

Critics Unforgiving of a Jewish Scholar's Def

In an article in this month's issue of the conservative religion journal *First Things*, Orthodox rabbi Meir Soloveichik relates the story of a Catholic nun stunned by the hatred that Israelis bear for their enemies. After witnessing the pride of an Israeli friend whose son exhibited a loathing for Saddam Hussein, the nun concluded,

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

ALANA NEWHOUSE

"hatred is in the Jewish religion."

It is a striking observation, one that might evoke suspicions of historic, theologically based Christian antisemitism. But Soloveichik, a scion of an illustrious rabbinical family, has this to say about the nun: "She was right."

In an article titled "The Virtue of Hate," Soloveichik, a graduate student at the Yale Divinity School, resident scholar at the

REPENT, YE SINNERS

A new book on forgiveness.
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Jewish Center in New York City and Beren Fellow at Yeshiva University, illustrates the divergent Christian and Jewish attitudes of forgiveness. Christians, taking their cues from Jesus, bestow forgiveness on saints and sinners alike, whereas Jews insist that

"while no human being is denied the chance to *become* worthy of God's love, not every human being engages in actions so as to be worthy of that love, and those unworthy of divine love do not deserve our love either."

This Jewish tradition comes alive in Soloveichik's references to prominent biblical figures, including Samson, who is portrayed heroically as he smites the Philistines who gouged out his eyes; the prophetess Deborah, joyous in the "gruesome" death of her enemy Sisera; and Queen Esther who, not content with disposing of her arch-enemy Haman, magisterially calls for the heads of all of his sons, too.

"Judaism believes that while forgiveness is often a virtue, hate can be virtuous when one is dealing with the frightfully wicked," Soloveichik writes. "Rather than forgive, we can wish ill; rather than hope for repentance, we can instead hope that our enemies experience the wrath of God."

A number of Christian theologians welcomed the piece. "It draws the contrast a little too sharply than I would, but the contrast is there," said Cardinal Avery Dulles, who teaches at Fordham University. "In general, he's correct that the emphasis on mutual forgiveness is not as strong in the Old Testament as in the New Testament."

Father Richard John Neuhaus, a

Catholic priest and editor of *First Things*, also approved of the piece, although he, too, added that Soloveichik may have drawn certain distinctions too sharply.

Jewish theologians, aptly enough, were not as forgiving.

"It perpetuates the stereotype that Christianity is a religion of love and Judaism is a religion of hate, that the Christian God is a loving god and the Jewish God is a

hateful god," said Neil Gillman, a professor of Jewish philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. "It's an infuriating article. It's irresponsible schol-



JEWISH CENTER
MEIR SOLOVEICHIK:
Journal article calls
hate a 'virtue.'

arship to lump all of Judaism in one boat and all of Christianity in one boat, to take one rabbinic passage and one passage from the Gospels and say the first represents Judaism and the second represents Christianity. It's not only irresponsible, it's immoral."

"I thought it was a rather strange article," said David Novak, a professor of religion at the University of Toronto and a

Defense of 'Hate'

member of the editorial board of First Things. Novak suggested that Soloveichik, who comes from "a very cloistered yeshiva world and ended up at Yale Divinity School, of all places," may simply be experiencing a sort of intellectual growing pain. "This is a kind of knee-jerk reaction that if Christianity says 'A,' Judaism must say 'not-A.' If Christianity says 'forgiveness,' Judaism must say 'not-forgiveness.'"

Harvard Divinity School professor Jon Levenson proffered credit to Soloveichik for publishing an article in a non-Jewish journal of religion, given his illustrious last name, but fretted that Soloveichik's overstatement of the differences between Judaism and Christianity could have repercussions for the interfaith conversation.

"I'm worried about readers, especially the mostly non-Jewish readers of First Things, who will say Judaism really does believe in vengeance, an eye for an eye, sinners should just drop dead, and all that," he said. "It's hard for me to see why Christians would want to be sympathetic to Judaism, when it's being described as a religion that esteems hate and doesn't seem to have much of a role for repentance."

But Soloveichik gives a boost to the interfaith relationship by taking a swipe at Jewish institutions and individuals who refuse to

abandon their centuries-old gripe with the Christian community.

"[A] danger inherent in hate is that we may misdirect our odium at institutions in the present because of their past misdeeds," he writes. "[A]fter centuries of suffering, many Jews have, in my own experience, continued to despise religious Christians, even though it is secularists and Islamists who threaten them today, and Christians should really be seen as their natural allies.... Modern anti-Christianity is no more excusable than ancient anti-Semitism."

In an e-mail to the Forward, Soloveichik stressed that the hate at the heart of his piece was of a very specific kind. "The point of my article is that Judaism does countenance hating extreme and egregious evildoers: Hitler, Stalin, Arafat, Hussein, bin Laden and the like," he writes. "For example, a Jew in a concentration camp need not pray that Hitler repent; rather, this Jew can and should pray that Hitler experience the wrath of God."

Indeed, toward the end of his article, Soloveichik uses his theological thesis to lash out at critics of Israel who argue that citizens of the Jewish state must forgive the Palestinian leadership and reengage in the peace process.

"When we are facing those who seek nothing but our destruction, our hate reminds us who we are dealing with. When hate is appropriate, then it is not only virtuous, but essential for Jewish well-being," Soloveichik writes. "Per-

haps there will soon be peace in the Middle East, perhaps not. But one thing is certain: we will not soon forgive the actions of a man who, as he sent children to kill children, knew — all too well — just what he was doing. We will not — we cannot — ask God to have mercy upon him."

For at least one Jewish leader, this point was pitch-perfect, and a message for our time.

"This is an amazing article, and he makes a compelling case," said Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, director of the Pennsylvania Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. When editing the Reform movement's first new Haggada in three decades, Elwell reinserted significant portions that had previously been edited out, including a passage from Psalms and Lamentations in which those at the table call on God to "Pour out your fury on the nations that do not know you.... Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from God's heavens."

According to Elwell, it is important, especially in the context of religious practice, to acknowledge feelings of anger and the desire for vengeance. As the intifada rages on, at a time when disillusion is *de rigueur* and many of those who once considered themselves firmly on the left have found themselves suddenly on the right, Elwell believes Soloveichik's piece is more than relevant.

"It's a very important article," she said. "I hope it gets everyone talking."

showitz's claims that Lanner was "continue unchecked for many years"