The Jewish Idea of Freedom

By: DAVID P. GOLDMAN

Never, perhaps in the history of human thought, has so much confusion surrounded the concept of freedom in the popular mind. Secular culture now asserts that all people are free to define themselves according to their whim, arbitrarily and without a nod to nature. This popular concept of freedom as expounded by the pop Existentialism of the 20th century now has been enshrined in American law, as in the first sentence of Justice Anthony Kennedy's majority decision in the Obergefell ruling on same-sex marriage: "The Constitution promises liberty to all within its reach, a liberty that includes certain specific rights that allow persons, within a lawful realm, to define and express their identity."

At the same time that secular culture asserts the absolute freedom of individual whim, it propounds an intellectual apparatus that altogether excludes the possibility of human freedom. It believes that scientists will make machines think the way that humans do, which means that human thought itself also must be mechanistic. It believes that analysis of brain waves somehow will account for human consciousness—even though physics cannot yet tell us what a wave might be. It believes that our consciousness is the product of random genetic mutation. It insists that endocrinologists and surgeons can take a person of one gender and make a person of the other gender. It believes that being determines consciousness, and that human nature can be transformed by an altered environment. Nonetheless, secular thought insists that we have the freedom to "define and express an identity," and that to assert natural constraints to human identity constitutes an offense to this freedom. The self-styled apostles of secular reason are as shameless as they are thoughtless in their inattention to the scandal of their own contradictions.

It is all the more urgent for religious Jews to make clear our concept of freedom, in contrast to this mishmash of crude determinism and pop-

---

David P. Goldman writes the Spengler column at *Asia Times Online* and blogs at PJ Media. He has written on Jewish topics for numerous publications including *First Things*, where he was a senior editor during 2009–2011, as well as *Tablet, The American Interest,* and *Commentary*. He is also a fellow at the Middle East Forum and at the London Center for Policy Studies. His book *How Civilizations Die (and Why Islam is Dying, Too)* was published in 2011 by Regnery. A book of essays, *It's Not the End of the World—It's Just the End of You* (Van Praag) also appeared in 2011.

existentialist bromides. This effort requires recourse to the tools and terminology of the Western philosophy founded on the thought of classical Greece, but it also exposes the failures of Western thought and sets in relief the alternative and in my view richer rabbinic account of man and the world.

The Jewish concept of freedom is the first such concept in human history and still the most radical. It asserts that the Covenant between God and man makes it possible for mortal man to rise to partnership with the Maker of Heaven in the continuing work of creation. It is different from the notions of freedom promulgated in the Christian West with its inheritance of Greek thought; indeed, the philosophical indifferentism of the secular West is the consequence of the failure of Greek philosophy and its successors.

Freedom is God's freedom, the freedom to create. Human freedom is *Imitatio Dei*, man's engagement in the divine work of creation. Freedom appeared first as a human possibility in the Hebrew Bible. It emerged in a rabbinic tradition that reaches from the Jewish sages of antiquity to the 20th-century writing of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (known by his students as the "Rav") and other Jewish authorities. Our tradition teaches that man can become God's partner in creation, but to do so, he also must recreate himself. Man's mastery of nature in the cause of human majesty parallels man's self-mastery in covenantal community.

Man is dust and ashes, but he is also the master of nature. Freedom thus has a double meaning. Soloveitchik elaborated this view of humanity in his well-known homily on the two Adams in *The Lonely Man of Faith*. Adam the First is blessed with intelligence and creative drive *b-tzelem Elokim*, with the practical and functional intellect to gain control of nature. Adam the First establishes man's dignity by freeing humanity from hunger and disease: "Human existence is dignified because it is a glorious, majestic, powerful existence."

In the modern era, the Jewish idea of freedom is reborn in the political sphere through the 17th-century revolution in political thought that preceded the American Revolution. More subtle is the contribution of biblical and rabbinic thought to the contemporaneous scientific revolution.

We are not the passive victims of nature. We strive to establish human dignity by mastering nature. We do not need to worry whether there is an Intelligent Design, nor whether we might grasp such a design if it indeed exists: As creative beings, we are a wild card in the design. We cannot know the design, because we do not know what we have yet to accomplish. We do not agonize over natural disasters and what they might imply for divine justice: Nature itself is a challenge to humanity to rise to partnership with the Maker of Heaven.

Adam the Second, made from the dust of the earth, seeks the redemptive rather than the majestic. Cathartic redemption can be achieved not by control of one's environment, Soloveitchik wrote, but rather by control of one's self. Majestic man achieves a dignified existence by defying nature, a lower form of existence in Soloveitchik's words. Humble man achieves redemption by allowing himself to be defeated by a higher and truer Being. "Dignity is discovered at the summit of success, redemption in the depth of crisis and failure."

