

BOOK REVIEW

Neehaz Ba-Sevakh

by CHAIM NAVON

(Jerusalem: Maaliyot Press 2006)

Ve-Hayu la-Abadim be-Yadekha

by YUVAL CHERLOW

(Alon Shevut: Sifriat Hegyonot, Hotsaat Tevunot, 2000)

Reviewed by

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The *dati-le'ummi* world in Israel has been shaped primarily by the figure and philosophy of R. Kook; the modern orthodox world in America by the figure and philosophy of R. Soloveitchik. This explains many of the ideological and sociological differences between the two communities. In recent years, in Israel, there has been an increased interest in the study of R. Soloveitchik's writings and ideas, and an attempt to increase their accessibility to the Israeli public. This promising development augurs well for Israeli society, as there is much in the *dati le'ummi* world that can be deepened and enriched through exposure to the Rav's worldview, with all of its complexity and its ability to appreciate dialectical values. (One may argue that, similarly, the modern orthodox world in America could do with an infusion of the pure spirituality of R. Kook, but that is a different topic altogether.) The two recent books, both in Hebrew, R. Chaim Navon's *Neehaz Ba-Sevakh*, and R. Yuval Cherlow's *Ve-Hayu la-Abadim be-Yadekha*, attempt to introduce the Rav's philosophy to the Israeli reader, and are therefore welcome additions to the Israeli intellectual and religious landscape.

Chaim Navon's book, *Neehaz Ba-Sevakh*, serves as a commendable introduction to the world of R. Soloveitchik's thought. Navon, a *talmid* of R. Aharon Lichtenstein at Yeshivat Har Etzion for many years, educator at numerous institutions of higher learning, and author of several books, is intellectually and conceptually a natural inhabitant of this world. Navon's grasp of the Rav's ideas is accurate, clear and cogent. He successfully elucidates the nuances of the Rav's complex philosophy in coherent, comprehensible language. His analyses are well reasoned, and, as a whole, solid and convincing. While he frames and discusses the issues in their larger philosophical context, overall, this work is a descriptive and explicative mapping out the Rav's philosophy.

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The first six chapters of Navon's work address central themes in the Rav's thought, while the last three deal with three of the Rav's major works: *Lonely Man of Faith*, *Halakhic Man*, and *U-Vikkashtem Mi-Sham*. Navon's solid grasp of the Rav's thought emerges in his choice of subjects, as well as in his treatment of them. For example, in his introduction, he discusses the proper theoretical approach to the Rav's works. He cites the opinions of various scholars who have attempted to trace the chronological development of R. Soloveitchik's thinking, and ultimately rejects this position. Instead, he argues that while the Rav's philosophy presents a fundamentally cohesive world perspective, and contains underlying themes and principles, it is far from a tightly structured, pre-designed system. Rather, the Rav's works reflect the complexity of reality as he experienced it. This observation seems to reflect an authentic understanding of the existentialist and experiential character of the Rav's thinking.

This sound approach begins in the first chapter, where Navon addresses the dialectical nature of the Rav's philosophy, and the question of the tension between dialectic and harmony in the Rav's thought. Navon analyzes the passages in the Rav's writings dealing with dialectic, explaining the importance of dialectic in R. Soloveitchik's philosophy. He then addresses the passages in the Rav's writings that appear to indicate that ultimate harmony is indeed possible, and to the question of how to reconcile these trends. Navon again presents the approaches of various thinkers, including that of R. Cherlow, who argues for an ultimately harmonistic reading of the Rav's thought. Navon rejects this perspective, arguing for a less rigid reading of the Rav. R. Soloveitchik, he maintains, may have presented different positions in different circumstances or contexts, but more fundamentally, this contradiction reflects the Rav's perception of the nature of reality. Dialectal tension is a fundamental element of human existence; this truth can exist concomitantly with an awareness of harmonious reconciliation of that tension. Again, I believe this observation reflects an accurate understanding of the true nature of R. Soloveitchik's thought.

Other major themes addressed by Navon include the concept of sacrifice, the problem of evil, repentance, and free choice, as well as an exploration of the place of Talmud Torah in the Rav's thought. The choice to devote a chapter to Talmud Torah reflects Navon's awareness of its centrality in the Rav's worldview. Navon explores the significance of both the intellectual and emotional aspects of Talmud Torah for R. Soloveitchik, beginning with an analysis of the Rav's (Brisker) view of

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halakha as an autonomous system, and concluding with a discussion of the Rav's emphasis on the experiential aspects of Talmud Torah.

