

Halakhic Man in Gaza

By: DAVID P. GOLDMAN

The daily mass demonstrations by secular Israelis against judicial reform during 2023 seem a distant memory. Only last July, 58 percent of Israelis told the newspaper *Ma'ariv* that they feared civil war, and 10,000 reservists declared that they would refuse to respond to a call for service—unprecedented in a country where the response rate to a reserve call-up normally exceeds 100 percent. Fate intervened on Simḥat Torah with a hard hand and reminded us that *sinat binam* leaves us vulnerable to those who would destroy us.

The Gaza War will end *IY"H*, and the great division in Israel will return to center stage. In its most extreme form, this division cannot be resolved, because it pits against each other two competing messianic ideologies: The secular-millenarian belief that the dissolution of all nationalities into a kind of world citizenship will eliminate the underlying causes of national conflict, and the religious-messianic belief that the apotheosis of the nation of Israel through the settlement of the nation to its Biblical borders will hasten the coming of the Messianic era. There is no possible compromise between these two forms of messianism, because they are identical in method; they disagree only on how human action can harness the will of Heaven.

There is another way to look at the division in Israel—through the teaching of Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, a towering figure for university-educated Orthodoxy in the United States but a far less influential figure in the State of Israel. In R. Soloveitchik's Torah, opposing standpoints are necessary moments in the life of the observant Jew: There is no logical way to resolve the dichotomies between cognitive man and *homo religiosus*, between the “scientific” practice of halakhic man and religious man's ecstatic pursuit of the Transcendent, between the practice of *mitzvoṭ* in the here and now and the apocalyptic hope for Mashiah, between the Lithuanian Rav and the Ḥasidic Rebbe—above all between Majestic Man, the transformer of nature who raises the dignity of human life, and Covenantal Man, who lives humbly in awe of his Creator.

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Israel's secular prowess in technology will prove fruitless unless it is informed by Torah, and the Torah of Israel's quietest religious minority will face destruction if Israel loses its technological edge over adversaries committed to its destruction. The technological elite of Tel Aviv and the Haredi leaders of Bnei Brak nonetheless embrace viewpoints which, in R. Soloveitchik's Torah, **represent moments of a struggle within the Jewish soul that is inevitable, and because it is inevitable, must be made productive. The contention within Israeli society is not an accident, or a mistake, or a manifestation of political immaturity. It is an inevitable expression of the antinomies that arise within Jewish life, and a point of departure for national revival.**

The Rav argued in the first pages of his 1944 essay *Halakhic Man*:

Halakhic man... bears within the deep recesses of his personality the soul of *homo religiosus*, that soul which... suffers from the pangs of self-contradiction and self-negation; ... at the same time halakhic man's personality also embraces the soul of cognitive man, and this soul contradicts all of the desires and strivings of the religious soul. However, these opposing forces that struggle together in the religious consciousness of halakhic man are not of a destructive or disjunctive nature. Halakhic man is not some illegitimate, unstable hybrid. On the contrary, out of the contradictions and antinomies there emerges a radiant, holy personality whose soul has been purified in the furnace of struggle and opposition and redeemed in the fires of the torments of spiritual disharmony to a degree unmatched by the universal *homo religiosus*. The deep split of the soul prior to its being united may, at times, raise a man to a rank of perfection, which for sheer brilliance and beauty is unequaled by any level attained by the simple, whole personality who has never been tried by the pangs of spiritual discord.

The conflict is not only unavoidable, but productive:

There is much truth to the fundamental contention set forth both by the dialectical philosophies of Heraclitus and Hegel with regard to the ongoing course of existence in general... namely, that there is a creative power embedded within antithesis; conflict enriches existence, the negation is constructive, and contradiction deepens and expands the ultimate destiny of both man and world.¹

¹ *Halakhic Man*, by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, translated from the Hebrew and annotated by Lawrence J. Kaplan (The Jewish Publication Society; Philadelphia, 2023), pp. 3-4.

This assertion proved more controversial than any of the Rav's other teachings, including within the Modern Orthodox world.²

Prof. Lawrence Kaplan, the translator of the Rav's 1944 essay *Halakhic Man*, has reissued the book in a 40th anniversary edition, with a new introduction recounting the reception of the Rav's dialectical understanding of Judaism. The Rav's portrayal of an inherent conflict between facets of the Jewish religious personality encountered opposition from the Haredi as well as liberal Jewish denominations, as well as in the Modern (or "Centrist") Orthodox world. None of the major currents of the Torah world has accepted the Rav's argument "that there is a creative power embedded within antithesis." Yet that insight has attained existential urgency for the survival of the State of Israel. It is time to confront the issue directly.

Kaplan notes "the antinomy in halakhic man's consciousness between this worldliness and otherworldliness." Halakhah employs the same cognitive methods as the scientist. But "Halakhic man, for Soloveitchik, is not just a 'secular cognitive type unconcerned with transcendence.' Rather, halakhic man's consciousness is not only directed to the concrete this-worldly realm but, like that of *homo religiosus*, is directed toward a transcendent one. *Homo religiosus* for Soloveitchik is 'intrigued by the mystery

² Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks argued in contrast to R. Soloveitchik that the antinomy between "halakhic man" and *homo religiosus*, and between Majestic Man and Covenantal Man, was not an inherent conflict in Torah Judaism but rather a "defective state" to be overcome by harmonious emotion:

I want, in contrast rather than disagreement, to describe an alternative phenomenology of the Jewish self, one which arises equally naturally from the traditional sources, and one in which the divided self occupies a different and impermanent place. There is a sense, strongly present in the account of Adam's creation, persisting through the Torah, explicit in the Psalms, and analyzed often enough in Kabbalistic and Hassidic sources, that alienation and loneliness are defective states, the consequence of sin, and that the religious man of any age transcends divisions, subsumes contrasts into harmonious emotion, and exists in unmediated closeness to God, the world and other Jews. In short, I want to argue that Judaism stands to contemporary alienation in a redemptive rather than an empathetic relation. (See Sacks, Jonathan, "Alienation and Faith," in *Tradition* 13 [1973].)

