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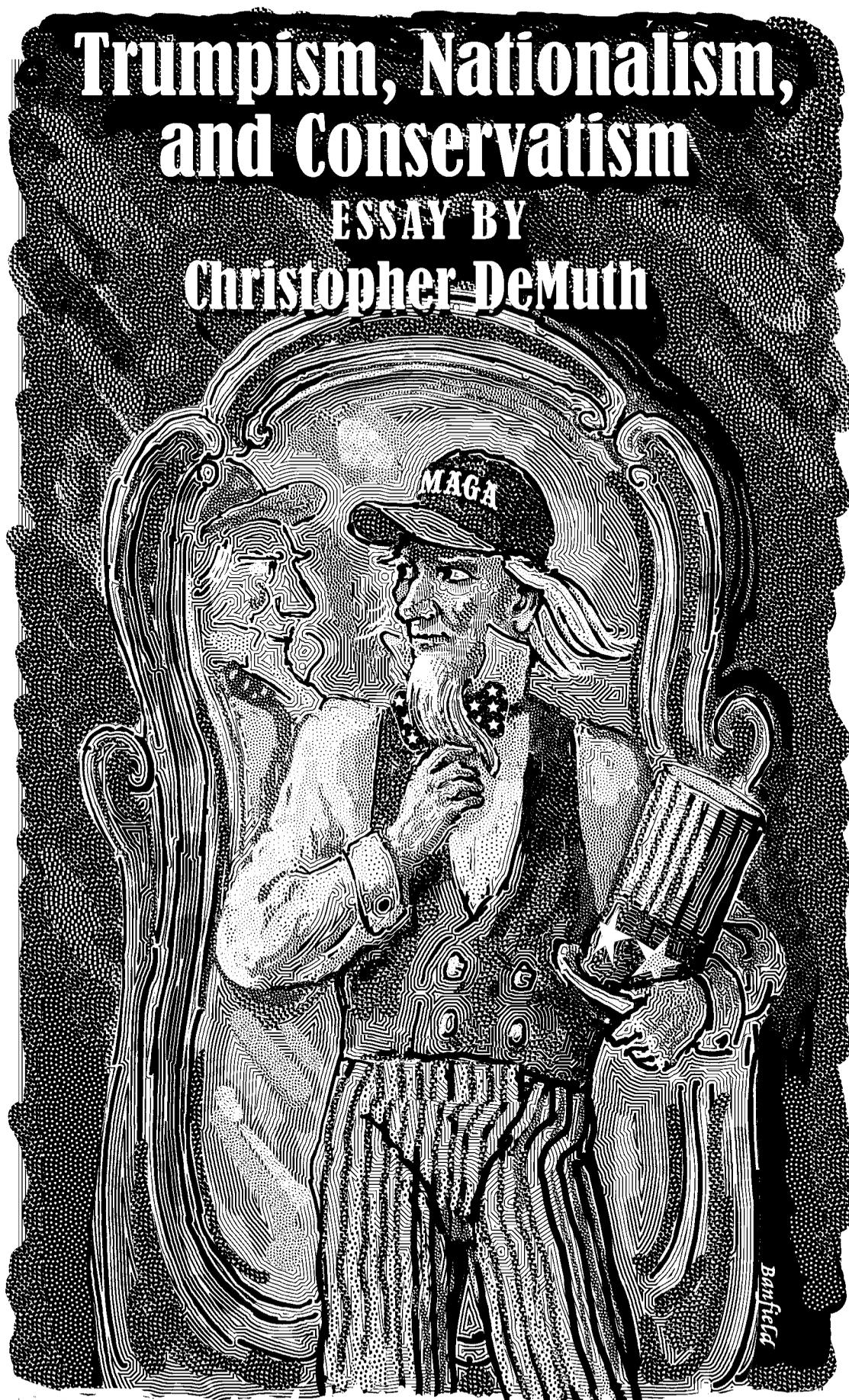
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THE INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THE HEBREW BIBLE

