

## THE CENTRALITY OF CREATIVITY IN THE THOUGHT OF RABBI JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK

God wills man to be a creator—his first job is to create himself as a complete being. . . . Man comes into our world as a hyllic, amorphous being. He is created in the image of God, but this image is a challenge to be met, not a gratuitous gift. It is up to man to objectify himself, to impress form upon a latent personality, and to move from the hyllic, silent personality towards the center of objective reality. The highest norm in our moral code is *to be*, in a total sense, . . . and to move toward . . . real true being.<sup>1</sup>

This existentialist emphasis upon self-creation is one of the central themes in the philosophy of Rav Soloveitchik *z.ts.l.* While it may remind us of Jasper's dictum, "To be a man is to become a man," or of Heidegger's espousal of authenticity, the Rav derives the centrality of creativity from the Torah, not from existentialism or neo-Kantianism or any other secular philosophy.

Significantly, many of the Rav's major writings revolve around the theme of creation and are in a sense commentaries on the first three chapters of *Genesis*. This preoccupation with creation themes is especially pronounced in his later essays, such as "Confrontation," "The Lonely Man of Faith," and "Majesty and Humility." The Biblical account of creation is not treated just as a metaphysical or cosmological doctrine, but as the matrix of normative teachings, providing guidance and direction for human conduct.

The Scriptural portion of the creation narrative is a legal portion, in which are to be found basic, everlasting halakhic principles. . . . If the Torah then chose to relate to man the tale of creation, we may clearly derive one law from this manner of procedure—viz., that man is obliged to engage in creation and the renewal of the cosmos.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Rav, human beings, as bearers of the image of God, are mandated to imitate the Creator. In view of the fact that the

commandment, *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* (*imitatio Dei*) refers exclusively to the divine moral attributes, the Rav treats creation as a moral category.<sup>3</sup> This, as we shall note later, has important implications for his analysis of the Maimonidean conception of the “middle road.”

It may appear that his emphasis upon human creativity is inspired by the Enlightenment. In actuality, however, it is rooted in Kabbalistic doctrines such as *tikkun ha-olam*, the *itaruta de-le-tata* (the stirring below), which must precede the *itaruta de-le-eila* (the stirring on high), and the human role in bringing about the re-unification of the Holy One, Blessed Be He, with the *Shekhina*.

R. Chaim of Volozin, a forebear of the Rav, already utilized these Kabbalistic ideas to define the human task as the realization of one’s potential for spiritual creativity. In his view, that human beings bear the image of God implies that they are charged with imitating His creativity. It is through novel insights into the meaning of the Torah or through meticulous observance of the *mitsvot* that man becomes a builder of spiritual worlds, with enormous repercussions in the highest regions of being. In a daring re-interpretation of a classic Rabbinic text, “*Da ma le-ma’ala mi-mkha*,” which literally means that man should be aware of a higher power, he reads into it the thesis that “whatever exists on high must come from you,” that the regions of spirituality on high come into being solely as the result of human agency.

He goes so far as to assert that the bliss of the Hereafter can be enjoyed only by those who actually *create* their own immortality. The World-to-Come is not a pre-existing domain to which God dispenses visas of admission to meritorious individuals. Everyone must by his own good deeds *create* his own spiritual domain in the World-to-Come.

The Rav adopts R. Chaim’s interpretation of the Biblical statement, “He created man in the image of God,” as referring to the human capacity for creativity. He rejects Maimonides’ interpretation that it is the possession of reason which endows man with the divine image. This may be in part due to the Rav’s theory of knowledge, which emphasizes the *creativity* of the human mind. Whereas Maimonides adopts the Aristotelian approach, which defines knowledge as noetic identification with the object known, the Rav, who was strongly influenced by the neo-Kantian theory of knowledge, viewed cognition as a construct of the human mind, not a copy of external reality. Since, according to Hermann Cohen’s idealism, even sensation is merely a question posed to the human mind, it is readily understandable why the Rav was far more comfortable with R. Chaim’s emphasis upon creativity

rather than that of Maimonides, who stressed the capacity for rational contemplation.<sup>4</sup>

The Rav develops R. Chaim's conception of spiritual creativity, expanding it considerably in the process. Basing his ideas upon Maimonidean conceptions, he shows that such fundamental religious notions as *teshuva*, prophecy, individual providence, personal immortality and freedom of choice represent forms of self-creation.<sup>5</sup>

