

Modernity and Jewish Orthodoxy: Nietzsche and Soloveitchik on Life-Affirmation, Asceticism, and Repentance*

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Much ink has been spilt over the question of “Nietzsche and the Jews”¹ ever since the distortion of Nietzsche’s manuscripts by his sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, forged the links with Nazism that would be further developed by the likes of Alfred

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¹ Translations of Nietzsche’s works are cited by part and/or section number and are abbreviated as follows:

- A* *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 565–656.
- BGE* *Beyond Good and Evil* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Random House, 1966)
- D* *Daybreak* (trans. R. J. Hollingdale; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982)
- EH* *Ecce Homo* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Random House, 1967)
- GM* *On the Genealogy of Morals* (trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale; New York: Random House, 1967)
- GS* *The Gay Science* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Random House, 1974)
- HH* *Human, All Too Human* (trans. R. J. Hollingdale; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)
- TI* *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 463–563.
- WP* *The Will to Power* (trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale; New York: Random House, 1967)
- Z* *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 103–439.

Works by Joseph B. Soloveitchik are cited by page number and are abbreviated as follows:

Bäumler into a “carefully orchestrated cult.”² Though it is a portrait long dismissed in the academic world, a combination of Nazi propaganda and some subsequent scholarship has ensured that the picture of Nietzsche as a virulent anti-Semite who provided Nazism with its conceptual underpinnings lingers in the popular mind. Most scholars, however, now accept at worst a more ambivalent picture.³ Others go beyond ambivalence, with Weaver Santaniello turning the accusation of anti-Semitism on its head by arguing that Nietzsche’s contempt for anti-Semitism was one of the driving forces behind his critique of liberal Christianity, which in its use of “conservative theological concepts . . . perpetuate[s] anti-Semitism.”⁴ Even Crane Brinton, arguably one of those scholars most responsible for perpetuating the misrepresentation of Nietzsche as an anti-Semite, insisted that he had never maintained “that Nietzsche was a ‘proto-Nazi.’”⁵ But whilst Nietzsche is almost universally exonerated from the charge of personal anti-Semitism, Brinton’s claim that “occasionally [Nietzsche] comes very close indeed to the Nazi program,”⁶ though based on poor use of Nietzsche’s writings and rightly dismissed by Walter Kaufmann,⁷ continues to find echoes even amongst more careful Nietzsche scholars, who claim that he “did have some responsibility for Nazi crimes.”⁸

Generally speaking, it seems possible to study Nietzsche’s relationship with Judaism from two different perspectives. First, one might concentrate on his attitude to the Judaism or Jews of clearly demarcated historical periods. Duffy and Mittelman, for example, have advanced a nuanced and persuasive thesis, arguing that comprehensive analysis of the Nietzschean canon reveals a three-fold distinction that emerges fully only in some of Nietzsche’s later writings, particularly

FR *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships* (ed. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky; Jersey City: Ktav, 2000)

HM *Halakhic Man* (trans. Lawrence Kaplan; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983)

SP “Sacred and Profane,” in *Shiurei Harav* (ed. Joseph Epstein; Hoboken: Ktav, 1974) 4–32.

UM “Uvikashtem MiSham,” in *Halakhic Man—Revealed and Hidden* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1979) 115–235. Translations are our own.

² So described in the introduction to *Nietzsche: Godfather of Fascism?* (ed. Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) 2.

³ Examples can be found in Arnold Eisen, “Nietzsche and the Jews Reconsidered,” *Jewish Social Studies* 48 (1986) 1–14; Siegfried Mandel, *Nietzsche and the Jews* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998); and Menahem Brinker, “Nietzsche and the Jews,” in *Nietzsche: Godfather of Fascism?*, 107–25. The Golomb and Wistrich collection contains a good selection of views on the topic.

⁴ Donna Weaver Santaniello, *Nietzsche, God, and the Jews* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) 133. Another version of the more philo-Semitic line can be found in Jacob Golomb, “Nietzsche’s Judaism of Power,” *Revue des études Juives* 146–47 (1988) 353–85.