This parallel account of majestic and redemptive man involves more than homiletics: it is both an ontology and an anthropology that contends with the view of man and nature given to us by the Greeks. To say that Adam the First is creative implies that he is set in a natural world that is susceptible to further creation. And if God gave man the capacity for creation, then creative action must be not only possible but obligatory. God deliberately left the work of creation incomplete in order to provide room for man's creativity. This is perhaps the most original premise of Jewish philosophy. Any other ontological premise, though, reduces human creativity to a contingent and relative status, to the play of children amidst heavenly fixity.

Even the Greek gods were not free; they remained subject to the merciless rule of Fate, which decreed that Zeus would be overthrown just as he had overthrown his father Chronos. Humanity was the plaything of cruel and capricious gods, and where fate decreed a tragic outcome, the tragic hero could only proceed silently and helplessly to his doom. Oedipus had no choice in the killing of Laius, or Creon in the execution of Antigone, or Orestes in the murder of Clytemnestra. "The power of fate is a wonder, dark, terrible wonder—neither wealth nor armies nor towered walls nor ships' black hulls lashed by the salt can save us from that force," sang Sophocles' chorus in *Antigone.*

Greek ontology conforms to Greek anthropology. Neither Greek philosophy nor the Western philosophy that succeeded it can give an account of the most fundamental qualities of the real world as we perceive it, starting with the fact that we perceive different things in a world that changes. Parmenides postulated a world in which a static One was capable neither of individuation or change.[1] In Parmenides' theory, change and

[1] The pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides taught that the world was an unchanging, undifferentiated eternal One, and that change and differentiation belonged to the realm of illusion. The argument proceeded in the following steps. If we think or speak of something, it must exist (or "have Being"). The implications of Parmenides' assertion are elaborated In Plato's dialogue "Parmenides." If we cannot conceive of Non-Being, Parmenides tells the young Socrates, then we

multiplicity are illusions, and nothing really exists but the immutable One.[2] Socrates' theory of forms (*Ideon*) does not give us a remedy to Parmenides' paradox, for it dissipates into the infinite regress of the so-called

must think of Being as one big thing with no parts. It cannot change, for that would imply that some part of Being has become Non-Being, and we cannot conceive of Non-Being. Being cannot be differentiated into different kinds of Being, for that would imply that some part of Being contains Non-Being with respect to another part of Being, and so forth. Therefore the One exists, but not the Many.

Parmenides' theory is encapsulated in Fragments 6 and 8 of his surviving *Poem*.

6.1 That which is there to be spoken and thought of must be. For it is possible for it to be,
6.2 but not possible for nothing to be.
….

8.3 That being ungenerated it is also imperishable,
8.4 whole and of a single kind and unshaken and complete.
8.5 Nor was it ever nor will it be, since it is now, all together,
8.6 one, continuous. For what birth will you seek for it?
8.7 How and from where did it grow? I will not permit you to say
8.8 or to think from what is not; for it is not to be said or thought
8.9 that is not. What necessity would have stirred up
8.10 to grow later than earlier, beginning from nothing?
8.11 Thus it must either fully be or not.
8.12 Nor will the force of conviction ever permit anything to come to be from what is not,
8.13 besides it…
8.16 It is or it is not. But it has been decided, as is necessary,
8.17 to let go the one way as unthinkable and nameless (for it is not a true
8.18 way) and that the other is and is real.
8.19 How could what is be in the future? How could it come to be?
8.20 For if it came into being, it is not, not if it is ever going to be
8.21 In this way, coming to be has been extinguished and destruction is unheard of.
8.22 Nor is it divided, since it all is alike;
8.23 nor is it any more in any way, which would keep it from holding together,
8.24 or any less, but it is all full of what is.
8.25 Therefore, it is all continuous, for what is draws near to what is.
(Parmenides' Poem, trans. Richard D. McKirahan in *Philosophy before Socrates*, pp. 151–157).

[2] Parmenides' argument seems valid only when we restrict the context to the perception of particular objects (obviously, we cannot perceive "no object"). It is exposed as a verbal trick to consider the *consciousness* in which perceptions arise. We cannot think of "nothing" as a particular object, but we can be bored by everything, and dread non-existence (in the form of our own death), as Martin

"third man problem."[3] Plato introduces intermediate states of being, or becoming, into the transient realm of perceived reality, while the Forms themselves remain eternal and unchanging. Human action can rearrange the ephemera but cannot affect the eternal realm. The heavens continue unperturbed in their perfection, set in motion by an indifferent Unmoved Mover. Humankind may have free will, but it is the freedom of children playing in the sandbox of the sublunar realm.