Chumash Mesoras HaRav: The Pentateuch Annotated with the Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (5 volumes), edited by Arnold Lustiger. Orthodox Union Press and Ohr Publishing, 1,952 pages, \$175

JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY ARE TWO religions separated by a common Scripture. Both observant Jews and believing Christians agree on the divine provenance of the *Tanakh*—the acronym for the Pentateuch, Prophets, and Writings. For Christians, the Hebrew Bible foreshadows the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; for Jews, it recounts the Election of Abraham and his family, the redemption from Egypt, the foundation and loss of the Jewish kingdom, and the constancy of God's promise to his people.

Observant Jews hear the entire Pentateuch read aloud in an annual cycle, in order to recreate the giving of the Torah at Sinai. It is a commonplace that Judaism places more attention on this world and Christianity on the next, but that requires qualification. The Jewish engagement with Scripture aims at an existential fusion of past and future into a present. This fusion brings the past to life and "plants eternal life among us," according to the concluding blessing of each section of the weekly Torah reading.

Chumash Mesoras HaRav: The Pentateuch Annotated with the Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is the first Orthodox Jewish presentation of the Pentateuch likely to interest a broad audience. Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik (1903–1993) is a unique figure in the religious world. He's the only traditional Jewish thinker to have gained a substantial following among Christian readers, initially through the essay "The Lonely Man of Faith" (1965), his only work composed for a Christian audience. Soloveitchik speaks vividly to today's believers, who find themselves surrounded by a world "technically minded, self-centered, and self-loving, almost in a sickly narcissistic fashion...seeing in the here-and-now sensible world the only manifestation of being."

Soloveitchik was the undisputed 20th-century leader of the wing of observant Judaism that embraces secular knowledge. What today we call Modern Orthodoxy would be unimaginable without him. In the observant world Soloveitchik is known simply as "the Rav"—the rabbinic authority. The scion of one of eastern Europe's great rabbinic dynasties, Soloveitchik taught the advanced Tal-

mud seminar at Yeshiva University for more than four decades and ordained more than 2,000 rabbis. Hundreds of scholarly articles and books expound his teaching, and a dedicated group of his students has translated and published more than a dozen volumes of his writings.

RABBI SOLOVEITCHIK COMPLETED A doctorate in philosophy of science at the Friedrich Wilhelm University (now Humboldt University of Berlin) in 1930 before immigrating to the United States. He could employ the language of Western philosophy as fluently as the idiom of traditional Jewish sources, often citing the existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard in his own religious teaching. He also had profound insights into the foundational issues of mathematics and physics.

Both Christian and Jewish readers will find Soloveitchik's Pentateuch commentary accessible. This compilation of thousands of comments on the Five Books of Moses was curated from published writings, transcribed lectures, and classroom notes. Arnold Lustiger, a yeshiva-trained scientist who edited several volumes of Soloveitchik's transcribed lectures as a labor of love, released the Genesis volume in 2013; Deuteronomy appeared in July 2018. Some of the material repeats traditional interpretations, but many annotations contain challenging, even disturbing insights that compel the reader to engage the deep implications of the human confrontation with the divine.

Two leading themes recur throughout the commentary: God's summoning of "majestic" man to partnership in creation, and God's consoling of "covenantal" man in his humility and distress. These ideas are well grounded in Scripture and classic Jewish sources. Soloveitchik adds a new dimension—an original phenomenology of religious consciousness.

Soloveitchik observes, for example, that the first commandment God gave the people of Israel as they prepared to leave Egypt "was to mark time" (Exodus 12:12):

The Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron in the Land of Egypt, saying, "this month shall be to you the head of the months, to you I shall be the first of the

months of the year." Freedom arises from the creation of time: "The slave lacks time experience. To the slave, time is a curse; he waits for the day to pass. The slave's time is the property of his master... Life, to the slave personally, is motionless. To live in time means to be committed to a great past and to an unborn future. Time-awareness also contains a moral element: responsibility for emerging events and intervention in the historical process. Man, according to Judaism, should try to mold and fashion the future. That is exactly why he has been created as a free agent.

