

Review Essay

Nietzsche, Soloveitchik and Contemporary Jewish Philosophy by Daniel Rynhold and Michael J. Harris (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 316 pp.

Reviewed by: **DAVID P. GOLDMAN**

The Superman and the Knight of Faith

Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik was occupied with Continental philosophy through the whole of his career, starting with his studies at the University of Berlin in the late 1920s and his 1931 dissertation on the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen. He was reticent about his relationship to secular sources; not until 1984 did he authorize publication of his most extensive treatment of secular philosophy, the essay *The Halakhic Mind*, forty years after he wrote it. Prof. Michael Wyschogrod, who attended his Talmud shiur at Yeshiva University for eight years, reported that he never discussed his years at the University of Berlin.¹

The Rav's relationship to secular philosophy nonetheless has inspired an extensive scholarly literature.² Dov Schwartz argues that the Rav began as a neo-Kantian and shifted towards Existentialism. Daniel Herschkowitz and Michael Feigenblat variously allege that R. Soloveitchik adapted his concept of Jewish fate and destiny from the Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger, and espoused a *Völkisch*, that is, racist, concept of Jewish peoplehood. In another contribution to this journal I rejected this characterization as outrageous distortion. William Kolbrenner in a recent book portrays the Rav as a Freudian of sorts, impelled by Oedipal rebellion against his Brisker forebears.³ My view is that R. Soloveitchik took secular

¹ Interview with the author.

² For a survey of the academic literature see David Shatz, "Contemporary Scholarship on Rabbi Soloveitchik's Thought: Where We are, Where We Can Go," in *Scholarly Man of Faith* (Urim Publications, p. 2018), ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Dov Schwartz, pp. 135–196.

³ William Kohlbrener, *The Last Rabbi: Joseph Soloveitchik and Talmudic Tradition*.

David P. Goldman is the author of numerous academic and popular articles on music, mathematics and philosophy, including two previous contributions to *Hakirah*. He is the author of *How Civilizations Die* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2011). He has headed several quantitative research groups at major financial firms.

philosophy as a foil rather than as a foundation for his own *hashkafa*, which was deeply rooted in Jewish sources.⁴

An important contribution to the debate comes from Daniel Rynhold and Michael J. Harris, who assert a correspondence between Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of religion and the Rav's presentation of Judaism. In their account, Nietzsche's polemic against religion applies to some medieval Rishonim and, particularly, to the Hazon Ish and his school, but not to R. Soloveitchik. Their point of departure is the Rav's concept of repentance as a creative act rather than as expiatory suffering. This is a brave assertion. Nietzsche was an outspoken atheist who proclaimed that the philosophy of Kant had killed God, just as Nietzsche set out to kill the philosophy of Kant. The Nazis claimed Nietzsche as a precursor, on the strength of his concept of the Will to Power and his nostalgia for the "blonde beast" banished by Christianity. The modern scholarly consensus rejects this view, as Rynhold and Harris emphasize. Instead, they see in Nietzsche a champion of creativity whose thought parallels that of the Rav in important ways. Central to their account is Nietzsche's rejection of the "life-denying" guilt in Christianity and some Jewish commentators.

We learn something important from Rynhold and Harris in examining a convergence between Nietzsche's and R. Soloveitchik's thinking. If we leave the matter there, we miss the opportunity to learn something even more important from their divergence. In one respect, Rynhold and Harris miss the Teutonic forest for the trees. There is a great divide in the Continental philosophy that succeeded Kant. Goethe, Kierkegaard and Scheler stand on one side of it; on the other we find Novalis, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger. A full account of the issues that Rynhold and Harris seek to address would require more attention to Nietzsche's antecedents and antagonists.

In R. Soloveitchik's philosophy, ethics and ontology are inseparable: Man emulates God's creation of the world and becomes God's partner in creation through ethical practice, as well as through scientific discoveries that enhance human dignity. The world as God presented it to us is literally, not just metaphorically, imperfect, and human creativity in partnership with God perfects creation literally, not just metaphorically. Ontology is not a given object but rather is shaped by human action as directed by the ethical will. There are intimations of this concept of creativity in Christian thinkers from St. Augustine to Kierkegaard, but I do not think that the unity of ethics and ontology can be presented adequately except in the context of Torah. We comprehend the Divine Will not through passive contemplation but by shaping our own ethical will in partnership

⁴ "Rav Soloveitchik's New World View"

with God. That is what the Rav meant by a “new world view out of the sources of Halakhah.”

In this specific sense, one might think of Nietzsche as the anti-Soloveitchik: He has no ethics because he has no ontology. I will show later that Nietzsche’s doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, which declares in effect that every moment has an importance equal to that of any other moment, makes ethics impossible to begin with. Nietzsche, I shall argue, is a Nihilist not merely by dint of his ironic attitude, but by the inner logic of his metaphysics.

