exiled from our land)" (134). There was always the acknowledgment that we couldn't necessarily say that every individual deserved their suffering, but, at least on the national level, suffering was assumed to be the product of sin. Indeed, many thinkers did attempt to apply this to the Holocaust as well. *Kol Dodi Dofek,* though, offered a fundamentally different approach. We do not try to explain why suffering happens. We ask only what the proper response to it is. To be sure, our tradition has always admitted that we cannot explain all suffering,[16] but this was an admission made with our back to the wall after we tried and failed to come up with an explanation. No one prior to the Rav made not asking why into a central tenet of their theodicy. Only this rejection of the *mi-penei hata'einu* theodicy enabled Greenberg to claim that the Holocaust had severed the original covenant. Sacks and Hartman figure much less prominently in this chapter. Sacks sometimes used language similar to Greenberg but stopped short of Greenberg's radical conclusion, hewing much closer to *Kol Dodi Dofek* (147-152). Hartman, for his part, explicitly rejected Greenberg's voluntary covenant (152-155) and claimed to have "no theology of history," denying that anything about his thought was impacted by the Holocaust.

Evaluation

Goodman's book is certainly well-researched, well-written, and compellingly demonstrates the deep influence the Rav had on Hartman, Greenberg, and Sacks, despite their sometimes differing with him. Goodman's discussion of Greenberg is particularly rich, filled with heretofore unpublished material from private conversations and public lectures. His discussion of Sacks, while limited to published material, dives deep into his writings, and will give the reader an understanding that goes far beyond his most popular works. When it comes to Hartman, on the other hand, I do not feel like the book gave me a particularly deep understanding of his theology. He is often presented as simply agreeing with Greenberg, with the occasional note when he disagrees (such as in the post-Holocaust theology). Goodman refers to Hartman as "the disciple…who departed from Soloveitchik the furthest" (159), and I could not honestly tell you why. It is hard for me to imagine a further departure from Soloveitchik than Greenberg's voluntary covenant, and Hartman specifically disagreed on that point.

My biggest critique of the book is not for anything

[16] See *Avot* 4:15 and *Berakhot* 7a.

in it, but for what is not included in it. I do not understand how a book on the major theological heirs of the Rav could exclude R. Aharon Lichtenstein. Goodman appears to group him together with those students of the Rav who were interested only in his Talmud and not his theology (17-18), which would be a gross mischaracterization. Lichtenstein wrote extensively on theology. Indeed, the teachers today most likely to be teaching the Rav's theology (not merely his Talmud) in their classrooms are students of R. Lichtenstein. What's more, many of Sacks' critiques of Greenberg and Hartman that Goodman discusses initially derive from R. Lichtenstein. And, like the others featured in this book, R. Lichtenstein did not always agree with the Rav either, preferring, for instance, humanistic philosophers over the Rav's preferred neo-Kantians.[17] It is hard to imagine anyone more deserving of the moniker "Soloveitchik's child" than his literal son-in-law, R. Lichtenstein.

What of Goodman's central thesis that all three bodies of work, despite their departures from the Rav, should be considered legitimate Orthodox theology? Again, to me, the most controversial idea presented in the book is clearly Greenberg's voluntary covenant. There is hardly a more central idea to Orthodox theology than the absolute binding nature of *halakhah*. Of course, Greenberg himself is fully committed to *halakhah*, so the question is: Exactly what did he mean when he said the covenant is voluntary? If he meant merely that we should not pass moral judgment on those who choose to be irreligious in a post-Holocaust world, it is not really all that radical, and many traditional-minded thinkers have expressed similar ideas. Hazon Ish (*Yoreh Deah* 2:16) writes:

> It appears that the law of [punishing heretics] only applies at a time when God's providence is revealed like at a time when miracles were common, they would regularly hear heavenly voices, and it was apparent to everyone that the righteous of the generation were under special divine protection… But in a time of [divine] hiddenness when many people's faith has been destroyed, [punishing heretics] will not repair the breach, it will add to the breach… [Instead], it is incumbent upon us to bring them back with love.

Hazon Ish also sees our present historical reality as fundamentally altering the way we ought to relate to the irreligious. There may be no practical difference (*nafka minah*) between what Hazon Ish said and what Greenberg said. Nevertheless, Hazon Ish manages to sound a lot more Orthodox with his rhetoric than Greenberg does. That may

[17] For a fuller discussion of the influence of the Rav on Lichtenstein's thought and where the two differed, see R. Nathaniel Helfgot's discussion here: https://traditiononline.org/divrei-ha-rav-ve-divrei-ha-talmid-ve-divrei-ha-rav-the-impact-of-rabbi-joseph-b-soloveitchiks-thought-on-that-of-r-aharon-lichtenstein/.

not matter in terms of the Orthodoxy of Greenberg's personal beliefs as an individual, but if you want your ideas to be accepted by the Orthodox community, rhetoric matters. In fact, in R. Lichtenstein's famous letter to Greenberg,[18] the bulk of his criticism concerns Greenberg's rhetorical style rather than the substance of his beliefs. Greenberg definitely has a tendency to write in a way designed to stir controversy and to later clarify that what he is actually calling for is far less radical than it sounded. This really gets to the heart of the issue of whether Greenberg and Hartman's thought should be considered Orthodox. A mentor of mine once put it succinctly: "The Orthodox community will tolerate theological innovation and it will tolerate halakhic innovation, but it won't tolerate both from the same person. If your innovative *halakhah* is grounded in innovative theology, there's nothing remaining to tether you to the Orthodox community." Greenberg and Hartman definitely pushed the Orthodox theological envelope as far as they could. But whether they pushed it too far ultimately depends on just how far they were willing to go with it on a practical level. Both were shul rabbis at one point in their careers, and no doubt answered halakhic *shaylos* from congregants. To what extent were their answers to these *shaylos* rooted in their theology? The answer to that question is not something that can be gleaned from the material presented in Goodman's book.

[18] Aharon Lichtenstein, "Rav Lichtenstein Writes Letter to Dr. Greenberg," *The Commentator*, Jun. 2, 1966.

The Meeting

Harris Bor is a barrister specialising in international dispute resolution and Research Fellow at the London School of Jewish Studies.

Silence only above the cattle bells
And low mooing,
an eagle circles overhead
Two men lead their caravans
From opposite directions
Sand between their toes
A breeze tugging at the beard
Of the one who stole

The hunter grasps the belted knife
At the sight of him
Across the ruddy plain
Not so slight, he thinks
The boy who stayed indoors has grown
As high as Edom's heights
Set the men upon his wives and babes?
Kill him now or wait?

Wait. Hold the pain.
Scream only inwardly at
The mother's treachery
The father's foolishness
Play the brother
Give the embrace
Hold out the hairy hand
That he could but emulate

But listen. There is a tremble in the voice of Jacob
--desperation even--
when he gestures:
“Take my gifts brother. Take my gifts”
The hunter answers, “Do I have need of these?”
But wants to say, “Like the one you took of mine”
Wants to raise the knife above his brother’s neck
And draw the father’s blood left unspilt
in defiance of the angel’s saving call
Instead, he took the gifts and walked, and walked
Until the paths split, one to Seir and the other to
Succot