Plato's assertion that the perception of beauty leads us to the truth allows us only the freedom to appreciate a harmony that was complete before it drew our attention. Platonic beauty attracts us, leaving us only with the freedom that a moth has to approach the flame. In Jewish

---

Heidegger observed in "What is Metaphysics?" Sigmund Freud used a variant of Parmenides' paradox to make the opposite case: we cannot fear death because we cannot imagine our own death (if we try to imagine it we exist as a spectator). Therefore, Freud argued, religion's concern with mortality is merely a disguise for our real fears, for example, castration.

[3] The Theory of Forms asserts that our sense perception is faulty, and that behind every object of perception there is an eternal and ideal form. This theory falls apart the moment we try to sort objects of perception according to specific forms. As Parmenides explains to the young Socrates in his eponymous dialogue, we can assert that there exists a form of "largeness" that governs our perception of size. The form of "largeness," though, also must itself be large, for it embodies the quality of largeness. The "largeness" of the form of largeness is a different, higher-order form of largeness than the largeness of ordinary measurement, and we require a new form of largeness that includes things that have both the quality of largeness and the form of largeness. But this new higher-order form of largeness must itself be large, so we require yet another higher-order form to include it as well as all the other manifestations of largeness, and so on ad infinitum.

The "Third Man" problem is an ancestor of Russell's Paradox in set theory, namely the attempt to define the set of all sets that are not members of themselves. If this set (by convention called "R") is not a member of itself then by definition it must contain itself; but if it contains itself, it cannot be the set of all sets that are not members of themselves. This is expressed informally in the example of a barber who shaves all men who don't shave themselves, and only men who don't shave themselves—which raises the question: Who shaves the barber?

There have been numerous attempts to resolve the "Third Man" problem, all of which involve an attempt to distinguish between different sorts of forms (the "largeness" of my grandmother's kneidlach is different from the "largeness" of the Form of "largeness"), none of them quite satisfactory. For a survey, see Pelletier and Zalta, "How to Say Goodbye to the Third Man Problem," in Noˆus, 34/2 (June 2000): 165–202.

thought, beauty is not a timeless Form that draws us to the Good, but a human perception, a temporal response to God's action in the world: God "made everything beautiful in its time; He also put an enigma [*Ha-Olam*] into their hearts so that man cannot comprehend what God has done from beginning to end," said Ecclesiastes (3:11).

If we reject Parmenides and declare instead with Heraclitus that Being is an illusion and that nothing exists but change, we come no closer to human freedom. I do not wish to enter into the debate about what Heraclitus actually meant, but in the understanding of the West, Heraclitus prefigures Nietzsche's embrace of non-Being as destruction.

Parmenides' problem of the One and the Many still haunts Western philosophy. Why do individual things exist, and not just one big thing? The problem of individuation remains a reproach to any philosophy that seeks to give an account of nature out of nature herself. Spinoza's *natura naturens* inherits the problem. God for Spinoza was merely nature, and the infinite substance he represents as God-in-nature is no more capable of generating many things than was the One of Parmenides.[4]

If we conceive of God as existing inside the natural world, then we can conceive of nothing else at all. Spinoza's God is a variant of Parmenides' One. Hegel quipped that the cause of Spinoza's death "was consumption, from which he had long been a sufferer; this was in harmony with his system of philosophy, according to which all particularity and individuality pass away in the one substance." That was nasty, but fair.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the philosopher and mathematician who co-invented the Calculus, offered a cure for Spinoza's consumption. In place of a single "infinite substance," Leibniz proposed a "pre-established harmony" that governed an infinite number of independent "monads,"

---

[4] Spinoza begins his Ethics with an ontological argument (Proposition XI): "God, or substance, consisting of infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality, necessarily exists" because "if this be denied, conceive, if possible, that God does not exist: then his essence does not involve existence. But this is absurd. Therefore God necessarily exists." In Spinoza's words, "By God, I mean a being absolutely infinite" that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality." God is reduced to the "substance" of nature. If God is inside nature, then there can be nothing in nature outside of God. Spinoza concludes: "As God is a being absolutely infinite . . . and he necessarily exists; if any substance besides God were granted it would have to be explained by some attribute of God, and thus two substances with the same attribute would exist, which is absurd; therefore, besides God no substance can be granted, or consequently, be conceived."

or atom-like entities each as unique as a snowflake. Leibniz added a theistic premise: By the law of sufficient reason, he argued, God does not do anything superfluous and therefore does not create anything twice. The systems of Spinoza and Leibniz seem to be mirror images: Spinoza's single substance cannot explain individuality, while Leibniz' individual monads cannot communicate with each other. We have a "pre-established harmony instead of infinite self-generating substance." But there is a fundamental difference: By turning Spinoza's system inside out, Leibniz makes room for God to return from his Babylonian captivity in *natura naturans*, to lordship over being.[5]

