**Nietschean Man**

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It is fair to say that Friedrich Nietzsche and R. Joseph Soloveitchik, had they met, may not have been fast friends. R. Soloveitchik, a traditional Jew and preeminent rabbinic authority, devoted his life to demonstrating the continued validity and vitality of Jewish law and the life of faith more broadly. Nietzsche, by contrast, condemned God, morality, and religion with a venomous verve unmatched before or after, diagnosing them as manipulative myths and the life of faith more broadly. Nietzsche, by contrast, condemned God, morality, and religion with a venomous verve unmatched before or after, diagnosing them as manipulative myths and in triumphantly declaring the death of God he called forth those Übermenschen – that “the beast of prey; that magnificent blonde brute” at the heart of the “noble race” – who could at long last return the Jews and their disciples to their rightful place in the natural order. Nietzsche, in sum, was no rabbi’s friend. The acuity of the conflict was certainly not lost on R. Soloveitchik, who, writing in the 1940’s, includes Nietzsche in a list of those philosophers whose “veneration of instinct, the desire for power, the glorification of the emotional-affective life and the flowing, surging stream of subjectivity,” among other things, have “brought complete chaos and human depravity to the world. And let the events of the present era be proof.”

And yet, Rynhold and Harris show in their masterfully executed work, it is a fact that R. Soloveitchik’s writing evinces real affinities with Nietzsche’s, affinities too pervasive and substantial to be merely incidental. It is clear, in fact, that R. Soloveitchik not only looks past Nietzsche’s blistering critique of religion but largely embraces that critique, arguing only that halakhic Judaism, suitably interpreted, can and ought to escape it. Nietzsche diagnoses religion as a pathological retreat from the world, writing that “It was the sick and decaying who despised body and earth and invented the heavenly

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2 Ibid.
3 *Idem*, I:11, 22.
6 I should note that I am a former student of Rynhold’s, that I am acknowledged, anonymously but upon inspection unambiguously, in the preface, and that my work is cited favorably in several places.
realm,” and that the very concept of God is a "counter-concept to life." And with respect to most religious forms, R. Soloveitchik seconds the charge: "Christians," for instance, "developed a theory of contempt for this world," R. Soloveitchik says. "Indeed some went and developed the doctrine of hatred for this world." Indeed, the vicious rejection of worldly reality is intrinsic to religion considered in its generic form: "The ethical and religious ideal of homo religiousus is the extrication of his existence from the bonds of this world."\(^\text{10}\)

For R. Soloveitchik, however, just the opposite is true of Judaism: "The beauty of Judaism is that it did not want to separate this transient temporal world from the eternal transcendental world... Judaism forbade the Jew to hate this world or to have contempt for it."\(^\text{11}\) R. Soloveitchik argues that it is implicit in the very character of Halakha, a set of imperatives governing concrete human life in pervasively thorough, concrete detail, that the primary site of religious achievement is in the real world. The ethos of "halakhic man" is thus profoundly this-worldly:

"Halakhic man's relationship to transcendence differs from that of the universal homo religiousus. Halakhic man does not long for a transcendent world, for "supernal" levels of a pure, pristine existence, for was not the ideal world...created only for the purpose of being actualized in our real world? It is this world which constitutes the stage for the Halakha, the setting for halakhic man's life."\(^\text{12}\)

The emphasis on Judaism's this-worldliness, in pointed opposition to the orientation of the generic religious personality, is a pervasive theme throughout R. Soloveitchik's work. And it is critical. Were the "teachings of the Torah...to clash with this world and were they to negate the value of concrete, physiological-biological existence," R. Soloveitchik argues, "then they would contain not mercy, lovingkindness, and peace but vengeance and wrath."\(^\text{13}\) The argument, definitive for R. Soloveitchik's project, is Nietzsche's.