⁵ Crane Brinton, *Nietzsche* (New York: Harper, 1965) vii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁷ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) 291–92.

⁸ Golomb and Wistrich, introduction to *Nietzsche: Godfather of Fascism?*, 9.

Beyond Good and Evil and *On the Genealogy of Morals*. An early and unthinking flirtation with anti-Semitism that Nietzsche himself later described as “a brief daring sojourn in very infected territory,”⁹ is soon replaced by admiration for both the pre-prophetic sections of the Old Testament and the nineteenth-century European Jewry of his day. His scorn, on the other hand, was directed at the priestly-prophetic Judaism of later biblical times, though his criticisms in this context are “almost always directly connected to his criticisms of Christianity. That is, they are the features which, in his view, Christianity went on to develop.”¹⁰

Others who take this moderate line note how Nietzsche’s praise for the Jews is usually based on the positive uses to which they put what he once described as “their capital in will and spirit accumulated from generation to generation in a long school of suffering.”¹¹ As one who reminds us that “profound suffering makes noble,”¹² it is unsurprising that Nietzsche admires the Jews for what Jacob Golomb calls the “patterns of positive power”¹³ that they exhibit despite, or indeed because of their history of suffering.¹⁴ But such admiration is not therefore explicitly based on any consideration of Jewish theological or religious commitments.

The second option for study would be to focus on the conceptual issue of Nietzsche’s critique of religion as it applies to Judaism. Undoubtedly, points of conflict between Nietzsche’s philosophy and Jewish tradition are numerous and striking. Section 125 of *The Gay Science*, perhaps Nietzsche’s most celebrated declaration of atheism, featuring the madman’s announcement that “God is dead,” is hardly likely to strike a responsive chord with a religious tradition based on uncompromising monotheism.¹⁵ In fact, Nietzsche declares that he is an atheist

⁹ *BGE* §251. Inexplicably, this is one of the sections that Brinton quotes to support his claims about the Nazi overtones of Nietzsche’s thought.

¹⁰ Michael F. Duffy and Willard Mittelman, “Nietzsche’s Attitudes Toward the Jews,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49 (1988) 301–17, at 307. Nietzsche often expressed his preference for the Old Testament over the New; see, e.g., *BGE* §52; *GM* 3, §22. Duffy and Mittelman’s three-fold distinction is substantially anticipated in Israel Eldad, “Nietzsche and the Old Testament,” in *Studies in Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (ed. James C. O’Flaherty, Timothy F. Sellner and Robert M. Helm; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) 47–68. A similar position is articulated by Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) 117. Yovel presents this analysis in earlier works also, e.g., in his “Nietzsche and the Jews: The Structure of an Ambivalence,” in *Nietzsche and Jewish Culture* (ed. Jacob Golomb; London: Routledge, 1997) 118.

¹¹ *HH* 1, §475.

¹² *BGE* §270.

¹³ See Golomb, “Nietzsche’s Judaism of Power,” 354.

¹⁴ See, e.g., *D* §205.

¹⁵ As Shalom Rosenberg points out, “God is dead” is a more ambitious claim than “God does not exist.” The latter is a metaphysical thesis; the former is also an anthropological one that hints at the human need for God and the tragic implications for humanity of his “death.” See Shalom Rosenberg, “Nietzsche and the Morality of Judaism,” in *Nietzsche, Zionism and Hebrew Culture* (Hebrew) (ed. Jacob Golomb; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002) 317–45, esp. 319.

as “a matter of course . . . from instinct.”¹⁶ Nietzsche’s atheism is of course far from incidental; rather it constitutes the fulcrum of his philosophy. Broadening the picture to encompass the moral arena, it is clear that Nietzsche deeply opposes the classical Jewish *Weltanschauung* in crucial ways. For example, he criticizes the notion of a moral world order, sin, conscience, guilt and pity as outgrowths of priestly *ressentiment* and hatred of life, and he insists that human beings inhabit a purposeless and meaningless universe in which we must create our own values. The universe is not a lawful cosmos but chaos, characterized by constant change, flux and struggle. Nietzsche’s views on metaphysical issues are no more sympathetic to traditional Jewish approaches—his consistent rejection of the idea that there is any kind of world beyond this one, whether of a Platonic, Kantian or religious variety, being an obvious case in point.¹⁷