Rynhold and Harris depict Nietzsche as a sort of intellectual ally of Brisker creativity against B’nai Barak literalism. Citing Prof. Lawrence Kaplan’s monograph on the *Hazon Ish*, they write:

[T]he emphasis on *hiddush*—the conception “innovation” that is at the very heart of the Brisker method—is seen as a supreme manifestation of intellectual creativity. And for that very reason, the *Hazon Ish* was opposed to it. While the opening for such creative intellectual expression within the beit midrash may well have countered the threat of a wholesale “brain drain” to the secular academy, with students becoming increasingly attracted to the opportunities offered there, Hazon Ish entirely rejected it. “*Hiddush* is alien to my nature,” he writes; “The plain understanding (*ba-pashtut*) is always the truth.” Kaplan explains this opposition to the Brisker method as reflecting a “fundamental ideological point... if only by implication” that the method “concedes too much to the modern temper, to the modern emphasis on the self and its intellectual autonomy.” (152)

Rynhold and Harris, to be sure, in no way view R. Soloveitchik as a follower of Nietzsche. The Rav listed Nietzsche among the thinkers who perverted the Jewish concept of creativity to catastrophe effect, as he wrote in *Halakhic Man*:

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... These ideas, which were pure and holy at their inception, were profaned and corrupted in modern culture. The will was transformed by Schopenhauer into a “blind” will, while for Nietzsche it was embodied in the “superman.” Similarly, the longing for creation was perverted into the desire for brutal and murderous domination. Such views

have brought chaos and disaster to our world, which is drowning in its blood.⁵

Rynhold and Harris do not cite this often-quoted passage. That is a notable omission, not because it contradicts their argument, but rather because it might have been brought to bear to support it. Nietzsche's formulation of what Soloveitchik calls "the creative gesture" takes the form of the "will to power." This emphasis on the will, one might conjecture, has a parallel in R. Soloveitchik. The Rav accepts ibn Gabirol's assertion that the world was created through divine will, a doctrine also advanced by Rambam. It is meaningless to speak of creation *ex nihilo* without reference to the attribute of will.⁶ Without willful action, we cannot associate creation with any particular moment in time, and therefore should assume that the world always existed, as the Greeks believed. Furthermore—as we learn from Soloveitchik's recently published lectures on the Rambam—the paradox of creation *ex nihilo* in time disappears when we conceive that time itself is created.⁷ Time is thus the creature of will. Time is not merely perceived in the passive sense of Aristotle, but rather is constituted by willful action. Time and will thus are inseparable; time is not perceived so much as it is constituted by an act of will.

That is the line of inquiry one might have expected in a phenomenological comparison of Nietzsche and Soloveitchik, but neither Ibn Gabirol nor Duns Scotus is mentioned in the present book. The authors' interest lies elsewhere, mainly in Nietzsche's attack on a Christian understanding of repentance that is echoed in the writings of some medieval Jewish authorities. They cite R. Jonah Gerondi's 13th-century *Sha'arei Teshuvah* as an example of the concept of penance that Nietzsche derided and that R. Soloveitchik rejected. It might have been more fruitful to address Soloveitchik's understanding of the will at the outset, along with its antecedents in Ibn Gabirol and Maimonides, before attempting the comparison with the voluntarist Nietzsche. This might have obviated some of the difficulties that I will address later.

Rynhold and Harris cite R. Soloveitchik's comment that "Spinoza [Ethics IV] and Nietzsche [in Genealogy of Morals]—from this perspective—did well to deride the idea of repentance."⁸ They are well aware that R. Soloveitchik's reasons for rejecting this approach to repentance differ

⁵ *Halakhic Man*, p. 164.

⁶ See Dov Schwartz, *Religion or Halakha: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, p. 173.

⁷ See David Goldman, "Hokhma and Narishkeit: Learning the Culture of a Declining West," in *Hakirah* Volume 25.

⁸ *Halakhic Man*, p. 114.

from Nietzsche's, but they believe that the commonality is sufficiently strong to consider Nietzsche an intellectual ally of the Rav. To be precise, Nietzsche sees repentance as a subterfuge of the weak, whereas R. Soloveitchik views it as a metaphysical impossibility within his understanding of time-consciousness. In my view the differences are more important, and more instructive, than the areas of agreement. The Rav's account of *teshuvah* is embedded in a phenomenology of time that differs so radically from Nietzsche's as to obviate comparison.

In this and several other important respects Nietzsche is maddeningly self-contradictory, and a minor academic industry is devoted to disentangling Nietzsche's polemics against what Nietzsche himself wrote in another location. Nietzsche's celebrated irony sometimes is hard to distinguish from confusion. Nietzsche wrestled with contradictory elements of his inheritance from earlier philosophers, and we shall have to go back to his antecedents to make sense of him. The adage applies about the cuisine of America's Southern states: More important than what it *is*, is what it *was*. In my view Rynhold and Harris misunderstand some of Nietzsche's central ideas, above all what he called affirmation of life, because they have not dug deeply enough into Nietzsche's own sources.

The Rav's engagement with Continental philosophy begins with the breakdown of the neo-Kantian school, the subject of his doctoral dissertation. That is a main theme of *The Halakhic Mind*, which asserts that the breakdown of materialistic determinism opens the way for a new philosophy of religion. Nietzsche was the most colorful and, in the popular mind, the most influential critic of Kant. Nietzsche and R. Soloveitchik have a commonality of interest in the collapse of the Kantian school. But there also are profound differences. Kant's philosophy sought to repair classical metaphysics after the 17th-century revolution in science left it in ruins. 19th- and 20th-century physics and mathematics, in turn, burst Newton's mechanistic vision of the world, and the Rav sought to show that the revolution in science itself opened a new vista for religious philosophy. Nietzsche's emphasis, by contrast, is wholly subjective. For R. Soloveitchik there is no harsher epithet than "antiscientific." In *Halakhic Man* he denounced the "antiscientific school of Heidegger and his coterie, and from the midst of which there arose in various forms the sanctification of vitality and intuition, the veneration of instinct, the desire for power, the glorification of the emotional affective life and the flowing, surging stream of subjectivity [which]... have brought complete chaos

and human depravity to the world.”⁹ When it is anchored in divine command or natural law, the human will can be majestic and beneficent; when it turns arbitrary, it becomes destructive.

