

## Soloveitchik Engagement with Western Philosophy

The Rav's engagement with Western philosophy is rooted in the thought of the German Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen whom the Rav himself calls "the greatest of modern Jewish philosophers" (lectures on Genesis Hakirah 27 46) and whose neo-Kantianism was the subject of his doctoral dissertation. The thought of Cohen however can be divided into two periods, his "younger" and "older" periods (See Bergman Contemporary Thinkers). The tension and dialectic between these two periods serve as the springboard for the tension and dialectic which defines the Rav's philosophy.

In Hermann Cohen's early period he saw the man's knowledge as a continual process of thought which defined Kant's thing-into-itself. This defined the methodology of science which constructs models of the physical world. The Rav understands the halachic process in a similar vein. This is the central idea of part 1. The emphasis is more on the process than on the body of knowledge and therefore is called Halakhic Man as opposed to The Halakhah.

While Kant himself coined his philosophy as a second Copernican revolution, this did not imply that he was abandoning the traditional goal of metaphysics but that rather that philosophical truth could not be gleaned from the world, but man's conceptualization. This "transcendental", according to Kant, constitutes an ideal world in and of itself. It was Cohen's interpretation of Kant, beginning in his 1871 work Kant's Theory of Experience which gave new meaning to Kant's Copernican Revolution wherein the focus was not on man's unchanging "transcendental idealism" but on man himself who is constantly thinking and producing knowledge.

It can therefore be said that Cohen launched the "second Copernican revolution" which established man as the "ontological" center of the world after Kant had established man as the "ontic" center.

(For a similar concept in Kabbalistic see Leshem chapter 16 of part 2 of his Sefer HaKlalim).

As the Rav writes in the Genesis lectures 51

To know is a basic moral virtue. Knowledge as such is a great ethical performance. Knowledge means to have possession of certain data. Cognition means to know through the process of searching. The pursuit of wisdom is the great ethical performance. Knowledge is an actus, not a factum." (See ft. 24).

In describing Halakhic Man, the Rav dwells on methodology which he describes as an act of contraction "tzimtzum" whereby the halacha begins with a priori concepts and uses them to describe the real world. Halakhic Man is not at all an essay on the halacha itself but on Halakhic Man's methodology for producing halachic concepts.

In his "older" period Cohen was occupied with the problem of the individual. The turning point was the publication in 1915 of his work "The Idea of Religion in Philosophy" (Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie). There he notes that any philosophy of ethics does not distinguish any individual from another and therefore leaves an important if not the most important component of ethics. Only religion and its idea of God can give meaning to the

individual. In his final work *Religion of Reason Out of The Sources of Judaism*, Cohen develops a theory of the individual based on the human qualities of guilt and self renewal.

In part 2 of *Halakhic Man* the Rav echoes Hermann Cohen's ideas on creativity and individuality as rooted in man's Divinelike uniqueness. The first is uniqueness that comes from intellectual creativity. The second comes from the unique property of man's identity as a unique "I" which is rooted in God's.

This tension is expressed in two seemingly contradictory footnotes, ft. 4 and ft. 147. In ft.4 the Rav derides "the entire Romantic aspiration to escape from the domain of knowledge, the rebellion against the authority of objective, scientific cognition which has found its expression in the biologicistic philosophies of Bergson, Nietzsche, Spengler, Klages, and their followers and in the phenomenological, existential, and antiscientific school of Heidegger etc.

In ft. 147 he writes "this concept of the obligatory nature of the creative gesture, of self-creation as an ethical norm, an exalted value, which Judaism introduced into the world, reverberates with particular strength in the world views of Kierkegaard, Ibsen, Scheler, and Heidegger. Man's ascent from a psychic I to a personal I in Scheler's view and his development from "inauthentic existence" to "authentic existence" in the philosophy of Heidegger (as expressed in *Being and Time*) symbolize that norm which aspires to the complete realization of man in the ongoing course of his ontic transformations."

It should be noted that the word "ontic" should read "ontological". See Kaplan p.170.