Prof. Kaplan notes that R. Sacks revisited his critique of R. Soloveitchik twelve years later in a 1985 essay on Halakhic Man.

Against Soloveitchik, R. Sacks appeals variously to the Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper and the Baal Tanya. It is a blend of British hostility to Continental philosophy and *hasidut*. That is less surprising than it sounds; as a philosopher of science, Popper followed "in the footsteps of Schelling," whose influence on Hassidic thinking has been documented by Prof. Paul Franks.

of existence,' longs for a 'refined and pure existence,' and 'passes beyond the realm of scientific experience and enters into a higher realm.'"

This antithesis is one among many that appear as a recurrent theme in the Rav's writings; it takes on many aspects. In *Halakhic Man, homo religiosus* contends with cognitive man. In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Majestic Man stands juxtaposed to Covenantal Man. In *U'Vikashstem mi Sham*, The Beloved of *Shir HaShirim* is sick with love, yet she cannot bestir herself to open the latch to let her Lover in; she does not rise from her bed until her Lover departs, and then searches for him through the dark streets of Jerusalem, asking the watchmen if they have seen him. The Rav evokes "a wondrous dream about the desired one, overflowing with love, who has promised his beloved eternal affection yet runs away from her, and about the daughter of nobles, drunk with yearning, who seeks her soulmate yet eludes him, a bride who conceals herself—what does it mean?... This mischievous game of enamoredness and rejection, of running after and running away, of tension and disappointment, of searching and hiding, of disclosure and concealment—what does it mean?"

These archetypes of antinomy in Soloveitchik's teaching—the hidden Lover and the diffident Beloved, halakhic man and *homo religiosus*, Majestic Man and Covenantal Man—all manifest the insoluble paradox of human existence: We are finite and mortal, but God is infinite and eternal. "Can halakhic man overcome this antinomy?" Prof. Kaplan asks. "Soloveitchik answers yes he can, thanks to the divine act of *tzimtzum*, to the divine contraction or self-limitation, to the divine descent into the realm of finitude. For divine contraction is a process that makes possible God's presence in the world via the 'lowering of transcendence into the midst of our turbid, coarse, material world. Therefore, halakhic man does not have to leave our concrete empirical realm and ascend to a transcendental one to meet God.... Rather, he can fulfill his religious longings while maintaining his resolute this-worldly consciousness."³

There is, however, a severe qualification to Prof. Kaplan's summary: *Tzimtzum* makes it possible for Halakhic man to overcome the antinomy inherent in his approach to the world—but sporadically, partially, and without final resolution, the Rav emphasizes elsewhere:

Judaic dialectic, unlike the Hegelian, is irreconcilable and hence interminable. Judaism accepted a dialectic, consisting only of thesis and antithesis. The third Hegelian stage, that of reconciliation, is missing. The conflict is final, almost absolute. Only God knows how to reconcile; we do not. Complete reconciliation is an eschatological vision. To Hegel, man and his history were just abstract ideas; in the

³ *Halakhic Man* (40th Anniversary Edition), Translator's Preface, p. LXXV.

world of abstractions, synthesis is conceivable. To Judaism, man has always been and still is a living reality, or may I say, a tragic living reality. In the world of realities, the harmony of opposites is an impossibility.⁴

Elsewhere he wrote:

Man is caught like Abraham's ram in a thicket of antinomies and dichotomies." His intellectual curiosity is of cosmic, universal dimensions... mesmerized by the infinite number of opportunities with which his fantasy presents him. He forgets the simple tragic fact that he is finite and mortal, and to reach out for infinity and eternity is a foolhardy undertaking. ("Majesty and Humility," 26)

This "tragic living reality" plays out in the tragedy of innumerable Jewish lives. By "tragedy," to be sure, R. Soloveitchik did not imply a failure, but rather an outcome without ultimate resolution and an enduring conflict that could be mitigated but not removed. It is not surprising that the Rav's difficult, dialectical appreciation of tragic conflict within Jewish life has attracted limited interest in Israel.

In contrast to this understanding of irreconcilable conflict, Jewish tradition includes simpler and happier alternatives. Mashiah will arrive and unite all Israel in a single joyous community. There are many variants of messianism with great influence in Israel, with several main expressions. Haredi quietism teaches that a certain density of *mitzvoth*, especially learning Torah, will hasten the coming of Mashiah. On Chabad's website on "hastening Mashiah":⁵

Teshuvah, the comprehensive principle of submission to G-d and His will, thus is the most obvious means to bring about the immediate coming of *Mashiah*.³ It does not require any extraordinary action or undertaking: the simple though sincere thought of regretting misdeeds with determination to better our ways is already complete *teshuvah*.

