

Review of Maimonides–Between Philosophy and Halakhah: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Lectures on The Guide of the Perplexed

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This recently produced book (2016), based on student notes, from lectures given by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik 65 years ago on Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, is an important and welcome addition to our understanding of Maimonidean thought, especially since it comes from such a significant voice within contemporary Orthodox Judaism.

I confess that I have not been a fan of Rabbi Soloveitchik.

In one way, the rabbi had been a breath of fresh air, a leading Orthodox rabbi, scion of a famous rabbinic family, who studied and wrote modern philosophy. But that was exactly the problem.

Although in his famous *Halakhic Man* (1944, English translation in 1983), he struggled against the tide of Kierkegaardian and Heideggerian existentialism, that book remained in the existentialist camp. The “Halakhic man” looked like a response to Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, while the “Halakhah” took the place of Heidegger’s “being.” The Halakhic man is surely an improvement over what Rabbi Soloveitchik called *homo religiosus*, the fraught romantic hero who exemplified the path of Kierkegaard and Buber; but Halakhic man’s turn to the outside world of Halakhic specificity seemed to replay the struggle of Heidegger’s *Dasein* with *Sein*, i.e., the struggle of man with the being of the *thing* in the world.

R. Soloveitchik recognized the problem. He designed his long footnote 4 of *Halakhic Man* to attack the romanticism in philosophy that he himself could not shake off, as this brilliant extract testifies:

“The entire romantic aspiration to escape from the domain of knowledge, the rebellion against the authority of objective, scientific cognition which has found

its expression in the biologicistic philosophies of Bergson, Nietzsche, Spengler, Klages, and their followers, and in the phenomenological, existential and anti-scientific school of Heidegger and his coterie, 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, the lavishing of extravagant praise on the Faustian type and the Dionysian personality, etc., etc., have brought complete chaos and human depravity to the world. And let the events of the present era be proof!”

The problem of modern philosophy occurs again in the latest document from R. Soloveitchik, *Maimonides – Between Philosophy and Halakhah*. This volume, published just in 2016, represents the labor of several individuals to reconstruct a lecture series that R. Soloveitchik gave in 1951 (he died in 1993), entirely from student notes. The modern philosophy haunting this work is the “Marburg” school neo-Kantianism of Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), rather than existentialism. These lectures thus represent R. Soloveitchik’s turn from the existentialism of *Halakhic Man* to his own early writing on Kantian thought.

I had no idea that R. Soloveitchik had given a course on Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*. The appearance of this volume represents an addition to the Maimonidean scholarly library, despite the problems it presents. While I criticize the lectures as a problematic accommodation to Kantianism, I acknowledge that R. Soloveitchik made a fundamental, even essential, contribution to the study of Judaism’s greatest philosopher. Indeed, when he wrote strictly about Maimonides, and not about “ethics” (the codeword for Kantianism), he got Maimonides right, in ways that our current academics do not.

This problem is one that I have frequently met. Our modern academy cannot approach important religious thinkers of the past without dressing them in contemporary garb. By contrast, since R. Soloveitchik began with the conviction that Maimonides was a Torah-true Jew, he validated conclusions that I feared I had reached alone.

For example, R. Soloveitchik recognized that *The Guide of the Perplexed* was essentially about prophecy. While he did not go as far as I do in calling the *Guide* a textbook for the training of prophets, he recognized that “all of the *Guide’s* ideas touch on this theme.” He agreed that Maimonides’ goal in the *Guide* was “progress in the Prophetic-Ecstatic experience.”

Again, I have argued against the Straussian claim that there is an esoteric hard-core Aristotelian doctrine concealed by the *Guide*. R. Soloveitchik agreed, saying here that Maimonides “seeks to negate any educational policy of esotericism; he was against any esotericism in education.” The teacher of the “divine science” must indeed proceed with only his best students, circuitously, since the Talmud prohibits the public and straightforward teaching of *Maaseh*

Bereshit and *Maaseh Merkava*. But the Guide does not conceal a secret rejection of creation *ex nihilo* and divine providence, as many contemporary scholars believe. (Perhaps the Rabbi aimed this critique at Leo Strauss' famous essay on esotericism, "The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed," published just 10 years before these lectures.)

The right way to read the great minds of the distant past, like Maimonides, is to try, however difficult that may be, to read them as they would have read themselves. These thinkers thought that they what they wrote was right, and we must understand why they thought so, and what exactly they meant, before we weigh them out on our modern scales. Maimonides discusses this very point in a number of chapters of the first volume of the *Guide*, where he urges a type of humility in the student, to *not* urge every alleged contradiction in "divine science," since, ultimately, there are none. He explained that though we can overturn those delicate structures with a pin, we do our teachers and ourselves no favors by doing so. The first and most difficult thing, especially for us, is to grasp what the teacher actually said: our critical response can only come once we know that we have sufficient clarity for that task.