The task of creation . . . is a triple performance; it finds its expression in the capacity to perform *teshuvah*, to repent, continues to unfold in *hashgahah*, the unique providence which is bestowed upon the unique individual, and achieves its final and ultimate realization in the reality of prophecy and the personality of the prophet.<sup>6</sup>

With respect to *teshuva*, the Rav focuses upon the emergence of a new personality rather than the attempt to secure atonement or win forgiveness. "Man, through repentance, creates himself, his own I."<sup>7</sup> Insofar as the attainment of individual providence or of immortality is concerned, the Rav resorts to the Maimonidean conception that the sublunar world, with the exception of man, is only subject to general providence. According to the Rav's interpretation of the Maimonidean thesis, individual providence extends only to those human beings who by dint of their intellectual and spiritual development have become genuine *individuals* and are no longer merely members of the human species.

When a person creates himself, ceases to be a mere species ("man"), and becomes a man of God, then he has fulfilled that commandment which is implicit in the principle of providence.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of the Rav's explanation, we can understand why, in striking contrast with the Torah's description of the creation of various organic creatures, where it is stated that they were created "according to their species," there is no reference to the species in the story of the creation of man.<sup>9</sup> As the *Mishna*<sup>10</sup> points out, Adam was created as a single person in order to underscore the importance of the individual.

The highest possible level of individuality is reached when a person turns into a prophet. In the Rav's words,

The prophet creates his own personality, fashions within himself a new "I" awareness and a different mode of spiritual existence, snaps the chains of self-identity that had linked him to the "I" of old—to man

who was just a random example of the species . . . —and turns into a man of God.<sup>11</sup>

Although in his *Halakhic Man*, the Rav, following in the footsteps of R. Chaim, refers to creativity only in the spiritual realm, in many other writings he enthusiastically endorses cultural, scientific and technological creativity as well. For all his affinity to the approach of R. Chaim, the Rav diverges from his radical disparagement of all purely secular creativity.

Insisting that our fate is completely in the hands of God, R. Chaim proclaimed the futility of all human efforts to improve human welfare. From his perspective, human agency directed towards the improvement of socio-political conditions is totally worthless. R. Chaim quotes the Talmudic statement that the destruction of the Temple was not a triumph of Titus' military skill, but was brought about by the sins of the Jewish people. Titus merely "burnt a burnt temple."<sup>12</sup> In other words, the plight of the Jewish people was merely an epiphenomenon of its spiritual failings. Since *galut* was not the disease but merely a symptom, it could be cured only by spiritual therapy, with Torah and mitzvot as the only remedy.

R. Chaim's disparagement of attempts to ameliorate the human condition exemplifies the pietistic quietism which predominated in the Jewish ethos of the pre-Emancipation and pre-Enlightenment era, when no effort was made to improve the collective socio-political or economic conditions of the Jewish people. To be sure, quietism and pietism play a significant role not only in Judaism but in most religions. William James went so far as to make the exaggerated claim that "the abandonment of human responsibility is the hallmark of religion." But there were many historic reasons why Jews gravitated towards pietistic approaches, especially during the long periods that Jews formed an underclass of European society and were denied the opportunity to participate in the cultural or political life of their respective host countries. Because of their lack of political power and the belief that with the arrival of the Messiah they would be ultimately redeemed by supernatural intervention, Jews were particularly prone to this disparagement of human initiatives. Professor Emil Fackenheim has shown that the reason why Spinoza heaped so much contempt upon Judaism but not upon Christianity was that he felt the religious faith of the Jews was responsible for their willingness to endure powerlessness and rendered them totally uninterested in making any efforts to shape their own destiny.<sup>13</sup>

With all his admiration for the Yeshiva world and its passionate love of Torah, the Rav did not subscribe to the quietistic pietism espoused by R. Chaim. He was convinced that if Torah values were perceived as incompatible with modernity's emphasis upon human responsibility for our socio-political and economic situation, the bulk of Jewry would dismiss Torah as totally irrelevant. It was his fear that a religious ethos which disparaged all human initiatives in ameliorating socio-political conditions and frowned upon any involvement with the trappings of modernity could at best result in halakhically committed Jews being marginalized and relegated to a ghettoized existence on the periphery of Jewish life.