As Soloveitchik remarks (in a footnote to his doctoral dissertation), this was an ontological solution, one that no-one but the discoverer of the Calculus might have ventured.[6] The scientific revolution of the 17th century made it possible to conceive of the infinite within finitude, a concept that eluded the Greeks with their abhorrence of actual infinity. As Leibniz wrote to Foucher in 1692: "I am so in favor of the actual infinite that instead of admitting that Nature abhors it, as is commonly said, I hold that Nature makes frequent use of it everywhere, in order to show more effectively the perfections of its Author."[7] Ontology can rise above Parmenides' paradoxes only when it confronts the infinite. Inquiry about the infinite during the 20th century moved from philosophical abstraction to mathematical investigation. Soloveitchik was one of very few religious

---

5 Recent scholarship reports that Leibniz was deeply influenced by the Lurian Kabbalah; indeed, he criticized Spinoza for distorting the Kabbalah in his own system. In a 1706 letter to Foucher de Careil, Leibniz wrote:

> It is utterly true that Spinoza abused the Cabala of the Hebrews. And a certain person, who converted to Judaism and called himself Moses Germanus, followed his perverse opinions, as is shown in a refutation in German by Dr. Wachter, who knew him. But perhaps the Hebrews themselves and other ancient authors, especially in the East understand the proper meaning. Indeed, Spinoza formulated his monstrous doctrine from a combination of the Cabala and Cartesianism, corrupted to the extreme. He did not understand the true nature of monads...

Leibniz, comments author Allison Coudert, "was "interested in pointing out the ways in which Spinoza's philosophy distorted the Kabbalah and in relating both Spinoza's ideas and those of the Kabbalah to his own philosophy." See *Leibniz and the Kabbalah (Springer 2013)* by A.P. Coudert. There is an extensive literature on the influence of Kabbalah on 17th-century ontology. See for example *Leibniz et Spinoza*, by Georges Friedmann (Editions Gallimard, 1945).

6 Joseph Soloveitchik (Josef Solowiejczyk), *Das reine Denken und die Seinskonstituierung bei Hermann Cohen* (Berlin 1932), p. 82.

7 Quoted in *Leibniz's Metaphysics of Time and Space*, by Michael Futch (Springer 2008), p. 84.

thinkers to understand the theological importance of the mathematics of the infinite.[8]

---

[8] Soloveitchik's essay *The Halakhic Mind* asserts that the collapse of the deterministic philosophy associated with Newtonian physics and Kantian philosophy made philosophy of religion possible in the first place, for if the deterministic model of the world holds true, religion is reduced to subjectivism and mysticism. The Rav was well aware that Kantian philosophy broke down in the face of the mathematical discoveries of the late 19th century.

Parmenides had asserted, "That which is there to be spoken and thought of must be," and Plato took this further to mean that all well-defined concepts must correspond to something that actually exists. Aristotelian realism countered that there are any number of things we can define in great detail (the mythical Phoenix, in St. Thomas Aquinas' example, or a hundred imaginary dollars in my pocket, according to Kant). Plato's Theory of Forms thus fails on two counts. First, we cannot satisfactorily define any Form (due to the "Third Man" problem of infinite regress), and second, we can define the Form of something imaginary as well as we can of something real. Aristotle countered that everything in the mind must come from the senses—the perception of something that actually exists"—and that we should restrict attention to "instantiated universals" (collections of things on which we have sense data). Aristotle's empiricism, in turn, failed on two counts. First, the 17th--century revolution in mathematical physics identified things in the mind (such as the infinitesimals of the Calculus and complex numbers) that do not exist in the senses yet correspond to real things in nature, such as planetary orbits and the trajectory of cannon balls. Second, as David Hume argued, cause and effect cannot be derived from sense data. Kant's synthetic a priori reason attempted to patch up the shattered Aristotelian system, by asserting an interaction between the mind's a priori capacity for synthetic judgments and sense data. Kant offered a model that united sense perception with transcendental thinking. As Rav Soloveitchik observed, this model collapsed when mathematicians discovered objects that cannot possibly be perceived by the senses but nonetheless are real. One example is the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries which can be understood but not 'seen' in the sense of conventional geometry. Another example is to be found in a set of functions first identified by Karl Weierstrass; these functions shift sign from positive to negative at infinitely small intervals. Weierstrass' curves have no tangents. Although they are continuous, they resist analysis by the Newton-Leibniz Calculus. The Rav writes on page 126:

> "That mathematics is not synonymous with receptive intuition, as Kant thought, was amply demonstrated by modern mathematics. It is sufficient to consider the Weierstrass curve in order to convince oneself of the incommensurability of mathematical knowledge with 'sensuous' intuition. The development of non-Euclidean geometry refuted Kant's 'Transcendental Aesthetics' completely." For more background on the theological implications of mathematical discoveries, see "The God of the Mathematicians: The Religious Beliefs That Guided Kurt Gödel's Revolutionary Ideas," in *First Things*, August 2010.