Rynhold and Harris expend considerable effort to show that the consonance of R. Soloveitchik's and Nietzsche's respective philosophies goes far beyond this programmatic point. For each theme they address, they first sift through the vast and wide-ranging thicket of Nietzschean scholarship to identify one of the less offensive interpretations of Nietzsche's position. They then move to show, usually rather handily -- there is scant dispute among Soloveitchik interpreters on any of these issues -- that R. Soloveitchik, despite having alternative options readily available, and in some cases seeming to break with long-dominant paradigms, renders an interpretation of the Jewish tradition on the question in a manner harmonious with and responsive to the Nietzschean line so interpreted. Nietzsche, they conclude, rejects not truth as such but truth independent of perspective and interpretation; R. Soloveitchik argues that truth is fundamentally plural and aspect-dependent. Nietzsche rejects not ethics as such but those forms of morality which impede individual vitality, creativity, and noble self-assertion; R. Soloveitchik argues that the Halakha, approached correctly, is in fact such a vehicle for dynamic individual creativity and halakhic constraints an opportunity for strength and self-realization through glorious sacrifice and submission. Nietzsche condemns the institution of repentance as a vindictive assault on life; R. Soloveitchik, knowingly breaking from the starkly ascetic classical interpretation of Rabbi Jonah Gerondi, portrays repentance as a liberating, affirmative exercise in self-creation. And so on.

Rynhold and Harris show further that R. Soloveitchik's positions on these questions, offered as faithful renderings of the Jewish tradition and his own family's rabbinic legacy, are often substantially underdetermined, if not undermined, by the tradition itself. Sometimes this is simply a matter of R. Soloveitchik's eliding inconvenient countercurrents. Speaking of "revulsion towards the world, the condemnation of natural drives or the deadening of the senses and the repression of the exercise of the natural faculties of man," Soloveitchik simply asserts that "Nothing of that sort was ever preached by Judaism."\(^\text{14}\) Nietzsche accuses Christianity of "hating the senses, hating the enjoyment of the senses,"\(^\text{15}\) and R. Soloveitchik's maneuver, in excluding prominent ascetic voices from the classical rabbis to the medieval pietists to Maimonides, makes Judaism out as in comfortable company with the Nietzschean critique.

In some cases, Rynhold and Harris argue, R. Soloveitchik goes so far as to adjust prooftexts to his liking. "Better is one hour of Torah and mitzvot in this world than the whole life of the world to come," R. Soloveitchik cites from the Mishnah (Avot 4:17), "and this


\(^12\) Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 30.

\(^13\) Idem, 34.


declaration is the watchword of the halakhist.”16 The authoritative rabbinic source thus supports Soloveitchik’s this-worldly worldview that he claims as halakhic man’s. But consider the Mishnah’s immediately prior statement: “This world can be compared to a corridor to the world to come: Prepare yourself in the corridor, so that you may enter the banquet hall.” Here this world is clearly subordinated to the next. And then there is the third, concluding maxim: “And better is one hour of spiritual bliss in the world to come than the whole of life in this world.” All three statements are by the same author and appear in direct sequence; Soloveitchik’s citation of the one that appears to support his view, betraying no acknowledgment of the triptych’s majority-countervailing components, is, as Rynhold and Harris say, “highly revealing.”17

A still more striking example is R. Soloveitchik’s apparent misrepresentation of a Talmudic passage regarding the resurrection of the dead (Sanhedrin 90b):

Rabbi Yohanan says: From where in the Torah is the resurrection of the dead derived? As it is stated: “And you shall give the terumah of the Lord to Aaron the priest” (Numbers 18:28). Does Aaron exist forever? But he did not enter the land of Israel such that they could give him terumah! Rather, the verse teaches that Aaron is destined to live in the future and the Israel will give him terumah. From here it is seen that the resurrection of the dead is from the Torah.

R. Soloveitchik, having argued that “The first concept of immortality as coined by Judaism is the continuation of a historical existence throughout the ages” – immortality is achieved by the individual not metaphysically but naturalistically, in and through their progeny – R. Soloveitchik claims that the Sanhedrin passage is “comprehensible only when we consider it from the viewpoint of historical perpetuation...the founder continues his existence throughout the history of the group.”18 But as Rynhold and Harris point out, in denying that Aaron entered the land and in explicitly pointing to a future time in which it is said Aaron will come to life, the Talmud clearly does not have in mind Aaron’s historical perpetuation through his descendants, who had entered the land long prior.19 R. Soloveitchik’s assertion that the text can only be understood according to his this-worldly view is thus quite remarkable. R. Soloveitchik, in other words, is sufficiently drawn to the Nietzschian line that he is prepared to bend, if not break, the rabbinic. To what end?

