Sephardic Heritage Update

A collection of current Essays, Articles, Events and Information
Impacting our community and our culture
A Publication of the Center for Sephardic Heritage

"Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time. Education is improving the lives of others and leaving your community and world better than you found it." -Marian Wright Edelman

Contents Meir Soloveichik First Things

The Virtue of Hate

By: Meir Y. Soloveichik

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there. . . . Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."
— Luke 23:33–34

In his classic Holocaust text, The Sunflower, Simon Wiesenthal recounts the following experience. As a concentration camp prisoner, the monotony of his work detail is suddenly broken when he is brought to the bedside of a dying Nazi. The German delineates the gruesome details of his career, describing how he participated in the murder and torture of hundreds of Jews. Exhibiting, or perhaps feigning, regret and remorse, he explains that he sought a Jew—any Jew—to whom to confess, and from whom to beseech forgiveness. Wiesenthal silently contemplates the wretched creature lying before him, and then, unable to comply but unable to condemn, walks out of the room. Tortured by his experience, wondering whether he did the right thing, Wiesenthal submitted this story as the subject of a symposium, including respondents of every religious stripe. An examination of the respective replies of Christians and Jews reveals a remarkable contrast. "When the first edition of The Sunflower was published," writes Dennis Prager, "I was intrigued by the fact that all the Jewish respondents thought Simon Wiesenthal was right in not forgiving the repentant Nazi mass murderer, and that the Christians thought he was wrong."

Indeed, the Christian symposiasts did sound a more sympathetic note. "I can well understand Simon's refusal [to forgive]," reflects Father Edward Flannery, "but I find it impossible to defend it." Archbishop Desmond Tutu cites the crucifixion as his source. Arguing that the newly empowered South African blacks readily forgave their white tormentors, Tutu explains that they followed "the Jewish rabbi who, when he was crucified, said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." If we look only to retributive justice, argues Tutu, "then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future."

And yet, many Jews would respond to Tutu's scriptural source by citing another verse, one that also describes a Jew strung up by his enemies, yet who responds to his enemies in a very different, perhaps less Christian, way:

So the Philistines seized [Samson] and gouged out his eyes. They brought him down to Gaza and bound him

with bronze shackles. . . . They made him stand between the pillars. . . . Then Samson called to the Lord and said, "Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes."

And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, . . . [and] then Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life.

The symposiasts' varying theological responses, Prager suggests, reflect "the nature of the Jewish and Christian responses to evil, which are related to their differing understandings of forgiveness." Indeed, the contrast between the two Testaments indicates that this is the case: Jesus' words could not be more different than Samson's.

Some might respond that the raging, vengeful Samson is the Bible's sinful exception, rather than its rule; or, perhaps, that Samson acted in self–defense. Yet a further perusal indicates that the Hebrew prophets not only hated their enemies, but rather reveled in their suffering, finding in it a fitting justice. The great Samuel, having come upon the Amalekite king Agag, after Agag was already captured and the Amalekites exterminated, responds in righteous anger:

Then Samuel said, "Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me." And Agag came to him haltingly. Agag said, "Surely the bitterness of death is past." But Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so your mother shall be childless among women." And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

And lest one dismiss Samuel's and Samson's anger as exhibitions of male machismo, it bears mentioning that the prophetess Deborah appears to relish the gruesome death of her enemy, the Philistine Sisera, who had, fittingly, been executed by another woman. Every bloody detail is recounted in Deborah's ebullient song:

Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite
Of tent–dwelling women most blessed.
She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen's mallet.
She struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple.
He sank, he fell, he lay still at her feet;
At her feet he sank, he fell;
there he sank, there he fell dead.
. . . So perish all your enemies, O Lord!

In his At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden, journalist Yossi Klein Halevi speaks with Johanna, a Catholic nun who is struck by the hatred Israelis bear for their enemies. Johanna tells of an Israeli Hebrew teacher "who was very close to us. She told us how her young son hates Saddam. . . . She said it with such enthusiasm. She was so proud of her son." "I realized," Johanna concluded, "that hatred is in the Jewish religion." She was right. The Hebrew prophets spoke in the name of a God who, in Exodus' articulation, may "forgive iniquity and transgression and sin," but Who also "by no means exonerates [the guilty]." Likewise, in refusing to forgive their enemies, Jewish leaders sought not merely their defeat, but their disgrace. When Queen Esther had already visited defeat upon Haman—the Hitler of his time, attempted exterminator of the Jewish people—and had killed Haman's supporters and sons, King Ahasuerus asks what more she could possible want:

The king said to Queen Esther, "In the capital of Susa the Jews have killed also the ten sons of Haman. . . . Now what is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." Esther said, "If it pleases the king . . . let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows."

Interestingly, the most vivid response in Wiesenthal's symposium was also written by a woman. The Jewish writer Cynthia Ozick, reflecting on how Wiesenthal, in a moment of mercy, brushed a fly away from the Nazi's broken body, concludes her essay in Deborah's blunt but poetic manner:

Let the SS man die unshriven.
Let him go to hell.
Sooner the fly to God than he.

During my regular weekly coffees with my friend Fr. Jim White, an Episcopal priest, there was one issue to which our conversation would incessantly turn, and one on which we could never agree: Is an utterly evil man—Hitler, Stalin, Osama bin Laden—deserving of a theist's love? I could never stomach such a notion, while Fr. Jim would argue passionately in favor of the proposition. Judaism, I would argue, does demand love for our fellow human beings, but only to an extent. "Hate" is not always synonymous with the terribly sinful. While Moses commanded us "not to hate our brother in our hearts," a man's immoral actions can serve to sever the bonds of brotherhood between himself and humanity. Regarding a rasha, a Hebrew term for the hopelessly wicked, the Talmud clearly states: mitzvah lisnoso—one is obligated to hate him.

Some would seek to minimize this difference between our faiths. Eva Fleischner, a Catholic interfaith specialist and another Sunflower symposiast, argues that

"Christians—and non–Christians in their wake—have misread, and continue to misread, [Christian texts] interpreting Jesus' teaching to mean that we are to forgive anyone and everyone. The element that is lost sight of is that Jesus challenges me to forgive evil done to me. Nowhere does he tell us to forgive the wrong done to another." Perhaps. But even so, a theological chasm remains between the Jewish and Christian viewpoints on the matter. As we can see from Samson's rage, Judaism believes that while forgiveness is often a virtue, hate can be virtuous when one is dealing with the frightfully wicked. Rather than forgive, we can wish ill; rather than hope for repentance, we can instead hope that our enemies experience the wrath of God.

There is, in fact, no minimizing the difference between Judaism and Christianity on whether hate can be virtuous. Indeed, Christianity's founder acknowledged his break with Jewish tradition on this matter from the very outset: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." God, Jesus argues, loves the wicked, and so must we. In disagreeing, Judaism does not deny the importance of imitating God; Jews hate the wicked because they believe that God despises the wicked as well.

Among Orthodox Jews, there is an oft–used Hebrew phrase whose equivalent I have not found among Christians. The phrase is yemach shemo, which means, may his name be erased. It is used whenever a great enemy of the Jewish nation, of the past or present, is mentioned. For instance, one might very well say casually, in the course of conversation, "Thank God, my grandparents left Germany before Hitler, yemach shemo, came to power." Or: "My parents were murdered by the Nazis, yemach shemam." Can one imagine a Christian version of such a statement? Would anyone speak of the massacres wrought by "Pol Pot, may his name be erased"? Do any Christians speak in such a way? Has any seminary student ever attached a Latin equivalent of yemach shemo to the names "Pontius Pilate" or "Judas"? Surely not. Christians, I sense, would find the very notion repugnant, just as many Jews would gag upon reading the Catholic rosary: "O my Jesus . . . lead all souls to heaven, especially those most in need of thy mercy."

Why, then, this remarkable disagreement between faiths? Why do Jews and Christians respond so differently to wickedness? Why do Jews refuse at times to forgive? And if the Hebrew prophets and judges believed ardently in the "virtue of hate," what about Christianity caused it to break with its Old Testament roots?

"More than a decade of weekly dialogue with Christians and intimate conversation with Christian friends," writes Prager, "has convinced me that, aside from the divinity of Jesus, the greatest—and even more important—difference between Judaism and Christianity, or perhaps only between most Christians and Jews, is their different understanding of forgiveness and, ultimately, how to react to evil." Here Prager takes one theological step too many and commits, in this single statement, two errors. The first is to deem the issue of forgiveness more important than that of Jesus' identity. Such a statement, to my mind, sullies the memory of thousands of Jews who died rather than proclaim Jesus Lord. Yet Prager also misses the fact that these two issues, that of approaching Jesus and that of approaching our enemies, are essentially one and the same: that the very question of how to approach our enemies depends on whether one believes that Jesus was merely a misguided mortal, or the Son of God. Let us examine how each faith's outlook on Jesus provides the theological underpinnings for its respective approach to hate.

The essence of a religion can be discovered by asking its adherents one question: What, to your mind, was the seminal moment in the history of the world? For Christians, the answer is easy: the passion of Jesus Christ, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God for the sins of the world. Or: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son" so that through his death the world would find salvation. Jews, on the other hand, see history's focal moment as the Sinai revelation, the day the Decalogue was delivered. On this day, we believe, God formed an eternal covenant with the Jewish people and began to communicate to them His Torah, the Almighty's moral and religious commandments. The most fascinating element of this event is that before forming this Covenant with the Hebrews, God first asked their permission to do so. England's Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, describes the episode:

Before stating the terms of the covenant, God told Moses to speak to the people and determine whether or not they agreed to become a nation under the sovereignty of God. Only when "all the people responded together, 'We will do everything the Lord has said'" did the revelation proceed. . The first–ever democratic mandate takes place, the idea that there can be no valid rule without the agreement of all those who are affected by it.

There is a wonderful bit of Jewish lore concerning the giving of God's Torah, in which God is depicted as a merchant, proffering His Law to every nation on the planet.

Each one considers God's wares, and each then finds a flaw. One refuses to refrain from theft; another, from murder. Finally, God chances upon the Jewish people, who gravely agree to shoulder the responsibility of a moral life. The message of this midrash is that God's covenant is one that anyone can join; God leaves it up to us.

Consider for a moment the extraordinary contrast. For Christians, God acted on humanity's behalf, without its knowledge and without its consent. The crucifixion is a story of a loving God seeking humanity's salvation, though it never requested it, though it scarcely deserved it. Jews, on the other hand, believe that God's covenant was formed by the free consent of His people. The giving of the Torah is a story of God seeking to provide humanity with the opportunity to make moral decisions. To my knowledge, not a single Jewish source asserts that God deeply desires to save all humanity, nor that He loves every member of the human race. Rather, many a Jewish source maintains that God affords every human being the opportunity to choose his or her moral fate, and will then judge him or her, and choose whether to love him or her, on the basis of that decision.

Christianity's focus is on love and salvation; Judaism's on decision and action.

The difference runs deeper. Both the Talmud and the New Testament have a great deal to say about the afterlife. Both ardently assert that it exists, and both assure the righteous that they will receive eternal reward and warn the wicked of the reality of damnation. Yet one striking distinction exists between these two affirmations of eternal life: only the Christian Testament deliberately and constantly links the promise of heaven with ethical exhortation, appealing to the hope of eternity as the incentive for righteous action. For Christians, every believer's ultimate desire and goal must be to experience eternal salvation. Leading a righteous earthly existence is understood as a means towards attaining this goal. Jews, on the other hand, insist that performing sacred acts while alive on earth is our ultimate objective; heaven is merely where we receive our reward after our goal has been attained. The Talmud, in this regard, makes a statement that any Christian would find mind–boggling: "One hour obeying God's commandments in this world is more glorious than an eternity in the World to Come."

This difference in emphasis can be seen most clearly by contrasting the central New Testament statement on ethics, the Sermon on the Mount, with Rabbinic writings.