TIME-AWARENESS, THE RAV EXPLAINS, has three components: "First, retrospection; without memory there is no time. Second, the exploration or close examination of things yet unborn and the anticipatory experience of events not yet in being. Third: appreciation or evaluation of the present moment as one's most precious possession." Christian readers will note the similarity of Soloveitchik's presentation of time to Augustine's in *Confessions*, Books XI–XIV, but there is an important difference. Augustine believes the past is gone, the present is insubstantial, and the future has not arrived. "What, then, is time? If no one ask of me, I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not." Time, for Augustine, is a paradox. In contrast, for Soloveitchik, man is himself a creator of time by virtue of being God's partner in creation. Memory is not simply the imprint of past events, but a willful act of reconstruction. The commanded act of making a calendar that commemorates the Passover in perpetuity begins this act of reconstruction. The future is not a point on an infinite horizon, but the self-created destiny of God's people in its journey to redemption.

This idea is implicit in the Biblical account of Creation. Soloveitchik comments:

The Midrash [commentary] states...He created worlds and destroyed them... At first glance this Midrash seems almost absurd. When man builds something, he may be dissatisfied with his



initial design, destroy it and start over. Why would omniscient God need to engage in such experimentation, building worlds and then destroying them? This Midrash speaks to the imperative...“and you shall walk in His ways” (Deuteronomy 28:10). Just as God builds and destroys, so must we.

About Genesis 2:2, “And God completed on the seventh day His work that he did,” Soloveitchik writes:

“And God completed” means that God finished His work, though the world remained incomplete. When God created the earth from [formless matter], He did not replace the chaos entirely. Some of this primordial entropy was allowed to remain, so that man, through his own effort, could strive to eliminate it.... Man was given the great assignment of completing creation.

SOME SCHOLARS SEE THE RAV AS A modernizer who injected 20th-century perspectives into traditional interpretations. I do not agree with this; the assertion that man is God’s partner in creation, and that this partnership begins with the creation of time, dates to the composition of the Tal-

mud in the first centuries of the Common Era. Man’s first act of sanctification of time is to observe the Sabbath (literally “cessation”), and the act of dividing the six profane days of the week from the seventh is understood to be a God-like act of creation: “A person who recites [the Sabbath evening blessing] *Vayekheli* [the text of Genesis 2:1-3] on eve of Shabbat is considered as if he were a partner with God in the work of creation.”

The re-creation of time also manifests itself in the traditional layout of the Pentateuch for synagogue use, which this edition follows. The material is organized by weekly portion, to be declaimed aloud in a yearly cycle. To the left of the Hebrew text appears a 1st-century A.D. Aramaic gloss; below the Hebrew and Aramaic texts is the classic 12th-century commentary of the Provence sage Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki). Two and a half millennia separate the original biblical text, the Aramaic gloss, and Rashi’s interpretation. Their juxtaposition embodies the colloquy across nearly a hundred generations through which the present enlivens the past.

Soloveitchik explains in a comment on Exodus 19:13: “The purpose of reading the Torah aloud in the synagogue is not solely to teach the congregation, but also to arrange an encounter with God, as experienced by our ancestors at Mount Sinai. Every act of read-

ing from the Torah is a new giving of the Torah, a revival of the wondrous stand at the foot of the flaming mountain. The reading of the Torah is a ‘staging’ of the giving of the Torah and a renewal of the awesome, sublime experience.” He quotes a maxim in the Talmud: “Just as at [Mount] Horeb there was dread and awe, trembling and fear, so too here [with respect to the study of Torah] it must be done with dread and awe, trembling and fear.” Man strives to become God’s partner in creation, but does so in profound awareness of his mortality and the fragility of his existence.