Walter Kaufmann, the dean of American Nietzsche scholars, observed that among all the important philosophers Nietzsche is the easiest to read and the hardest to understand. Kant’s prose is impenetrable, but his theory of perception is fairly straightforward. Nietzsche writes an aphoristic, ironic German, and mixes playful antiphrasis with positive assertion. He repeats himself constantly, except when he contradicts himself. There is more disagreement about what he actually meant to say than in the case of any other philosopher of note. Rynhold and Harris carefully review the scholarly literature in order to isolate “their” Nietzsche from what they consider to be falsifications of his philosophy, for example the tendentious claim that he was a forerunner of Nazism.

Nietzsche refers back to problems that beset German philosophy as soon as Kant’s work appeared in the last decade of the 18th century. Sometimes Nietzsche isn’t just being playful, but actually is confused. It is helpful to begin at the beginning, or rather at two beginnings: in 1687, the year that classical metaphysics collapsed, and in 1872, the year that Kant’s attempt to rescue classical metaphysics collapsed as well. This route may seem laborious, but one cannot quite make sense of Nietzsche without following it. Reading Nietzsche is like listening to the monologue of a schizophrenic conversing with the voices in his head; without knowing what the voices were saying, it is hard to understand the other side of the dialogue.

In 1687, a Venetian mortar round landed in the Parthenon, which the occupying Ottoman Turks had turned into a powder magazine, and blew up the greatest architectural remnant of Greek antiquity. By a quirk of destiny, Sir Isaac Newton in the same year blew up the physics of Aristotle with the publication of his *Principia Mathematica*, which replaced the clutter of ancient thought with his Laws of Motion.

The Rav observed:

Aristotelian physics, which unfortunately dominated Western thought throughout antiquity and in the Middle Ages, failed miserably because its foundation was common sense. The great accomplishment of Galileo and Newton consisted in replacing the practical, commonsense approach with the conceptualizing, creative scientific logos. The scientific logos conceptualizes reality; the commonsense logos takes reality at face value. Galileo and Newton pro-

⁹ *Halakbic Man*, p. 141.

claimed the principle of mathematicization and quantification of reality, of converting sense qualities like heat, light, color and sound into quantitative mathematical relations. Aristotle, for instance, said that all things fall downwards because they are heavy. In other words, he considered the gravitational pull a result of heaviness or weight. This is nonsense; the reverse is true; weight is the consequence of the gravitational pull. Newton discarded common sense and approached the matter from the viewpoint of the esoteric, abstract, creative conceptualizing logos, and he came up with his famous formula, $F = G(m_1*m_2)/r^2$. In other words, gravitational pull is nothing but a mathematical relation between two bodies, which consists of the product of the masses over the square of the distance. This method of quantification was perhaps the greatest discovery in the annals of mankind.¹⁰

The momentous year that destroyed Aristotelian physics along with the Parthenon also made a shambles of Aristotle's metaphysics. Physicists now reckoned with the arbitrarily small numbers of the Calculus, which Newton called "fluxions" and Leibniz "infinitesimals." These are entities unimaginable in Aristotle's philosophy, which excludes the possibility of an "actual infinite," a concept that Leibniz championed. Kant in his 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* proposed a patch that would preserve the foundation of Aristotelian metaphysics while accommodating the new mathematical physics. The center of Kant's system is what he called "synthetic *a priori* reason," a sort of inborn facility to construct from sense-data a concept that cannot be formed by induction. In particular, Kant sought to preserve intact Aristotle's categories of Time and Space as *a priori* forms of perception: They are the background against which sense-information is perceived and processed, like the Cartesian grid in classical mechanics.

Of the various objections directed against Kant's proposed solution to the breakdown of Aristotelian metaphysics, the most compelling also was the oldest, namely Augustine's critique of Aristotelian time. The future isn't here, the past is gone, and the present is insubstantial, said Augustine, so we cannot speak of any of them; rather, what we have is memory and anticipation in the present. In contrast to Kant's unsuccessful attempt to embody synthetic *a priori* reason in arithmetic, his critics proposed rather that sensory intuition arises from the perception of beauty.

By shifting the content of synthetic *a priori* reason from mere arithmetic to the perception of beauty, Kant's critics also undermined his con-

¹⁰ *Vision and Leadership*, 200-201.

cept of time as an *a priori* form. The question of time-consciousness focuses upon the moment of perception of beauty. The poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) famously declared in his poem “The Artists,” “Only through the morning-gate of beauty can you press into the land of experience.” He expanded on this theme in his poem “The Favor of the Moment”:

From the gods, like summer showers
 Blessing falls from cloudless sky
 And the mightiest of powers is –
 The twinkling of an eye.

From the first of all endeavor
 When the universe was wrought
 The Divine on earth has ever
 Been a lightning-flash of thought.

Stone by stone the work arises;
 Slow the hours pass on Earth.
 Swift, the work’s design surprises;
 Swift the spirit gave it birth.¹¹

Schiller’s celebration of the moment of aesthetic perception becomes “ecstasy” [*Ekstase*] in the Romantic vision of the poet-philosopher Novalis (1772–1801): “The paired concept of ‘Anticipation’ and ‘Fulfillment’ can only be related to the subjective experience of time, for an objective quantity of time permits no qualitative valuation. Fraught waiting, hoping and longing are conditions of the soul which are directed towards the future. They come to expression in intimations, prophecies and dreams... In decisive moments the process comes to a head in a comprehensive look backwards and forward, which brings together all times. Through dreams, feasts, delirium, pleasure, love and poetic inspiration, every consciousness breaks its boundaries and is lifted up over continuous time.”¹²

Romantic *Ekstase* cannot be summoned at will: It can be evoked only indirectly through “dreams, feasts, delirium, pleasure, love,” and so forth; it falls from heaven, out of the lap of the gods, as Schiller wrote. Nietzsche later suggested that “Dionysian” rapture might bring on the mood. Nor

¹¹ “Aus dem Himmel muss es fallen
 Aus der Götter Schoss, das Glück.
 Und der Mächtigste von allen
 Herrschern ist der Augenblick.” My translation.