"It is striking," Rynhold and Harris write, “that Soloveitchik who studied in the Berlin of the Weimar Republic in which Nietzschian thought was central for the radical right, and writing at the height of the Nazi interpretation of Nietzsche in 1944, would commend his thought to us at all.”20 Considered in the abstract, it is indeed quite surprising that a post-Holocaust, traditional rabbinic writer would exhibit any fidelity to the work of someone widely considered a preeminent proto-Nazi. On a concrete historiographic level, though, it is worth noting that Soloveitchik did not get to hear his religious Nietzschianism from Nietzsche. Max Scheler, a powerful figure in pre–WWII German philosophy known widely as the “Catholic Nietzsche,” embraced the Nietzschean critique of religion, morality, and European civilization not to reject but to reform them. “Among the scantly discoveries which have been made in recent times about the origin of moral judgments,” he writes in his 1912 monograph on the subject, “Friedrich Nietzsche’s discovery that resentment can be the source of such value judgments is the most profound.”21 For Scheler, it is only that this is not essentially so: Christianity, and with it modern European civilization, can be redeemed from corruption and decay, made strong and authentically vital once again, if only we take Nietzsche, read rightly, to heart.

Scheler was somewhat early but hardly alone in his philo-Nietzschianism. As the sense of deep civilizational crisis metastasized throughout German intellectual culture in the Weimar years, Nietzsche’s prophetic condemnations and calls for a revolutionary “transvaluation of all values” in pursuit of a new man and new Europe came to be an increasingly ubiquitous lodestar for left-wing socialists, fascists, conservatives, liberals, Zionists, anarchists, Christians, Jews, atheists, and every combination thereof. Nietzsche’s dynamic radicalism meant he could be everything to everybody, and as Steven Aschheim observes, Nietzsche’s ideas “contributed to the general sense of fluidity, loosening traditional definitions and rendering political postures more open and elastic” in an era where the past’s rigidities were an increasingly de rigueur scapegoat for the present’s ills.22 This was the environment in which R. Soloveitchik pursued his doctoral studies in philosophy at the University of Berlin. Beyond the general ambience, his friend Alexander Altmann wrote, under the same advisors as R. Soloveitchik, a dissertation on Scheler’s value theory framed by the

16 Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man, 30.
18 Soloveitchik, The Emergence of Ethical Man, ed. Michael Berger (Jersey City: Ktav, 2005), 176.
19 Rynhold and Harris, Nietzsche, Soloveitchik, and Contemporary Jewish Philosophy, 251.
20 Idem, 191
challenge of Nietzschean transvaluation, and R. Soloveitchik himself draws on Scheler heavily in his work.

The all-too-easy appropriation of Nietzsche by Nazi enthusiasts indeed changed little. Karl Jaspers published his Nietzsche, a tacit reclamation of Nietzsche for liberal ends, in 1936, and his Nietzsche and Christianity, based on lectures delivered in 1938, was among the first books approved for publication by the British Military Government in 1946 Germany. In a searching 1965 lecture reflecting on the failures of moral consciousness required to facilitate Hitler’s evils, Jasper’s student Hannah Arendt still looks to Nietzsche’s “abiding greatness” in having “dared to demonstrate how shabby and meaningless morality had become.” Nietzsche, she says, is “the last philosopher…who took moral issues seriously.” Martin Buber, whose well-known fascination with Nietzsche, arguably deeper and more pervasive than that of any other major Jewish thinker, began in his childhood, publishes reflections on Nietzsche’s concept of the Will-to-Power in 1947; Walter Kaufmann, who escaped Germany in 1939, completed his dissertation on Nietzsche’s theory of values in 1947 and then published his own Nietzsche, a work which did more than any other to shore up Nietzsche’s standing as a legitimate philosophical figure in post-war America. The world was ill, and the German intellectual world looked to Nietzsche for the cure.

If, then, there are considerable Nietzschean currents in R. Soloveitchik’s work, this would not have been in the least bit surprising, not to R. Soloveitchik himself nor to anyone belonging to any degree to his native intellectual habitat. Surprise at just this fact, however, is the central premise of Rynhold and Harris’ book.