IF JEWISH TIME-CONSCIOUSNESS BEGINS at the Exodus, what determined the timing of humanity’s rendezvous with the one Creator God? Man, not God, set the time: “God was ready to bring about the redemption,” Soloveitchik comments on Exodus 3:1, “[but] Moses however was not yet ready for his mission, so God waited. That God functions primarily through man is a basic Jewish concept. Redemption is always achieved through an agent.” As the ancient rabbis argued, God chose Abraham because Abraham had already discovered God’s existence in contemplating nature.

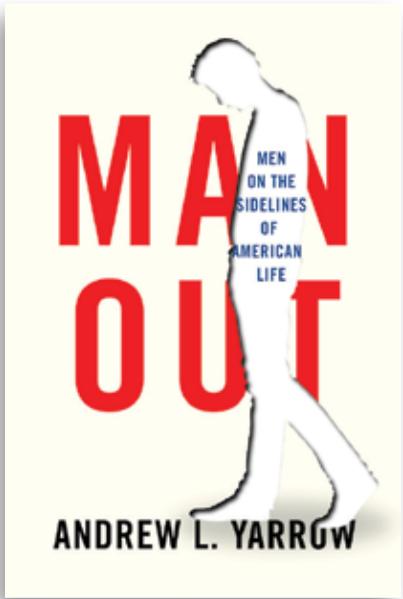
Failure to rise to the demands of partnership with God produces tragedy. The Exodus, begun by Moses, not God, when he killed the