Shabbat: If Israel will keep just one Shabbat properly, *Mashiah* will come immediately.

Torah-study: "Torah-study is equivalent to all [the *mitzvoth*]." (Pe'ah 1:1) By virtue of Torah they will return to the Holy Land and be gathered in from the exile. Israel shall be redeemed by virtue of ten people sitting one with the other, each of them studying with the other.

⁴ "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1978, p. 25.

⁵ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/101681/jewish/Hastening-Mashiach.htm

Especially significant in this context is the study of *pnimiyut Hatorah*, the mystical dimension of the Torah: “In the merit thereof ‘You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land’ (Leviticus 25:10).”

For R. Soloveitchik, however, quietism is contrary to Halakhah:

The doctrine of faith in God’s charity is not to be equated with the folly of the mystical doctrine of quietism, which in its extreme form exempts man from his duty of attending to his own needs and lets him wait in “holy” idleness and indifference for God’s intervention. This kind of repose is wholly contrary to the repose which the Halakhah recommends: the one which follows human effort and remedial action. Man must first use his own skill and try to help himself as much as possible. Then, and only then, man may find repose and quietude in God and be confident that his effort and action will be crowned with success.⁶

Lurian Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem explained, “raised the Halakhah to a position of incomparable importance for the mystic, and strengthened its hold over the people. Every *mitzvah* became an event of cosmic importance, an act which had a bearing upon the dynamics of the universe. The religious Jew became a protagonist in the drama of the world; he manipulated the strings behind the scene. Or, to use a less extravagant simile, if the whole universe is an enormous machine, then man is the machinist who keeps the wheels going by applying a few drops of oil here and there, and at the right time. The moral substance of man’s action supplies this ‘oil,’ and existence therefore becomes of extreme significance, since it unfolds on a background of cosmic significance.”⁷

Another manifestation of messianism comes from the school of R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook, who famously wept over the 1947 Partition Agreement:

I sat alone, and burdened. In those first hours I couldn’t make my peace with what had happened, with the terrible news that the word of God in the book of Prophets had now been fulfilled: “They divided my land!” Then Rav Kook suddenly cried out: “Where is our Hebron? Have we forgotten it? And where is our Shechem—have we forgotten it? And where is the other bank of the Jordan River? Where is every clod of earth? Every piece of God’s Land? Do we have the right to cede even a centimeter of it? God forbid!”⁸

⁶ *Lonely Man of Faith*, p. 85.

⁷ *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* by Gershom Scholem (Shocken, 1947), pp. 29-30.

⁸ Yossi Klein Halevi, *Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers Who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 33.

Israeli religious nationalists abhorred R. Soloveitchik's ruling that *pikuach nefesh* took precedence over settling Biblical land. He stated in 1967:

In my opinion, the greatest deliverance, and the greatest miracle, is simply that He saved the population of Israel from total annihilation. I want you to understand, I give praise and thanks to the *Ribono Shel Olam* for liberating the *Kotel Hamaaravi* [Western Wall] and for liberating and for removing all *Eretz Yisrael* from the Arabs, so that it now belongs to us. But I don't need to rule whether we should give the West Bank back to the Arabs or not to give the West Bank to the Arabs: we Rabbis should not be involved in decisions regarding the safety and security of the population. These are not merely Halakhic rulings: these decisions are a matter of *pikuach nefesh* for the entire population. And if the government were to rule that the safety of the population requires that specific territories must be returned, whether I issue a halakhic ruling or not, their decision is the deciding factor. If *pikuach nefesh* supersedes all other mitzvos, it supersedes all prohibitions of the Torah, especially *pikuach nefesh* of the *yishuv* [settlement] in *Eretz Yisrael*. It is not a topic appropriate for which Rabbis should release statements or for Rabbinical conferences.⁹

As R. Shlomo Brody reports in his recent book on Jewish war ethics:

In a public lecture in New York, R. Soloveitchik declared ... "It is prohibited for rabbis or anyone else to declare in the name of Torah that it is forbidden to return any part of the land, when stable peace can save the lives of thousands and tens of thousands of our brethren who dwell in Zion." R. Tzvi Yehuda and his students were outraged. Yet R. [Yehuda] Amital persisted. R. Amital, alongside the co-dean of his rabbinic seminary and R. Soloveitchik's son-in-law, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, founded Meimad, a dovish religious political party that supported the 1993 Oslo Accords with the PLO. The accords were built on the premise that Israel should concede territories from Judea and Samaria (aka "the West Bank") for the sake of a peace agreement with a new Palestinian state. Rabbis Goren, Yisraeli, Porat, and many others adamantly opposed these agreements. Such concessions would endanger Israeli citizens and the Jewish state as a whole. They would also violate our religious covenantal duties to the land.¹⁰

⁹ *Of Priorities and Perspective: Land for Peace in the Thought of Religious Zionist Thinkers*, by Avraham Wein.
https://www.kolhamevaser.com/2017/04/of-priorities-and-perspective-land-for-peace-in-the-thought-of-religious-zionist-thinkers/#_edn19

¹⁰ Shlomo Brody, *Ethics of Our Fighters* (Maggid, 2024), pp. 234-235.

The issue was not whether a land-for-peace agreement with the Palestinians was possible, but whether it was permissible. Yasser Arafat answered the first question definitively in 2000 and 2001 by rejecting then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak's offer of a Palestinian state incorporating virtually all of the West Bank. As a halakhic issue, the precedence of *pikuah nefesh* over *yishuv* remains of interest as an exercise in *Torah lishmah* but has no practical importance.

