

## ***Hokhmah and Narishkeit: Learning the Culture of a Declining West***

**By: DAVID P. GOLDMAN**

*Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*  
Ed. by Jacob J. Schacter. Maggid Books, 2018 (Reissue of the 1998 Edition).

The summer of 2018 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. His "biological" theory of the rise and decline of civilizations is today regarded as quaint, but some of his insights about the weaknesses of Western culture were prescient. He was among the first to warn that societies that foster the arbitrary self-assertion of the individual would stop producing children. Like it or not, we live in Spengler's world. The consensus culture of today's West rejects its own religious and cultural foundations. Christianity itself has become a minority culture in most Western countries.

When *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures* first appeared in 1998 under the editorship of R. J. Schacter, the question was: Should religious Jews learn the *hokhmah* of other cultures, Western Christian culture in particular? An additional question now arises: Can we learn Western culture, even if we want to? The answer to the two questions, respectively, is maybe yes and maybe no, and sometimes yes and sometimes no.

We have far less to fear from Gentile *hokhmah* than in the past, but we also have less opportunity to learn from it. Only a generation ago, the culture of the West with its deep Christian associations still appeared as a challenge to Judaism. For nearly two hundred years the first rank of Jewish talent was decimated by defections to science (Jacobi, Einstein, Pauli, Schroedinger), poetry (Heine), fiction (Kafka), philosophy (Hermann Cohen, Cassirer, Husserl, Scheler), music (Mendelssohn), painting (Modigliani, Max Liebermann), and other Gentile cultural endeavors. Jews enriched Western culture more than Western culture enriched Jewish life. The high culture of the West presented itself as a competitor to religion, claiming that the aesthetic experience of art surpassed the experience of

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the sacred. The German “Classic” of Goethe and Schiller and its English acolytes from Coleridge to Matthew Arnold set art above religion. Three generations ago the Columbia University scholar Lionel Trilling taught Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot to young Jewish students who later founded the Neoconservative movement.<sup>1</sup> The German Classic is a closed book to American university students, and even its distant echo in Arnold has faded away.

Two magisterial essays form the core of the present volume: R. David Berger’s account of the Maimonidean controversy during the Middle Ages, and R. Aharon Lichtenstein *Z”TL*’s impassioned advocacy of the high literature of the West. It is good to have the volume back in print, for this material should be required reading for every educated Jew. The issues addressed by R. Berger and R. Lichtenstein appear quite different, but there is good reason to read them as two aspects of the same problem, as I shall attempt to explain below. For contemporary Jewish life, to be sure, the Maimonidean controversy seems more pressing. It remains unfinished business for Jewish philosophy, according to R. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, so much so that he justifies the effort required to formulate a distinctly Jewish philosophy on this ground. The Rav concludes his essay *The Halakhic Mind* with the thought that a Jewish philosophy

...would help us to discriminate between the living and the dead in Jewish philosophy. What, for instance, is of halakhic nature in the Guide and the Kuzari, and what merely an echo of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy? The purpose of such an analysis is not to eliminate non-Jewish elements. Far from it, for the blend of Greek and Jewish thought has oftentimes been truly magnificent. However, by tracing the Jewish trends and comparing them to the non-Jewish, we shall enrich our outlook and knowledge.

Three questions arise in this context:

- 1) Is Greek (or later Christian) philosophy *hochma* to begin with, or is it *narishkei*?
- 2) If it is indeed *hokhmah*, is it of any relevance to religious Jews?
- 3) And if it is indeed *hokhmah*, and it is also relevant to religious Jews, did our best thinkers, for example Rambam, employ this *hokhmah* in an appropriate way?

Rav Lichtenstein asks, “If some measure of cultural activity can be recognized as a legitimate need, when, then, did R. Ishma’el enjoin Ben

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<sup>1</sup> See Gertrude Himmelfarb, “The Trilling Imagination,” in *The Weekly Standard*, February 14, 2005.