But these intrusions of modernity appear even in R. Soloveitchik's lectures on the *Guide*. This becomes clear from a quick look at the volume's index. The largest entry, "ethics, ethical," is six column inches. The next largest, "God," is a mere four and a half column inches. None of the other entries rates more than an inch. This overemphasis on ethics is not just in one or two chapters, but pervades nearly every section.

Once again, R. Soloveitchik recognized the problem (endnotes to *Halakhic Man*, note 51). He wrote that such overemphasis on ethicism "fits in with the worldview of liberal religious Judaism, which based Judaism upon ethics." He recognized that German Reform Jews had created their religion of ethics to replace Judaism's religion of law. Reform's exaggerated moralism was its unconvincing answer to Protestantism's demand to know why Jews remained Jewish after abandoning halakhah.

It is possible to recognize R. Soloveitchik's trajectory as a struggle with his youthful neo-Kantianism. In these lectures he frequently distances himself from particularities of the Kantian approach, especially its independence from religion. Kant's moral exemplar attains an entirely inner-directed, free embodiment of the categorical imperative to do good unto others. But Maimonides, to the contrary, placed the ethical stage as just the introductory level in the school of the divine science. Maimonides said that "It has been explained or rather demonstrated that the moral virtues are preparation for the rational virtues" (*Guide* 1:34).

However, when R. Soloveitchik re-examined the *Guide*, he found that there are two levels of the ethical life of man, as there are two levels in the ethical life of God. God, "prior" to creation is "all-exclusive," but in order for creation to occur, God turns to become "all-inclusive," conferring existence upon all things by way of creation. God creates by making

everything else a part of Him.

Similarly, when men begin their path as ethical individuals, they are completely “all-exclusive,” i.e., excluding themselves by devoting themselves to others. But this is the lowest level, for, as R. Soloveitchik says, “if I live for others, I falsify my own existence.” Indeed, this lower level is precisely the Kantian level, wherein the moral imperative becomes the individual’s “forced act.” He complained that “One might describe Kantian ethics as a form of Prussian militarism (whereby) the superior Will reigns over the insignificant soldier.”

Upon attainment of the prophetic-ecstatic level, when we reach cognitive merger with God at the level of active intellect (*sekhel ha-poel*), we then become “all-inclusive,” that is, completely selfish, egocentric. We want to engulf the entire universe into ourselves, excluding everything outside ourselves. At this pinnacle, the demand is: “do not abandon yourself to others, but let yourself grow through merger with others.” R. Soloveitchik calls this “ethical solipsism; no one else exists.” By making myself the universe, actualizing Torah within myself, I become, paradoxically, the true ethical personality. It is through this dialectical reversal that R. Soloveitchik overcomes Kant’s autonomous outer-directed ethicism, replacing it with his new appreciation of Maimonides’ inner-directed “ethical” goal.

However, as is obvious in even a cursory perusal of R. Soloveitchik’s developed doctrine, he merely takes Maimonides’ system of prophetic attainment and renames it “ethical.” To be sure, there is an ethical dimension to the prophetic conjunction with the active intellect, especially Maimonides’ emphasis on *imitatio dei*. Nonetheless, such an explicit recasting seems like another vain effort to make Maimonides more academically acceptable, by making him more Kantian than Kant.

Notes

Rabbi Gerald (Yaacov) Homnick took these notes during those 1951 lectures. Prof. Lawrence J. Kaplan, who was the translator of *Halakhic Man*, thoroughly edited and annotated those notes, and provided an introduction.

This volume is clearly a labor of love, but there is no avoiding the necessarily fragmentary character of some of the lectures. Prof. Kaplan tries to remedy this defect in footnotes, sometimes supplying material from other writings of R. Soloveitchik. The lengthy *Editor’s Introduction* (68 pages) is essential to understanding the text, and must be read before reading the lectures themselves.

The book comes equipped with various indices: subject, names, modern authors. There is also an index of biblical, rabbinic and medieval sources. There is no bibliography as such, which is unfortunate. There is a list of some of R. Soloveitchik’s books cited in the notes, but

it is by no means complete. An interesting and useful addition is a series of brief biographical notices of various names mentioned, including some names that aren't so well-known, such as Al-Qifti, Heinrich Emil Brunner, the Pseudo-Dionysius, and one of my favorites, Rudolf Otto.

Amazon carries the 256 page volume, from KTAV Publishing, for \$28.95.

Author's Bio

Scott Michael Alexander is a philosopher and theologian, with special interest in medieval Jewish philosophy. He is the author of *The Guide: An Explanatory Commentary on Each Chapter of Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed*, which can be found at maimonides-guide.com. He has taught the Guide for many years at Kollel Toras Chesed in Skokie, Illinois.

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