Leibniz' scheme had two defects. The first is that his assertion that a good God would make only the best of all possible worlds does not explain why nature can be so nasty. The second is that in this best of all possible worlds, all unpleasant things somehow must be for the best. (The Midrash conjectures that God had made and destroyed many worlds before this one, and that some might have been more beautiful than this one, Rav Soloveitchik observed).[9] Dr. Pangloss tells Candide at the end of the novel that if all those terrible things had not happened, he would not be eating preserved lemons and pistachio nuts. Voltaire was a scoundrel, but here he was correct.

The best of all possible worlds does not need us to improve it. All events must be a concatenation of one sort or another that works out for the best, even if it does not seem that way to us. Freedom remains as remote from Leibniz' system as from Spinoza's, or from those of Parmenides and Plato. Spinoza's infinite substance crowds out everything but the God of nature; Leibniz' best-of-all-possible worlds removes the need for change.

The Hebrew Bible and its rabbinic interpreters saw things otherwise. Psalm 102 declares (in the KJV translation):

> Of old didst thou lay the foundation of the earth; And the heavens are the work of thy hands.
> They shall perish, but thou shalt endure; Yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; As a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed:
> But thou art the same, And thy years shall have no end.
> The children of thy servants shall continue,
> And their seed shall be established before thee.

It is not the sublunar realm that is ephemeral but the heavens themselves, and we servants of the Lord will endure forever while God changes the heavens like a suit of clothes. In the understanding of the rabbis, this is not hyperbole but ontology. The existence of the world in the presence of an infinite God—Spinoza's problem—requires an understanding radically different from that of Parmenides or Plotinus, and this we encounter in the concept divine self-contraction, or *tzimtzum*, as Soloveitchik notes.[10]

---

9 "The Midrash relates that God created and destroyed many worlds before He allowed this world to remain in existence. Some of the earlier worlds were even more beautiful than the present one, but the Creator eliminated them. He then went ahead and created this world, which has endured." Quoted in *The Rav*, by Aharon Rakeffet-Rothkof (Vol. 2), p. 15.

10 In *From There You Shall Seek*, Soloveitchik writes (p. 172):

It is not only that God by the principle sufficient reason does not make the same snowflake twice, as Leibniz argued; for the world to exist, God had to withdraw from the world in order to make room for it. Holiness for Soloveitchik "is the 'contraction' of infinity within a finitude bound by laws, measures and standards, the appearance of transcendence within empirical reality." Unlike the Greeks, Judaism embraces the actual infinite.

In this context Soloveitchik drew attention to a remarkable passage in the monthly Jewish prayer for the sanctification of the moon:

> May it be your will, O Lord, my God and God of my fathers to fill in the darkness of the moon that she not be diminished at all. And let the light of the moon be as the light of the sun, and as the light of the seven days of creation, just as she was before she was diminished, as it is said: "the two great lights." And may we be a fulfillment of the verse: "And they shall seek out the Lord their God and David their king."

We pray, in other words, for the restoration of the moon to its original status on par with the sun. This rests on the Sages' reading of Genesis 1:16, in which sun and moon first are called "two great lights," and immediately afterward the "greater light" and the "lesser light." God evidently diminished the moon. The Sages offered several homiletic explanations which are less important here than the remarkable assertion that God deliberately introduced an imperfection into the heavens, which we hope to see corrected in the Messianic era, and this in an epoch where all the peoples worshipped heavenly bodies as divine beings. It is clear how much the rabbinic differs from the idea of "fallen" nature; the diminution of the moon occurred before the creation of humans.[11]

> This entire matter is explained in R. Isaac Luria's doctrine of *tzimtzum*. In this view, God "constricted" His glory in order to create the world, leaving an open, empty "space in the middle"—that is, the act of creation is composed of separation and advance. God separated himself from the world when He had the idea of creating it, and this separation is the beginning of the act of creation, since the world cannot exist in the bosom of the Holy One, Blessed Be He, as His infinite being precludes any other existence.

[11] A stand of Christian theodicy attempts to explain human suffering at the hands of nature by reference to the "Fall of Man" in the Garden of Eden, before which nature supposedly was benign. The Orthodox Christian theologian David Bentley Hart writes of "Christian belief in an ancient alienation from God that has wounded creation in its uttermost depths, and reduced cosmic time to a shadowy remnant of the world God intends, and enslaved creation to spiritual and terrestrial powers hostile to God." See D.B. Hart, "Tsunami and Theodicy," in *First Things*, March 2005.