Such antinomies, and others, have led some Jewish thinkers to view Nietzsche’s philosophy as entirely hostile to Judaism. In an extraordinarily sharp formulation, Jonathan Sacks writes:

I, for one, find Nietzsche the very antithesis of Jewish values. I take no pleasure in the fact that, from time to time, he found nice things to say about Jews ancient and modern. The man who expressed contempt for “pity, the kind and helping hand, the warm heart, patience, industriousness, humility, friendliness” defined for all time what Judaism is not. I read him to know what Judaism is the battle against, then, now, and for the future.¹⁸

In this paper, we aim to go beyond the analyses sketched above, which tend to construe the relationship between Nietzsche and Judaism in very general terms without engaging significantly with the details of Jewish philosophy and theology. It is that detailed engagement with Jewish thought that we wish to begin here. Thus, our central concern is the hitherto somewhat neglected issue of the compatibility of Nietzsche’s philosophy and Jewish thought itself, with particular emphasis on the modern era and the fundamental question of whether his critique undermines contemporary interpretations of Judaism as a continuing living tradition. We will try to show that, despite the many irreducible conflicts between Nietzsche’s philosophy and Jewish tradition outlined above, there are at least two central areas (central for both Judaism and Nietzsche) in which Nietzsche’s ideas resonate strongly with at least some important strands in modern Jewish thought, and in particular with the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993), the leading twentieth-century exponent of modern Jewish Orthodoxy (henceforth “modern Orthodoxy”). Whilst their relaxation of halakhic demands and reinterpretation of many of the

¹⁶ *EH* 2, §1.

¹⁷ See, for example, Zarathustra’s famous injunction to remain faithful to the earth and not to grant credence to those who speak of other-worldly hopes (*Z*, Prologue, §3), and Nietzsche’s condemnation of “the concept of the ‘beyond’, the ‘true world’ invented in order to devalue the only world there is—in order to retain no goal, no reason, no task for our earthly reality!” (*EH* 4, §8).

¹⁸ Jonathan Sacks, review of *Nietzsche and Jewish Culture*, ed. Jacob Golomb, *Le’ela* 47 (1999) 62.

more supernatural theological concepts might make progressive denominations of Judaism the most likely candidates for some sort of Nietzschean revaluation,¹⁹ our argument will be that there are significant Nietzschean resonances in modern Orthodox Judaism, a form of Judaism which claims continued fidelity to the classical rabbinic tradition. Moreover, these Nietzschean themes are adopted by modern Orthodoxy in order to deflect the Nietzschean critique of religion itself. In essence, therefore, this paper is a case study in how modern Orthodoxy parries the modern critique of religion by partially absorbing it.

It is important to emphasize that we are focusing on Nietzsche and Soloveitchik as prominent *representatives* of broader trends in modern thought and modern Orthodoxy respectively. We do not deny that some of Nietzsche's attitudes are part of the much wider contemporary Western *Weltanschauung* that was a formative influence on Soloveitchik's thought. We have, however, selected these two thinkers as particularly potent spokesmen for these trends. Moreover, the quasi-religious nature of some of Nietzsche's language and the fact that, as will be illustrated later, some of Soloveitchik's particular formulations carry strong Nietzschean resonances make these two thinkers appropriate foci for our analysis. We will concentrate first on an essential element of the Nietzschean critique of ancient priestly Judaism and his views on the related issues of life-affirmation, asceticism and the passions. We will then turn to the concept of repentance.