It was his unshakeable faith that Torah is a Torah of life that inspired him to search for formulations that would not only grudgingly condone secular studies and scientific, technological, industrial, commercial and political activities, but, as long as they fully conformed to halakhic standards, would fully endorse them as intrinsically desirable and religiously valuable.

What enabled the Rav to formulate a religious philosophy which would enable observant Jews to participate in all facets of modern culture was a re-interpretation of the very text that R. Chaim had relied upon in extolling human creativity in the spiritual realm. From the context of the phrase, "He created man in the image of God," it is quite clear that the Rav's interpretation, which includes all forms of scientific or cultural creativity, is actually far closer to the meaning of the Biblical text, because the very next verse states, "God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and conquer it and rule over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heaven. . . ." This shows that it is first and foremost through activities enabling them to harness the forces of nature and help perfect the world that human beings are supposed to imitate the Creator. They are charged with the mission to attain dignity (*kevod ha-beriot*) through imitation of the Creator in Whose image they were created. This is why the Rav links the halakhic concept of *kevod ha-beriot* (human dignity) with the *tselem E-lohim* (the image of God).<sup>14</sup>

One may argue that this conception betrays the influence of neo-Kantian categories as formulated by Hermann Cohen. There can be no doubt that, in spite of the Rav's irreconcilable differences with Cohen's views concerning the very essence of Judaism, he adopted many of Cohen's ethical views, especially that Rambam's ethics reflects a Platonic rather than an Aristotelian approach.<sup>15</sup> According to Aristotle, human beings become most God-like through intellectual perfection.

Plato, however, maintained that ethical conduct and attainment of virtue constituted *imitatio Dei*. This, in large measure, accounts for the centrality of ethics in the Rav's religious philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

Professor Ravitzky<sup>17</sup> has advanced some cogent arguments against Cohen's interpretation of Maimonides' ethical views.<sup>18</sup> But for our purposes, this controversy is irrelevant, since it is of interest only to the student of the history of ideas. What matters for us is that, basing himself on Rambam, the Rav unequivocally declared that striving for ever higher rungs of moral perfection and participating as a partner with God in overcoming the imperfections of the universe is the pre-eminent approach to *imitatio Dei*.

In opposition to doctrines which delegitimize reliance on science and technology to advance human welfare as a usurpation of divine prerogatives (*e.g.*, the Promethean myth), Rav Soloveitchik developed the notion of Adam I, who is summoned to exercise creativity as a member of the "majestic community." He fulfills his divine mandate of becoming a co-creator with God by not passively submitting to the forces of nature but by transforming them through the employment of rational faculties. In the Rav's view, when human beings engage in efforts to harness the forces of nature to the advancement of human welfare, they are carrying out a God-given task to become partners with Him in completing the work of creation. Scientific and technological activities are not manifestations of *hubris* but the response to divine directive to conquer the earth.<sup>19</sup>

The Rav remains consistent with this definition of the human task in his approach to the problem of evil. Although, in keeping with the Kantian disdain for theodicies, he shies away from any attempt to provide metaphysical explanations for the existence of evil, he maintains that human beings are challenged to *respond* to evil. The human assignment is to eliminate want, misery and suffering, as much as possible. If there were no evil in the universe, human beings could not help perfect the world of creation. The Rav goes so far as to declare that God had to leave the world in a state of imperfection in order to provide human beings with a mission.<sup>20</sup>

According to the Rav, seeking dominion over nature and attaining a dignified existence is only one aspect of human creativity. There is another dimension, which is symbolized by Adam II. In his existential loneliness, man becomes aware of the need to enter into a "Covenantal Community," in which he totally surrenders himself and gives up everything to God.

Man, who was told to create himself, objectify himself, and gain independence and freedom for himself, must return everything he owns to God.<sup>21</sup>

In striking contrast with his *Halakhic Man*, which largely revolves around human creativity, his *U-Vikkashtem* is devoted to the analysis of the features associated with Adam II, who remains unfulfilled until he creates a covenantal community with God through total self-surrender and submission.

For the Rav, however, this act of renunciation represents also imitation of the divine Creator. As he points out in his “Ethics of Majesty and Humility,” the act of creation, as emphasized in the Lurianic Kabbalistic notion of *tsimtsum* (divine self-contraction), was possible only because God, in a sense, withdrew in order to create space for the existence of the world.