Brit milah according to Ḥazal was the supreme example of human intervention to improve on God's definitive work, the creation of *tzelem Elokim*, the human being itself. The work of man is greater than the work of God, Rabbi Akiva famously argued to the Roman Governor Turnus Rufus, because man transforms what God has created into something better:

> Once the evil [Roman governor] Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, 'Whose deeds are greater—God's or man's?' He replied, 'Man's deeds are greater.' Turnus Rufus asked him, 'Is man then capable of creating heaven and earth, or anything like them?' Rabbi Akiva replied, 'I was not referring to the sphere beyond man's ability, over which he has no control. I refer to those creations of which man is capable.' He then asked, 'Why do you circumcise yourselves?' Rabbi Akiva replied, 'I knew that that was the point of your question, and therefore I answered in the first place that man's deeds are greater than God's.' Rabbi Akiva brought him grains of wheat and some bread, and said: 'These grains of wheat are God's handiwork, and the bread is the handiwork of man. Is the latter not greater than the former?'
>
> The Roman mocked Akiva, asking the sage, 'If God wanted you to perform circumcision, why did He not create the child already circumcised while still in the womb?' Rabbi Akiva answered, "Why do you not ask the same question concerning the umbilical cord, which remains attached to him and which his mother must cut? In response to your question—the reason why he does not emerge already circumcised is because God gave Israel the commandments in order that they would be purified by performing them. Therefore David wrote, 'Every word of God is pure' (or, purified).'[12]

There is no paradox of the one and the many in rabbinic thought: God made room for the world through self-contraction, and created it through acts of individuation, separating first light from darkness, and then sea from dry land. Nor is there a paradox of omniscience and omnipotence: God limited himself by making a covenant with man that made man a partner in the continuing work of creation.

---

12 *Midrash Tanhuma, Tazria* 5. See *Sefer Ha-Ḥinukh,* Mitzvah 2, "The eternal L-rd desired to perfect the [physical] character of the chosen people and he wished that this perfection be effected by man. He did not create him complete and perfect from the womb, in order to hint to him that just as the perfection of his physical form is by his own hand, so does it lie in his hand to complete his spiritual form by the worthiness of his actions."

The imperfection of the created world, we have seen, is explicit in Psalm 102, and implicit (as Jonathan Levenson observes[13]) in references to a primal chaos that threatens to reassert itself (as in Psalm 74:14 and Isaiah 27:1). Yet the rabbis first speak explicitly of man as co-creator in the sphere of Adam the Second, redemptive and covenantal man. We read in the Talmud: "The judge who judges his fellows fairly for just one hour, renders a just decision; it is as though he had collaborated with God in the work of Creation."[14] And again: "A person who recites [the blessing] *Vayekhelu* on eve of Shabbat is considered as if he were a partner with God in the work of creation."[15] To become God's partner in creation requires man to cleave to God's will, first of all in pursuing justice.

Teshuva—repentance, or "return"—is a creative act. Rav Soloveitchik wrote that "Man, through repentance, creates himself, his own I." Forgiveness of sin is possible because the penitent has recreated himself and become a new person. The classicist David Konstan (cited by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks) observes that the first person to be forgiven in the annals of human experience is Judah, and the first person to forgive is Joseph. Forgiveness in this biblical sense did not exist for the ancient Greeks. One could appease the anger of the gods or of another person, but the offense cannot be erased.[16] Rabbi Sacks explains that Joseph can forgive Judah because Judah has become a different man: when Judah intercedes to save his brother Benjamin from slavery, he has become a different person than the envious older brother who sold Joseph into slavery twenty years earlier. Judah can be forgiven because he has become a new man.[17] In light of the sinner's self-transformation into a new person, the old sin is regarded as unintentional: the new person never would have intended to

---

13 In Creation and the Persistence of Evil (Princeton 1988), p. 15.

14 Shabbat 10a.

15 Shabbat 119b.

16 David Konstan, Before Forgiveness: the origins of a moral idea. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010

17 <http://www.rabbisacks.org/birth-forgiveness-vayigash-5775/>.
Rambam writes in Hilchos Teshuva (Section 2, Halacha 4) that the repentant sinner may take on a new name to declare that he is a new man:
Among the paths of repentance is for the penitent to
a) constantly call out before God, crying and entreating;
b) to perform charity according to his potential;
c) to separate himself far from the object of his sin;
d) to change his name, as if to say "I am a different person and not the same one who sinned";
e) to change his behavior in its entirety to the good and the path of righteousness; and f) to travel in exile from his home. Exile atones for sin because it causes a person to be submissive, humble, and meek of spirit.

commit such a sin. To the recreated penitent, the sin committed by his former self was an error that he would not commit now. If character is destiny, Judaism asserts that man can change destiny by changing his character. Greek literature is tragic; the subject of Jewish Scripture is tragedy averted or mitigated by *teshuva*.

