Dr. Yoel Finkelman is Curator of the Haim and Hanna Salomon Judaica Collection at the National Library of Israel.

Review Essay

"God Is Not Dead, But He's on Freud's Couch"

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

***The Last Rabbi: Joseph Soloveitchik and Talmudic Tradition* by William Kolbrener (Indiana University Press, 2016), 227 pages.**

Two ambitious but frustrating books have a related goal. They attempt to describe a path that North American Modern Orthodox thought can travel down, one that is both profoundly influenced and aware of the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik but also not beholden to it entirely.

Certainly, the Rav is the single most influential philosopher in contemporary Modern Orthodoxy. However, he wrote his most significant philosophical essays in the 1940s and 60s, and passed away a generation ago. Despite this, so often interlocutors on the Orthodox scene, when discussing controversial issues, make do with assertions about what R. Soloveitchik said or what he would have said on the matter, as if that alone settles the issue.

It would seem wiser to begin to articulate a theology and ideology for American Modern Orthodoxy that is familiar with the Rav and rooted in his thinking, but is also capable of answering new questions or speaking in a new language that have become part of the discourse in the past half a century.

Daniel Rynhold and Michael Harris find direction in, of all places, the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, the most outspoken and iconoclastic

TRADITION 51:3 / © 2019
Rabbinical Council of America

atheist of 19th century philosophy. Famous for his quip that "God is dead," Nietzsche's reputation stems not only from his bitter style, but from his systematic rejection of convention, his disapproval of organized religion, and his polemic against even such seemingly obvious positives as the values of truth and human compassion.

Rynhold and Harris argue that Nietzsche's reputation notwithstanding, there is shared territory between Nietzsche's most valuable and thoughtful ideas and those of some texts in traditional Jewish thought, especially that of R. Soloveitchik. One who draws a Venn diagram of the ideas of the Rav and those of Nietzsche will be surprised to discover more overlap than expected.

The authors read the Rav in a fairly straightforward manner, and those familiar with his theology might be surprised by the similarity with Nietzsche, but they will not find new readings of the Rav's essays. But in reading Nietzsche, they are creative and subtle. The project of building on Nietzsche to create a new Jewish theology requires bracketing some of his most radical ideas – particularly his atheism or advocacy of euthanasia for "unproductive" people. It also involves reading Nietzsche through the lenses of analytical philosophy, by identifying and articulating key arguments and determining as precisely as possible their philosophical meaning and exact definition. Following several recent scholars, Rynhold and Harris argue that some of Nietzsche's reputation is undeserved, that some of his more radical statements should be understood as more moderate, and that those ideas can stand up to exacting philosophical scrutiny.

Nietzsche, like R. Soloveitchik in *Halakhic Mind*, is a perspectivist thinker who understands that an individual's conception of truth is not objective, but dependent on the person's experience, intellectual method, and way of looking at things. They both demand great people to recreate themselves and build themselves into something new. Both are willing to reject conventional practice or ideas and replace them with something more demanding, sophisticated, and even unpopular, and both have no expectation that a life well lived will also be comfortable. Both the Rav and Nietzsche see the longing for a mystical or supernatural success, a world to come, as being distracting at best and damaging at worst for the best kind of life to be lived here on earth, with all its concreteness and temporality.

That overlap contains the seeds and raw materials which, Rynhold and Harris claim, Modern Orthodoxy can use to build a life-affirming, this-worldly religiosity that eschews the dangers of fundamentalism or

slavish attachment to the past, while encouraging people to focus their energies on self-creation and this-worldly concrete ethical action. Human behavior in this world, preventing human suffering, and people striving to make themselves better can be the focus of this new religious vision.

On the one hand, *Nietzsche, Soloveitchik, and Contemporary Jewish Philosophy* is a creative work, and the possibility of using as radical an atheist as Nietzsche as part of the stuff of a contemporary Orthodox Judaism is intriguing. But Rynhold and Harris's analytic approach has an unintended consequence of stripping Nietzsche and Soloveitchik of much of their force. The book's deliberately unprovocative and straightforward prose maximizes clarity. But Soloveitchik and Nietzsche are both thinkers who place great stock in the force of their highly personal literary style. The authors end up isolating R. Soloveitchik's ideas from the larger arguments he makes about the nature of halakha and Torah study, or his interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. For readers of *Tradition* this is likely less of a problem, since they may know that context already. But in the case of Nietzsche, presumably less familiar to Orthodox readers, the authors ignore his literary style and tone, elements which make reading Nietzsche fun, provocative, and challenging. Rynhold and Harris treat Nietzsche's writings as a kind of antiseptic container for philosophical ideas, which can then be separated from their stylistic character and examined under the light of fine categorical distinctions.