It is precisely because the act of creation involved the utilization of polar values, an ethics of majesty as well as of humility, that the Rav interprets the Maimonidean notion of the “Middle Road” not as an adaptation of Aristotelian ethics, but as the imitation of the moral attributes which the Creator manifested in the creation of the universe. In this respect he sharply differs with Hermann Cohen, whose overall approach to Maimonidean ethics is, in the main, accepted by the Rav. Whereas Hermann Cohen had contended that the ethics of the middle road is a “survival” of the Aristotelian elements which do not really fit into the Maimonidean system, the Rav argues that, far from representing an ethics of compromise, the ethics of the middle road reflects the synthesis of polar qualities which were manifested by the Creator of the universe and which go into an ethics of *yishuv ha-olam*. Hence, not only the “ethics of the pious,” but also the “ethics of the middle road” reflect not a concession to Greek notions of balance, but an authentically Jewish ethics, which revolves around the imitation of the divine attributes of action. The Rav calls attention to the fact that the Kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sefirot* similarly operates with polar values which in turn are synthesized. Thus *Hesed* and *Gevura* yield *Tiferet*, whereas the blending of *Netsah* and *Hod* engenders *Yesod*.<sup>22</sup>

Like Kabbala, which utilizes differences in gender to symbolize activity and passivity, the Rav suggests that a truly fruitful life is possible only by the interaction of both the active and the passive roles that are suggested in the Biblical account of creation, according to which Adam was created as both male and female (*Genesis* 1:27). Just as the Kab-

balistic *Sefirot* reflect male and female characteristics, the human personality functions properly only when neither of the two distinct components is repressed.<sup>23</sup>

Because the dialectical tension between the two components of human nature (Adam I and Adam II) mandates divergent approaches to concrete situations, the Rav always insisted one cannot simply resolve ethical dilemmas by recourse to formal rules. It therefore becomes imperative to rely on ethical intuitions, which can be cultivated by the imitation of Torah personalities who can serve as role models.

It was this emphasis upon the need to respond to divergent and even polar values which accounted for his espousal of moderation. In public lectures he often referred to R. Yohanan ben Zakkai's state of mind before his death. Why was he, of all people, so apprehensive? The Rav contended that since Rabbi Yohanan was not an extremist, he had ample reason to question his place in Jewish history. Perhaps R. Akiva was right when he ridiculed him for his failure to plead for Jerusalem instead of merely requesting Yavne and its scholars and when he denounced R. Yohanan's moderation as "*meshiv bakhamim ahov*." But it might have also been possible that Vespasian, who granted Yavne, would not have been ready to accede to a request for Jerusalem, and all would have been lost.<sup>24</sup> According to Rav Soloveitchik, the extremist enjoys the advantage of being self-assured. But whoever has deeper insight and perceives different aspects of issues must forego the satisfaction of dogmatic certainty.

Rav Soloveitchik points to the dialectical tension within human beings as demanding the balancing of *hesed* and *emet*. In his interpretation,<sup>25</sup> *hesed* mandates involvement in the world to transform it and create conditions conducive to human welfare. *Emet*, on the other hand, refers to the eternal values of the covenantal community, which transcend the world of temporal flux and which alone can provide us with a sense of meaning and purpose and enable us to overcome our existential loneliness. Since, according to halakhic Judaism, it is our task to seek to encounter God's Presence primarily in the lower realms of being (*ikkar Shekhina ba-tahthonim*), we must not try to escape from this world by a flight into transcendental spheres. The human task is to create an abode for God in this world.

The Rav's emphasis upon creativity explains what prompted him to overcome all kinds of social pressures, defy family traditions, and incur alienation from the so-called Torah world by affiliating with Religious Zionism. He thereby affirmed the religious significance of the



State of Israel, where Jews enjoy the opportunity to employ their creativity in developing a society in keeping with the ideals of halakha.

The Rav categorically rejects the position of the Neturei Karta, who claim that any attempt to create a pre-Messianic Jewish state violates the prohibition against “forcing the end.” He maintains that the Messianic faith entails human participation in the process of Redemption, rather than total reliance upon supernatural intervention. He also contends that the belief in the ultimate arrival of the Messiah is not merely an eschatological doctrine, but entails that human beings dedicate themselves to the pursuit of the ideals which will be fully realized only with the arrival of the Messiah. But the Rav also disagreed with those who were prepared to grant *de facto* recognition to the state of Israel while refusing to endow the existence of a sovereign Jewish state with intrinsic religious value.