Adam the Second is social man who seeks community and covenant. He enters freely into partnership with God. Soloveitchik states that "the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai was the result of free negotiation between Moses and the people who consented to submit themselves to divine will." In the biblical account God did not simply free Israel from Egyptian slavery, a unique event in human history, but he summoned them out of degradation and weakness to be a free people unlike the tribes and empires that surrounded them. According to Rabbi Lord Sacks, "The concept of the moral limits of power is more important to freedom than is democracy. For democracy contains within it a fatal danger. Tocqueville gave it a name: the 'tyranny of the majority.' A majority can oppress a minority. The only defense against this is to establish the moral limits of power… Biblical politics is limited politics—the political of liberal democracies, not of the Greek city state."

Modern democracy drew more from the Bible and rabbinic sources than it did from the Greek polis. As the historian Eric Nelson wrote in his book *The Hebrew Republic*, the English revolutionaries of the 17th century returned to the biblical concept of election in response to the catastrophic failure of the European political model. The Religious Wars of the 16th and 17th centuries contested the claims of kings by divine right and nations by divine election. In the standard account, the republican challenge to monarchy came from secular philosophers like Spinoza and Hobbes. This is misleading: As Nelson shows, the English republicans who sowed the seeds of the American founding drew their ideas from biblical and rabbinic sources. John Milton proposed an English Republic in 1649 on the strength of the Midrash Rabbah on Deuteronomy 17:14, which likens kings to idols and condemns as idolaters those who put their trust in princes. Milton, Algernon Sidney, James Harrington, and other English revolutionaries made a biblical case against monarchy that Thomas Paine later cribbed in his 1776 pamphlet "Common Sense." Israel's free choice to enter into the Covenant at Sinai became the founding principle of the American Constitution.

Adam the First and Adam the Second are the same man, and the ontological freedom of Adam the First must be of the same order as Adam the Second's ethical freedom. Adam the First's search for dignity and Adam the Second's search for redemption ultimately are the same quest by the same individual. "Halakhic man," the Jew whose religious impulse

is channeled into Torah learning, acts more like a mathematician than a mystic. If the scientist seeks to penetrate infinite complexities of creation, the Torah scholar seeks access to the infinite mind of God. The Rav's grandnephew Rabbi Meir Soloveitchik writes, "The Torah draws the Jew into engagement with God's infinite mind… Although the Torah contains in potential all that God wants to teach us, all the generations of Israel labor together to make this manifest. Because the Torah is infinite and inexhaustible, learning Torah yields new insights—what the rabbis called *ḥiddushim*, or innovations."[18] The Rav's contention that the collapse of scientific determinism opened a new horizon for the philosophy of religion parallels the thinking of the great Austrian mathematician Kurt Gödel, whose proof of the incompleteness of mathematical systems destroyed the philosophical foundation of the deterministic model. Gödel, who was deeply religious, argued that mathematics entailed an infinite sequence of discoveries, where new axioms arose from intuition rather than formal logic.[19]

The parallel tracks of Torah learning and scientific investigation sometimes converge. The most striking example in my view is the influence upon mathematics of the biblical concept of time.

---

18 <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/10/torah-and-incarnation>.

19 Gödel wrote in a 1961 essay that the supposed "foundational crisis" in mathematics at the turn of the 20th century was not a problem for mathematics at all, but for philosophy: "Around the turn of the century…it was the antinomies of set theory, contradictions that allegedly appeared within mathematics, whose significance was exaggerated by skeptics and empiricists…I say "allegedly" and "exaggerated" because, in the first place, these contradictions did not appear within mathematics but near its outermost boundary towards philosophy, and secondly, they have been resolved in a manner that is completely satisfactory and, for everyone who understands the theory, nearly obvious." Gödel continued that "the certainty of mathematics is to be secured" not by looking for agreement with systems of philosophy, but "by seeking to gain insights into the solvability, and the actual methods for the solution, of all meaningful mathematical problems….it turns out that in the systemic establishment of the axioms of mathematics, new axioms, which do not follow by formal logic from those previously established by formal logic, again and again become evident…every clearly posed mathematical yes-or-no question is solvable in this way. For it is just this becoming evident of more and more new axioms on the basis of the meaning of the primitive notions that a machine cannot imitate." See Kurt Gödel, *Collected Works Volume III* (Oxford 1995) pp. 377–385. Unlike the determinists, who sought to reduce all mathematics to a single system of logic, Gödel demonstrated that mathematical discovery had to end, but rather involved the creative discovery of new axioms "which do not follow by formal logic by those previously established by formal logic."

