

BOOK REVIEW

BY BEZALEL NAOR

Maimonides Between Philosophy and Halakhah: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Lectures on the Guide of the Perplexed

Edited with an Introduction by Lawrence J. Kaplan

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In the late 1970s, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik entrusted Lawrence Kaplan with the formidable task of translating his classic Hebrew monograph *Ish ha-Halakhah* into English. Since the publication of *Halakhic Man* (1983), Professor Kaplan has presented us with Rabbi Soloveitchik's previously unpublished manuscript *The Halakhic Mind* (1986). And now this: A student's notes of a course on the *Guide of the Perplexed* that Rabbi Soloveitchik offered in Yeshiva University's Bernard Revel Graduate School in the academic year 1950-1951.

Kaplan is much more than a translator or even editor of Rabbi Soloveitchik's works. Over the years, he has emerged as a leading interpreter of Soloveitchik's thought, as well as a gifted thinker in his own right. He is at once reverential towards and critical of his Rav's thought. In the words of Dov Schwartz, in his Foreword to the book: "His admiration of R. Soloveitchik has not detracted from his critical sense. As a student, he transcends the scholar in him, and as a scholar, he transcends the student in him." I would go one step further in defining the role of Lawrence Kaplan. To employ the by now famous imagery of Rabbi Hutner, Kaplan is that "singular student who has the unique ability to grasp the thought of the Rav when he is silent; when he passes from speech to silence."¹

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Rabbi Soloveitchik opened the course with this salvo:

There are two aspects to creativity in the realm of philosophy. The first is philosophical creativity, whereby one brings new thoughts to the totality of man's historical treasures. The second is creativity in the realm of philosophical style. Philosophical style refers to one's philosophical formulae and terminology, the choice of one's words, the literary categories one employs. If a philosopher is both philosophically creative and, as well, creates a new philosophical style, he will revolutionize philosophy.

Sometimes, however, a philosophical genius is handicapped by the routine philosophical jargon that prevails in a particular climate. Literary categories are always needed as tools enabling one to express subjective ideas. Each epoch has its own jargon and categories...Not every creative genius will be able to fashion new tools. Some may be exceedingly creative in the area of

¹ Rabbi Isaac Hutner, *Pahad Yitshak: Hanukkah 8:5*.

philosophical analysis, but lack creativity in the field of literary inventiveness. They are unable to find a new medium or instrumentality to present their thought.

Maimonides was such a genius. He was a great genius in the realm of philosophical analysis and imagination. Indeed, in the *Mishneh Torah*, in the realm of Halakhah, he was able to mint new terms, to fashion new philosophic categories. There he was creative in all senses. But in the *Guide* there is sterility as to the form of presentation. He used the old, routine, Aristotelian philosophical jargon. Perhaps his use of Arabic hampered him; perhaps he was so overawed by Aristotle that he adopted his tools and took on his tradition. (pp. 75-76)

One can imagine students sitting on edge in shock and awe upon delivery of this candid appraisal of the book widely held to be the pinnacle of Jewish Philosophy! I will leave it to others more conversant with the Judeo-Arabic literary tradition to opine on the correctness of Rabbi Soloveitchik's assessment. It is not difficult to glean where Rabbi Soloveitchik was coming from and where he was going to with this bold, perhaps even brash statement. His grandfather Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik (known in the yeshivah world as "Reb Hayyim Brisker") was a genius in both senses. He excelled in originality of thought and expression. The "*Brisker Derekh*," the revolutionary method of conceptualization that he bequeathed to coming generations of Talmudists, came equipped with an equally exciting lexicon: *heftsa/gavra*, *hiyyuv/kiyyum*, *shnei denim*, *din mesuyyam*. And Rabbi Soloveitchik himself would prove a master at coining neologisms, of which the present volume has its fair share: "ethical-intellectual," "metaphysical-transcendental" (p. 82). While the modern reader might find these hyphenated terms a bit old-fashioned or outlandish, in context they do serve their purpose.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was renowned for having inherited his grandfather's consuming passion for Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. It is public knowledge that in the realm of Halakhah, the Rabbi of Boston perpetuated Rabbi Hayyim's razor-sharp method of analyzing that *magnum opus*. What remains a little known fact is that Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik was an avid student of the *Guide* as well. In Volozhin, Rabbi Hayyim confided to a visitor, Rabbi Yosef Alexander—Rabbi of Darbian (today Darbenai, Lithuania) and author of a commentary to the Prayer Book, *Porat Yosef* (Warsaw, 1898)—that it had taken him two years to study the *Guide*.² Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik shared with his students that not only was his grandfather Rabbi Hayyim expert in the *Guide* but that he wished to pen a commentary thereto—a wish that unfortunately remained unfulfilled due to the exigencies of time. On that occasion, Rabbi Soloveitchik related that he received directly from his grandfather guidance how to deal with contradictions between the *Guide* and *Mishneh Torah*.³ It seems that at one point in time Reb Hayyim's study partner in the *Guide* was an enigmatic Habad Hasid by the name of Rabbi Hayyim Abraham Dov Baer Hakohen Levine (known in Hasidic circles as "The Mal'akh").⁴

Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik's enthusiasm for the *Guide* was shared by his contemporaries, Rabbi Meir Simha Cohen and Rabbi Joseph Rosen. These two, who served respectively as the Mitnagdic and Hasidic Rabbis of Dvinsk, produced monumental commentaries of their own on *Mishneh Torah*. While Rabbi Hayyim had no recourse to the *Guide* in his *Hiddushei Rabbenu Hayyim Halevi*, the *Tsafnat P'ane'ah* of

² Rabbi Uri Moinester, *Karnei Re'em* (New York, 1951), p. 104, note 1.

³ Rabbi H. Reichman, *Reshimot Shi'urei Maran ha-Grid Halevi: Sukkah* (New York, 1990), p. 258.

⁴ Rabbi Yisroel Besser, *Mishpacha*, no. 191 (2 Shevat, 5768/2008), p. 41. Rabbi Barukh Baer Leibowitz, eminent disciple of Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik, referred to Rabbi Levine as "*a mentsch vos hot geshushket mit mein rebbe in Moreh*." The Yiddish is idiomatic and well-nigh untranslatable.

Rabbi Joseph Rosen (known as the “Rogatchover”) and the ‘*Or Same’ah* of Rabbi Meir Simha abound with references to the *Guide*. There is a simple explanation why Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik’s *Hiddushei Rabbenu Hayyim Halevi* has no truck with the *Guide* while ‘*Or Same’ah* is replete with references to the *Moreh*. The former deals only with the halakhic portions of *Mishneh Torah*, while the latter takes up with the philosophic sections of *Sefer ha-Madda’* as well. In the case of the Rogatchover, the involvement with the *Guide* is much more complex. For starters, unlike Reb Hayyim Brisker who was prevented from writing a commentary to the *Guide*, Reb Yoshe Denaburger (the former name of Dvinsk, today Daugavpils, Latvia) penned notes to that philosophic work. While he rails time and time again against the heresies of Moses Narboni (Moses of Narbonne), he has no problem with the *Giv’at ha-Moreh* of Solomon Maimon, whom he refers to simply as “*Ha-Mefaresh*” (“the Commentator”). It is conceivable that this Habad Hasid was simply unaware who authored the anonymous commentary to the *Guide*. But the relation of the *Tsafnat P’ane’ah* to the *Guide* does not end there. Those same Aristotelian categories which Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik found to be time-worn, routine and hackneyed—*homer/tsurah*, *harkavah mizgit/harkavah shekhenit*, *’etsem/mikreh*, *he’eder/metsi’ut*—were now introduced into Talmudic analysis! (Tail end of the story: The Rogatchover’s method of analysis, plucked from the *Guide*, found one disciple in Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik’s long-standing friend, Rabbi Menahem Schneerson, Lubavitcher Rebbe.)

Whereas numerous scholars perceive two distinct Maimonides—one, the halakhist of *Mishneh Torah*; the other, the vaguely antinomian author of the *Guide*—these three “*Litvishe gedolim*” saw no discontinuity, no disconnect, no split in personality.⁵ Rabbi Meir Simha concluded: “The words of Rabbenu [i.e. Maimonides] in all of his books—the *Yad*, the *Guide*, and the *Commentary to the Mishnah*—one *Geist* runs through them.”⁶

Rabbi Yehiel Ya’akov Weinberg had the audacity to tell a young Joseph Baer Soloveitchik in Berlin that though his grandfather’s interpretations of Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* are certainly not what Maimonides intended, nonetheless Rabbi Hayyim’s novellae are of interest in their own right. “Reb Hayyim was a *rishon*.” We might be tempted to say something similar concerning Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s interpretation of Maimonides’ *Guide*. While in places it leaves the reader far from convinced that this was Maimonides’ original intention, it is fascinating in its own right. “Reb Yoshe Baer was a *rishon*.”