Yet another manifestation is the universalist messianism of the Left, which embraces the same sort of post-national ideal that guides the European Community: Once all peoples eschew their national distinctions and historical peculiarities and blend into a grand fusion of world citizenship, conflict will disappear because no-one will have anything to fight about. In its extreme form, left-wing messianism proposed the liquidation of the State of Israel into a bi-national state of the sort proposed by Martin Buber. The "Woke" ideology of today's Left is more extreme, perhaps uniquely so in the history of millenarian delusions. Not even the Communists argued that every intellectual contribution of the past is contaminated by racism, sexism, homophobia, colonialism, and so forth, and that the present generation can achieve moral purity only by eradicating every trace of the past.

It does not suffice to declare *teiku* regarding the antinomies that R. Soloveitchik presents. The nagging problem with messianism is that all of its expressions are mutually exclusive. If there is one way to force the coming of Mashiah, it precludes other ways to force the coming of Mashiah. The messianism of the Left cannot be reconciled with the messianism of Zvi Yehuda Kook, and neither can be reconciled with the belief that a certain density of mitzvah performance will occasion the appearance of Mashiah. The messianism of the Left and the messianism of the religious fuels the seemingly irresolvable conflict in Israeli society.

Absent Mashiah, we live with inescapable conflicts within Jewish life, conflicts that manifest themselves not only among different groups of Jews but within the religious life of every single Jew. "There is a creative power embedded within antithesis; conflict enriches experience, the negation is constructive, and contradiction deepens and expands the ultimate destiny of both man and the world." In a long footnote to this declaration, the Rav adds:

The individual who frees himself from the rational principle and who casts off the yoke of objective thought will in the end turn destructive and lay waste the entire created order. Therefore, it is preferable that religion should ally itself with the forces of clear, logical cognition, as uniquely exemplified in the scientific method, even though

at times the two might clash with one another, rather than pledge its truth to beclouded, mysterious ideologies that grope in the dark corners of existence, unaided by the shining light of objective knowledge, and believe that they have penetrated to the secret core of the world.¹¹

Adam the First's intervention into nature fulfills a divine mandate, the Rav argues:

He engages in creative work, trying to imitate his Maker (*Imitatio Dei*). The most characteristic representative of Adam the First is the mathematical scientist who whisks us away from the array of tangible things, from color and sound, from heat, touch and smell which are the only phenomena accessible to our senses, into a formal relational world of thought constructs, the product of its "arbitrary" postulating and spontaneous positing and deducing. This world, woven out of human thought processes, functions with amazing precision and runs parallel to the workings of the real multifarious world of our senses. The modern scientist does not try to explain nature. He only duplicates it. In his full resplendent glory as a creative agent of God, he constructs his own world and in mysterious fashion succeeds in controlling his environment through manipulating his own mathematical constructs and creations.¹²

The history of Jewish participation in the majesty of scientific discovery, though, is tragic indeed. Jews have won a fifth of all Nobel Prizes in physics and 27 percent of all Fields Medals in mathematics, an astonishing achievement considering our vanishingly small proportion in the world population. Without a uniquely Jewish sensibility, this margin of outperformance would be inconceivable, and it is absurd to speak of a uniquely Jewish sensibility apart from Torah, the living culture of the Jewish people since the end of the First Exile. Einstein quipped that Jews had spent the last two thousand years studying for university entrance exams, but they did so in the *beit midrash*. That by itself constitutes overwhelming evidence that something in Torah prepares its students for scientific investigation at the loftiest level. I will return to this issue below.

If we take the universe of Jewish Nobelists in physics as an exemplar for the qualities of Majestic Man among Jews, the degree of overlap between Majestic Men and Covenantal Men in this domain is exactly zero: Not one of the 50 Jewish Nobelists in physics to my knowledge was *shomer mitzvyot* as an adult. The attrition rate from the Torah world is 100 percent.

¹¹ *Halakbic Man* (40th Anniversary Edition), p. 141.

¹² *Lonely Man of Faith*, pp. 17-18.

There have been a few observant mathematicians of prominence, including Avraham Fraenkel, a founder of modern set theory and the founder of Israeli mathematics as rector of Hebrew University, and Nobelist Robert Aumann. Shabbat observance excludes the performance of classical music as a Jewish career. It is impossible to account for the disproportionate success of Jewish scientists, mathematicians, musicians, and philosophers without invoking a uniquely Jewish sensibility, but it is distressing to note how little of this sensibility took the form of explicit recognition of the authority of Torah.