■ Life-Affirmation, Asceticism and the Passions

In this section, we shall first illustrate that Nietzsche considered Judaism, as well as Christianity, guilty of a negative attitude towards the world and hostility towards the passions. We shall then try to demonstrate how Soloveitchik's stance on these matters largely avoids falling foul of the Nietzschean critique and indeed, at certain points, echoes Nietzsche both linguistically and conceptually. Finally, we shall show how Soloveitchik privileges some strands in traditional rabbinic and later discussion of asceticism and the passions in arriving at his distinctively modern perspective on these issues.

¹⁹ Indeed, elements of Duffy and Mittelman's threefold distinction coincide with the four eras of Judaism discussed by one of the most significant early reform theologians Abraham Geiger. Geiger is similarly well disposed towards the pre-prophetic era for the rather Nietzschean reason that it was a period "of vigorous creation, unfettered and unhindered." (Abraham Geiger, "A General Introduction to the Science of Judaism," in *Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism* [comp. Max Wiener; trans. Ernst Schlochauer; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1981] 156). He also has high hopes for the era of liberation that corresponds to Nietzsche's modern Judaism. Interestingly though, the second period, that of tradition, which takes place in Duffy and Mittelman's priestly-prophetic era, for Geiger, lasts until the sixth-century completion of the Babylonian Talmud, and is seen as one that "took root in the spiritual heritage of the past and at the same time *still maintained a certain degree of freedom in its approach to that heritage*" (ibid., emphasis added). Geiger's ire is reserved for the period of rigid legalism "characterized by toilsome preoccupation with the heritage as it then stood," (ibid.), which lasted from the sixth until the eighteenth century.

Nietzsche's Critique of Ancient Judaism and Christianity

Nietzsche's affirmation of this life and this world is of course a central motif of his thought and is expressed in many places in his oeuvre.²⁰ Nietzsche recommends *amor fati*, the love of one's life just for what it is.²¹ The doctrine of the eternal recurrence, understood in existential terms as the test of one's willingness to embrace the notion of the infinite repetition of one's life in all its details despite the lack of any meaning beyond that life or of any metaphysical consolation—and hence understood as the test of one's greatness—is perhaps Nietzsche's most extreme version of life-affirmation.²²

Particularly in Nietzsche's late writings, Christian asceticism and indeed Christianity itself are consistently and harshly criticized as the antithesis of life-affirmation in passages such as the following:

It was Christianity, with its *ressentiment* against life at the bottom of its heart, which first made something unclean of sexuality: it threw *filth* on the origin, on the presupposition of our life.²³

Once one has comprehended the outrage of such a revolt against life as has become almost sacrosanct in Christian morality, one has, fortunately, also comprehended something else: the futility, apparentness, absurdity and *mendaciousness* of such a revolt.²⁴

The Christian conception of God . . . is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine ever attained on earth . . . God degenerated to the *contradiction* of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes! God as the declaration of war against life, against nature, against the will to live!²⁵

Nietzsche writes of the kind of asceticism that he considers favoured by Christianity: “[O]ne may without any exaggeration call it *the true calamity* in the history of European health.”²⁶

Moreover, Christianity's life-denying nature issues in an inverse—and perverse—system of values:

Wherever the theologians' instinct extends, *value judgements* have been stood on their heads and the concepts “true” and “false” are of necessity

²⁰ See e.g. *Z*, Prologue, §3; 1, §3; and 1, §4; as well as *TI* 5.

²¹ E.g., *GS* §276; *EH* 2, §10.

²² See our fuller discussion of the eternal recurrence in the section, “A Nietzschean Perspective: Eternal Return and Repentance of Love,” below.

²³ *TI* 10, §4.

²⁴ *TI* 5, §5.

²⁵ *A* §18.