Here are some of Jesus' ethical exhortations:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

A traditional Jew studying Jesus' style in delivering the Sermon on the Mount is instantly reminded of the Mishnaic tractate Ethics of the Fathers, a collection of rabbinical sayings that Jesus' words appear to echo. Consider these parallel passages from the tractate:

Fortunate is man, for he was created in the image of God.
Fortunate are the Israelites, for they are called the children of God.

Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion in pursuit of the will of your Father in heaven.

While the common phrases used by Jesus—"fortunate are," "Father in heaven"—are standard rabbinic utterances, Jesus' repeated support for his statements—"for they will inherit the kingdom of heaven"—is his own. Such a phrase appears nowhere in the rabbinic ethical writings. Their focus is more on action than on salvation.

The contrast extends to differing ways of celebrating holidays. In speaking to Fr. Jim about our respective faiths, I told him about the phenomenon of "Yom Kippur Jews." Many of my nonobservant coreligionists, I said, show up in synagogue only on the Day of Atonement and so experience a Judaism that focuses only on judgment and repentance. They never experience Judaism at its most joyous moments: Passover, Hanukkah, Purim. "I have the opposite problem," said Jim. "Some people show up in church for Easter only—Christianity at its most joyous. And so they never think about judgment and repentance."

Both rabbis and priests would appreciate regularly packed houses of worship; but the contrast between the central days of the Jewish and Christian calendars is instructive. Christians celebrate a day when, they believe, Jesus was given his place in heaven and so, at least potentially, was every member of humanity. Yom Kippur, in contrast, is not a day for celebration but for solemnity, a day for focusing

not on salvation but on action. Jews recite, again and again, a long litany of sins that they might have committed; they pray for forgiveness, and conclude, time and again, with the sentence: "May it be Thy will, Lord our God, that I not sin again." While the entire day is devoted to prayer, and to evaluation of past deeds, the concept of reward and punishment in the afterlife is not mentioned once. The only question of concern is whether, at the end of the day, God will consider us sufficiently repentant. Yom Kippur's climax comes at sunset, during the neilah, or "closing" prayer. After begging once again for forgiveness, Jews the world over end the day with the recitation of "Our Father, Our King," named thusly because of the first phrase in every sentence:

Our Father, our King, we have sinned before You.
Our Father, our King, we have no king but You.
Our Father, our King, return us in wholehearted repentance before You.

We ask God for mercy and for forgiveness, attributes of God that Judaism holds dear. But then our thoughts turn to the utterly evil and unrepentant. Towards the end of this prayer, one anguished, pain–filled sentence stands out: "Our Father, our King, avenge, before our eyes, the spilled blood of your servants." After a day devoted to prayer, synagogues everywhere are filled with the cry of fasting, weary, exhausted Jews. They have spent the past twenty–five hours meditating upon their sins and asking for forgiveness. Now, they suddenly turn their attention to those who gave no thought to forgiveness, no thought to God, no thought to the dignity of the Jewish people. After focusing on their own actions, Jews turn to those of others, and their parched throats mouth this message: "Father, do not forgive them, for they know well what they do."

The essence of each religion is reflected in its attitude toward the sinner. The existence of hell should be a painful proposition for Christians, who profess to believe that Christ died to redeem the world. C. S. Lewis, in his The Problem of Pain, mournfully admits as much. Yet the doctrines of free will and divine justice compel him to admit that some will not be redeemed.

There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specifically, of Our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.

The notion that someone may be eternally damned, Lewis writes, is one that he "detests" with all his heart; yet anyone who refuses to submit to salvation cannot ultimately be saved. Despite this, Lewis adds that even these wretches must be in our prayers. "Christian charity," he stresses, "counsels us to make every effort for the conversion of such a man: to prefer his conversion, at the peril of our own lives, perhaps of our own souls, to his punishment; to prefer it infinitely."

Here Judaism strongly disagrees. For Jews deny that there ever was a "divine labor" to redeem the world; rather, God gave humanity the means for its own redemption, and its members will be judged by the choices they make. Christians may maintain that no human being is unloved by the God who died on his or her behalf, but Jews insist that while no human being is denied the chance to become worthy of God's love, not every human being engages in actions so as to be worthy of that love, and those unworthy of divine love do not deserve our love either.

This distinction between salvation and decision is evident in the fact that some Christians hold out hope for something that traditional Jews never even consider: that every human being will ultimately be saved. As Fr. Richard John Neuhaus notes, some verses in the New Testament have been said to assert this explicitly ("Will All Be Saved?" FT, Public Square, August/September 2001). Take, for example, 1 Corinthians: "For as all die in Adam, so will all be made alive in Jesus Christ." Romans states it even more strongly:

For just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all"

Pope John Paul II has suggested that we cannot say with certainty that even Judas is in hell.

Forget Judas, a Jew might respond. What about Hitler? Even here, Fr. Neuhaus refuses to relent: "Hitler may have repented, turning to the mercy of God, even as his finger pressed the trigger." Maybe, Neuhaus suggests, Hitler and Mao spend thousands of years in purgatory. Or perhaps, he whimsically says, "Hitler in heaven will be forever a little dog to whom we will benignly condescend. But he will be grateful for being there, and for not having received what he deserved," just as "we will all be grateful for being there and for not having received what we deserve."

The Mishnah's view, set down approximately at the time Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans, could not be more different, explicitly singling out specific wicked men in biblical history who will never by saved. And unlike Lewis, the rabbis seem utterly unperturbed that some are eternally damned; for, unlike Neuhaus, the rabbis quite strongly believed that we go to heaven precisely because we deserve to be there. One of the most fascinating differences between Judaism and Christianity is that while both faiths believe in heaven, only Judaism speaks of one's eternal reward as a chelek, a portion. For instance: "Jeroboam has no portion in the World to Come." The

rabbis saw the afterlife as a function of one's spiritual savings account, in which the extent of one's experience of the divine presence is determined by the value of the good deeds that he or she has accumulated in life.

This does not mean that the rabbis believed that those with few virtues were eternally damned. The sages believed in a form of purgatory, where those with more sins than good deeds were sent. Damnation was reserved for the frightfully wicked.

Jewish intolerance for the wicked is made most manifest in Maimonides' interpretation of damnation. In his view souls are never eternally punished in hell: the presence of the truly wicked is so intolerable to the Almighty that they never even experience an afterlife. Rather, they are, in the words of the Bible, "cut off": after death, they just . . . disappear.

The Protestant theologian Harvey Cox, who is married to a Jew, wrote a book on his impressions of Jewish ritual. Cox describes the Jewish holiday of Purim, on which the defeat of Haman is celebrated by the reading of the book of Esther. Enamored with the biblical story, Cox enjoys the tale until the end, where, as noted above, Esther wreaks vengeance upon her enemies. Like Sister Johanna, he is disturbed by Jewish hatred. It cannot be a coincidence, he argues, that precisely on Purim a Jew by the name of Baruch Goldstein murdered twenty innocent Muslims engaged in prayer in Hebron.

There is something to Cox's remarks. The danger inherent in hatred is that it must be very limited, directed only at the most evil and unrepentant. According to the Talmud, the angels began singing a song of triumph upon the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt until God interrupted them: "My creatures are drowning, and you wish to sing a song?" Yet the rabbis also state that God wreaked further vengeance upon Pharoah himself, ordering the sea to spit him out, so that he could return to Egypt alone, without his army. Apparently one must cross some terrible moral boundary in order to be a justified target of God's hatred—and of ours. An Israeli mother is right to raise her child to hate Saddam Hussein, but she would fail as a parent if she taught him to despise every Arab. We who hate must be wary lest we, like Goldstein, become like those we are taught to despise.

Another danger inherent in hate is that we may misdirect our odium at institutions in the present because of their past misdeeds. For instance, some of my coreligionists reserve special abhorrence for anything German, even though Germany is currently one of the most pro–Israel countries in Europe. Similarly, after centuries of suffering, many Jews have, in my own experience, continued to despise religious Christians, even though it is secularists and Islamists who threaten them today, and Christians should really be seen as their natural allies. Many Jewish intellectuals and others of influence still take every assertion of the truth of Christianity as an anti–Semitic attack. After the Catholic Church beatified Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Christianity, some prominent Jews asserted that the Church was attempting to cover up its role in causing the Holocaust. And then there is the historian Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, who essentially has asserted that any attempt by the Catholic Church to maintain that Christianity is the one true faith marks a continuation of the crimes of the Church in the past.

Burning hatred, once kindled, is difficult to extinguish; but that is precisely what Jews must do when reassessing our relationship with contemporary Christianity. The crimes of popes of the past do not negate the fact that John Paul II is one of the righteous men of our generation. If Christians no longer hold us accountable for the crime of deicide, we cannot remain indifferent to such changes. Christians have every right to assert the truth of their beliefs. Modern anti–Christianity is no more excusable than ancient anti–Semitism.

Yet neither does this mean that hate is always wrong, nor that Esther's actions were unnecessary. The rabbis of the Talmud were bothered by a contradiction: the book of Kings describes Saul as killing every Amalekite, and yet Haman, according to his pedigree in the book of Esther, was an Agagite, a descendant of the Amalekite king. The Talmud offers an instructive solution: after Saul had killed every Amalekite, he experienced a moment of mercy, and wrongly refrained from killing King Agag. This allowed Agag a window of opportunity; he had several minutes before he was killed by the angry Samuel. In those precious moments, Agag engaged in relations with a random woman, and his progeny lived on to threaten the Jews in the future. The message is that hate allows us to keep our guard up, to protect us. When we are facing those who seek nothing but our destruction, our hate reminds us who we are dealing with. When hate is appropriate, then it is not only virtuous, but essential for Jewish well–being.

Archbishop Tutu, who, as indicated above, preaches the importance of forgiveness towards Nazis, has, of late, become one of Israel's most vocal critics, demanding that other countries enact sanctions against the Jewish state. Perhaps he would have Israelis adopt an attitude of forgiveness towards those who have sworn to destroy the only democracy in the Middle East. Yet forgiveness is precisely what the Israeli government attempted ten years ago, when it argued that the time had come to forget the unspeakable actions of a particular individual, and to recognize him as the future leader of a Palestinian state. Many Jews, however, seething with hatred for this man, felt that it was the Israeli leaders who "knew not what they were doing."

At the time, my grandfather, a rabbi, joined those on the Israeli right in condemning the Oslo process, arguing that it would produce a terrorist state responsible for hundreds of Israeli deaths. As a rabbinical student, I could not understand my grandfather's unremitting opposition. He was, I thought, so blinded by his hate that he was unable to comprehend the powerful potential of the peace process. Now, many hundreds of Jewish victims of suicide bombings later, and fifty years after the Holocaust, the importance and the necessity of Jewish hate has once again been demonstrated. Perhaps there will soon be peace in the Middle East, perhaps not. But one thing is certain: we will not soon forgive the actions of a man who, as he sent children to kill children, knew—all too well—just what he was doing. We will not—we cannot—ask God to have mercy upon him. Those Israeli parents whose boys and girls did not come home will pray for the destiny of his soul at the conclusion of their holiest day, but their prayer will be rather different from the rosary:

Let the terrorist die unshriven.
Let him go to hell.
Sooner a fly to God than he.

Rabbi Meir Y. Soloveichik is Resident Scholar at the Jewish Center in Manhattan and a Beren Fellow at Yeshiva University. He is currently studying philosophy of religion at Yale Divinity School.

From First Things, January 2003

No Friend in Jesus

By: Meir Y. Soloveichik

I cannot conceive an argument with John's Jesus," Jacob Neusner once wrote, "because eternal Israel in John is treated with unconcealed hatred." The Gospel of Matthew, on the other hand, was written for a Jewish audience, and the Jesus it portrays is someone with whom Neusner could imagine a conversation. And so, fifteen years ago, he wrote *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. "In this book," he begins, "I explain in a very straightforward and unapologetic way why, if I had been in the Land of Israel in the first century, I would not have joined the circle of Jesus' disciples."