¹² Quoted in *Astralis von Novalis: Handschrift, Text, Werk*, by Sophia Vietor. (Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), p. 211. Author’s translation.

can *Ekstase* be sustained. In the fleeting moment one glimpses the Beautiful. And then, as Schiller mourned,

As the sunlight's sparkling glances
Weave a tapestry of hue
When immortal Iris dances
In a raincloud passing through

So the Beautiful must vanish
Like the fleeting spark of light
That the stormy vapors banish
To the darkling grave of Night.

Ekstase survives with little variation in the time-philosophy of Heidegger, who identifies it with the acceptance of Fate.¹³ The Romantics and their successor Heidegger reject Kant's view of time and space as simple extension, and look to the union of past and future in the present. But in their understanding man is the passive recipient of the ecstatic vision, and the object of fate, determined by historical circumstances. R. Soloveitchik also rejects Kantian time, but from a radically different vantage point: We have the capacity to create time, such that the future determines the past. I will return to R. Soloveitchik's phenomenology of time later.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the most influential of all German writers, eschewed the aesthetic moment of the Romantics. The repudiation of the ecstatic moment that unites past and future in a beatific vision is his 1805 drama *Faust*. The most famous scene in the most influential work of modern European literature was written as a response to this aesthetic approach to time. The search for the aesthetic moment, Goethe countered, denies life. It is not difficult to find parallels between Faust and some strands of Jewish thought, as I argued in a 2015 article for this publication ("A Yeshiva Curriculum in Western Literature"), and by no coincidence. Faust is the most biblical of secular works of literature, with extensive paraphrase of *Job* and *Kobelet*.¹⁴

Faust turns on the question of the moment. Rather than sell his soul to the devil for earthly pleasures, Faust offers Mephistopheles a wager: if the devil can show him a moment so beautiful that he longs for it to linger, then he is lost. Mephistopheles has offered Faust the usual incentives: money, fame, women, and so forth. What Faust demands rather is life: "to enjoy in my inner self what is apportioned to all of mankind, to grasp

¹³ David P. Goldman, "Rav Soloveitchik's New World View," *Hakirah* Volume 24.

¹⁴ David P. Goldman, "A Yeshiva Curriculum in Western Literature," *Hakirah* Volume 15.

in mind the highest and the lowest, to gather their weal and woe upon my breast.” Amused, Mephisto replies: “Believe me, I’ve chewed on this hard lump for thousands of years—from the cradle to the grave, no-one has digested the old sourdough of life. Believe our kind: The whole of life is fit only for a God! He basks in eternal light, and cast us into darkness, and all you get is—day and night.”

There is no “affirmation of life” in Goethe; life does not need to be “affirmed.” It is lived. To surrender to the temptation of the moment, Goethe tells us, is to turn one’s back on life. No pact is possible between Faust, who craves the reality of human life, and Mephistopheles, who offers destruction concealed behind the illusion of pleasure. Instead of a pact, Faust proposes a wager with the devil: “If ever I lay down content on a bed of idleness, let me be finished then and there! If you can fool me with flattery to the point that I admire myself—let that be my last day! I offer this bet!” And Faust adds: “If I say to the moment: ‘Yet linger! You are so beautiful!’ Then you will be free of service, and my time will be up.”

Faust never succumbs to the diabolical temptation of the moment. He dies with the declaration, “Only he deserves freedom and life who must conquer them every day!” and is saved. That is well and good if you happen to be Goethe, Franz Rosenzweig observed: Goethe alone could conquer that steep mountain ridge, where there stands a little memorial plaque to mark the spot where Zarathustra [i.e., Nietzsche] fell to his doom. “The memorial plaque warns hikers who have ascended the ridge not to follow in Goethe in hopeful trust in their own footsteps, without the wings of faith and love.” A guide to life that succeeds only if one happens to be a genius like Goethe has limited usefulness.

By a second quirk of fate, the year 1872 brought two quite independent events that together finished off Kant’s system. The first was Karl Weierstrass’ discovery of “pathological” functions that are everywhere continuous and nowhere differentiable. As R. Soloveitchik observed in *The Halakhic Mind*, this refuted Kant’s attempt to link sense-perception and *a priori* reason through “sensuous intuition.”¹⁵ It took philosophers a generation or two to absorb the implications of Weierstrass’ discovery. The second event was the publication of Nietzsche’s first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, which assaulted the classical ideal of beauty in a way from which it never recovered. He cited Plutarch’s tale of King Midas, who was told that the goat-footed demigod Silenus possessed the ultimate secret of wisdom. Midas had his hunters trap Silenus and refused to turn him loose until he revealed it. Silenus told the king:

¹⁵ *The Halakhic Mind*, p. 126.

Oh, wretched race of a day, children of chance and misery, why do ye compel me to say to you what it were most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is forever beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. The second best for you, however, is soon to die.