In his *Hamesh Derashot*, the Rav described in most moving terms the tremendous price which he paid for identifying with Religious Zionism.<sup>26</sup> To be sure, he was never comfortable in any political role. He always referred to himself as a *me-lamed*. But for all his disdain for political activities, the Rav felt an obligation to formulate an ideology which would enable Jews to live in two worlds,<sup>27</sup> so that they would not feel it necessary to choose between the lure of modernity and the eternal truths of Torah. He felt that those who seek to confine Torah to the “tents” in order to avoid the challenge of “field”—the public arena calling for participation in the development of agriculture, industry, science, technology and commerce—are in no position to implement the ideals of the Torah as a *Torat Hayyim*, which is supposed to guide and mold all facets of human existence.<sup>28</sup>

We thus note that the Rav’s affirmation of the value of human creativity manifests itself in the endorsement not only of secular studies and scientific research, but also of Religious Zionism.

## NOTES

1. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” *Tradition*, Spring 1978, p. 64.
2. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, translated by Lawrence Kaplan, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1983, pp. 100-101.
3. Rabbi Soloveitchik emphasizes that the biblical doctrine of Creation makes it possible to take freedom and individuality seriously. Whereas for Aristotle, the world was based upon eternally valid laws, the Torah’s con-

- ception of creation introduces radical novelty and freedom. See *Halakhic Man*, p. 116 and p. 134 and *U-Vikkashtem*, p. 223.
4. Because the Rav adopted Hermann Cohen's thesis that Maimonides' ethics was basically Platonic rather than Aristotelian, he particularly emphasized those aspects of the Maimonidean system that characterize the concluding section of the *Guide*.
  5. *Halakhic Man*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
  6. *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 113. See also HaRav Yosef Dov haLevi Soloveitchik, *Al ha-Teshuva*, written and edited by Pinchas Peli, Torah Education Department of the World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem, 1974, especially Chapter 1.
  8. *Ibid.*, p. 128. See also Zvi Kolitz's discussion in *The Teacher*, Crossroad, New York, 1982, p. 7.
  9. See my discussion of this issue in my *Ethics of Responsibility - Pluralistic Approaches to Covenantal Ethics*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1994, pp. 60 ff.
  10. *Sanhedrin* 4:1.
  11. *Halakhic Man*, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
  12. B.T. *Sanhedrin* 96b.
  13. Emil L. Fackenheim, *Mending the World*, Schocken Books, New York, 1982, pp. 38 ff.
  14. HaRav Yosef Dov haLevi Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron*, translated by Mosheh Krone, Department of Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem, 1986, pp. 9-11.
  15. See my "The Maimonidean Matrix of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Two-Tiered Ethics," in *Through the Sound of Many Voices*, Leester and Orpen Dennys Limited, Toronto, 1982 pp. 178-179.
  16. *Yemei Zikaron*, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-87. See also the Rav's explanation of the reason for the recital of *Pesukei deZimra* in his *Shiurim leZekher Abba Mari Z.L.*, Jerusalem, 1985, vol. 1, pp. 17-34.
  17. Aviezer Ravitzky, "Kinyan haDa'at beHeguto: Ben haRambam leNeo-Kantianism," in *Sefer Yovel liKhvod Moreinu haGaon Rabbi Yosef Dov haLevi Soloveitchik*, Shaul Yisraeli, Nachum Lamm, Yitshak Raphael, eds., Mossad HaRav Kook and Yeshiva University Press, Jerusalem 1984, pp. 141-151.
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition*, Summer 1965, pp. 13-15.
  20. *Halakhic Man*, pp. 105-110; *Yemei Zikaron*, pp. 85-91.
  21. "Redemption," *op. cit.*, p. 72.
  22. I have dealt with this issue more extensively in my *Ethics of Responsibility—Pluralistic Approaches To Covenantal Ethics*, p. 101.
  23. *Hamesh Derashot*, pp. 46-47 and *Yemei Zikaron*, pp. 32-36.
  24. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-35.
  25. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.
  26. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-26.
  27. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.
  28. *Ibid.*, pp. 113-115.