After writing the book, Neusner sent it to Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger to ask if he would consider praising it for a cover blurb. The cardinal readily agreed, to Neusner's great delight. And, no doubt to Neusner's even greater delight, Ratzinger—who had become Pope Benedict XVI—returned to the book again in 2007, devoting a good twenty pages of his bestselling book *Jesus of Nazareth* to discussing Neusner's work.

"More than other interpretations known to me," Benedict explains, "this respectful and frank dispute between a believing Jew and Jesus, the son of Abraham, has opened my eyes to the greatness of Jesus' words and to the choice that the gospel places before us." *Time* magazine promptly announced that the pope has a "favorite Rabbi." For *Haaretz*, an Israeli newspaper, Neusner is "second to the saints," because the only people quoted more in *Jesus of Nazareth* are the canonized. "A pope taking seriously what a Jew says—and says critically—about the New Testament," said Eugene Fisher, the liaison for Catholic-Jewish relations for American bishops. "Wow. This is new."

All of which may be true. But, in an article this year in the *Forward*, Neusner goes further, suggesting that their respective books represent not just an affectionate exchange but the future of interfaith dialogue.

"Disputations," Neusner argues, "went out of style when religions lost their confidence in the power of reason to establish theological truth." But, with their books, he and Benedict have, Neusner suggests, found a new beginning: "What we have done is to revive the disputation as a medium of dialogue on theological truth. In this era of relativism and creeping secularism, it is an enterprise that, I believe, has the potential to strengthen Judaism and Christianity alike."

Neusner is certainly correct that we cannot relativize or ignore the deep differences dividing Jews and Christians, and in this respect his instincts and intentions are admirable. The careful reader of *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, and Benedict's response, will realize, however, that, even as Neusner attempts to delineate the differences between Judaism and Christianity, his book dilutes the deepest of those differences. The dialogue between Neusner and Benedict, rather than serving as an example of all that can be achieved by Jewish-Christian debate, is instead a reminder of the pitfalls in the endeavor.

In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict describes how, with *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Neusner "takes his place among the crowds of Jesus' disciples," listening to the Sermon on the Mount. Neusner, Benedict continues, "speaks with Jesus himself. He is touched by the greatness and purity of what is said, and yet at the same time he is troubled by the ultimate incompatibility that he finds at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount." Ultimately, Neusner rejects Jesus' message, deciding that Jesus deviates from Judaism's focus on sanctifying this world by turning his followers' focus from Jewish law and ritual to himself. Essentially, Neusner argues, Jesus equates God's will with his own, something that someone loyal to the Torah cannot accept.

A central passage for Neusner's discussion is Jesus' defense of his violations of the Sabbath:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck ears of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." He said to them, "Have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in

the temple profane the Sabbath, and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the son of man is lord of the Sabbath."

Neusner notes that actions that are usually forbidden on the Sabbath, such as lighting fires, slaughtering, and cooking, were permitted in the Temple. Thus, Jesus' argument is that he has replaced the Temple: "His claim, then, concerns not whether or not the Sabbath is to be sanctified, but where and what is the Temple, the place where things are done on the Sabbath that elsewhere are not to be done at all. Not only so, but just as on the Sabbath it is permitted to place on the altar the food that is offered up to God, so Jesus' disciples are permitted to prepare their food on the Sabbath, again a stunning shift indeed."

Neusner argues that Jesus is not a liberal Jew seeking to ignore the rituals of the Torah; rather, he is claiming to be the dwelling place of the divine: "No wonder, then, that the son of man is lord of the Sabbath! The reason is not that he interprets the Sabbath restrictions in a liberal manner. . . . Jesus was not just another reforming rabbi, out to make life 'easier' for people. . . . No, the issue is not that the burden is light. . . . Jesus' claim to authority is at issue."

Neusner imagines himself conversing with a disciple of Jesus: "Is it really so that your master, the son of man, is lord of the Sabbath? Then—so I asked before, so I ask again—is your master God?" Again and again, Neusner returns to this question. Both Jesus and the rabbinic sages, he argues, agree that the essence of life is imitation of God. Jews believe that the holy life is achieved via observance of the Torah, the sanctification of the mundane world by adhering to its many minutiae. For Jesus' followers, their master is now the equivalent of God, of the Torah, and Jesus' instructions focus less on whether grain can be picked on the Sabbath and more on entering the Kingdom of Heaven. As such, the holy life must be defined by following him.

Benedict is delighted with Neusner's interpretation. "The issue that is really at the heart of the debate," writes the pope, "is thus finally laid bare. Jesus understands himself as the Torah—as the word of God in person." For Benedict, this is perhaps most evident in another passage in Matthew. When Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are waiting to speak with him, he responds, stretching out his hands, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother." Israel comprises a family structure centered on observance of the Torah, while Jesus is announcing that now everything ought to be centered on himself: "This restructuring of the social order finds its basis and its justification in Jesus' claim that he, with his community of disciples, forms the origin and center of a new Israel."

This is the heart of the agreement between Neusner and Benedict. Both agree that Jesus' words can be interpreted only as asserting his divinity. Jesus' argument is not that he is a reformer but something more. The pope writes that Neusner gives Matthew a "Christological" interpretation, in that he understands Jesus is not just rejecting Judaism but rather equating himself with the divine. "We come to the same conclusion as in our earlier analysis of the commandment to keep the Sabbath. The Christological (theological) argument and the social argument are inextricably entwined. If Jesus is God, then he is entitled and able to handle the Torah as he does. On that condition alone does he have the right to interpret the Mosaic order of divine commands."

And how does Neusner see himself as responding to this man who puts himself in place of the Torah, who accords himself the authority of the Almighty? He politely voices his disagreement, arguing for the eternity of the Torah and insisting that the Torah addresses all Jews together and makes no special differentiation between a Jesus of Nazareth or a Jacob Neusner. At the same time, Benedict writes that Neusner "is constantly moved by the greatness of Jesus; again and again he talks with him." When Neusner asserts that Jesus is mistaken, it is "only with great respect and reverence." Again and again, Jesus and Neusner agree to disagree and part amicably. Even as Neusner feels that Jesus' arguments are profoundly misguided, at the same time he depicts himself telling Jesus that "I honor you and wish you well."

Benedict is touched by these sorts of exchange. Neusner, he writes, "accepts the otherness of Jesus' message, and takes his leave free of any rancor; this parting, accomplished in the rigor of truth, is ever mindful of the reconciling power of love."

But it is passages such as these that make Neusner's book problematic. For the moment that one person in an argument claims to be God, dialogue and debate become impossible. When someone asserts divinity, his interlocutor has only two options: Believe, obey, and worship, or back away slowly. As such, Neusner's friendly dialogue with Jesus amounts to what Matthew Scully, in a 1993 review of the book in *National Review*, called a "polite hedge." Faced with a man who insists he is the equivalent of the Lord, one cannot disagree "with respect and reverence," one cannot challenge the man's claim while remaining "moved" by his greatness. "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher," C.S. Lewis famously wrote. "He would either be a lunatic—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. . . . But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

Or, as Benedict himself puts it: "Jesus' teaching is not the product of human learning, of whatever kind. It originates

from immediate contact with the Father, from 'face-to-face' dialogue—from the vision of the one who rests close to the Father's heart. It is the Son's word. Without this inner grounding, the pope continues, his teaching would be pure presumption. That is just what the learned men of Jesus' time judged it to be."

And that, of course, is exactly how Jews must judge it to be today. Jews know that Deuteronomy warns us to beware a prophet who will attempt to lead us astray from all that Moses instructed. Jews have, moreover, known in our history many false messiahs, endowed with extraordinary charisma who announced that they were our savior with authority to abrogate the Torah. And, above all, we remember the Almighty's admonition: "Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of form on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire." Jews believe that the Torah tells us that the Incarnation is incompatible with all that God has taught us about who he is. Christians embrace the concept of the Incarnation; but, from the Jewish perspective, a human God is the equivalent of a four-sided triangle. The hard truth is that when it comes to the choice facing Christians and Jews, there is no way of splitting the difference: Is Jesus who he claims to be, is he someone worthy of worship, or is he someone with whom even friendship is not worthwhile? Christians answer this question differently than Jews, but Neusner refuses to make this choice.

We are now able to understand why Christians should be so genuinely pleased with *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus.* Neusner, an esteemed academic and observant Jew, has indicated that Jesus is a man for whom he can have an abiding affection, one whom he can intellectually respect. In fact, Neusner writes that he and Jesus are "friends"; he tells Jesus "I honor you and wish you well." And, as the pope notes, Neusner, "an attentive listener" to Jesus' words, is "constantly moved by the greatness of Jesus." But Neusner also admits that Jesus claims to be God. And, if Jesus claims such a thing, then, as C.S. Lewis taught us, he can only be a liar, a lunatic, or God. Surely Neusner would not have respect for a liar; surely he could not befriend a lunatic. Even as Neusner argues that Jesus is mistaken about his divinity and authority, it follows from much that Neusner has written that Jesus must be God.

In a telling passage, the pope hints that Neusner's book supports Christianity's claim that the New Testament is everything it claims to be, everything Jews deny that it is. For if a Jew can read Jesus' words with "reverence," if a rabbi can have a true dialogue with the Jesus of the Gospel of Matthew, then the gospel is obviously the words of the Living God, and Jesus is exactly who he claimed to be. Though Neusner would never see it that way, Benedict nevertheless found in Neusner's engagement of Christian texts the ultimate indication that they are the word of God: "The rabbi's dialogue with Jesus shows that faith in the word of God in the Holy Scriptures creates a contemporaneous bond across the age: Setting out from Scripture, the rabbi can enter into the 'today' of Jesus, just as Jesus, setting out from Scripture, can enter into our 'today.'"

I do not begrudge Benedict his happiness. How could he not rejoice in the significance of a prominent Jew approaching Jesus in such an admiring manner? How could this gifted and sophisticated theologian not see the significance of Neusner's words? How could Benedict not make Neusner's book—in which a rabbi recognizes that Jesus puts himself in God's place and still retains his admiration for Jesus—a centerpiece of his own book on Jesus?

But, for Jews, Neusner approaches Jesus in the wrong way, for Jesus is not someone with whom we can have this sort of "dialogue." If we deny his divinity, then we can respond with nothing short of shock and dismay when we read the words of a man who puts himself in the place of God. Thus, in his admirable attempt to distinguish between Judaism and Christianity, Neusner elides the most important difference of all.

Neusner notes that, unlike certain other Jewish scholars who have come before him, he refuses to see Jesus as a rabbi, a colleague of the fathers of rabbinic Judaism. "Christianity," he notes, "does not believe in a Galilean miracle worker, nor does Christianity worship a rabbi." As such, Neusner writes in his preface, to honor Jesus with such an appellation is "demeaning and dishonest." He is absolutely correct. But to find a "friend" in Jesus even as Jesus claims divinity, to deny his claim to be God but at the same time to "wish [him] well," to reject the assertions Jesus makes while at the same time praising his "virtue" and "wisdom," is demeaning to both Judaism and Christianity, because it still obfuscates the choice with which Lewis confronts us.

What, then, should be the foundation of Jewish-Christian engagement? Neusner finds it unthinkable that Jews and Christians should have nothing to say to each other. "There is more to Judaism in its meeting with Christianity," he argues, "than a mere no." He is right, and he is also correct that Jews, living "in the free climate of American religion," should engage their fellow citizens in this "mostly Christian country." But the most fruitful dialogue should not, contra Neusner, focus on the nuts and bolts of our relation to Jesus but rather on what traditional Jews and Christians have in common.

In fact, the most important subject of dialogue between Jews and Christians has been presented to us by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, right before he became Pope Benedict XVI. In a homily given before the College of Cardinals convened to pick the next pope, Ratzinger reflected on the Church's responsibility in the modern age: "The small boat of thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves—thrown from one extreme to the other: from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism.