The chapter on the Rav's Zionism provides a worthwhile contribution toward clarification of this complex topic that has been the source of much confusion and misrepresentation of the Rav. Navon examines the relevant sections of *Kol Dodi Dofek*, and then deals with several important questions, such as the basis of the Rav's Zionism, and the interplay of pragmatism and ideology in the Rav's approach to the state of Israel. In addition, he includes an interesting passage regarding the grounds for the *haredi* rejection of Zionism (particularly that of the Rav's uncle, R. Yitshak Zev Soloveichik), claiming that the basis for this rejection lies in the lack of theoretical halakhic principles with which we are to grapple with a modern secular state. Navon argues that this position, that sees an area of reality as lying outside the purview of the halakha, is untenable for Rav Soloveitchik. Navon concludes this chapter with a critique of the position that attempts to view the Rav as a member of the so-called "religious-Zionist school" of thinkers, (such as R. Kook). He demonstrates that the Rav's approach is significantly different than those of this idealistic, messianic school.

In the chapters dealing with *Lonely Man of Faith*, *Halakhic Man*, and *U-Vikkashtem Mi-sham*, Navon outlines and assesses the central ideas of each work, presenting them within the framework of various philosophical questions.¹ These chapters provide a serviceable introduction to the Rav's major philosophical writings.

Any scholar or teacher of a particular topic will find points of disagreement with the details of another's presentation of the same topic. I would have liked to have seen greater emphasis in this work on the role of halakha in transforming and elevating the world. While Navon does deal with the role of halakha in the world as is it expressed in *Halakhic Man* and in *U-Vikkashtem Mi-sham*, I would have put more emphasis on the way in which the halakhic system serves as a bridge between the physical and spiritual world, and that actualization of halakha in this world is thus the means of unification between the human and the Divine. In addition, I would have liked the chapter on *teshuva* to have been more fully developed, with perhaps a greater emphasis on the importance of creativity in general in the Rav's thought, and an expanded discussion of the Rav's view of man's relationship to time.²

However, overall, Navon's book serves as a solid introduction for those looking to become acquainted with the Rav's philosophy. Its

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delineation of the Rav's ideas and its insights will hopefully serve as a springboard for further, in-depth independent study, enabling more people to forge their own individual spiritual and intellectual connections to the Rav's *weltanschauung*.

If the success of Navon's work stems from the fact that he is entirely at home in the Rav's oeuvre (as he himself states, his first encounter with the Rav's writings was like "water to a thirsty soul"), R. Cherlow's work comes from a completely different mindset. R. Yuval Cherlow (also a student of Rav Lichtensein), Rosh Yeshivat Hesder in Petah Tikva and a founder of *Tsohar* (an organization that attempts to bridge the religious-secular divide), is a leading figure and educator in the *dati le'ummi* world. He is well known for his contributions to public dialogue on many contemporary issues, and is recognized for his ability to identify and respond to the complexity of such issues with insight and sound judgment. He is firmly based, in his audience and educational milieu, in the *dati-le'ummi* worldview that is profoundly influenced by the thought of Rav Kook.³

I find that his book is better read as an example of what happens when this world meets the world of R. Soloveitchik, rather than as a straight explication of R. Soloveitchik's thought. For example, R. Kook's perspective serves as backdrop in R. Cherlow's book from page one. The introduction contrasts the Israeli public's lack of knowledge and appreciation of R. Soloveitchik's thought, with its widespread knowledge and assimilation of R. Kook's outlook and ideas. Throughout the book, R. Soloveitchik's views are frequently considered in light of their contrasting or complimentary relationship to those of R. Kook, such as the two thinkers' opposing interpretations of *Akedat Yitshak*, their differing perspectives on *kedushat Erets Yisrael*, and their attitudes regarding reconciling various tensions in religious life.