The Greek ideal of beauty in Nietzsche's account was a palliative that mankind invented to distract attention from its horror in the face of nothingness. Goethe had said this all before, to be sure (his protagonist Faust conjures and marries Helen of Troy, the classical exemplar of beauty, with tragic consequences). But Goethe put the idea into a story, while Nietzsche puts it in our face. This is a side of Nietzsche that bears comparison to R. Soloveitchik's thinking, in particular the contrast between the "aesthetic" and the "ethical," which the Rav drew from Kierkegaard. Nietzsche's predicament is more complicated: He wanted to have his cake and eat it too. He wanted to wallow in the *Ekstase* of the aesthetic moment, but he also was too astute to fool himself into believing that "beauty" was anything more than a distraction from existential dread before the absurdity of existence. In effect, Nietzsche hands his soul to the Devil not because he has been tricked, but because he despairs.

Nietzsche made public confession of his addiction to the aesthetic moment. In "The Drunkard's Song" section of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*,¹⁶ he announces that he takes Mephistopheles' side of Faust's wager: He desires the beautiful moment that will make him want it to last forever. It is dangerous to assert that any particular statement of Nietzsche's represents his actual thinking on the matter; he is everywhere ironic, and ironic self-refutation is the most characteristic feature of his writing. Nonetheless, there is one idea of which Nietzsche cannot rid himself, and which cannot be dismissed as a polemical construct to be upended in a new turn of irony. Walter Kaufmann observes that Nietzsche's submission to the aesthetic moment explains his most characteristic and idiosyncratic idea, namely eternal recurrence. Nietzsche's *alter ego* Zarathustra declares:

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy?... Then you said Yes, to all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored. If ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said "you please me, happiness! Abide moment!" then you wanted back all. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored—oh, then you loved the world. Eternal ones, love it eternally and evermore.... You higher men, do learn this, joy wants eternity. Joy wants the eternity of all things, wants, deep, deep eternity!¹⁶

¹⁶ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, IV 10. Quoted in Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton 1968) 320-321.

Kaufmann calls this “the supreme exaltation of the moment. Negatively, the doctrine of eternal recurrence is the most extreme repudiation of any deprecation of the moment, the finite, and the individual—the antithesis, too, of any faith in infinite progress, whether it be evolution, Faust’s unbounded striving, or the endless improvement of the human soul in Kant’s conception of immortality.” Nietzsche remains imprisoned in the eternal present of the aesthetic experience; “eternal recurrence” expresses the petulant desire of the aesthete to prolong the ecstatic moment into “deep, deep eternity.”¹⁷

Nietzsche wrote for a German audience that knew Goethe’s *Faust* intimately. In Goethe’s drama, the embrace of the aesthetic moment and its corollary, eternal recurrence, constitute a repudiation of life; it is precisely because Faust seeks life rather than Mephistopheles’ illusions that he declares that his life will terminate if he is seduced by the moment. Walter Kaufmann, who published a fine English translation of *Faust*, perceived this vividly, as we saw earlier. What was obvious to 19th-century readers is less obvious to today’s readers. Goethe is barely mentioned in the present volume, and *Faust* not at all. That is a significant omission on the part of Rynhold and Harris. They miss the implications of eternal recurrence, and write: “The doctrine of the eternal return or recurrence, understood not as a cosmological thesis but in existential terms as the test of one’s willingness to embrace the notion of the infinite repetition of one’s life in all its details, including all its suffering, despite the lack of any meaning located beyond that life or any metaphysical consolation, and hence understood as the test of one’s greatness, is perhaps Nietzsche’s most extreme version of life-affirmation.”¹⁸ That is true only in the ironic sense that Nietzsche “affirms” what he has forever repudiated.

Extracting declarative statements from Nietzsche is a treacherous task. No writer managed to express confusion with more aplomb than Nietzsche. He is all too aware that what he wants and what he can have are radically incompatible things, and he addresses the absurdity of his situation with comic irony. Nietzsche scholars offer diametrically opposed readings of what supposedly Nietzsche really thought, and in some sense all of them are right. As Kierkegaard wrote of Socrates, he was not a prophet but an ironist, not forward looking, because he could see no way out of his contradictions, but rather looking backward at the hopelessness of his contemporaries’ predicament. His shifting opinions about the mu-

¹⁷ Kaufmann, p. 321.

¹⁸ P. 119.

sic of Richard Wagner illustrate the problem. In his later work he expressed a perspicacious contempt for Wagner's predilection for grand climaxes:

If we wish to admire him, we should observe him at work here: how he separates and distinguishes, how he arrives at small unities, and how he galvanizes them, accentuates them, and brings them into pre-eminence. But in this way he exhausts his strength; the rest is worthless. How paltry, awkward, and amateurish is his manner of "developing," his attempt at combining incompatible parts.¹⁹

In full knowledge of Wagner's musical failings, though, Nietzsche remained fascinated by the composer. Long after his break with Wagner he wrote in *Ecce Homo*, "To this day I am still looking for a work of equally dangerous fascination, of an equally gruesome and sweet infinity as [Wagner's opera] *Tristan*.... The world is poor for anyone who has never been sick enough for this 'voluptuousness of hell.'"²⁰ Nietzsche remains a Romantic, but a self-critical Romantic, to the end. He wants Novalis' *Ekstase*, but well understands that the Dionysian frenzy leads inevitably to Schopenhauer's rejection of the world. Nietzsche's predicament isn't lost on Rynhold and Harris, to be sure. They repeatedly note his inconsistencies, writing for example: "So while Nietzsche clearly directs his ire at those he considers life-denying throughout his corpus, at the same time, he recognizes his own struggle with those signs of decadence, to which, given the very nature of reality, one is forever condemned, and without which, Nietzsche would have to be committed to a deeply un-Nietzschean eschatological vision."²¹

The question is: Which Nietzsche wins the argument? The ecstatic receptor of the aesthetic vision, as noted earlier, is the object of forces beyond his rational understanding, forces that only can be conjured through the sort of Romantic idling recommended by Novalis, or the sort of Dionysian frenzy that Nietzsche craves. Walter Kaufmann called attention to Nietzsche's hope to be seduced by the aesthetic moment, the same seductive moment that Faust rejected on pain of his soul. Yet Kaufmann remains astonished by Nietzsche's *Narrishkeit*: "One may yet wonder why Nietzsche, having conceived of the will to power and the overman, able to look back upon many a keen psychological insight as well as a comprehensive philosophy, should have preferred to think of himself as the

¹⁹ See David P. Goldman, "Why We Can't Hear Wagner's Music," in *First Things*, December 2010.