. . . Having a clear faith, based on the creed of the Church, is often labeled today as a fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and 'swept along by every wind of teaching,' looks like the only attitude (acceptable) to today's standards. We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires."

Benedict's words ought to resonate with the religious Jew. For even as Jews and Christians profoundly disagree about the truth, they are united in the belief that there *is* a truth to be sought. Moreover, Orthodox Jews and Christians share a belief in a traditional ethics that is seen today as old-fashioned and outmoded. There is much about the Church today and its leadership that I find troubling. In its attitude toward world affairs, in its statements about Israel and Palestinians, and on the war in Iraq, the Vatican often expresses an overly pacifistic European perspective. But, in an age that Benedict correctly describes as one of "relativism and creeping secularism," one in which Orthodox Jews are often derided as fundamentalists because of their views regarding religious truth, sexuality, and medical ethics, a Jew who reads Ratzinger's homily cannot help feeling that he has an ally in Pope Benedict XVI.

Does truth as traditionally understood still exist? Traditional Jews, like Catholics, know the answer to the question. In the end, this is what unites Jews and Christians. Because they believe in truth, traditional Jews cannot and will not find a friend in Jesus—but because they do believe in truth, they can find a friend in followers of Jesus such as Benedict. A friendship founded on our mutual resistance to relativism is one that can unite us despite our theological differences. That will have to do until our debate over Jesus is resolved by God himself.

Meir Soloveichik is a doctoral candidate in the philosophy of religion at Princeton University and associate rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York.
From First Things, January 2008

God's First Love: The Theology of Michael Wyschogrod

By: Meir Y. Soloveichik

Paradox attends the influence of Michael Wyschogrod, perhaps the most original Jewish theologian of the past half century. An unapologetic defender of Israel's particularity and God's special love for the Jewish people, he has often found a warmer reception among Christian thinkers than among traditional Jewish ones. Twenty years ago, the appearance of his book *The Body of Faith* transformed the way many leading Christian theologians understand Judaism. Perhaps this is not surprising for, over his long career, this American thinker, born in Germany in 1928, has proved extraordinarily willing to draw on Christian theologians: Karl Barth, for instance, whom Wyschogrod deploys in his efforts to free Judaism from dependence on such extraneous philosophical influences as Aristotle and Kant. For that matter, in his emphasis on the uniqueness of Jewish revelation, Wyschogrod has found surprising commonalities with Christians.

As an Orthodox Jew, Wyschogrod insists that his work rises and falls with the ability of traditional Jews to be moved by it: "Ultimately it is the Torah-obedient Jewish community that judges a work of Jewish thought," he wrote in his 1989 masterwork, *The Body of Faith*. At the same time, it is precisely the Orthodox community that has failed to appreciate his work perhaps because of his criticisms of Maimonides, one of the most beloved thinkers in Jewish history.

Maimonides, Wyschogrod insists, introduced extraneous influences into Judaism, partly in an attempt to reconcile Jewish religion with Aristotelian philosophy. Wyschogrod argues that Judaism concerns not a philosophical doctrine but rather God's unique and preferential love for the flesh-and-blood descendants of Abraham. The election of the Jewish people is the result of God's falling in love with Abraham and founding a family with him. And, out of passionate love for Abraham, God continues to dwell among the Jewish people. Maimonides, in Wyschogrod's account, deviated from the biblical view to accommodate Aristotle's philosophy.

Along the way, Maimonides also attempted to banish all anthropomorphism from Judaism. An entire tradition of Jewish rationalism has followed Maimonides in this and has applied it to the concept of Israel's election. Thus many German Jewish thinkers, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, see Israel's election as symbolic of God's equal love for all of humanity" for surely a good God would not violate Kant's categorical imperative. The result is the loss of any reason for the election of Israel, a foundational idea of Judaism. The biblical insistence on God's indwelling in the living Jewish people, Wyschogrod observes, requires us to believe that God is present in the physical people of Israel. To Jewish critics, Wyschogrod's emphasis on divine love and on the indwelling of the divine sounds more Christian than Jewish. Wyschogrod, however, insists on demanding that Jews refresh their religion from its original sources, arguing that a general and unspecific love is no love at all and thus that God's particular love for Israel is what makes possible his love for all humanity.

Despite, or perhaps precisely because, he is so rooted in Jewish Orthodoxy and so persuaded of God's special love for Israel, Wyschogrod has not hesitated to engage Christians. One of his great contributions has been to transform the way Christian theologians understand Judaism. The Methodist theologian Kendall Soulen (editor of an anthology of Wyschogrod's essays) first read him when he was in graduate school studying Christian theology. He felt "an almost physical sense of discovery, as if I had bumped into a hitherto unforeseen rock. What I had

just read was undoubtedly the most unapologetic statement of Jewish faith I had ever encountered."

Some Jews may bristle at Wyschogrod's belief that Christian thinkers such as Karl Barth can help correct errors that have crept into Jewish theology over the centuries. Yet at the same time, in his encounter with Christian thinkers, Wyschogrod has remained unabashed in his insistence on the exclusivity of Israel's election. One day in 1966, Wyschogrod visited Karl Barth in Basel and informed the great Christian thinker that he had begun to refer to himself as a "Jewish Barthian." Barth was much amused by the appellation, and a discussion ensued about the Jewish people versus the Church in the eyes of God: **At one point he said, "You Jews have the promise but not the fulfillment; we Christians have both promise and fulfillment." Influenced by the banking atmosphere of Basel, I replied: "With human promise, one can have the promise but not the fulfillment. But a promise of God is like money in the bank. If we have his promise, we have his fulfillment, and if we do not have the fulfillment we do not have the promise." There was a period of silence and then he said, "You know, I never thought of it that way." I will never forget that meeting.**

When *The Body of Faith* appeared in 1989, it seemed profoundly unlike any work of Jewish thought published before, including that of Wyschogrod's teacher, the great Talmudist and philosopher, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. Rabbi Soloveitchik's best-known books are written from the perspective of the religious individual. *The Lonely Man of Faith*, for instance, tries to show how a religious man can reconcile secular endeavors with the existential experience that embodies the essence of faith. Similarly, Rabbi Soloveitchik's classic, *Halakhic Man*, stresses how Jewish law is not merely a series of obligations but indelibly impacts the way the religious Jew experiences the world.

In Wyschogrod's work, on the other hand, Jewish thought begins not with analysis of who the man of faith is but with who God is not with how a member of the Jewish people approaches God but how God approaches the Jewish people. The Bible's answer, he believes, is obvious: "It is the proclamation of biblical faith that God chose this people and loves it as no other, unto the end of time." The clarity with which he focuses on the central biblical premise of election, God's love for Israel, is what makes his work both so Orthodox as well as so original. For centuries Jewish thought has attempted to adapt itself to foreign philosophical categories, and Wyschogrod's bold return to biblical sources provides a platform upon which to critique even such a revered figure as Maimonides.

Jewish theology must begin with the exclusive election of Israel, Wyschogrod argues, for it is the central principle of the Hebrew Bible. The chosenness of Israel is often described by Jews as consisting in the giving of the law. While this is doubtless an essential aspect of Israel's election, it is a narrow account of it. Yet, even in this narrow form, we are forced to a more basic question: Why did God choose Israel, of all the nations in the world, to receive the Torah?

Deuteronomy answers explicitly that he did so out of preferential love for Israel's ancestors: "Unto thee it was showed, that thou mightest know that the Lord he is God; there is none else beside him. Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: And upon earth he showed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire. And because he loved thy fathers, therefore he chose their seed after them, and brought thee out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt; to drive out nations from before thee greater and mightier than thou art, to bring thee in, to give thee their land for an inheritance, as it is this day."

Deuteronomy further declares that God's love was extended to Abraham's descendants. You were not chosen, Moses informs the Israelites, "because you were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers." As Wyschogrod puts it: "If God continues to love the people of Israel, and it is the faith of Israel that he does, it is because he sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved."

Maimonides' attempt to expunge anthropomorphism thus cannot be reconciled with this biblical idea of a God who showed an impassioned love for one particular human being and his descendants. For Wyschogrod, the legacy of Maimonidean rationalism is to enfeeble the biblical concept of election.

Many modern Jews are uncomfortable with this concept, assuming that a truly good God would treat all human beings equally and love all of them in the same way. In fact, many modern Jewish theologians and philosophers end up embracing, in the name of pluralism, an odd sort of religious relativism. The notion that Israel experiences a special love from God, vouchsafed by sacred texts more valid than any others, may be true from Jews' perspective but false from another. Israel, in other words, can experience what it fancies to be a unique form of divine love while other faith communities can, from their own perspective, be showered with an equal abundance of affection.

Other modern writers on Israel's election tend to avoid the subject of love entirely. In 1966, for instance, *Commentary* magazine conducted a symposium among prominent Jewish American academics called "The State of Jewish Belief." One of the questions put to the respondents focused on the doctrine of Israel's election: "In what sense do you believe that the Jews are the chosen people of God?" While the Orthodox participants in the symposium defended Israel's election and wrote of Israel's obligation to observe the Torah and communicate monotheism to the world, they did not discuss the reason Israel alone was

given the Torah; in fact, not one of them stressed the unique love that God maintains for the Jewish people.

So how is one to defend a perfect God preferentially loving a particular people? Over the years, many Christian theologians have expressed abhorrence at the idea of God's preferential love. The twentieth-century Swedish theologian Anders Nygren, for example, contrasts the different depictions of divine love found in Jewish and Christian Scripture: "In Judaism love is exclusive and particularistic," while Christian love "overleaps all such limits; it is universal and all-embracing." God's love stands in stark contradistinction to human love, absolutely "unmotivated." It expects nothing back, no return on the emotional investment.

Wyschogrod takes issue with just this sort of understanding. The Hebrew Bible does not depict such a radical distinction between divine and human love. Humanity was created in the image of God; our love is a reflection of his. God can desire to enter into a relationship with us; he can be drawn to some aspect of our identity. In the Hebrew Bible, writes Wyschogrod, God's love is "a love very much aware of a human response. God has thereby made himself vulnerable: He asks for man's response and is hurt when it is not forthcoming." Further, because "God's love is directed toward who we are . . . there are those whom God loves especially, with whom he has fallen in love."

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Bible's depiction of God's passionate, preferential love for Abraham, and it is here that Wyschogrod defends divine love for Israel. Indeed, he does more than defend the doctrine: He insists, strikingly, that everyone, Jew and Gentile, has a stake in God's preferentially loving some more than others. If God loves human beings and seeks to relate to them because he is drawn to something unique about them, then his love must be exclusive and cannot be universal. He loves individuals because he has found something unique about them worth loving, which he may not find in another individual. As Wyschogrod writes, "Undifferentiated love, love that is dispensed equally to all, must be love that does not meet the individual in his individuality but sees him as a member of a species, whether that species be the working class, the poor, those created in the image of God, or what not."

In contrast, divine love is concrete, a genuine encounter with man in his individuality, and must therefore be exclusive. A love directed at all human beings without any grounding in their unique identities is a love "directed at universals and abstractions rather than real persons." A daughter whose father loves her with only unmotivated love and not for anything unique, shared kinship, unique virtues and traits, could correctly claim that she has not truly been loved. For Wyschogrod, Hebrew Scripture speaks of preferential love and conveys thereby the extraordinary notion that God loves men *because of* who we are, not *despite* who we are.