In addition, I sensed R. Kook's philosophical presence in the broader tone of the work as well. For instance, R. Cherlow introduces R. Soloveitchik's dialectical perspective in the context of the observation that although typically one embarks on a religious quest in the search for spiritual peace and serenity, R. Soloveitchik's thought leads in the opposite direction – towards existential crisis. R. Cherlow acknowledges those seekers (including his students) who prefer a religious philosophy that pursues this spiritual peace, and defends religion in general against the claim that it is merely of soporific value. This framing of the issue is legitimate, but it reveals a perspective, and an audience, far more attuned to R. Kook's thought than that of R. Soloveitchik.⁴

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Again, I found that the book is strongest when one focuses on R. Cherlow's unique insights. R. Cherlow, an accomplished thinker and teacher, presents his own perspectives, observations, and expansions of the topics he explores. Indeed, the book grew out of classes he delivered on the thought of R. Soloveitchik. These discussions are often quite intriguing. For example, Cherlow opens his chapters on *U-Vikkashtem Mi-sham* with his own interesting interpretation of the structure and themes of *Shir ha-Shirim*, upon which *U-Vikkashtem Mi-sham* is grounded.⁵

R. Cherlow's central intention is to examine the question of dialectic versus harmony in R. Soloveitchik's thought. To this end, Cherlow analyzes selected writings of R. Soloveitchik in an attempt to define the extent and limits of their dialectical nature. For example, while he concedes that *Lonely Man of Faith* is a book categorically based on dialectic principles, he would like to claim that *Halakhic Man*, despite certain dialectical elements, contains much less tension than other works. He also focuses on areas in R. Soloveitchik's writings that suggest a more harmonious perspective, such as the ending of *U-Vikkashtem Mi-sham*. Cherlow concludes that while R. Soloveitchik's philosophy is undeniably rooted in dialectical tension, he believes that the strain of harmonious reconciliation in the Rav's thought is too considerable to be ignored.

According to Cherlow, R. Soloveitchik's writings indicate that over the course of an ultimately dialectical life, certain pockets of harmony are to be identified. These pockets include the experience of prayer and the experience of halakhic practice, both of which serve as oases of existential wholeness in the religious person's life. In addition, Cherlow suggests that while conflict is a central element of man's individual religious experience, perhaps this tension eases when this experience is broadened to include others, such as God, the "other," or the community.

Cherlow's understanding of the Rav's thought is not simplistic; he appreciates and does not underrate the depth and nature of dialectic in the Rav's perspective. I personally find his approach to interpreting R. Soloveitchik's philosophy a bit too pat and neat, as I resist the attempt to fit the Rav's thinking into a neatly structured system accounting for all anomalies. The Rav's philosophy is one of shifting perspectives, corresponding to the reality of shifting human experiences. However, while Cherlow's ideas do not inspire my wholehearted acceptance, they are thought provoking. The question of dialectic versus harmony in the Rav's thought is important, and Cherlow's conclusions are worthy of deliberation and consideration.

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Both of these books represent worthwhile contributions to the corpus of work in Hebrew on the Rav. Chaim Navon has written a solid and perceptive introduction to R. Soloveitchik's thought. R. Cherlow's book's most important contribution lies in its ability to serve as a bridge for those steeped in the singular perspective widespread in the Israeli religious world into a stimulating and revitalizing new perspective.

NOTES

1. For instance, he deals with the proper context in which to understand *Halakhic Man*, and the question of whether *Lonely Man of Faith* is ultimately an affirmation or rejection of modernity (and therefore perhaps can even be considered a post-modern composition). Navon concludes that the Rav indeed affirms the value of the modern enterprise, and that while in his time R. Soloveitchik may have felt that social trends needed to be countered with precautions against modernity, today a stronger confirmation of the value of the world's contribution may be called for.
2. I found that both of these works made use of somewhat different source material than most English works on R. Soloveitchik, with greater emphasis on primary sources written in Hebrew.
3. R. Cherlow has authored two books on R. Kook's philosophy, *Ve-Eirastikh Li Le-Olam*, and *Torat Erets Yisra'el Le-Or Mishnat Ha-Ra'ayah*.
4. Indeed one can argue that the whole premise of the book, which places great importance on reconciling disparate strains, as well as a particular emphasis on harmony, is one that reveals R. Kook's influence; however I do think the question of dialectic vs. harmony in R. Soloveitchik's writings is a legitimate one in and of itself.
5. Cherlow claims that the central tension of *Shir ha-Shirim* stems from the gap between the backgrounds and lifestyles of the lover and the beloved—he, a majestic ruler, she a simple country girl - and on the girl's lack of true understanding of the nature and responsibilities of love. R. Cherlow recently published a book on *Shir ha-Shirim*, *Aharekha Narutsa*.

REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE

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