²⁰ Quoted in Walter Kaufmann op. cit. p. 51.

²¹ P. 175.

teacher of the eternal recurrence. Why did he value this most dubious doctrine, which was to have no influence to speak of, so extravagantly?"²² But Kaufmann has already given us the answer: "eternal recurrence" is simply the ecstatic moment turned inside-out.

Kierkegaard, the Gentile philosopher whom R. Soloveitchik most often quotes with approbation, provides an instructive contrast. He wrote of "the situation described in a well-known tale of the Middle Ages which tells of an unhappy man who awoke in hell and cried out, 'What time is it?' and the devil answered, 'An eternity.' And now even if this is something which cannot be represented in art, let it be your comfort as it is mine that the highest and most beautiful things in life are not to be heard about, nor read about, nor seen but, if one will, may be lived." Kierkegaard here restates what Faust tells Mephistopheles: The Romantic fixation on the ecstatic moment is inherently hostile, indeed fatal to life. But Kierkegaard's restatement contrasts two different orders of time, in this case the time of Romantic love and the time of married love:

Let us now glance at the relation between romantic and conjugal love. Romantic love remains constantly abstract in itself, and if it is able to acquire no external history, death already is lying in wait for it, because its eternity is illusory. Conjugal love begins with possession and acquires inward history. It is faithful. So is romantic love—but now note the difference. The faithful romantic lover waits, let us say, for fifteen years—then comes the instant which rewards him. Here poetry rightly sees that the fifteen years can very well be concentrated. It hastens on, then, to the moment. A married man is faithful for fifteen years, yet during those fifteen years he has had possession, so in the long succession of time he has acquired faithfulness. But such an ideal marriage cannot be represented, for the very point is time in its extension. At the end of the fifteen years he apparently got no further than he was at the beginning, yet he has lived in a high degree aesthetically. His possession has not been like dead property, but he has constantly been acquiring his possession. He has not fought with lions and ogres, but with the most dangerous enemy—with time. For him eternity does not come afterwards as in the case of the knight, but he has had eternity in time. He alone, therefore, has triumphed over time; for one can say of the knight that he has killed time, as indeed a man constantly wishes to kill time when it has no reality for him. But this is never the perfect victory.

²² *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, by Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books, 1968), p. 323.

The married man, being a true conqueror, has not killed time but has saved it—and preserved it in eternity.²³

Life for Kierkegaard is defined by the triumph over time. Life conquers time; mere poetry is lost in the moment.

It is instructive to contrast Soloveitchik's characterization of the transformative moment with that of Kierkegaard, whom Soloveitchik cites often and for the most part sympathetically. In his disquisition on the decisive moment, Kierkegaard compares the Savior to the teacher in Plato's dialogue *Meno* who awakens a memory of a truth that lay dormant in the mind of the pupil. This Savior appears "in the fullness of time," but he does not appear as a result of any action on the part of his pupil. On the contrary, the pupil is incapable of initiating his own salvation, because he is paralyzed by the *Meno* paradox: one does not seek the truth if one already knows it, and cannot seek the truth if one does not know it, because one doesn't know what to seek. The Savior intervenes by an ineffable act of grace, but there is no way to explain why the "fullness of time" comes about at one point in time rather than another.²⁴ For Plato as well as Kierkegaard, the pupil is incapable of activity until the teacher initiates the process of recall. Time thus remains a logical conundrum for Kierkegaard, and his discussion of the significance of the moment in the *Philosophical Fragments* remains incomplete and somewhat confusing. Man as co-creator understands time by making it. As an object of contemplation, time remains an insoluble enigma.

It hardly requires mention that the concept of ethics has no application in Nietzsche's way of looking at the world; the term does not have an index entry in the Rynhold and Harris volume. If every moment will recur eternally, all moments are of equal value, and all actions are indifferent.

On closer examination, Nietzsche offers us "will to power" without will, and the "affirmation of life" without life. Rynhold and Harris, though, take Nietzsche at his word. They focus on "Nietzsche's affirmation of this life and this world, a central motif of his thought expressed in many places in his oeuvre. Arguably, it is *the* central motif. Indeed, Nietzsche seems to use the idea of life-affirmation to determine the order of rank of the various worldviews with which he is concerned. As a result, the concept of life-affirmation runs through the remainder of our book in its entirety. There is a sense in which each of the ensuing chapters takes

²³ See *The Essential Kierkegaard*, by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton 1995), pp. 70-71.

²⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 121-125.

a particular topic and explores the manner in which Judaism can either incorporate or interpret it in a way that is life-affirming rather than life-denying.”²⁵

Nietzsche, to be sure, can be as confusing and self-contradictory in the matter of life-affirmation as in everything else, as Rynhold and Harris concede:

It is not immediately obvious precisely what Nietzsche’s affirmation of life amounts to. Though the basic notion seems intuitively fairly straightforward, Nietzsche devotes much of his writing not to affirming but to sharply critiquing certain forms of life such as the Christian one. There is also some vacillation in Nietzsche between the affirmation of life in general and the affirmation of a particular person’s life and the particular ways in which it has unfolded. Nevertheless, the key thought of Nietzsche’s affirmation of life for our purposes — and one undoubtedly central to Nietzsche himself — is that the meaning of this life must not be sought in any life or world beyond this one. Such lives or worlds are, for Nietzsche, entirely fictitious, and belief in them is damaging to our human earthly life, the only one we have and which we must value entirely on its own terms.²⁶

Nietzsche’s notion of life-affirmation is confusing, in my view, because his complementary obsessions—the aesthetic moment and eternal recurrence—bespeak an inherent hostility to life. To make sense of this, Rynhold and Harris reduce Nietzsche’s life-affirmation to the assertion that we should ignore the blandishments of eternal life and concentrate on this world. That would turn him to a mere Teutonic Omar Khayyam (“Oh take the cash, and let the credit go/Nor heed the rumble of a distant drum”).

Repentance and penance in Nietzsche’s view deny life, because they refer to a fictitious life after death. He argues that the concept of repentance is directed

...against the ‘debtor,’ in whom bad conscience now so firmly establishes itself, eating into him, broadening out and growing, like a polyp, so wide and deep that in the end, with the impossibility of paying back the debt, is conceived the impossibility of discharging the penance, the idea that it cannot be paid off (‘eternal punishment’); ultimately, however, against the ‘creditor,’ and here we should think of the *causa prima* of man, the beginning of the human race, of his ancestor who is now burdened with a curse (‘Adam,’

²⁵ Rynhold and Harris p. 117.

²⁶ P. 118.

‘original sin,’ ‘the will in bondage’), or of nature, from whose womb man originated and to whom the principle of evil is imputed (‘diabolization of nature’)...until, all at once, we confront the paradoxical and horrifying expedient through which a martyred humanity has sought temporary relief, Christianity’s stroke of genius: none other than God sacrificing himself for man’s debt, none other than God paying himself back, God as the only one able to redeem man from what, to man himself, has become irredeemable — the creditor sacrificing himself for his debtor, out of love (would you credit it?), out of love for his debtor!²⁷

Rynhold and Harris call attention to “the shared idea [in Nietzsche and R. Soloveitchik] that the accrual of punishment is to be likened to a contractual debt and as such can be paid off. R. Jonah’s self-torture through worry, regret, and possible future punishment could not be farther from Soloveitchik mind.”²⁸ They acknowledge, to be sure, that “Nietzsche’s account is set against the background of a denial of freewill to absolve the debtor of any *moral* wrongdoing in a manner that would be alien to Soloveitchik.”

As the authors observe, there is a degree of overlap between Nietzsche and R. Soloveitchik. But I believe that Rynhold and Harris overstate their case. Soloveitchik’s concept of sin and repentance is bound up inextricably with his phenomenology of time, such that his concept of repentance is fundamentally incompatible with Nietzsche’s. Soloveitchik also rejects the Christian notion of guilt and penance (and R. Jonah’s similar account), but he proposes quite different reasons for doing so. In his framework, penance for past sins is not merely undesirable, as Nietzsche believed, but metaphysically impossible:

It is impossible to regret a past that is already dead, lost in the abyss of oblivion. Similarly, one cannot make a decision concerning a future that is yet “unborn.” Therefore, Spinoza [Ethics IV] and Nietzsche [in *Genealogy of Morals*]—from this perspective—did well to deride the idea of repentance. However, there is a past that persists in its existence, that does not vanish and disappear but remains firm in its place. Such a past enters into the domain of the present and links up with the future. Similarly, there is a future that is not hidden behind a thick cloud but reveals itself now in all its beauty and majesty. Such a future, drawing upon its own hidden roots, infuses the past with strength and might, vigor and vitality. Both—past

²⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge University Press 2007), p. 104.

²⁸ P. 194.

and future—are alive; both act and create in the heart of the present and shape the very image of reality. From this perspective we neither perceive the past as “no more” nor the future as “not yet” nor the present as “a fleeting moment.” Rather past, present and future merge and blend together, and this new threefold time structure arises before us adorned with a splendid unity. The past is joined to the future, and both are reflected in the present...The past by itself is indeterminate, a closed book. It is only the present and the future that can pry it open and read its meaning. There are many different paths, according to this perspective, along which the cause can travel. It is the future that determines its direction and points the way. There can be a certain sequence of events that starts out with sin and iniquity but ends up with *mitzvoth* and good deeds, and vice versa. The future transforms the thrust of the past. This is the nature of that causality operating in the realm of the spirit if man, as a spiritual being, opts for this outlook on time, time as grounded in the realm of eternity.²⁹

Soloveitchik’s presentation of time as the unity of past, present, and future in some respects echoes Augustine’s critique of Aristotelian time in *Confessions* XI–XIV, but with a decisive difference: human will reshapes the past just as it determines the future. In place of Augustine’s paradox of time, Soloveitchik presents us with a temporality that is raw material for the exercise of the will: the essence of *Imitatio Dei* is the recreation of the self through the creation of time, just as God created the world by first creating time. Nietzsche simply cannot think in such terms. Rynhold and Harris mention R. Soloveitchik’s phenomenology of time as it applies to repentance, claiming that the Rav “appropriates this idea for his theory of repentance via Bergson’s contrast between quantitative and qualitative time.”³⁰ The Rav cites Bergson, but his own concept of time is far richer than that of the French philosopher. The authors fail to appreciate the depth and originality of the Rav’s approach, and by implication the radical differences with Nietzsche.