Of course, Wyschogrod is not insensitive to the fact that this sounds hurtful to non-Israelites. If God is a father, motivated by genuine desire to be with us, then the fact that his love is a love founded in our uniqueness means that it is therefore dispensed unequally. Ultimately, however, according to Wyschogrod, it is precisely God's preferential love for Israel that guarantees the possibility that each one of us can have a genuine relationship with God. Chosenness expresses to everyone, Jew and Gentile, "that God also stands in relationship with them in the recognition and affirmation of their uniqueness":

When we grasp that the election of Israel flows from the fatherhood that extends to all created in God's image, we find ourselves tied to all men in brotherhood, as Joseph, favored by his human father, ultimately found himself tied to his brothers. And when man contemplates this mystery, that the Eternal One, the creator of heaven and earth, chose to become the father of his creatures instead of remaining self-sufficient unto himself, as is the Absolute of the philosophers, there wells up in man that praise that has become so rare yet remains so natural.

This, then, is our choice: to be loved by God for whom we uniquely are and thus risk being loved less than others, or to be loved by God equally but not uniquely and therefore not truly. It is a choice between a genuine relationship and bland benevolence.

In fact, this account of Israel's exclusive election has not offended many orthodox Christians but reassured them, for just the reasons Wyschogrod presents: God's special love for his first love, Israel, shows that he can love them in their own uniqueness and particularity as well.

Maimonides, by contrast, rejects the notion of God's passionate love for humans as an anthropomorphism. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, he insists that, when the Bible describes God's love, "of course God is not experiencing the feeling of affection or tenderness." These are mere references to what he describes as "attributes of action." The Bible's message that God loves the Jewish people is merely a statement that he acts in a loving manner toward them.

Wyschogrod starkly states that it is with Maimonides that much of Jewish thinking about God went awry: "Maimonides' demythologization of the concept of God is unbiblical and ultimately dangerous to Jewish faith. Jewish faith cannot survive if a personal relation between the Jew and God is not possible. But no personal relation is possible with an Aristotelian Unmoved Mover." The Bible speaks of God's love and anger, and the religious reader is obligated to take these statements, to some extent, literally. Refusing to take literally the Bible's accounts of an emotionally engaged Almighty, for Wyschogrod, amounts to subjugating the text of the Bible to an external agenda.

It is this insistence, that we must accept the truths presented to us in Scripture without reinterpretation, that led Wyschogrod to refer to himself as a Jewish Barthian. In

The Body of Faith, he notes his admiration for how Karl Barth "plunges his reader into the world of faith without defensive introductions." Reading Barth is like "shock therapy," because "it introduces the reader or the listener to a frame of reference that attempts only to be true to itself and its sources and not to external demands that can be satisfied only by fitting the Church's message into their mold, a mold foreign to it and therefore necessarily distorting."

Maimonides' attempt to expunge anthropomorphism from Judaism has led later Jewish thinkers to assume that ascription of affection to God is a primarily Christian idea. Consider the modern Orthodox Jewish philosopher Eliezer Berkovits. While not especially influential in his lifetime, his writings have gained currency in the Modern Orthodox community, thanks to their recent republication. In an essay attacking Abraham Joshua Heschel, who spoke of the Bible's "God of pathos," Berkovits dismisses the notion of a passionately loving God as fundamentally Christian. Judaism "abhors any form of humanization" of divine nature, he writes. "The theological climate is determined by a long tradition of affirmation of divine impassibility in face of numerous biblical texts to the contrary . . . . Dr. Heschel's theology of pathos and religion of sympathy seem to be offspring of theologically oriented fancy."

From a Wyschogrodian perspective, however, Berkovits' desire to stress the uniqueness of Judaism forces him to excise an essential aspect of Jewish faith. That God loves Israel is a fundamental tenet not only of the Bible but of the rabbinic writings of late antiquity in the Midrash. And through the centuries, the Jewish people were sustained not by a belief in Maimonides' God of the philosophers but by what the Midrash calls the "Divine Presence in Exile," the God who dwells among his persecuted people, making their travails his travails and their suffering his suffering.

Because the Jewish community was so devastated by the Holocaust, there is a tremendous temptation to give it a prominent role in one's theology. For traditional theologians, especially the Orthodox, there are dangers in this. Giving the Holocaust pronounced theological prominence can lead Jewish thinkers to dilute or relativize Judaism's theological foundation. More, it allows the Jewish experience of anti-Semitism in the past to influence unduly theological attitudes toward Christians today.

Wyschogrod has criticized Jewish theologians who place the Holocaust at the center of theology. Emil Fackenheim, for instance, is famous for insisting that after the Holocaust Judaism must add what he calls a "614th commandment" to the 613 commandments of the Torah: an obligation to provide for the continuity of Judaism after the Holocaust. Indeed, Fackenheim argues that the Holocaust unites both religious Jews and secular Jews, for even if Jews no longer believe the Bible, they are obligated not to allow Hitler to succeed in his attempt to obliterate Judaism.

In reply, Wyschogrod warns against making Hitler and the Holocaust an argument for Judaism. There is, he observes, only one true reason to remain Jewish: God's election of Abraham and his selection of his descendants to serve as a light to the nations. Fackenheim's argument amounts to what he terms "negative natural theology""an argument from evil that, in Wyschogrod's words, is "as serviceable to the secularist as it is to the believer." For Wyschogrod, Hitler rather than Abraham, and Auschwitz rather than Sinai, becomes the foundation for Fackenheim's Judaism. "One is almost driven to the conclusion," writes Wyschogrod, that in the absence of the Holocaust, for the secularist, "no justification for the further survival of Judaism could have been found. With the Holocaust, amazing as it may appear, Judaism has gotten a new lease on life." But if the Holocaust becomes "the dominant voice that Israel hears, it could not but be a demonic voice it would be hearing. There is no salvation to be extracted from the Holocaust, no faltering Judaism can be revived by it, no new reason for the continuation of the Jewish people can be found in it. If there is hope after the Holocaust, it is because, to those who believe, the voices of the Prophets speak more loudly than did Hitler, and because the divine promise sweeps over the crematoria and silences the voice of Auschwitz."

A faith founded on God's eternal love of Israel emphasizes instead our experience of God's salvation and redemption, which we once experienced and, Judaism declares, we will experience again. Israel's faith, Wyschogrod writes, "has always centered around the saving acts of God: the election, the exodus, the Temple, and the Messiah." Acts of destruction were remembered in minor fast days "while those of redemption became the joyous proclamations of the Passover and Tabernacles . . . . The God of Israel is a redeeming God; this is the only message we are authorized to proclaim, however much it may not seem so to the eyes of nonbelief."

Other Jewish theologians, reflecting on the Holocaust, have drawn radical theological conclusions not about the faith of the Jews but about Christians. Berkovits, for example, argues in *Faith after the Holocaust* that the Holocaust taught us "a straight line leads from the first act of [Christian] oppression against the Jews and Judaism in the fourth century to the Holocaust in the twentieth." After the Holocaust, he therefore believes, any notion of a special bond between Jews and Christians is impossible: Judaism's main message to Christianity is that Christians must "keep your hands off us and our children!" Indeed, "It is not interreligious understanding that mankind needs but interhuman understanding, an understanding based on our common humanity and wholly independent of any need for common religious beliefs and theological principles . . . . These goals of freedom, peace, and social justice have universal validity. It would be extremely foolish to seek their realization by means of a narrowly Jewish-Christian front."

As Stanley Hauerwas notes, Berkovits fails to understand that "societies putatively founded on values of 'universal validity' cannot help but interpret the particularistic

commitments of the Jewish people as morally retrogressive." In contrast, many Christians have come to appreciate, and even celebrate, God's special relationship with the Jewish people. Wyschogrod, in his description of God's election of Israel, notes that anti-Semitism is, at its core, a resistance to, and jealousy of, this election. "Instead of accepting Israel's election with humility," he writes, the nations of the world all too often "rail against it, mocking the God of the Jews, gleefully pointing out the shortcomings of the people he chose," for "Israel's presence is a constant reminder to them that they were not chosen but that this people was." At the same time, as Kendall Soulen notes in his excellent introduction to Wyschogrod's thought, for Wyschogrod, it is through God's love of Israel that we come to know his love for all the world, or, in Soulen's words, "God also desires to be Redeemer of the world as the One whose first love is the people of Israel." Thus Soulen cites Wyschogrod: "Because [God] said: 'I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; in you shall all the families of earth be blessed' (Gen. 12:3), he has tied his saving and redemptive concern for the welfare of all humankind to his love for the people of Israel."

What this means, for Christians such as Soulen, is that Wyschogrod has transformed even the issue that most divides Christians from Jews, the incarnation of Jesus, into a challenge for Christians to recognize the holiness of Israel. As Wyschogrod wrote in the essay "Incarnation and God's Indwelling in Israel": "If the Jewishness of Jesus is not contingent, then it is for Christians the climax of the process that began with the election of Abraham." In other words, while the incarnation remains a central disagreement between Jews and Christians (see my January 2009 article in First Things, "No Friend in Jesus"), fealty to God's word in Hebrew Scripture requires a recognition by Christians of God's love for, and presence in, the Jewish people. Recognition of this election requires Christians, in Wyschogrod's felicitous phrase, to be even "more Barthian than Barth."

Today, decades after Berkovits insisted that Jews join the rest of the world to support values such as "social justice" that have nontheological, "universal validity," secular supporters of social justice often seem remarkably concerned about justice for all individuals except for Jews. Meanwhile, in America, support for Israel and the well-being of the Jewish people has been found first and foremost among traditional Christians who, contrary to critics, are motivated mainly not by apocalyptic expectation but rather by a rejection of moral relativism and a belief that the Bible promises to bless those who stand by the Children of Abraham. We live in a world where, for the first time in many centuries, there are Christians who believe that participating in God's love for the Jewish people is demanded by the divine in Hebrew Scripture. To conclude from the Holocaust that we ought to dismiss this outpouring of love and support is not only unwise but, for the reader of Wyschogrod, a profound theological error. A world where Jews are threatened physically by fundamentalist Islam and morally by secularism, a world where Jews and Christians ought to go their separate ways, is one where Israel, both the people and the country, will be very much alone. And, in an age when Jewish theology must reject relativism on the one hand and instinctive anti-Christianity on the other, it is, I believe, Michael Wyschogrod who has shown us the way.

Meir Y. Soloveichik is Associate Rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York.
From First Things, November 2009

Torah and Incarnation

By: Meir Y. Soloveichik

How can finite man commune with an infinite God? To both Christians and Jews, God himself has made that possible by irrupting into the temporal world. To Christians, God became man in the Incarnation; to Jews, the God that spoke out of the fire on Mount Sinai gave his Torah. Their ways of experiencing God follow from their respective accounts of God's irruption into the world—and these accounts are profoundly different and reveal profoundly different theological perspectives. To Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant Christians, communion involves partaking of the physical real presence of God in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. By contrast, the Torah draws the Jew into engagement with God's infinite mind. Torah learning is the definitive Jewish mode of communion with God. Although the Torah contains in potential all that God wants to teach us, all the generations of Israel labor together to make this manifest. Because the Torah is infinite and inexhaustible, learning Torah yields new insights—what the rabbis called hiddushim, or innovations. That is how the Torah sustains and renews Israel's love affair with God. A love nourished by the Torah may seem obscure to Christians, and perhaps even more obscure to loosely affiliated Jews. God loves Israel by sanctifying everyday life—waking, eating, and family relations, along with birth, marriage, and death. We bless God who "has sanctified us with his commandments" in all these actions. But God has made Israel his partner in sanctification by giving a Torah that requires the human mind to engage the mind of God.

Jews seek to cleave to the will of God as set forth in the Bible and, particularly, the Pentateuch, with its rabbinic commentaries, the Mishnah and Talmud. And although the five books of Moses contain history as well as law, it is first of all the legal aspects of the Bible that constitute a bridge to the divine. A Jew's definitive devotional act is learning "the law." As the nineteenth psalm puts it: "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul: The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes."

Judaism thus focuses on the commanded word of God, which stands in contrast to Christianity and its turn toward what the Gospel of John calls the "Word made flesh." Jews focus on the Torah, the embodiment of God's will; Christians, on an embodied God. At the heart of this distinction are two very different answers to the question faced by all faiths: How does finite, physical, fallible man relate to an infinite, immaterial, and almighty God?