Among the most prominent Jewish philosophers of the past century, Bergson was agnostic, while Husserl and Scheler converted to Christianity. The greatest composer and poet respectively in the land of music and poetry in 1830, Felix Mendelssohn and Heinrich Heine, were Christian converts (although Heine on his deathbed quipped that he had come back to God after years of “herding swine among the Hegelians”). The Torah world has given profusely to secular civilization and has gotten very little back. Israeli society has two characteristic types that correspond broadly to R. Soloveitchik’s “Majestic Man” and “Covenantal Man,” the Adam the First and Adam the Second of *The Lonely Man of Faith*. The first is the scientist/entrepreneur who brings military prowess and economic prosperity, and fulfills a fundamental *religious* responsibility:

The brute’s existence is an undignified one because it is a helpless existence. Human existence is a dignified one because it is a glorious, majestic, powerful existence. Hence, dignity is unobtainable as long as man has not reclaimed himself from coexistence with nature and has not risen from a non-reflective, degradingly helpless life to an intelligent, planned and majestic one...Only when man rises to the heights of freedom of action and creativity of mind does he begin to implement the mandate of dignified responsibility entrusted to him by his Maker.¹³

Tel Aviv is bursting with these Adams. They have tripled Israel’s per capita Gross Domestic Product since 1995 while the world’s per capita GDP slightly more than doubled. They have given the Jewish State a bounty of technological miracles that protect it against enemies who would annihilate it. They have earned nine Nobel Prizes in science since the founding of the state, dozens of times the proportion of Israeli Jews in the world population. They are mainly secular, and preponderantly opposed to Israel’s judicial reform or any other measure that might vitiate the secular character of Israel’s polity.

¹³ *Lonely Man of Faith*, p. 16.

Where is Covenantal Man in Israel? Never before in Jewish history have so many Jews studied Torah, with more than 138,000 full-time Kollel students as of 2021.¹⁴

A Haredi friend in Israel comments:

There is no way to understand Haredim apart from the trauma of the Haskalah. It is engraved upon their memories, informs their insistence on vigilantly ignoring, or rising up to fight, foreign incursions into their consciousness. Even if those incursions possess some kernel or more of truth. What is like rolling off a log to you, for them is akin to rolling off a cliff. Having lost their millions, the children of their greatest, no less, who chased similar promises, they want nothing more of it. And they NEED nothing more of it.

R. Soloveitchik came from the first generation of Lithuanian Rabbis who confronted the Haskalah on its own terms, studying at the University of Warsaw before his six years of graduate education at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. He was proud that the intellectual rigor and systemic construction of Brisker Torah required no apologies to Western philosophy:

[R. Chaim Soloveitchik] introduced into the study of the Talmud something which Aristotle, Leibniz and Kant had introduced into secular philosophy. A new method of analysis, conceptualization, and classification. He actually modernized the study of the Talmud in a way which was unprecedented. As a matter of fact, my father told me that if not for Reb Chaim it would be impossible to study Gemara with boys who simultaneously study science, mathematics and physics. The Gemara would lag behind their other studies. Now the Gemara does not lag behind any philosophical approach, even the most modern analytical approach. I know a little about modern philosophical analysis. We can compete with the most profound and the most precise philosophical analysis of today.¹⁵

The Rav's observation that without the Brisker reforms in Talmud study, Gemara studies would lag behind secular studies distills the defensiveness of the Eastern European Rabbis before the Haskalah that spirited away so much Jewish talent. But the Rav's stance was anything but defensive. What the Rav encountered as a student in Berlin was not an impregnable fortress of enlightened scientific thinking, but rather **Western philosophy in disarray and confusion in the face of the collapse**

¹⁴ <https://en.idi.org.il/haredi/2022/>.

¹⁵ Quoted in *The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, by Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, vol. 2 (Ktav, 1999), p. 42.

of deterministic scientific models. Religion therefore had an epochal opportunity to assert its independence from atheistic philosophy. He began his 1944 essay *The Halakbic Mind*:

It would be difficult to distinguish any epoch in the history of philosophy more amenable to the meditating *homo religiosus* than that of today. The reason for this is the discrepancy that exists at present between the mathematico-scientific and philosophical methodologies. A schism of enormous magnitude has developed between the scientist and the philosopher, between the regional viewpoint of the empiricist and the universal vision of the metaphysician. The scientific method, which exalts the microscopic idea and integrates reality out of the simplest elements, has collided with the metaphysical world-view which strives towards boundless ontological totality. As a result of this conflict, new vistas now beckon to the *homo religiosus*.¹⁶

In an earlier essay in this publication,¹⁷ I cited R. Soloveitchik's enigmatic conclusion to *The Halakbic Mind*: "Out of the sources of Halakha, a new world view awaits formulation."¹⁸

Out of the "tragic" dichotomy between Majestic Man and Covenantal Man arises the possibility of a unifying *hasbkefab* built upon the source of Halakhah, and the defeat of the secularizing Haskalah. These words were put on paper in 1944, as Hitler's hordes destroyed not only Jewish life in Europe, but also the cultural sources of Europe's great scientific and cultural achievements. R. Soloveitchik came of age in the 1920s, in the flowering of quantum theory and mathematical logic, and in the midst of a philosophical upheaval that produced the work of Scheler, Husserl, and Rosenzweig, as well as Martin Heidegger. The best European minds who survived the war migrated to America, and their influence lasted barely a

¹⁶ *The Halakbic Mind*, p. 3.

¹⁷ "Rav Soloveitchik's New World View," *Hakirab*, vol. 42, pp. 91-127.

¹⁸ Op. cit. p. 125. "The 'new world view' that R. Soloveitchik proposed can be formulated tentatively as follows: The ordering of sacred time through ethical practice, and the mathematical investigation of physical time, both arise from the ethical will. Adam the First, majestic man, and Adam the Second, covenantal man, ultimately are the same person. Covenantal man becomes a nation when Israel learns to mark time on the road out of Egypt, and creates time in the moment of liberation. The first act of *Imitatio Dei* that defines the nation of Israel is an ethical one—to choose freedom—and its first creative act is the creation of time. From this creative act, covenantal man can begin to understand, however faintly, how God created universal time. Covenantal man thus becomes majestic man; the ethical will makes possible scientific discernment."

generation. A generation ago, the educated public could have named a great philosopher or physicist. Today no names come to mind.