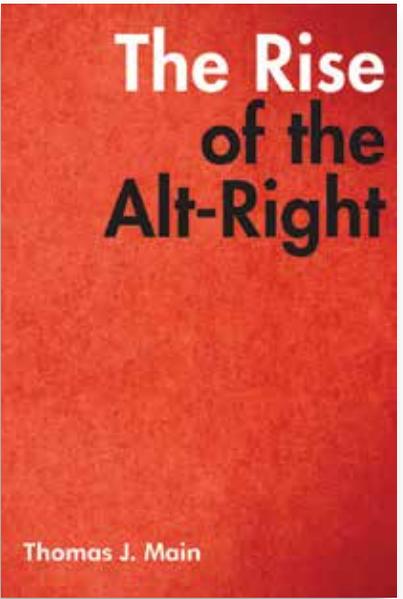
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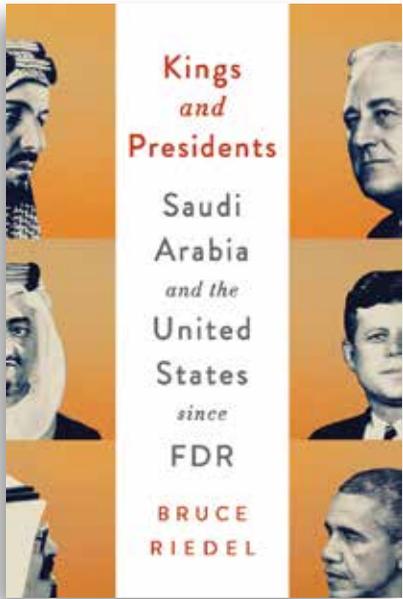
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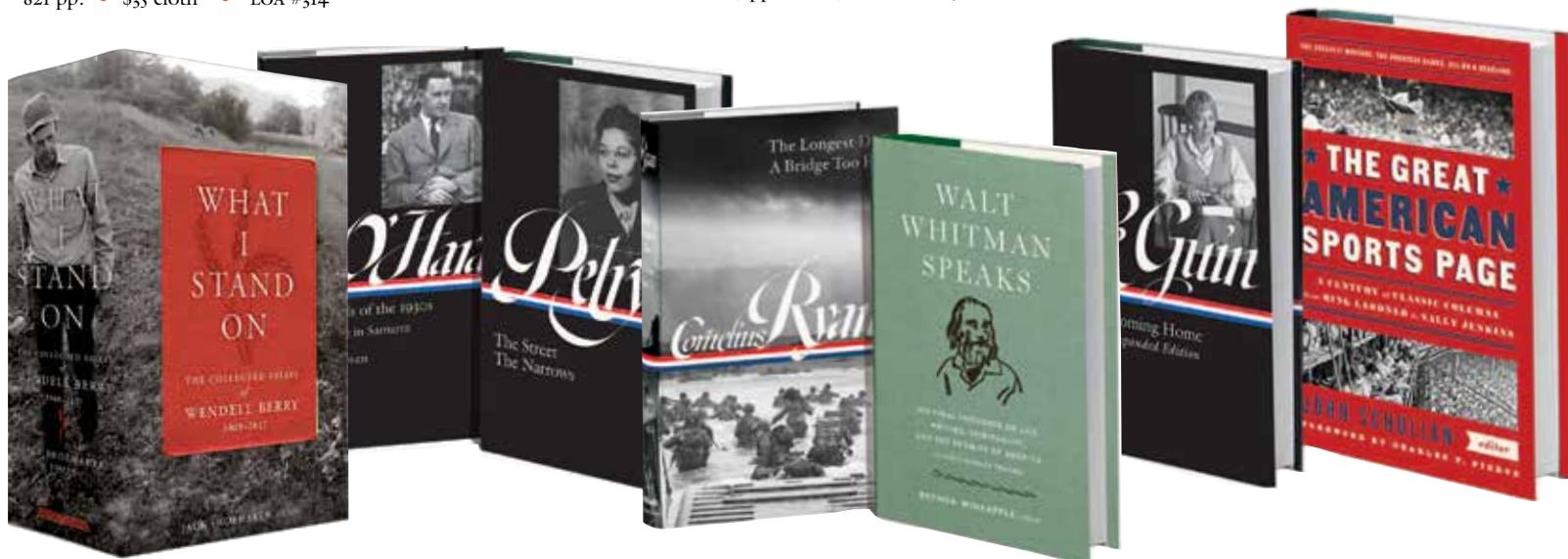
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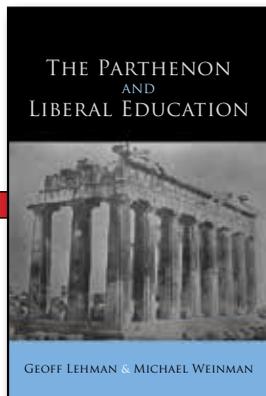
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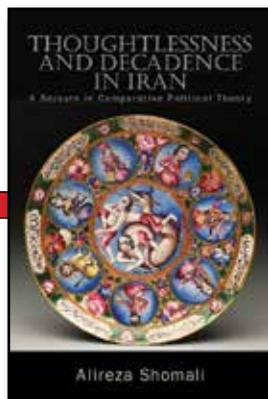


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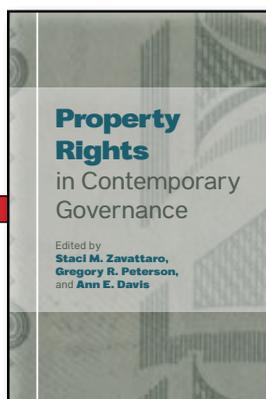
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Egyptian overseer who beat a Hebrew slave, was a triumph; but entry into the Promised Land was in some ways tragic. Moses, writes Soloveitchik, should have led the people into the Promised Land; had he done so, he would have been the Messiah, and the subsequent tragedy of Jewish history would have been averted. But the people of Israel weren't ready for redemption. Their failure to join Moses in his plea to enter the land betrayed their inadequacy. They preferred Aaron, the peacemaker who acquiesced in their desire to make a golden calf, to Moses, their admonisher. Soloveitchik infers this from the Biblical report that Aaron was mourned for a longer time than Moses. God forbade Moses entry into the land as punishment for striking rather than speaking to a water-giving rock. He comments (on Deuteronomy 3:22):

When he was told that he would not enter Eretz Yisrael, Moses pleaded for forgiveness. Had the people joined him in prayer, the Holy One would have been forced to respond. But they did not join. Thus, we read that with tears in his eyes Moses tells them, "Va'eschanan," I prayed alone. It was not *vanischanan*, we prayed.... But God became angry and did not listen to me, "lema'anchem," because of you."