God warns us that "man cannot see Me and live." But if we cannot envision God, how can we approach him? The human mind yearns for the infinite but is incommensurate with it. In his reflections on prayer, C. S. Lewis confided that he found it difficult to pray to a noncorporeal God: "I didn't mean that a 'bright blur' is my only idea of God. I meant that something of that sort tends to be there when I start praying, and would remain if I made no effort to do better. And 'bright blur' is not a very good description. In fact you can't have a good description of anything so vague. If the description became good it would become false."

For Christians, that gap is bridged through the Incarnation—through God becoming man. God thus accomplishes what man himself cannot, becoming finite so that finite man may commune with him. For Jews, incarnation seems not so much to bridge the gap as to abolish it. In the Jewish understanding, finitude is absolutely untrue to God's incorporeal, infinite nature. Indeed, recalling the Sinai revelation, God himself sternly warns, "Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of image on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire." God's presence dwells in the Temple and amidst the people of Israel, and the "glory of God" descends onto Sinai and leads Israel through the desert. In that sense, God may be considered to be present in the flesh of the Jewish people, as Michael Wyschogrod argues, but Hebrew Scripture never depicts the divine appearing before the Jewish people in human form.

Turning toward a God-man, an infinite Almighty in finite form, does not assist us in relating to God, because such an image of God ceases to be God. I must emphasize that Jews recognize the difference between Christianity and pagan idolatry. Christians, like Jews, worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At the same time, as I have explained previously in these pages ("No Friend in Jesus," First Things, December 2007), Jews believe that Christians, in the process of worshiping the God of Abraham, also worship a human being who was not God.

The Jewish rejection of incarnation, though, does not leave God at a distance, remote and inaccessible. Judaism approaches God through the observance of his commandments, the most important of which, equal to all the others combined, is Torah learning: the intellectual engagement with the divine author of the commandments. The liturgical dictum that the meta-commandment of Torah learning surpasses all other commandments makes clear that Jewish observance is not merely a matter of mechanical submission. Torah learning elicits a divine-human partnership, a continuing relationship of teacher and taught, of lover and beloved. It is not submission but communion, in which the engagement of the intellect is essential to approaching God.

This most characteristic aspect of Jewish practice escapes even some of Christianity's most acute thinkers. In his *Reflection on the Psalms*, for example, C. S. Lewis expresses astonishment at the psalmist's rapturous ode to the Torah in Psalm 19. "One can easily understand," Lewis assents, "how laws such as 'thou shalt not steal,' or 'thou shalt not commit adultery' are important to study, and even more important to obey." But "it is very hard to find how they could be, so to speak, delicious, how they exhilarate." How, for instance, could anyone find the command against theft exhilarating? We must adhere to a moral code, of course, but Lewis insists that study of this code is "more aptly compared to the dentist's forceps or the front line than to anything enjoyable or sweet." He reports that he expressed his confusion to a Christian biblical scholar, who suggested that the psalmist is expressing delight in knowing that he had obeyed the law, in the "pleasures of a good conscience." Lewis, however, notes that "the psalmists never seem to me to mean anything very like this."

What, then, is to be made of the Jewish "delight" in the law? Lewis offers several conjectures. He notes that the corpus of Jewish law is vast and complex; one can delight in study in the way one enjoys his favorite subject, such as history, or physics, or archeology. Lewis further suggested that one's delight in mastering the complexities of divine legislation could be a manifestation of sinful, intellectual pride. Ultimately, Lewis concludes his discussion with the suggestion that the biblical delight in the law must stem from the exultant knowledge that one's morality is superior to that of one's neighbors. The ancient Hebrews, Lewis notes, lived nowhere near a culture such as that of Greece, a center of wisdom and philosophy. Rather, their nearest neighbors were barbarians, Canaanites and Assyrians. Lewis imagines an ancient Jew contemplating that culture, reflecting that "when he thought of sacred prostitution, sacred sodomy, and the babies thrown in the fire for Moloch, his own 'Law' as he turned back to it must have shone with an extraordinary radiance."

That C. S. Lewis, a mind sensitive to religious questions, struggled to explain the psalmist's delight suggests that the source of Torah's surpassing sweetness is not intuitively obvious to Christians. Learning Torah proceeds from intense faith, but it is not merely a matter of faith. The encounter with the Divine takes place through lifelong intellectual engagement with God's infinite mind, which surpasses all praise and, by implication, all belief.

For hundreds of years, the discovery of *hiddushim*—new discoveries in the text, answers to conundrums and contradictions not previously discovered by earlier

generations—has been a goal of Torah learning, perhaps the surpassing goal. One of the great authorities of twentieth-century Orthodox Judaism, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, refused while teaching to consult his own earlier interpretation of a Talmudic passage, lest it hinder him from discerning in the text something that he had missed. As his son-in-law, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, recounts:

"Any insight," the Talmud states, "that a prodigious child will discover in the future, was already said to Moses at Sinai." Rabbi Lichtenstein notes that this does not mean that "the specific *hiddushim* were revealed at Sinai" but rather "that, as latent possible developments and interpretations, they were, *in potentia*, present, only to be kinetically generated subsequently." The infinity of insights latent and awaiting human discovery moved the rabbis to marvel at the Torah's magnitude: A famous rabbinic passage reports, "If all seas were ink, all reeds quills, heaven and earth scrolls, and all men scribes, they would not suffice to write down the amount of Torah I have learned, even though I abstracted no more from it than a man might take by dipping a painting stick in the sea."

What, then, makes the Torah, as the psalmist says, "sweeter than honeycombs"? The answer lies in the joy of discovering God's mind. *Talmud Torah* demands intense engagement with God's will in order to bring to light new facets of the Divine Mind. To study Torah leads to new insights. And with every insight there emerges a deeper sense of the infinity of insights still hidden, waiting to be gleaned. Truly, as the infinite horizons of the Torah bring us to see, the mind of God is without limit.

The Torah was given as an invitation into the infinite expanses and depths of his mind, precisely because God refuses to present himself in finite form. The Torah is not God incarnate; it is not a finite embodiment of God; it is a bridge to divine infinity. God does not make himself finite through the Torah; he gives finite, fallible human beings the means to commune with his infinite mind. Through the nature of the law and its sanctifying regard for even the most minute of human actions, we can conceive of the loving nature of the Lawgiver; in the infinitude of the Torah we are given a glorious glimpse of the infinitude of the Almighty.

Because Torah learning is the definitive devotional act through which Israel relates to God, the search for *hiddushim* constantly renews Israel's relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. One who learns Torah comes to understand that Israel is loved by an infinite God and to rejoice in his infinity, which through study is made intimate without being made finite. On the contrary, because our capacity to engage God's will is depthless—we yet may discover facets of the Torah that our ancestors failed to see—we finite creatures participate in God's infinity.

This transcendence, however, is worldly rather than otherworldly. The more a Jew communes with the mind of God, the more he learns not only about God but also about himself. Judaism, Michael Wyschogrod argues, is a "religion of the body," in which the chosenness of Israel is realized through the sanctification of the body. God enlists his people as partners in achieving this sanctification. The study of Torah endows every earthly action with holiness. As the sages of the Talmud admonish: "One ought not to begin words of prayer unless it follows the study of Torah." Every morning, prior to praying, religious Jews recite the rabbinic maxim that, while the reward for good deeds extends into the world to come, "The study of Torah is equivalent to them all." Torah study assumes a supreme role because it aligns our will with God's will. Another rabbinic maxim declares that Torah is studied *al menat la-asot*, in order to be obeyed and performed. The more one learns Torah, the better one knows God; and the better one knows God, the more one is aware of what this world, together with our actions in it, means to him.

In the world of Torah learning, communion with the mind of God is not Aquinas's beatific vision; it is a practical exercise. Its object is not a transcendent vision of perfection; instead, one seeks the specific shape of God's intent to sanctify our daily lives. The Neoplatonic tradition seeks the mind of God in the transcendent forms of things, of which our quotidian world seems a mere hint or shadow. In communion with the mind of the God of Israel, one seeks not the ideal forms but, rather, proper use of the pots and pans in a kosher kitchen, the candles and wine of the Sabbath table, and the laws governing Jewish birth, marriage, and death. Socrates spoke of philosophy as a way of escaping this world by way of a cognitive grasp of the transcendent perfection of the next. In contrast, the rabbis spoke of the afterlife as the "Heavenly Academy," whose divine Teacher and immortal pupils concern themselves with the here and now.

"When the righteous sit in the world to come," Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik writes, "they occupy themselves with the study of the Torah, which treats of bodily life in our lowly world . . . . They do not concern themselves with transcendence, with questions that are above space and time," he continues, "but with the problems of earthly life in all its details and particulars."

Religions influenced by Plato invariably maintain that the lower yearns for the higher, and the result is often an array of spiritual disciplines designed to lever the soul out of the body and into imagined realms of eternity distant from earthly life. In contrast, "halakhic man," writes Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik of the Torah-focused mode of Jewish life, "with his unique mode of understanding, declares: The higher longs and pines for the lower." As the ancient sages stated, God himself studies Torah in the age to come, concerning himself with minutiae of human life brought under the sanctifying purposes of his commandments.

This movement of the finite to the infinite—and the infinite to the finite—across the bridge of the Torah gives Jewish life a sensibility that interweaves the eternal splendor of

God's commandments with the often arresting realities of earthly life. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik recalls an exemplary moment from his own childhood: "I remember how once, on the Day of Atonement, I went outside into the synagogue courtyard with my father [Rabbi Moses Soloveichik], just before the Ne'ilah service. It had been a fresh, clear day, one of the fine, almost delicate days of summer's end, filled with sunshine and light." His father turned to him and said, "This sunset differs from ordinary sunsets for with it forgiveness is bestowed upon us for our sins." As his knowledge of the Torah penetrated the young Rabbi Soloveitchik's experience of the sunset, he says, "The Day of Atonement and the forgiveness of sins merged and blended here with the splendor and beauty of the world and with the hidden lawfulness of the order of creation and the whole was transformed into one living, holy, cosmic phenomenon."

The Torah for Judaism, and the Eucharist for Christianity, recreates what each faith deems to be the central moment in human history. Torah reading reenters the Sinai revelation, *matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah, making the divinely saturated past part of the everyday present. The Torah reader proclaims the laws of God to the community, just as God proclaimed his will to the Jewish people millennia ago when he descended to Mount Sinai.

A comparison between the role of Torah learning in Judaism and that of the Eucharist in Christianity reveals a profound difference. Where Torah reading and study sanctify reality through God's commandments for the daily activity of life, for Christians, the Eucharist's bread and wine offer an encounter between physical man and physical God. Christians, to be sure, would insist that to reduce the Eucharist to a physical encounter would be a caricature, but many nevertheless insist that it is the "real presence" of God in the Eucharist that constitutes their communion with a God who is at once finite and infinite. For Christians, the gap between finite man and infinite God is thereby bridged; for Jews, Christians are succumbing to the temptation that Deuteronomy warns against: seeking to bridge the gap between man and God through finite means.

The two distinct practices, then, manifest radically different ways to bridge the gap between man and God. In a way that might surprise Christians whose reading of Paul trains them to label Jews as "carnal" and Christians as "spiritual," the reverse seems to be true. Those who partake of the Eucharist enter into communion with what they believe to be God's physical body. Jews reject the notion that God might take bodily form and instead seek to commune with what they believe to be his infinite mind.

This sense of intimacy with God sustained the people of Israel through our long centuries of exile: Our oppressors bound our hands, but they could never enslave our intellects. In the millennia when we had neither power nor rights, we nonetheless walked with God in his kingdom through study.