During the academic year 1949–1950, the Rav lectured on Genesis at Yeshiva University. The late R. Robert Blau’s detailed notes on these lectures have been published by *Hakirah* in three installments with annotation by R. Meir Triebitz.¹⁹ In these lectures, the Rav addressed foundational issues of mathematics and physics as they bear on the concept of creation, drawing a bright line between Jewish thought and Greek philosophy. He drew attention to frontier issues of mathematics that had occupied him since his 1931 dissertation. What the Rav proposed was nothing less than a radical rethinking of philosophy and science replacing static Greek thought with a dynamic Jewish approach, drawing on Lurian Kabbalah among other sources.

Tzimtzum makes possible transcendent moments in which the finite touches the infinite. Why do *Chazal* teach that “A person who recites *VaYekhulu* on the eve of Shabbat is considered as if he were a partner with God in the work of creation”?^{20, 21} At the moment of performing the *mitzvah*, he ushers in a different order of time and a higher state of being. Judaism has no monopoly on the intersection of the finite and the Infinite; creative scientists and artists produce *hiddushim* that in many fields of endeavor and many ways evoke a higher state of being. Judaism uniquely places this transcendent power within the reach of every Jew, through the *mitzvot* that host eternity in the constricted space of everyday life, just as the *Shekhinah* abided in four cubits within the Holy of Holies.

That is the promise, and it is realized sporadically as the performance of *mitzvot* rises above daily routine and evokes moments of true transcendence.

It is Judaism that has given the world the secret of *tzimtzum*, of “contraction,” contraction of the infinite within the finite, the transcendent within the concrete, the supernal within the empirical, and the divine within the realm of reality. When the Holy One, blessed be He, descended on Mt. Sinai, He set an eternally binding precedent that it is God Who descends to man, not man who ascends to God.

The “secret of *tzimtzum*” implies no less than the dethroning of the self-contemplating God of Aristotle and Plotinus, and the coronation of

¹⁹ In *Hakirah*, vols. 27, 29 and 31.

²⁰ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1978, pp. 25–37, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23258673. Accessed 12 Apr. 2020.

²¹ *Shabbat* 119b.

the God of the Bible, and a change of intellectual regime from divine passivity to “divine turbulence,” in Gershom Scholem’s felicitous phrase. Creation is unthinkable under the reign of Aristotle’s God, the “unmoved mover” who is eternally unchanging. As Parmenides demonstrated, differentiation and change must be an illusion. Creation *ex nihilo* (*yesh m’ayin*) stumbles into contradictions: If God created the world from nothing, there was nothing but God before Creation, and all creation must be part of God. God therefore is everything and everywhere, and we are trapped in Spinoza’s pantheism.

R. Isaac Luria offered a revolutionary solution, implicit perhaps in Biblical and Rabbinic sources, but formulated with luminous originality: God contracted Himself within Himself to create empty space in which He could create something that was *not* God.

The finitization of the infinite, the “secret” that Judaism imparted to the world through *tzimtzum*, is the defining characteristic of what for lack of a better word we call “modern.” In the middle of the 15th century, the West began to see the world differently thanks to perspective in painting, and to hear the world differently thanks to tonal counterpoint in music. By the middle of the 17th century, we understood the universe in an entirely new way, through the laws of planetary motion and infinitesimal calculus. This envisions a Creator God who makes this engagement possible by contracting his finitude.

The ancient world, to be sure, recognized the infinite in the irrational numbers, whose discovery is attributed to Hippasus of Metapontum in the sixth-century-BCE Zeno’s paradox of motion, in Archimedes’ approximation of the calculus, in the Babylonian discovery of the mean speed theorem, and—most notably in my view—Augustine’s identification of “numbers of the intellect” in his *De Musica*.²² But these intimations are a perception of something beyond ordinary calculation, in contrast to our modern capacity to act upon infinite space, infinite time, and infinite series of numbers.

The finitization of the infinite is the foundational concept of modern mathematics (in the calculus), of visual arts (in linear perspective), of music (in the plasticity of time in modern voice-leading), and of philosophy, most prominently in Kant’s aesthetics²³ and the Hegelian dialectic. In the medieval representation of space in painting, objects simply coexist on a

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

²³ David P. Goldman, “Beethoven and Freedom,” *Tablet Magazine*, Dec. 16, 2020. <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/beethoven-freedom-250>.

surface with no defined relation to each other. The linear perspective invented by Brunelleschi in 1415 established a hierarchy of proportions that gave order to objects in representational space, and it did so by organizing space around the “vanishing point” of the lines of perspective, that is, the point of convergence of the lines at infinity.

R. Soloveitchik’s celebrated discussion of time is a special case of the finitization of the infinite. We might think of the *mitzvoth* as the instruments by which we bring past and future—*Matan Torah* at Sinai and *Olam ha-Ba*—into the Jewish present. Time is not a created thing, an object to be contemplated as Maimonides implied. Rather, time is constituted by our actions as directed by the ethical will. The reliving of the past and the anticipation of the future enrich every moment of Jewish life with an infinite density of time-experience.