This historical context is dutifully noted by Rynhold and Harris, and they are careful to clarify that their project lies in a “conceptual, rather than historical” register. This is why, for instance, they need not get bogged down on the vexed question of whether or to what extent Nietzsche really was the antisemite he often seemed to be, and why they are broadly unconcerned with claiming that the Nietzschean motifs they discover in Soloveitchik’s work can be traced to Nietzsche himself. But if their work is in some sense ahistorical, it is not ahistorical in the manner purported by much of contemporary philosophy – not ahistorical through and through – if only because it does seem to genuinely matter that it is these historical figures who said the things Rynhold and Harris show them to have said. And indeed, were the project merely conceptual,

there would be no reason to sort through the vast array of conflicting interpretations of Nietzsche’s writings in pursuit of the most authentic, as Rynhold and Harris so expertly do. The question is thus not whether, but in what way, and for what purpose, history matters.

In the end, what the case amounts to for Rynhold and Harris is the disclosing of new horizons for Jewish thought, the claim that “read in this manner, Soloveitchik can be seen to indicate interesting pathways for contemporary Jewish thought.” The idea is that whereas there are many people – they suggest it is the majority of Jewish scholars and laypeople – “who would dismiss Nietzsche’s writings as the rantings of a rabid atheist and vehemently oppose everything that he wrote,” the example and tacit heikhsher (seal of approval) of R. Soloveitchik’s appropriations empower those people to supplement their Jewish-philosophical toolkit with certain Nietzschean ideas. And what this supplementation enables, R. Soloveitchik’s example then shows, are Jewish understandings of religion, morality, and truth which are consonant with rather than subversive of authentic human vitality.

This is fine as it goes. The history Rynhold and Harris flirt with, however, suggests a further line of thought: that R. Soloveitchik’s work is something other, more than, the work of a parochial man of faith addressed to his faithful flock. It very much is that, but it is also, quite centrally and vitally, an effort, born out of a unique climate of historical and intellectual crisis, to heal the world through philosophy. For Nietzsche, this meant, among other things, broadening the scope of philosophical labor such that it would resonate not just intellectually but existentially – would speak to and for human persons as the finite, biological, emphatically worldly organisms they actually are. And it meant exemplifying in that way what it could mean for a human person to live authentically. For R. Soloveitchik, it meant the same – with the crucial twist that flourishing as a flesh-and-blood being in the world means not the forfeiture of morality but its intensification in the form of responsibility for the world.

Indeed, at some point in each of his three major monographs, Halakhic Man, Halakhic Mind, and And From There You Shall Seek – all written, not incidentally, in the 1940’s – R. Soloveitchik reveals, in surgically brief but devastatingly clear terms, his deepest argument against the philosophical positions against which his project is set. “Such views,” he says in Halakhic Man, “have brought chaos and disaster to our world, which is drowning in its blood.” “Had they not desired to unite with infinity and to merge with transcendence,” he reflects, “then they might have been able to aid the widow and


24 Rynhold and Harris, Nietzsche, Soloveitchik, and Contemporary Jewish Philosophy, 9.

25 See idem, 10.

26 Daniel Rynhold and Michael Harris, Nietzsche, Soloveitchik, and Contemporary Jewish Philosophy, 4.

27 Idem, IX.

28 Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man, 164 fn. 147.
the orphan, to save the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor.”

Soloveitchik advanced an emphatically this-worldly religious existentialism, one through which its adherents, their feet firmly planted on the ground and their eyes fixed straight ahead, would fail to stand against the world’s evils no longer. For both Nietzsche and R. Soloveitchik, what is most needful is for individuals to free themselves from inherited existential mediocrity and indifference in achieving personal excellence – on Nietzsche’s view for their own sake, on R. Soloveitchik’s view for the sake of others and the world.

On the standard reading, R. Soloveitchik’s principal essays are devotional and apologetic efforts of religious phenomenology addressed to R. Soloveitchik’s own community of faith. The standard reading is not wrong. It elides, however, the project’s most fundamental aim and animating concern: to save European humanity from itself – or, to set European humanity aright as prophylactic security against further civilizational catastrophe. To understand that and how this is so, one must understand that Soloveitchik is writing in a tradition with Nietzsche as a prominent patriarch, and more critically, writing with a rich array of Weimar-era thinkers at his side who, in seeking to cure Europe of what ails it, turn to Nietzsche with desperately clear eyes and open minds.