Zog mir a shtickl Torah: The Yiddish phrase encapsulates the secret of Jewish survival. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of Great Britain, notes, "In the shtetl, the small township of Eastern Europe, when Jews met, one would say to the other: '*Zog mir a shtickl Torah,* Tell me a little Torah.' Its words were their intimations of infinity, its letters the solid shapes of mysteries to be decoded." If there are in the Torah limitless insights waiting to be found, then Jewish survival is assured: For as long as there are *hiddushim* to be discovered, God will provide Jews to discover them. The Torah's infinity guarantees Jewish eternity.

Communion with the divine through Torah learning brings the Jew into God's eternal time. All the Jews who ever lived were present at Mount Sinai, the rabbis teach. Mount Sinai remains eternally present among us, always available to be studied and obeyed. All the generations of Israel, all its sages and teachers, assemble on the study benches of the Beit Midrash when Torah is learned.

"When I enter the classroom I am filled with despair and pessimism. I always ask myself: Can there be a dialogue between an old teacher and young students, between a rebbe in his Indian summer and boys enjoying the spring of their lives?" Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik asked. But the generations gather around the study table of Torah. "When I start a *shiur* [lesson]," adds Rabbi Soloveitchik, who is descended from influential Talmudists, "the door opens and another old man walks in and sits down. My students call me the Rav. He is older than the Rav. He is the grandfather of the Rav. His name is Reb Chaim Brisker."

The fellowship of Torah extends still further, transcending family connections and leaping over the centuries: "The door opens quietly again and another old man comes in. He is older than Reb Chaim because he lived in the seventeenth century. His name is Reb Shabbetai haKohen, the famous Shakh . . . . Then more visitors show up, some from the eleventh, twelfth, or thirteenth centuries . . . among them are Rashi, Rabbeinu Tam, the Ravad and the Rashba. More and more keep on coming in."

The heat of disputation welds together the generations. As Rabbi Soloveitchik reports: "At times the Ravad utilizes harsh language against the Rambam. A boy jumps up to defend the Rambam against the Ravad. In his defense the student expresses himself rashly, too outspoken in his critique of the Ravad. Young boys are wont to speak in such a fashion. So I correct him and suggest more restrained tones. Another boy jumps up with a new idea." Centuries collapse into the eternity of Torah. The young speak in the voices of those long dead, citing the one against the other, wrestling with their solutions to the deep, puzzling questions of Torah. In this way, "A *mesorah* [tradition] collegiality is achieved. It is a friendship, a comradeship of young and old, spanning antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times."

Communion with the mind of God allows us to see history from God's perspective. Through Torah learning, Rabbi

Soloveitchik concludes, “Not only the infinite past, but also the infinite future, the future in which there gleams the reflection of the image of eternity, also the splendor of the eschatological vision, arise out of the present moment, fleeting as a dream. Temporal life is adorned with the crown of everlasting life.”

The human creature always feels the remoteness of God. As the prophet Isaiah reports: “And Zion said, ‘God has left me.’” Yet we should not fear, for as Isaiah consoles, God has not forsaken us, he will redeem us: “For the Lord has comforted Zion, and made its desert into an Eden.”

In most English translations, this verse from Isaiah promising redemption is rendered incorrectly, adopting the future tense in spite of the unmistakable past tense of the Hebrew. But the past tense is crucial, and it points to the central truth of a Torah-centered view of redemption. God gave the Torah to his people, planting eternal life among us. The desert is made into an Eden as Jews return to the Torah, making it present in action and study. Israel communes with God’s infinite mind and lives in his eternity.

Meir Y. Soloveichik is associate rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York.

From First Things, October 2010

King David

By: Meir Y. Soloveichik

In a provocative and profound essay in this magazine (“A King in Israel,” May 2010), the late Michael Wyschogrod proposed that the Jewish state define itself as a democratic, constitutional monarchy. Israel, Wyschogrod suggested, should rename its head of state—the president elected by its legislature, who already plays a largely ceremonial role—and give him or her the title “Regent of the Throne of David.” This would not, he wrote, involve changing anything about the Knesset and other aspects of the political process. Without redefining its democratic nature, “Israel nonetheless can be declared a Davidic monarchy without a reigning king.” This symbolic action, Wyschogrod argued, “would build into the self-understanding of the state of Israel the messianic hope of the Jewish people, while excluding a messianic interpretation of the present state of Israel.”

The proposal was given very little attention by Jewish thinkers, and even less by Jewish politicians. Yet the essay, for admirers of this great theologian, is classic Wyschogrod. It puts forward a provocative statement, expressed in a way that may attract few allies, that nevertheless forces us to reflect on a profound, and often ignored, theological truth. In this case, the truth is that many religious Jews simultaneously celebrate the existence of a Jewish republic while praying three times a day for the advent of a messianic era featuring a restored Davidic monarchy.

We seldom reflect on the dialectical nature of this theological posture. If religious Jews believe that Israel should be both democratic and Jewish, Wyschogrod writes, “we must conclude that a constitution uniquely suited to a Jewish state should embody the political form through which this higher authority has been manifest in the Jewish concept of polity for the past three thousand years,” which means a monarchy of the line of David. Here we see the tension. “The deep Jewish longing for Davidic restoration, expressed so frequently and with such deep emotion in the daily liturgy that Jews have recited for thousands of years, in which we beseech God to see a descendant of David on the throne of Israel,” shapes the political imagination of religious Jews. The state of Israel, however, has no civic or political dimension that reflects that yearning, and this clashes with a religious Jew’s pride in the accomplishments of the Jewish people in founding their own state, as well as his proper sense that the state of Israel plays a central role in the future of the Jewish people. Hence the genius of Wyschogrod’s proposal: To be a constitutionally *Jewish* state, “Israel must understand itself as a monarchy temporarily without a king.” With the office of “Regent of the Throne of David,” one of the civic symbols of a Jewish state would embody the millennia-long yearning that has animated Jewish prayer.

Wyschogrod’s provocative proposal may be unrealistic. That should not prevent us from engaging his philosophical point. Any seriously Jewish political philosophy must consider the place of the House of David when reflecting on what it means for Jews to exercise sovereignty as a people.

Since the Mishnaic era, the first centuries of the Common Era, Jewish political thinking has had to grapple with a seeming contradiction in biblical texts. The resulting rabbinic debate has had enormous influence on the ultimate direction of modern democratic thought.

Deuteronomy, the most political text in the Torah, seems to anticipate, and even approve of, the crowning of a king, as long as he is an Israelite: “When thou art come unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me; Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee.”

Nevertheless, when the Bible later recounts this historical moment in which the people seek a king, the connotations are negative. After the period of the judges, Israel ultimately asks the prophet Samuel to establish a monarchy (“Give us a king to judge us”). The request “displeased Samuel.” God, in turn, informs Samuel that “they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.” The question is therefore obvious: Is the appointment of a king encouraged, or is it not?

The matter is debated in Tractate Sanhedrin:

R. Judah said: Three commandments were given to Israel when they entered the land: [i] to appoint a king,

[ii] to cut off the seed of Amalek, and [iii] to build themselves the chosen house. . . . While R. Nehorai said: This section [in Deuteronomy regarding the appointment of a king] was spoken only in anticipation of their future murmurings, as it is written, And shalt say, I will set a king over me etc.

In this exchange, Rabbi Judah seems to embrace the system of monarchy, while Rabbi Nehorai rejects it. Yet the latter's reason for regarding monarchy as morally problematic is not made clear. In Devarim Rabbah, however, the Midrash identifies monarchy with the supreme sin:

God said to Israel: My Children, it was My intention that you be free of kings . . . but you sought differently. . . . I therefore said, since you will in the end ask for a king for flesh and blood, from [Israel] shall they rule and not a foreigner. . . . Rabbi Simon said: All who trust in God will be like Him. How do we know? For it is written, "blessed is the man who trusts in God" . . . and all who trust in idols will end up like them.

The implication is that the appointment of a king is akin to idolatry; it is a form of honoring and placing one's trust in someone who is not God. It is for this reason, according to the rabbis, that God saw the Israelites' request for a king as equivalent to a rejection of the divine.

This midrashic interpretation may seem simply a matter of intra-Jewish debate, but one can make the case that it changed the world as we know it. Eric Nelson's recent book *The Hebrew Republic* makes the remarkable and convincing case that seventeenth-century European political thinkers were deeply engaged by Jewish texts. This, he notes, runs counter to our standard assumptions, as it is often held that modernity's achievements were made through a progressive secularization. The truth, Nelson shows, is exactly the opposite. Renaissance humanism, "structured as it was by the pagan inheritance of Greek and Roman antiquity, generated an approach to politics that was remarkably secular." Yet, in the seventeenth century, during the ongoing fervor of the Reformation, "Christians began to regard the Hebrew Bible as a political constitution, designed by God himself for the children of Israel. They also came to see the full array of newly available rabbinical texts as authoritative guides to the institutions and practices of this perfect republic." Nelson goes on to argue that the political achievements associated with modernity—including democracy and religious toleration—reflect a "political Hebraism," an outlook on civic life that used rabbinic sources to bring European ideas about the polity into better conformity with biblical sources.

In the debate over the execution of Charles I, Milton cited rabbinic texts in *Pro populo Anglicano defensio* to make his case against monarchy, utilizing the argument from Devarim Rabbah.

God indeed gives evidence of his great displeasure at their request for a king—thus in [1 Samuel 8] verse 7: "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me." The meaning is that it is a form of idolatry to ask for a king, who demands that he be worshipped and granted honors like those of a god. Indeed he who sets an earthly master over him and above all the laws is near a strange god for himself, one seldom reasonable, usually a brute beast who has scattered reason to the winds.

Milton further notes that the Bible "imputed it a sin" that the Israelites sought a king, explaining that the sin lay in the fact that "a king must be adored like a Demigod" by his subjects who are "on either side deifying and adoring him." The argument was echoed a century later by Thomas Paine in a passage that he acknowledged was lifted from Milton and inserted into *Common Sense,* one of the most influential polemical pamphlets in American history:

Government by kings was first introduced into the world by the Heathens, from whom the children of Israel copied the custom. It was the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry. The Heathens paid divine honours to their deceased kings, and the Christian World hath improved on the plan by doing the same to their living ones. How impious is the title of sacred Majesty applied to a worm, who in the midst of his splendor is crumbling into dust! As the exalting one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of scripture; for the will of the Almighty as declared by Gideon, and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by Kings. . . . And when a man seriously reflects on the idolatrous homage which is paid to the persons of kings, he need not wonder that the Almighty, ever jealous of his honour, should disapprove a form of government which so impiously invades the prerogative of Heaven.

Paine's argument is first and foremost a religious argument, one we can trace back to the rabbis. Wyschogrod, in his aforementioned essay, claims that a rejection of monarchy is inherently secular. "A world without God is a world in which nothing is hereditary but all glory is temporary and republican," he observes. "God's election of Israel—which is, in a sense, a royal election—is based on none of these fleeting considerations but is as permanent as the throne of David, the most permanent of all the earthly thrones sanctioned by God. It is probably for this reason that monarchy is so repugnant to secularists." As we have seen, however, opposition to monarchy need not be secular. Influential aspects of the Jewish tradition regard sovereignty without a king as preferable, because it allows a people to be ruled by God alone. At the same time, it is undeniable that the rabbinic tradition, and especially its liturgy, embraces David's kingship as essential to Jewish thinking about history, politics, and nationality. Thus the question must be asked: If a significant strand of Talmudic theology, one that exercised an important influence on modern political thought, worries that monarchy has the

potential for idolatry, how are we, as modern Jews, to understand the significance of the Davidic dynasty for Jewish theology?