Soloveitchik's interpretation is bold and original: because Israel failed to unite in opposition to God's decree against Moses, it failed to achieve its final redemption. Man is God's partner in the completion of Creation, and entitled to contest the judgments of the senior partner in the covenant. This interpretation is consistent with Scripture: Abraham argued with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Moses changed God's decision to destroy the Jewish people after the golden calf incident. But it assigns a striking degree of weight to the human element in the divine-human partnership.

THE EXODUS AND THE OBSERVANCE OF Passover demarcate the beginning of Jewish historical time. The appointed hour arrives again in Jewish history, according to Soloveitchik, in the 2nd-century A.D. rebellion against Rome, as well as in the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. Jewish time is qualitatively different from the static time of the pagan world:

The concept of a slow historical process that was popular among the peoples who lived under the influence of Greek philosophy, the endless morphological

evolution from matter into form, from a lower to a higher eidetic stage, carries weight and significance so far as time is lived through quantitatively. Then the forces of history move with an extremely slow pace; years, decades, and centuries are nothing but drops in the sea of eternity.... The Jews have inherited from Abraham the alternative to *minyán hashanim* [quantitative years]. The prophecy of the "generations" challenges man, not to live in time, but to mold it, to give to the indifferent chronos new aspects and new interpretations. Time is computed according to man's own creativity and self-determination. A qualitative time experience enables a nation to span a distance of hundreds and thousands of years in but a few moments.

Man as object is subject to fate, Soloveitchik writes; man as actor creates his own destiny:

In the life of a people (as in the life of an individual) destiny signifies an existence that it has chosen of its own free will and in which it funds the full realization of its historical existence. Instead of a passive, inexorable existence into which a nation is thrust, an Existence of Destiny manifests itself as an active experience full of purposeful movement, ascension, aspirations and fulfillment. The nation is enmeshed in its destiny because of its longing for an enhanced state of being, an existence replete with substance and direction. Destiny is the font out of which flow the unique self-elevation of the nation and the unending stream of Divine inspiration that will not run dry so long as the life of the people is demarcated by the laws of God.

IT IS INSTRUCTIVE TO CONTRAST Soloveitchik's characterization of the transformative moment with that of Kierkegaard, whom Soloveitchik cites often and for the most part sympathetically. In his disquisition on the decisive moment, Kierkegaard compares the Savior to the teacher in Plato's dialogue *Meno* who awakens a memory of a truth that lay dormant in the mind of the pupil. This Savior appears "in the fullness of time," but he does not appear as a result of any action on the part of his pupil. On the contrary, the pupil is incapable of initiating his own salvation, because he is paralyzed by the *Meno* paradox: one does not seek the truth if one already knows it, and can-



not seek the truth if one does not know it, because one doesn't know what to seek. The Savior intervenes by an ineffable act of grace, but there is no way to explain why the "fullness of time" comes about at one point in time rather than another. For Plato as well as Kierkegaard, the pupil is incapable of activity until the teacher initiates the process of recall. Time thus remains a logical conundrum for Kierkegaard, and his discussion of the significance of the moment in the *Philosophical Fragments* remains incomplete and somewhat confusing.