The Rav’s published writings and lecture notes have left us a road map to a concept of objective scientific knowledge that is not only compatible with religion, but draws life from religion, and strengthens religion. The Rav’s unfinished program proposes nothing less than to impose the demands of Covenantal Man on Majestic Man, the intellectual ascendance of Jerusalem over Tel Aviv. Considering our starting point, this may seem an enterprise worthy of Don Quixote. Even at the peak of his influence, the Rav found scant purchase for his new worldview. He told R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “You know, I have devoted *talmidim*—very devoted *talmidim*. If I were to announce a *sh’iur* at two o’clock in the morning, they would come *en bloc*. And yet, deep in their hearts, they think I’m an *apikores*.”²⁴

If R. Soloveitchik failed to rally support for his intellectual program in the 1950s when he was widely recognized as the *Gadol ha-Dor*, how can we hope to revive his grand design three generations later? The answer is: We need to. The Rav did not propose an elective curriculum for cultural edification, but rather a unique solution to the fundamental problem in Jewish life, namely the “creative power embedded within antithesis.” Absent this solution, Israeli society will continue to tear itself apart.

The antibodies of the Orthodox world will attack attempts to introduce Greek *hochmah* into the yeshivah world as an alien bacillus, and rightly so—unless it is taught as a critique of Greek thought and an exposition of its deficiencies. Yet while the Rav made use of Western philosophy, prominently including Kant and Hegel, he never did so uncritically. Instead, he judged these sources by Jewish criteria, as he wrote (in *Halakbic Morality*). Jewish students should engage with Greek philosophy not

²⁴ Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning*, vol. 1, p. 201.

as “the wisdom of the ancients,” but as a sequence of paradoxes that cannot be resolved within the realm of philosophy itself. The virtue of the Greeks is not that they promulgated timeless wisdom, but rather that they formulated the persistent problems of philosophy with sufficient rigor that the antinomies set forth by Parmenides in the eponymous Plato dialogue are instantly recognizable in the paradoxes of modern set theory.

The way forward is the way back—back to the *hashkafah* that inspired and guided the scientific revolution to begin with.²⁵ The discovery of scientific *hiddushim* is a religious obligation as much as learning Gemara. It is also a matter of *pikuah nefesh*, of the survival of the Jewish State. R. Soloveitchik built a bridge between the worlds of science and religion, using the language of the former to illuminate the latter. Israel’s existential crisis should inspire us to finish his work. Otherwise, the secularism of the Israeli left will lose the Jewish people, and the quietism of the Israeli ultra-Orthodox will lose the Jewish State. The quietest messianism of Eastern European Orthodoxy came to grief in 1939. It is a testimony to the power of nostalgia and the loyalty of its adherents to tradition that the same messianism still predominates among Israel *haredim*.

The *mitzvoth* are precisely defined, finite actions performed by a finite human being that nonetheless engage the infinite God. This miraculous intersection of finite and infinite is possible because God “ordered finitude to emerge out of infinity and the Universe, including man, to unfold itself.”²⁶ This exalted relationship is attained at great cost: “The God of Israel is united with the finite creature only after man has sanctified and cleansed himself from all pollution, and longingly and agitatedly awaits this wondrous encounter.”²⁷ But the human aspiration to the Infinite finds expression in the achievements of Majestic Man as well: “Majestic Adam has developed a demonic quality: laying claim to unlimited power—alas, to infinity itself. His pride is almost boundless, his imagination arrogant, and he aspires to complete and absolute control of everything. Indeed, like the men of old, he is engaged in constructing a tower whose apex should pierce Heaven. He is intoxicated with his own adventures and victories and is bidding for unrestricted dominion. From a religious point of view, as I said before, they are quite legitimate and in compliance with the divine testament given to Adam the First that he should rule nature.”²⁸

²⁵ See *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, chapters 2-4, where Rambam defines *Ma’aseh Merkanah* as philosophy and *Ma’aseh Bereishit* as Science.

²⁶ *Lonely Man of Faith*, p. 9.

²⁷ *Kol Dodi Dojek*, p. 67.

²⁸ *Lonely Man of Faith*, p. 97.

Torah Judaism does not vitiate the striving of Adam the First towards the Infinite, which is “quite legitimate and in compliance with the divine testament,” but rather to anchor it in the faith community. The antagonism between the “demonic quality” of secular scientific achievement and the demands of the Torah world has well-defined practical implications.

The mechanistic, materialistic view of 19th-century science was in ruins when the Rav studied in Berlin during the 1920s, but it has revived with a vengeance, a species of intellectual Amalek that needs to be defeated in every generation. At the extreme pole opposing Torah Judaism we find the bestselling Israeli public intellectual Yuval Noah Harari, whose books have sold 35 million copies in 65 languages. He predicts that “*Homo sapiens* as we know them will probably disappear within a century or so, not destroyed by killer robots or things like that, but changed and upgraded with biotechnology and artificial intelligence into something else, into something different. The timescale for that kind of change is maybe a century.”²⁹ Harari opined recently, “In games like chess, no human can hope to beat a computer. What happens when the same thing occurs in art, politics, or religion? A.I. could rapidly eat the whole of human culture—everything we have produced over thousands of years—digest it and begin to gush out a flood of new cultural artifacts. Not just school essays but also political speeches, ideological manifestos, holy books for new cults. By 2028, the U.S. presidential race might no longer be run by humans.”³⁰

Chess, of course, is a game with fixed rules, while halakhah is infinitely open-ended, always modified by *biddushim* that arise from human creativity. To equate human discourse with chess involves a grotesque fallacy of composition, equating a game bounded by fixed rules with human activity in which rules are subject to constant modification. Equating men to machines is inimical to Judaism, whose four millennia of history and practice stand as a reproach to sophomoric speculation of this kind. Harari’s claims, however, cannot be cast aside lightly. It is not only that Harari is a cult figure in secular Israeli society, but also that Artificial Intelligence is among the most important areas of excellence of the Israeli economy as well as a mainstay of its national defense.