Deuteronomy can be viewed as the constitution of ancient Israel. Yet its concerns are as theological as they are political; indeed, perhaps its central concern is the worry lest the political and social be promoted at the expense of the theological. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has noted, if there is one consistent message in Deuteronomy, it is a warning: "When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase, when all you have is multiplied—it is then you must beware lest your heart becomes proud and you forget God your Lord who brought you out of Egypt and the land of slavery." In verses such as these throughout Deuteronomy, Sacks writes, Moses gives voice to the most counterintuitive message imaginable: "The greatest challenge is not slavery but freedom; not poverty but affluence; not danger but security; not homelessness but home. The paradox is that when we have most to thank G-d for, that is when we are in greatest danger of not thanking—nor even thinking of—G-d at all." If the Jewish political tradition's concern regarding monarchy is the danger of worshipping the non-divine, its concern is part of a larger worry that we are tempted to worship the self.

It is with this in mind that God's election of David is to be understood. If David is chosen, it is because throughout his career he sees and cites God as the source of his success, as well as the success of the state he rules. He embodies the importance of Jewish power, of military might, and at the same time ascribes all triumph, all success, all glory to God. We see this combination already in David's first great triumph against the gargantuan Goliath, before he becomes the warrior king of Israel who awed all his enemies. He is at this point but a stripling, and a shepherd boy at that, spoiling for a fight. When Saul voices skepticism, David replies in defiance that he has bested many a mighty adversary on the field of battle: "Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock . . . thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them." He appears, superficially, to embody arrogance, confidence, and braggadocio. Yet David says more, allowing us to understand that in fact, his entire approach to victory is different: "The God who saved me from the lion and the bear, *He* will save me from the Philistine." David draws confidence not only from his own abilities but also from his faith, declaring to Goliath: "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a javelin; but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel."

For this reason David, and only David, is chosen as the eternal ancestor of the Israelite monarchy. If the danger of monarchy is potential idolatry—and if the central social concern of Deuteronomy is the idolization of the self—then David as king, statesman, and political leader is the antidote. Several of the recent books about David, including Malcolm Gladwell's *David and Goliath*, have argued that David's victory against Goliath was the result of brilliant strategy and the choice of a weapon that is quite powerful and deadly. His victory was, therefore, not *merely* miraculous. This may well be true, but to stress this is to miss the full meaning of the episode. What is remarkable is that David is grateful to God even when he could have given all credit to himself. David is not Moses, who disrupts the laws of nature in his daily life. The miracle in David's life is that he ascribes his achievements to God when the temptation to do otherwise is enormous. He is the man who refuses to allow society to idolize him, and thereby reminds society not to idolize itself.

While this central feature of David's character is made manifest in the book of Samuel, it is even more evident in the Psalms. Thomas Cahill has noted that the Psalms are a "treasure trove of personal emotions and a unique early roadmap to the inner spirit." While the historian must normally "guess at the emotions of his subjects from incomplete or indirect evidence, David's Psalms reassure us that three thousand years ago people laughed and cried just as we do, bled and cursed, danced and leapt—that our whole repertoire of emotions was theirs." This is exactly right, but to this description one more point must be added: Every one of the Psalms, poetry and prayer that run the gamut of the human spirit, is addressed and dedicated to God. David composes Psalms to God when he defeats his enemies and when he is fleeing from them, when he is studying the Torah and when he has sinned, when his kingship is teetering and when it is secure. There is no part of his life, no part of his failures and his achievements, in which God does not have a role. This is Deuteronomy's ideal. And that is why, for all his failings, the political and civic society of the nation of Israel must always be linked to David and his legacy. There can be no Jewish state that does not have a role for God.

David's unique role helps us understand his dream of building a temple, and why that dream was denied. According to Chronicles, David went so far as to put together the blueprints for what would ultimately be known as the "Temple of Solomon." This is a biblical instance of a dream deferred and denied. David was informed by the Almighty that not he but his son would construct the house of God in Jerusalem. Before his death, charging his son to bring his dream of a temple to fruition, David explained why God would not allow him to do the one act that he desired more than any other:

He called for Solomon his son, and charged him to build an house for the Lord God of Israel. And David said to Solomon, My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build an house unto the name of the Lord my God: But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars: thou shalt not build an house unto my name, because thou hast shed much

blood upon the earth in my sight. Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about: for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. He shall build an house for my name.

Rather than building a temple as a reward for his military career, God tells David that he cannot, and cannot precisely *because of* his military career. What are we to make of God's refusal to grant David his wish to build the Temple? Is Israel not grateful for David's valor? Were the people of God not saved again and again because of the Goliaths slain by this warrior of Israel?

The Hebrew Bible never puts forward a pacifist ideal, recognizing again and again that the existence of evil, and of Israel's enemies, can require a firm, steely response. If the bloodiness of David's leadership should not be seen as a moral failing, why, then, was David denied his dream? Martin Goodman's study of the contrast between Jewish and Roman culture, *Rome and Jerusalem*, provides helpful insight. He notes that Jews, like Romans, recognized the reality of war and its necessity. At the same time, Jews have been careful never to idealize warfare and have avoided glorifications of military might as an end in itself. "Jews as much as Romans viewed war as a natural condition but, unlike Romans, they sometimes expressed a hope that this might change." Despite all the violent exhortations in the Hebrew Bible, "the biblical prophets Isaiah, Micah and Joel all looked forward with longing to a time when there would be no more war at all." Thus the famous words of Isaiah's eschatological vision: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Although exaltations of military might have their place in the Jewish tradition, that has never been an end in itself. This, notes Goodman, was one of the greatest differences between Jews and Romans. "This notion of permanent peace, shalom, and an end to war, espoused by Isaiah was quite different from the Roman notion of *pax*, which constituted little more than a pause to take stock between victorious and glorious campaigns."

Thus the logic of God's refusal of David's desire. Had he concluded his career by building what would inevitably have been seen as a monument to his might—had Israel's greatest warrior built a Temple "of exceeding magnificence, of fame and of glory throughout all countries"—the Israelites would have been tempted to see David's lifetime endeavors of war and bloodshed as achievements to glorify and events to celebrate on a par with their worship of the divine. Thus David's dream was denied lest Judea become Rome, and David become Vespasian, who constructed a colosseum as an eternal testament to his own conquests. God's Temple in Jerusalem would be built by Solomon. This clarifies the ultimate purpose of all of David's efforts, including his military triumphs: "For from Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." David could not build the Temple, for in so doing he would create a symbolic equivalence between his own glorious victories and God's greater purpose for the entire world. Thus, God's final frustration of David's ambition reinforces rather than diminishes his greatness, for it lies in the fact that the figure of David reminds Israel that, ultimately, all success flows from God.

Politics, in Judaism, is important, but it is a means to an end; only our relationship with God is an end in itself. The Temple in Jerusalem embodied this central truth. The Cambridge historian Simon Goldhill, in this vein, offers the following remarkable reflection on Pompey, the Roman general who conquered Jerusalem in 63 b.c., after a three-month siege.

Pompey walked straight in, we are told, to see what he no doubt expected to be a glorious statue to match the significance of the Temple for the Jewish people. Romans regularly took cult statues of other cultures and transported them back to Rome in triumphant appropriation. He was amazed to find nothing there and remained baffled by the whole experience. This story is told by Tacitus, the Roman historian, but it is retold by the Jews. History is not always controlled by the victors. The contrast of the emptiness of the shrine and the practical man of war's confusion is eloquent—and for once allows the non-material its moment of assertion over the powerful realities of war and conquest.

David died without a monumental structure to glorify his reign, and just such an absence makes his political and spiritual triumphs more visible to biblical readers.

While killing Goliath was an impressive feat, there is no question that David's greatest military victory was the conquest of Jerusalem, the Jebusite city that Israel had failed to capture in all the centuries following Joshua. After making Jerusalem his capital, the Bible informs us that David constructed a palace for himself. Yet archaeologists searched in vain in the original Jebusite Jerusalem for the remains of such a structure. It was the archaeologist Eilat Mazar who first suggested, using the Bible as a source of evidence, that the palace would have been built just beyond the original walls of Jerusalem, further up the mountain on which the city was located. Digging in the predicted location, she uncovered a massive and impressive structure. The nature of her find continues to be debated today, but the theological question remains noteworthy: Why would David have built his palace outside the city walls, rather than within?

The answer, perhaps, as Mazar herself suggests, lies in David's dream: to build not merely a house for himself, but one for God, a temple that would ultimately crown the summit of the mountain, standing higher than his palace and his city. Interestingly, for the Jewish sages, the name "Yerushalayim" is a combination of "Shalem," the political entity that was conquered by David, and *Yirah,* which means awe, reverence, a word that refers not to the

Jebusite city but rather to the place where Abraham bound his son, and where the Temple was destined to be built. The meaning of this midrash, perhaps, is that Jerusalem is meant to be both the capital of Judaism and Judea, and that one precedes the other; *yirah* precedes *shalem*, faith takes precedence over politics. Following this line of thinking, building a palace beyond the city walls may have served to point to Jerusalem's ultimate expansion to include the center of Israel's faith. David, then, intended his palace to be, for his subjects, the conceptual bridge between Jerusalem's political successes and its sanctity, between Jerusalem as it was and Jerusalem as it was meant to be. Though his capital embodied his military success, there are achievements higher than that. That which was to be highest, geographically as well as religiously, was not the nation as a political entity, but the nation of Israel in relationship with God.

David's legacy—biblical, Talmudic, and archaeological—challenges us to reflect on how Jews can create a society that can celebrate its successes but not idolize itself. David challenges us to envision a double project: sustaining a functioning, prosperous polity that points beyond its worldly achievements to God's higher purposes.

A wide variety of Israelis, deep down, struggle with this question. The most famous and beloved photograph in Israel is not that of Ben Gurion's declaration of the state, Menachem Begin's peace agreement with Anwar Sadat, or the raising of the flag over the newly conquered Eilat in the War of Independence. Israel's most enduring image is David Rubinger's arresting photograph of three simple soldiers at the Western Wall, gazing with reverence into the distance. The Six Day War was itself a David and Goliath story, and what makes the picture so memorable is that, like David, the soldiers seem to be celebrating more than themselves. As Yossi Klein Halevi puts it, "The image endures, in part, because of the humility it conveys: At their moment of triumph, the conquerors are themselves conquered. The paratroopers, epitome of Zionism's 'new Jews,' stand in gratitude before the Jewish past, suddenly realizing that they owe their existence to its persistence and longing."

How can Israel be a vibrant democracy that celebrates its independence and even at times its power, while creating a civic structure that embodies the Jewish story and mission, which transcend the modern state? This is one of the most critical questions facing Israel today, and it must look to David's life and his character for inspiration in seeking an adequate answer. At the same time, David's example is important for countries throughout the West, especially now, with the advent of a resurgent nationalism.

On the one hand, the Jewish political tradition sees national identities as part of God's plan. Even its eschatology, as the political philosopher Daniel Elazar writes, depicts "what properly may be termed a world confederation of God-fearing nations federated through their common acknowledgment of God's sovereignty and dominion, with Jerusalem, where all go up to worship God, as its seat." On the other hand, the Bible warns us lest nationalism—and our celebration of the state—become an end in itself: "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance. . . . All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity." In the seventeenth century, political thought inspired by the Hebrew Bible led to the political birth of the West as we know it today; perhaps political Hebraism can inspire the West again. While few thinkers have embraced Michael Wyschogrod's political proposal, they ought to recognize David as a central figure in any serious account of Jewish politics, statesmanship, and sovereignty. Perhaps in this respect, at least, Jewish philosophers and theologians—and those who recognize the importance of particular loyalties that are open to the transcendent—can embrace "the return of the king."

Meir Y. Soloveichik is rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.
From First Things, January 2017

Editorial Note: All opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of its individual writers. Please feel free to submit your own thoughts in the form of an essay which will be considered for publication by the editors.

While credits are given, we have not obtained consent to reproduce or publish these articles, and only do so as "fair use," i.e. for our minimal academic purpose. Mass distribution is not intended.

If you wish to have an e-mail address added to our list please contact david.shasha.shu@gmail.com

A full listing of all the contents of past issues is available by e-mailing David Shasha.