Rynhold and Harris concede that their effort to read R. Soloveitchik through Nietzsche’s lens raises a set of problems. The most egregious of these problems is the matter of free will. The characteristic human impulse in Nietzsche’s presentation is what he calls “the will to power,” yet he appears to reject the concept of free will altogether. Rynhold and Harris observe:

²⁹ *Halakic Man*, pp. 114-115.

³⁰ P. 117.

The notion of free will is central to traditional Jewish thought... Without free will, Maimonides asks, “what place would there be for the entire Torah?”... there appears to be an irreducible tension in Nietzsche’s thinking about free will. In many of his mature works, Nietzsche severely criticizes the notion of free will. In *Day-break*, he explicitly denies its existence... In a famous passage in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche attacks slave morality on the basis of its conception of agency and free will. He assails the idea of the free metaphysical subject that lies behind any particular deed and is able to choose whether to perform the deed or not... In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche accepts the traditional linkage of free will and moral responsibility, while utterly rejecting standard accounts of free will’s veracity and origins. Free will, Nietzsche asserts, is “the shadiest trick theologians have up their sleeves,” an invention, a fiction designed precisely to underpin ascriptions of responsibility and guilt and to justify punishment.³¹

That is, Nietzsche so despises the notion of guilt and penance that he rules out the possibility of moral agency that would allow the sinner to incur guilt in the first place.

As we have seen, Nietzsche’s problem with free will has a deeper source than simple rancor at Christian moralizing. He is trapped in Faust’s seductive moment, and condemned to its eternal recurrence. The will to power and the affirmation of life are reduced petulant gestures rather than creative acts.

Nietzsche’s great-grandchildren interpret life-affirmation to mean an arbitrary act of self-invention in face of the inherent meaningless of life. In the brave new progressive world, life means whatever you want it to mean. It is up to you to invent a meaning that suits you, which you may change whenever it occurs to you to do so. That surely is one way to understand Nietzsche’s “affirmation of life.” Because life itself is so miserable and pointless (with reference to the legend of Silenus), each individual must “affirm” life by an arbitrary act of will. The trouble is that if life can have any meaning you assign to it, then it has no meaning in particular. Your life is meaningless, in the strict sense of the word. If you choose your identity at whim, your life has no meaning. That is true in the most parsimonious sense of the word: if you can arbitrarily decide to be a gender-fluid bestialist as well as a F to M to F trans-entity, then your life can “mean” any number of different things, all of them equally arbitrary. The term “meaning” implies a unique meaning, which in turn implies a

³¹ Rynhold and Harris pp. 76-77.

meaning that has grounds for being there. To invent one's self is to abolish one's past, and, by implication, to cut off one's future, for one's children (if any there be) also will reinvent themselves, and abhor their parents as intensely as their parents abhorred their grandparents. The self-inventors are lost in time, as it were, condemned to find meaning in the fleeting and unsubstantial moment. They have taken the other side of the bet that Faust made with Mephistopheles—that his soul was lost if the devil could show him a moment that he wanted to hang onto forever. Their illusory sense of meaning can survive only in an echo chamber where it is constantly reinforced by group-think.

Rynhold and Harris devote many pages to the problem of elitism. Nietzsche in the popular mind is most identified with the concept of the *Übermensch*, traditionally translated as “superman” but more recently as the more neutral “overman.” What Nietzsche evidently means by this is the higher man who transcends himself through striving. As Zarathustra says in the Prologue to Nietzsche's book, “The *Übermensch* shall be the meaning of the world!” The sort of *Übermensch* Nietzsche had in mind is exemplified by Byron's tragic hero Manfred, who dies nobly to expiate his guilt (Nietzsche wrote a piano piece entitled “Manfred Meditation”). This sort of theatricality is quite alien to R. Soloveitchik, who wrote:

The hero of classical man was the grandiose figure with whom man identified himself in order to satisfy his endless vanity. Hero worship is essentially self-worship. The classical idea of heroism which is aesthetic in its very essence, lacks the element of absurdity and is intrinsically dramatic and theatrical. The hero is an actor who performs in order to impress an appreciative audience. The crowd cheers, the chronicler records, countless generations afterwards admire, bards and minstrels sing of the hero. The classical heroic gesture represents disenchanting man, who tries to achieve immortality and permanence by identifying himself with the heroic figure on stage. It lasts for a while, vibrant and forceful, but soon man reverts to the non-heroic mood of everyday living.

In contrast to classical aesthetic heroism, Biblical heroism, as portrayed in the narrative about Jacob, is not nurtured by an ephemeral mood or a passing state of mind. It is perhaps the central motif in our existential experience. It pervades the human mind steadily, and imparts to man a strange feeling of tranquility. The heroic person, according to our view, does not succumb to frenzy and excitement. Biblical heroism is not ecstatic but contemplative, but loud but

hushed, not dramatic or spectacular but mute. The individual, instead of undertaking heroic action sporadically, lives constantly as a hero.³²

Among secular philosophers the closest relation to Soloveitchik's Biblical hero is Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith, an epithet that Soloveitchik (following Kierkegaard) applies to Abraham. Judaism has little patience for the Byronic hero, the grandiloquent gesture, the paroxysm of inspiration, the ecstatic moment. Its endeavor is to turn the lightning of Horeb into the *Ner Tamid* of the Mishkan.

Rynhold and Harris have done an important service by drawing attention to sources in Continental philosophy that influence, or run parallel to, R. Soloveitchik's thinking. But their predilection for Nietzsche is in some respects a case of mistaken identity. Untangling the strands of secular philosophy that shed light on the Rav's thinking requires a broader historical perspective and greater attention to Goethe, Kierkegaard and other Continental thinkers who preceded Nietzsche. ❧

³² *Catharsis*, pp. 41-42.