²⁹ In *The Guardian*, March 19, 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/mar/19/yuval-harari-sapiens-readers-questions-lucy-prebble-arianna-huffington-future-of-humanity>

³⁰ “You Can Have the Blue Pill or the Red Pill, and We’re Out of Blue Pills,” by Yuval Harari, Tristan Harris, and Aza Raskin, in *The New York Times*, March 23, 2023.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/24/opinion/yuval-harari-ai-chatgpt.html>

How does Torah refute the claim that human beings in essence are no different from highly sophisticated machines, that the human mind is a mere algorithm that at some not-too-distant date might be replaced by a superior algorithm embodied by a machine? That is the same issue that R. Soloveitchik addressed in *The Halakbic Mind*, in his assertion that a deterministic science guided by a deterministic philosophy left no room for a distinctly religious worldview. The collapse of the deterministic model with the advent of quantum theory opened new vistas to religious philosophy:

What is perhaps most striking in all these considerations is that the physicist himself, in expounding “peculiar” epistemological theories concerning the physical world, has helped deliver the philosopher from his bondage to the mathematical sciences...[Niels] Bohr, exploiting Heisenberg’s Principle of Indeterminacy, undertook the refutation of the time-hallowed myth of the insularity of the objective world. The reciprocal relation of phenomenon and experiment and the interference of the latter (the light beam) with the objective occurrence of the former (the state of the particle) as implied in the Principle of Indeterminacy, must remit the entire classic relation of subject-object for reconsideration; the claim of the natural sciences to absolute objectivity must undergo a thorough revision.³¹

Harari’s pretensions are a rehash of the early ambitions of positivism, of which R. Soloveitchik wrote: “Positivism of today is servile to science. It accepts scientific statements without analyzing them critically.”³² The Rav refers here to the Viennese positivist Rudolf Carnap, who proposed “the logical construction of the world” in his eponymous 1928 treatise. Carnap’s nemesis was the mathematician Kurt Gödel, who in 1931 published his celebrated Incompleteness Theorems, which showed that no logical system powerful enough to explain arithmetic could prove its own premises.³³ The axioms that make mathematics possible, that is, are not provable within any given logical system; they must be devised by human intuition. As Gödel wrote, “the philosophical implications... are very decidedly opposed to materialistic philosophy... this seems to imply that the working of the human mind cannot be reduced to the working of the brain, which to all appearances is a finite machine with a finite number of parts, namely, the neurons and their connections.”³⁴ Gödel used the tools

³¹ *Halakbic Mind*, pp. 24-25.

³² *Halakbic Mind*, p. 7.


³³ David P. Goldman, “Rav Soloveitchik’s New World View,” *Hakirah*, vol. 24, p. 93.

³⁴ Kurt Gödel, *Collected Works*, vol. III, p. 311.

of logical positivism to overthrow it, with an explicitly religious motivation.³⁵

“Among the things that Gödel indisputably established was that no formal system of sound mathematical rules of proof can ever suffice, even in principle, to establish all the true propositions of ordinary arithmetic,” wrote the distinguished mathematician Roger Penrose. “This is certainly remarkable enough. But a powerful case can also be made that his results showed something more than this, and established that human understanding and insight cannot be reduced to any set of computational rules... there must be more to human thinking than can ever be achieved by a computer, in the sense that we understand the term ‘computer’ today.”³⁶

To enquiring young minds among the Israeli secular, we must say, as the Rav did in *The Halakbic Mind*, that the mechanistic, materialistic view of the world has failed, and that the crisis of science and philosophy has opened the door to a new philosophical understanding of religion. Western philosophy came to a dead end when Kurt Gödel demonstrated that mathematics could not prove its own premises. What great philosophers are working today? Set theory has not advanced since Gödel and Paul Cohen proved the independence of the continuum hypothesis from its axioms. Physics has learned nothing fundamental since the quantum revolution of the 1920s.

Torah Judaism should seize the high ground of scientific discovery from the barren materialism of the secular. We should spur our best minds to attack the foundational problems in mathematics and physics. These problems have urgent practical implications, for example, in defining the proper role of so-called Artificial Intelligence (performing the sort of tasks that humans now perform with the lower functions of the human brain), as opposed to the utopian effort proposed by Yuval Harari to substitute machine algorithms for the human mind itself. The religious Jewish world is still licking the wounds suffered at the hands of the Haskalah. Now it is the secular enlightenment that is stagnant, fruitless, bereft of self-confidence, and vulnerable to counterattack. “Out of the sources of Halakhah, a new world view awaits formulation,” R. Soloveitchik concluded in *The Halakbic Mind*. It is time. 

³⁵ David P. Goldman, “The God of the Mathematicians,” *First Things*, August 2010.

³⁶ *The Shadows of the Mind: The Search for the Missing Science of Consciousness*, by Roger Penrose (Oxford, 1994), pp. 64-65.