Yet, once you have chosen to bracket the atheism and rejection of morals, once you have chosen the least offensive interpretive options in reading Nietzsche, and once you have sidelined the poetics and tone of his iconoclasm, you are left with something perhaps more clearly defined, but also more anodyne and pareve than Nietzsche intended. I suspect that old Friedrich himself would have something harsh to say of the Nietzsche presented in this book!

I prefer my Nietzsche in his unadorned, angry, caustic, and rejectionist glory. I don't expect him to become one of the building blocks of a religious vision, but his atheism might better serve Orthodox Jews not as something to be bracketed, but as something to be taken in small doses as a contrarian corrective to the dangers of exaggerated religious self-confidence, and his challenge of a herd mentality might help counter the tendency for religious communities to become too comfortable and conformist. I'd rather learn from Nietzsche's anger than domesticate him.

William Kolbrener's *The Last Rabbi* is in some ways an even more ambitious work, and in other ways even more frustrating. If Rynhold and Harris offer a straightforward, and to my mind correct, reading of

R. Soloveitchik, Kolbrener is doing something bolder. He is reading the Rav in associative conjunction with literary theory, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and sources in Hazal and Jewish thought. Kolbrener is also profoundly sensitive to the contradictions in the Rav's theological writings, helpful in a context of so many authors who do not give them the attention they deserve. In the end, Kolbrener is bringing to the table a refreshing new set of thinkers and modes of analysis than have not previously been used to deal with the Rav's theology.

The Last Rabbi's argument is hard to summarize, in part due to its telegraphed arguments and a working assumption that readers already know much about the philosophers and thinkers Kolbrener cites without full explanation. Still, put broadly, Kolbrener builds on Freud to distinguish between two categories of encounter with death, loss, or tragedy: mourning and melancholy. Mourning is a mature encounter with death that encourages the mourning child to face the future fully aware of the loss and the necessity to take responsibility for the future without the parent and guide. Melancholy, in contrast, is an unhealthy response to death in which the child replaces the security that the parent provided with a façade of assuredness, a false confidence, without fully facing up to the loss and the insecurity that death thrusts on the child. Kolbrener argues that the self-assurance and certainty of the hero of *Halakhic Man* reflects Soloveitchik as a melancholy figure rather than a model of healthy mourning, which Kolbrener associates with Hazal.

Kolbrener pays close attention to the metaphors R. Soloveitchik uses to describe knowledge. In many of R. Soloveitchik's essays, knowledge is "conquest," a military image in which the subject subdues the object, defeating it. These metaphors imply conflict, the taking of sides and captives in an intellectual battle, rather than the back-and-forth conversation which Kolbrener associates with a more playful, less self-assured discourse of Hazal and other rabbinic literature. More, Kolbrener identifies contradictions or at least tensions between the places, such as the first half of *Halakhic Man*, where the melancholy Soloveitchikian hero confidently defeats nature, and the places, like the second half of *Halakhic Man*, where the mournful repentant hero engages with loss and defeat as part of a process of mature self-transformation.

The Last Rabbi takes as its starting point, indeed the fulcrum of its analysis, the well-knows anecdote from *U-Vikkashtem mi-Sham,* in which the young Joseph declares Rambam to be his only childhood friend. Young Joseph fears for his friend's wellbeing while his father, R. Moshe Soloveichik, identifies contradictions or problems in Rambam's writings, but he celebrates when his father succeeds in solving the problems, saving

Rambam. When R. Moshe fails to solve the contradiction, Joseph runs to his mother, who helps comfort him after the attack levelled at his friend. "'Don't be sad,' Mother would answer, 'Father will find a solution for the Rambam. And if he doesn't find one, then maybe when you grow up you'll resolve his words. The main thing is to learn Torah with joy and excitement'" (*And From There You Shall Seek*, 145).