Soloveitchik writes in his essay *The Halakhic Mind*:

> The reversibility of time and of the causal order is fundamental in religion, for otherwise the principle of conversion would be sheer nonsense. The act of reconstructing past psychical life, of changing the arrow of time from a forward to a retrospective direction, is the main premise of penitence…The homo religiosus, oscillating between sin and remorse, flight from and return to God, frequently explores not only the traces of a bygone past retained in memory, but a living "past" which is consummated in his emergent time-consciousness. It is irrelevant whether reversibility is a transcendental act bordering on the miraculous, as Kierkegaard wants us to believe, or a natural phenomenon that has its roots in the unique structure of the religious act. The paradox of a directed yet reversible time concept remains.

Repentance changes the future by redirecting the chain of the events set in motion by the original sin. *Teshuva* can change destiny. But the transformation of moral time has implications for the physical realm. The existential time of human existence is not the same as the clockwork of heavenly bodies. For the Greeks, time is the demarcation of events. But in Hebrew time, it is the moment itself that remains imperceptible. As Kohelet 3:15 states: "That which is, already has been; and that which is to be has already been; and only God can find the fleeting moment."[20]

A red thread connects the biblical notion of time to the 17th-century scientific revolution. After Ecclesiastes, we first hear of a point of time without duration in Book 11 of St. Augustine's Confessions. Aristotle's account of time as a sequence of moments, in Augustine's view, leads to absurdities. The moment itself is immeasurable as it passes with ineffable speed. Events that have passed no longer exist, which means that measuring past time is an attempt to measure something that does not exist. The future is not yet here. Our perception of past events thus depends on memory, and our thoughts about future events depend on expectation. Expectation and memory, Augustine adds, determine our perception of distant past and future: "It is not then future time that is long, for as yet it is not: But a long future, is 'a long expectation of the future,' nor is it time past, which now is not, that is long; but a long past is 'a long memory

---

[20] The word *nirdaf* is usually translated as "the pursued." The19th-century Torah scholar and polymath Michael Friedländer (best known today as the first English translator of *The Guide for the Perplexed*) rendered it as "the fleeting moment" in his English version of the Tanakh, still in print as *The Jerusalem Bible* (Koren). Rabbi Friedländer may have been influenced by Goethe's Faust (verse 1700 et. Seq.).

of the past.'" Reflecting on Augustine, Franz Rosenzweig wrote in The Star of Redemption, "Revelation is the first thing to set its mark firmly into the middle of time; only after Revelation do we have an immovable Before and Afterward. Then there is a reckoning of time independent of the reckoner and the place of reckoning, valid for all the places of the world."

Augustine's meditation on the nature of time usually is portrayed as a psychology. But Augustine proposed this as an ontology of time as well. In Augustine's discussion of the moment in time without duration, we have the first intimation of the infinitesimal moment later embodied in the calculus of Newton and Leibniz. Applied to musical rhythm, Augustine's theory of time brings forth what he called "numeri iudiciales." These "'numbers of judgment'" bridge eternity and mortal time; they are eternal in character and lie outside of our ordinary concept of number, but act as an ordering principle for all other numbers.[21]

In Augustine's "numbers of judgment" we have the first intimation of the 17th-century mathematical revolution.[22] It portended the great leap from the world of Aristotle, for whom everything in the mind must first be in the senses, to the world of higher mathematics, where abstract thought created concepts that the senses could not fathom (infinitesimal magnitudes and multi-dimensional geometries, for example), but the intellect could apply to the mastery of nature. Kohelet's contemplation of human mortality before God's infinity as refracted through Augustine's meditation on time and mortality was the point of origin of modern mathematical physics.

Adam the First stands in fear and trembling before God, overwhelmed by his mortality. He perceives the infinite reach of eternity and the vanishing smallness of the moments of his life. In his search for redemption he reverses the arrow of time. He learns to "count his days and gain a heart of wisdom." With this wisdom Adam the Second reaches out to the infinite and joins God in the continuing work of creation. ☙

---

21 In the Sixth Book of *De Musica Libri Sei,* Augustine presents a hierarchy of rhythm that begins with "sounding numbers"—the rhythm we actually hear—followed by "memorized rhythms," that is, the mind's recognition and remembrance of a pattern. Rising above all such numbers is what Augustine calls "consideration," the numeri iudiciales. These "numbers of judgment" bridge eternity and mortal time; they are eternal in character and lie outside of rhythm itself but act as an ordering principle for all other rhythms. Only they are immortal, for the others pass away instantly as they sound, or fade gradually from our memory. They are, moreover, a gift from God, for "from where should we believe that the soul is given what is eternal and unchangeable, if not from the one, eternal, and unchangeable God?"

22 See David P. Goldman, "The Divine Music of Mathematics," *First Things*, April 2012.