This tension is not only implicit in the text of *Halakhic Man* but is explicit in the footnotes most notably p. 139 ft.4 and p.163 ft.147.

While the two periods in Hermann Cohen's philosophical work appear to be at odds, nonetheless they are "entangled". This is because the infinite process of thought which seeks to objectify the world also leads to the establishment of the irreducible uniqueness of man and God.

Cohen's neo-Kantianism is echoed by the Rav's discussion of the theoretical halacha in section v of part 1 beginning on page 17. There he compares the halachic process to "a mathematician who fashions an ideal world and then uses it for the purpose of establishing a relationship between it and the real world. The essence of the halacha, which was received from God, consists in creating an ideal world and cognizing the relationship between that ideal world and our concrete environment in all its visible manifestations and underlying structures". (19,20)

In essence, the Rav is describing the halachic process as an ever continuing intellectual one

In the second part of *Halachic Man*, the Rav echoes the thought of Cohen's "older" period where the uniqueness of the individual becomes the cornerstone of his religious philosophy.

*Religion of Reason Out of The Sources of Judaism* o 173.13

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The concept of the originative principle as used for the concept of the divine being also settles the problem of the nothing, which is a stumbling block for the thought of creation. The Hebrew

word that seems to correspond to nothing אין in no way means merely nothing: it means, rather, the relative infinity of privation...Creation, as a problem of thought finds its complete solution in this concept, in the unity of the concepts of the uniqueness of being and the infinite, privative originative principle. If God is the unique being, then he is the originative principle of becoming, as a problem of thought, has found its primary basis

See Halakhic Man 102 for an elucidation of this principle.

The peculiar character of religion, though it remains unshakably connected to ethics, will only be fulfilled when the correlation of God and man assumes a more intimate significance for man as an individual and as an I. Therefore, to the question of whether there are any problems of moral action that remain after those concerning the fellowman have been resolved, religion gives the following answer. Although it is permanently connected with ethics, religion elevates itself beyond ethics and designs its own method analogous to ethics. Religion will provide a foundation for, will prepare and secure those problems of moral action which are beyond the problem of ethics, due to the limitations of its method, cannot deal. (166).

We repeat. If we claim that religion is concerned with man's guilt, and if we impart to religion the origin of the I as an individual, we do not dissolve its connection with ethics, but on the contrary, make the connection affective, so that ethics itself must demand the translation to religion, just as it will also have to demand that transition for the concept of God. (168).

Cohen's concept of correlation is discussed *Der Begriff der Religion in System der Philosophie* (1915)

Neither of the two can be thought of in isolation. When I think of God, I must also think of the human being at the same time, and I cannot think of the human being without simultaneously thinking of God" (BR 96).

God is conditioned by correlation with the human being. And the human being is conditioned by correlation with God (*Judische Schriften* 3:191).

In the *Religion of Reason* (88) Cohen sees correlation, expressed in creation and revelation, as having its "ground" in the concept of unique being as the presupposition of becoming.

In *Halakhic Man*, the Rav writes (110)

The Halakhah introduced the concept of creation, in all its force and splendor, into both the commandment of repentance and the fundamental principles of providence, prophecy, and choice.

Repentance, according to the halakhic view, is an act of creation-self creation. The severing of one's psychic identity with one's previous "I", and the creation of a new "I" possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals-this is of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future.

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Halakhic man is engaged in self-creation, in creating a new "I".

The old problem of the status of the individual, which had its roots in the philosophy of Aristotle and which, for a long time, engaged the attention of the Christian and Arab scholastics, found both its clearest expression and its most profound and original solution in the philosophy of Maimonides.

On the one hand, Maimonides subscribed to the view of Aristotle (and Plato) that true, authentic existence is to be found only in the realm of the forms-the universal ideas- while the realm of particularity, rooted in matter (as an individuating principle) does not attain the level of complete being but exists only as an image of the universal. On the other hand, the Halakhah has always insisted upon the principle of individual immortality. How can these two apparently contradictory positions be maintained?