This creative capacity of man to achieve partnership with God makes him dangerous, Soloveitchik warns:

This concept of the obligatory nature of the creative gesture, of self-creation as an ethical norm, an exalted value, which Judaism introduced into the world, reverberates with particular strength in the world views of Kierkegaard, Ibsen, Scheler, and Heidegger.... These ideas, which were pure and holy at their inception, were profaned and corrupted in modern culture. The will was transformed by Schopenhauer into a "blind" will, while for Nietzsche it was embodied in the "superman." Similarly, the longing for creation was perverted into the desire for brutal and murderous domination. Such views have brought chaos and disaster to our world, which is drowning in its blood.

Our creative impulse must be anchored to God's will. Jewish tradition depicts a tension between what Soloveitchik calls "majestic man"—the nature-transforming creator—and "covenantal man"—the humble member of the Lord's congregation who approaches the divine in fear and awe. He quotes a famous homily attributed to Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859) states that everyone should carry in their pocket two pieces of paper. One should state, "I am dust and ashes"; the other, "The world was made for me." Wis-

dom, Mendel added, is knowing when to take which one out.

FEAR IS FUNDAMENTAL TO THE JEWISH religious experience; Soloveitchik, following Moses Maimonides, insists fear and love of God are inseparably intertwined:

Maimonides refused to accept th[e] view that severs fear from love. For him, the higher kind of fear is both inseparable from the love of God and dialectically related to it. "And what is the way to the love of Him and fear of Him? When a person contemplates his great and wondrous works and creatures and discerns from them his wisdom, which is without measure and without end, he will straightway love him.... And when he considers these very same matters he will straightway recoil and he will be afraid and fearful and will know that he is an insignificant creature, lowly and turbid, standing with slight and slender knowledge before Him who is perfect in knowledge."

Some of the most affecting parts of Soloveitchik's commentary address the fears and limitations of mortals in the face of the Divine. He illuminates some of the most ancient and forbidding portions of the biblical text, for example the sacrificial service, showing their purpose in the context of the human condition. A striking example is the ancient service of the Day of Atonement. Self-transformation through repentance (*teshuvah*—literally, "return") is a central concern of the Hebrew Bible, both for Israel as a nation and for each individual Jew. The original divine service for the forgiveness of Israel's sins (depicted in Leviticus 16) requires the high priest Aaron to cast lots over two goats, one to be driven into the wilderness (the scapegoat) and the other to be sacrificed at the tabernacle in the desert. Soloveitchik explains the purpose of these obscure actions in terms of man's existential predicament:

There is a profound idea behind the casting of lots in this ritual of atonement. The penitent argues that his moral directions were influenced by forces beyond his control, that his sinning was not entirely a free and voluntary choice. The Almighty can evaluate the extent of human culpability in situations that are not entirely of man's making. Only God knows to what extent a man was a free agent in making his decisions. The casting of lots is thus a psychodramatic representation of the penitent's state of mind. The compelling intrusion of the unknown and irrational is basic to man's existential condition, and his weakness in the face of such intrusion qualifies him to reserve God's compassionate forgiveness on Yom Kippur. Only by entering such a plea can man be declared not guilty.

Man has free will, but never knows to what extent his will is free. The penitent cannot know the full extent of his guilt. He cannot escape "the unknown and irrational" because his powers are limited. He is declared not guilty when he accepts that ultimate knowledge and power reside in God. God not only summons man to partnership, he consoles him in his lowliness.

Soloveitchik's commentary will change the way that many Jews read the Bible, and many Christians as well. His frequently inspiring reading sheds light on ancient texts in a unique and powerful way. The appearance of this Pentateuch is a milestone in the literature of religion, and a window into both the ancient world and Jewish observance that will be of value to a broad audience.

David P. Goldman is a columnist for Asia Times and PJ Media, a senior fellow at the London Center for Policy Research, and the author of How Civilizations Die (And Why Islam Is Dying Too) (Regnery Publishing). He has published a series of articles on the philosophy of Joseph Soloveitchik in the Jewish scholarly journal Hakirah.

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