For Kolbrener, the self-confident solution of the masculine father represents melancholy, while the modest comfort of the feminine mother represents mourning. The close reading of this story in a chapter entitled "Interlude" is sharp and insightful, one of the most elegant and enlightening parts of the book.

In the final analysis, despite the bold project, the primary arguments in *The Last Rabbi* are not, to my mind, fully convincing. R. Soloveitchik's thought in fact emphasizes the necessity of an honest encounter with death and human suffering, and his lectures on the philosophical and halakhic grounding of mourning require more direct treatment than *The Last Rabbi* provides. In places, the book drifts from using psychoanalytic theory to illuminate aspects of the Rav's writings to suggesting something about the Rav's inner personality. Even if Kolbrener does not mean to do this, it is far too speculative for my taste. More, Kolbrener overstates the gap between R. Soloveitchik's presentation of Brikser *lomdus* as self-confident conquest and the pluralism of rabbinic literature. The Rav's own Talmudic analysis never tries to eliminate the polyvocality of rabbinic dispute, but to explain the multiple, disputing voices. R. Soloveitchik's own penchant for reading the same texts differently from year to year suggests that Kolbrener might exaggerate the implications of the "conquest" metaphors. Indeed, a work whose subtitle is "Joseph Soloveitchik and Talmudic Tradition" would benefit from a richer accounting of the Rav's Talmudic exegesis itself and not only his theological writings.

Furthermore, Kolbrener makes gender a much more central category for interpreting R. Soloveitchik's philosophical writings than I think the evidence justifies. In addition to the story in *U-Vikkashtem mi-Sham*, where the distinctive roles of father and mother are central, Kolbrener borrows most of his evidence for the role of gender in the Rav's thought from the eulogy for the Talne Rebbitzen and from *Family Redeemed*. The former (published in these pages in Spring 1978), like so many of the eulogies which R. Soloveitchik delivered, may tell us as much about how the Rav perceived the subject of the eulogy as about the Rav himself, and the latter is a collection of essays taken and edited from the Rav's manuscript archive and from transcripts of oral lectures, which were not published in his lifetime and which he may not have considered finished,

certainly in the form the editors have given them. Gender is not nearly as critical in the more central essays, such as *Halakhic Man*, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, and *Halakhic Mind*—or in *U-Vikkashtem mi-Sham*, aside from that one anecdote—and these works are not so open to psychoanalytic analysis as recollections of childhood.

The most intriguing sections of the book are Kolbrener's creative readings of *midrashim* that describe the need to recall and reconstruct Torah that was forgotten upon Moses death. In Kolbrener's reading, this reflects mourning the loss of certainty that comes from Moses' face-to-face revelation, replacing it with the unsurety of a creative tradition about which one is confident but also cautious and humble. The epistemological pluralism of Hazal is here a healthy response to Moses' death, and it sits at the core of proper Torah study and Jewish theology to this day.

This points to the most important contribution of these two books, appearing almost at the same time. They both move beyond simply understanding the Rav's philosophy and begin a much broader project of building a creative and new theology of Judaism that is in conversation with the Rav, but not bound to him. Rynhold and Harris suggest not only broadening the canon of thinkers with which Modern Orthodoxy conducts its conversations, but highlighting the place of this-worldly, life-affirming Jewish practice. Kolbrener is more concerned with understanding what we do when we interpret texts, what role creativity plays in Talmud Torah, and the tension between submission to the authority of Torah and the role of the reader in making meaning. I prefer Kolbrener's hints at a midrashic discourse as a way forward for Jewish theology, as opposed to the more organized and clearly defined tradition of analytical philosophy exemplified by Rynhold and Harris. But this is just my own idiosyncratic preference, and any articulated Jewish theology that engages seriously with great non-Jewish thinkers and works to articulate a path forward for Modern Orthodoxy is beneficial.

One hopes that Rynhold and Harris will dedicate a second volume to clarifying how the preference for a life-affirming theology and a Nietzschian individualism translates into practice, whether individual, communal, or educational. At the same time, one hopes that Kolbrener will spell out the theological and epistemological implications of his hermeneutic-midrashic approach more thoroughly in a dedicated work. Articulating what we mean when we dedicate our lives to certain texts, when we interpret those texts, when we commit ourselves existentially to one of multiple possible readings of sacred texts, is a task that Jewish theology can ill afford to ignore.