We indeed ought to be shocked, therefore, that a traditionalist rabbinic thinker like Soloveitchik imbibed Nietzsche’s thought so substantially, but not because Nietzsche was a consummately scandalous provocateur. What we ought to be freshly impressed by, rather, and what we ought to learn from going forward, is just how compellingly Soloveitchik succeeded in doing Jewish thought while not only borrowing from or reacting to but creatively contributing to the European intellectual tradition. In speaking intimately to his own community, R. Soloveitchik took responsibility for, and spoke to, the world. Rynhold and Harris’ book, then, serves as an invitation to his community to turn toward the world in broadening the horizons against which, and toward which, Soloveitchik is read.

KIVNEI MARON
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I wrote “Kivnei Maron” in the arc of the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah (Ten Days of Repentance). I was in quarantine over much of this period, having just returned to Jerusalem from a family emergency in America. The urgencies and exigencies of this trip, and the strange period of isolation that followed, figured more overtly in earlier drafts. In the final poem, they remain part of the deep backdrop.

Far more explicit are various public emergencies of the time. The desperation of asylum-seekers trying to get into Hamid Karzai Airport or across bridges over the Rio Grande are refracted through, and themselves refract, the phrase kivnei maron, our selection for life or death, whether as soldiers or sheep, by God-as-Judge.

Rosh Ha-Shanah sets the tenor of the poems—the title phrase and central conceit, of course, but also the idea of God’s coronation (here imagined, as perhaps is inevitable in the English-speaking world, through certain grainy black-and-white film clips from Westminster Abbey). To my eye and ear, the heavy, twelve-syllable lines, the loose terza rima, and the fourteen-line sections all have, too, a touch of the regal. Within and against these processional received forms is the voice of the speaker, quick and nervous, with its syncopes and colloquialisms, its qualifications and reversals—the voice of a speaker, in short, who is unsure of his own place in the ceremony, whether as participant or spectator.

For all the immediacy of the poem, however, I find that it has an unmistakably retrospective cast. When writing the poem, and when rereading it now, I cannot help but look back to the personal, family, and public emergencies-in-slow-motion of the previous months. The speaker, too, looks back over much of the poem from the coronation ceremony to the tender heartbreak of Elul. In the closing section, and particularly in the final line, the speaker, and we as readers, find ourselves in the aftermath of the coronation, the ordinary day-in day-out of small apartments, the long passage through the dark of the year that we all, separately and together, are traveling now.

I

The insistent question, the petulant question,
The question that, frankly speaking, gets under your skin
Just a little bit, the statement phrased as a question

With a little upglide pigtailed at the end,
The questions others ask or don’t ask but assume
An answer, somehow they know more about me than

I know myself, and really, what do I know,
The urgent question, the question I return to
Always, not expecting an answer but somehow

29 Idem, 41.
30 Soloveitchik, And From There You Shall Seek, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Jersey City: Ktav, 2008), 55.
Hoping for one, the question demanding *yes* or *no*,
And the multitude of answers, all contingent,
Crowding on a *puente internacional*

Or at an airport, its gates, their open-and-shut,
We are there and not there, shut in, kept out.

II

From one day to the next, sometimes, or one moment
To the next, I find myself, suddenly, strangely
Unresponsive to the most elementary

Stimuli, looking, I see your hands on me
Without feeling anything, as if they were touching
Or holding another body, not my own, a body

Like mine, but whiter, a complete scarification
Has also left it cold to the touch, I know this
In the same way that I know the hovering

Of a soul above a deathbed, interested,
Perhaps a little regretful, or disoriented,
Maybe momentarily catching its breath,

You are patient, but patience does not last forever,
Soon I’ll feel your fists, demanding, *Anyone in there?*

III

I just returned from your coronation. Every year,
Expecting not to be moved, being moved despite myself.
You almost disappeared, again, under all that glitter,

I could only imagine the nocturnal
Hours under your robes, your body was trained for this,
In the same way it was trained for gentleness

And patience, in other seasons and hours, no less
Strange, really, than the rigors of the processional,
Your face hard, your eyes fixed in the far distance,

And your hands? I could see them nowhere
And felt them everywhere, which is perhaps why I wept
With such complete abandon, together

With the throngs assembled under the high transept,
And later, here, in my small apartment, joyful, bereft.