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In his thorough Introduction, Professor Kaplan mentions *en passant* a *Yahrzeit Shi’ur* of Rabbi Soloveitchik, “*Be-’Inyan Mehikat Hashem*,” “devoted to an analysis of Maimonides’ theory of divine attributes and the resulting obligation of imitating God” (p. 23). While Kaplan is certainly correct when he writes that it “takes the form of a commentary on the opening paragraphs of *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah*, Chapter 6,” upon internal inspection we discover that the *shi’ur* is infused with the spirit and substance of the *Guide*. This is a summation from the *shi’ur*:

⁵ The three shared in common exposure to Rabbi Hayyim’s father, Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik of Brisk (author *Beit Halevi*). As a youth, Joseph Rosen of Rohatchov studied with the latter (though he may later have looked back on his erstwhile teacher with some measure of condescension). As for Meir Simha of Bialystock, his talent was duly noted by Rabbi Joseph Baer, who recommended him for the (Mitnagdic) rabbinate of Dvinsk.

⁶ Rabbi Meir Simha Cohen, *Meshekh Hokhmah* (Riga, 1927), *Yitro*, s.v. *Lo yihyeh lekha*.

A new light is shed, if so, upon all the 24 books of the Tanakh. I always had difficulty with the role of the prophets of Israel. On the one hand, we hold that a prophet is not permitted to innovate, to add or detract by even an iota; on the other hand, the word of the Lord came to the prophets, they prophesied and their prophecy was written down for eternity. What is the purpose of their prophecy, since they cannot innovate any halakhah? True, they rebuked Israel, and exhortation was one of the purposes for which our prophets were sent. But I still find it difficult to say that in their prophecy they did not relate to Israel the word of the Lord in a halakhic sense. But now all is crystal clear. An entire teaching is contained in the Prophets—the teaching of the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He; the teaching of the attributes that obligates man in *imitatio Dei*. Therefore Maimonides included the chapter dealing with erasing the Name—which essentially is the chapter of the proper names and attributes—in the *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* before the explanation of the foundation of prophecy, because in the teaching of the names of the Holy One, blessed be He—“I will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”—is hidden the foundation of prophecy and its purpose. In brief, prophecy comes to teach man how to participate in the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He, and merit to be called by the same.⁷

The Biblical quote is from Exodus 33:19. This verse is discussed by Maimonides in the *Guide*, Part I, Chapter 54. That chapter concludes:

For the utmost virtue of man is to become like unto Him, may He be exalted, as far as he is able; which means that we should make our actions like unto His, as the Sages made clear when interpreting the verse, *You shall be holy*. They said: *He is gracious, so be you also gracious; He is merciful, so be you also merciful*.⁸

Rabbi Soloveitchik’s discussion in “*Mehikat Hashem*” of the role that prophecy plays and of the two forms of *imitatio Dei* (behavioral versus characterological) is seminal. It might be interesting to contrast that Maimonidean interpretation to Abraham Joshua Heschel’s perception of *The Prophets*, who express the word of an anthropopathic deity—a notion in direct contravention of the strictures set up by Maimonides in the *Guide*. For Rabbi Soloveitchik (as for Maimonides), God engages in activities designed to evoke and inculcate in man various character traits. In Rabbi Heschel’s reading of the Prophets, God goes so far as to share in the pathos, the emotion described so vividly by the *Nevi’im*.

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In his Preface, Prof. Kaplan apprises us that the present volume takes us through the student’s notes of the First Course, but there yet awaits “Course Two.” This reviewer was privileged to hear Rabbi Soloveitchik hold forth on the *Guide of the Perplexed* one Saturday night in the Maimonides School that he founded in Boston. (If my memory is not subject to the vagaries of time, the Philosopher of Boston explored on that occasion Maimonides’ solution to the Problem of Evil in the *Guide*, Part III, Chapter 12.) Is there any chance that there exists a record of *that* series of lectures?

⁷ Rabbi Joseph Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, *Shi’urim le-Zekher Abba Mari* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2002), vol. 2, pp. 188-189.

⁸ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 128.