²⁶ *GM* 3, §21. Nietzsche states explicitly several times in *GM* 3 that, nevertheless, the ascetic ideal is, paradoxically, necessary and life-promoting. For a lucid discussion of this and other complexities regarding Nietzsche's attitude to asceticism, see Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985) 114–37.

reversed: whatever is most harmful to life is called “true”; whatever elevates it, enhances, affirms, justifies it, and makes it triumphant, is called “false.”²⁷

Nietzsche explicitly holds Judaism, as well as Christianity, responsible for fostering a negative attitude toward life and the world. He accuses the Jews of hostility to the natural—“whatever is natural is considered ignoble.”²⁸ Indeed, in a celebrated passage, he accuses the Hebrew prophets of being the originators of this attitude, which is identical with the “slave rebellion in morals”:

The Jews—a people “born for slavery,” as Tacitus and the whole ancient world say . . . have brought off that miraculous feat of an inversion of values . . . their prophets have fused “rich,” “godless,” “evil,” “violent,” and “sensual” into one and were the first to use the word “world” as an opprobrium. This inversion of values (which includes using the word “poor” as synonymous with “holy” and “friend”) constitutes the significance of the Jewish people: they mark the beginning of the slave rebellion in morals.²⁹

As Nietzsche makes clear in *GM* 1, §7, this slave rebellion in morality for which ancient “priestly” Judaism was responsible is, from his perspective, a negative phenomenon of world-historical proportions. The Jewish revaluation of aristocratic values was inherited by Christianity (“One knows *who* inherited this Jewish revaluation”) and is ultimately responsible for the corrupt, decadent state (in Nietzsche’s view) of contemporary Western values. The slave revolt in morality is a “tremendous and immeasurably fateful initiative,” the “most fundamental of all declarations of war,” and is something “which we no longer see because it—has been victorious.”

Closely related to these critiques of Judaism and Christianity are Nietzsche’s objections to the treatment of the passions in those faiths. In an important passage, Nietzsche deplores the radical and uncompromising nature of what he understands as the Christian stance on the passions:

Formerly, in view of the element of stupidity in passion, war was declared on passion itself, its destruction was plotted; all the old moral monsters are agreed on this: *il faut tuer les passions*. The most famous formula for this is to be found in the New Testament, in that Sermon on the Mount . . . [where] it is said, for example, with particular reference to sexuality: “if thy eye offend thee, pluck it out.” Fortunately, no Christian acts in accordance with this precept. *Destroying* the passions and cravings, merely as a preventative measure against their stupidity and the unpleasant consequences of this stupidity—today this itself strikes us as merely another acute form of

²⁷ A §9.

²⁸ GS §135.

²⁹ BGE §195. Nietzsche does not believe that Judaism was always hostile to life. His view is that “[o]riginally, especially at the time of the Kings, Israel also stood in the right, that is, the natural, relationship to all things”, but that subsequently “priestly agitators” fostered a morality “no longer the expression of the conditions for the life and growth of a people, no longer its most basic instinct of life, but . . . become the antithesis of life . . . the ‘evil eye’ for all things” (A §25).

stupidity. We no longer admire dentists who “pluck out” teeth so that they will not hurt anymore. . . . To be fair, it should be admitted, however, that on the ground out of which Christianity grew the concept of the “*spiritualization* of passion” could never have been formed. After all the first church, as is well known, fought *against* the “intelligent” in favour of the “poor in spirit.” How could one expect from it an intelligent war against passion? The church fights passion with excision in every sense: its practice, its “cure” is *castration*. It never asks: “How can one spiritualize, beautify, deify a craving?” It has at all times laid the stress of discipline on extirpation (of sensuality, of pride, of the lust to rule, of avarice, of vengefulness). But an attack on the roots of passion means an attack on the roots of life: the practice of the church is *hostile to life*.³⁰

For Nietzsche, then, any attempt to deal with the potentially damaging potency of the passions by uprooting them is unintelligent—the “throwing out of the baby with the bath water”—and, far worse, constitutes an assault on life itself. What is required, instead, is what Christianity has failed to accomplish—the spiritualization or sublimation of the passions.

In a similar passage, Nietzsche excoriates “the insanity of religious moralists” in desiring the extirpation of the passions:

Instead of taking into service the great sources of strength, those impetuous torrents of the soul that are often so dangerous and overwhelming, and economizing them, this most shortsighted and pernicious mode of thought, the moral mode of thought, wants to make them dry up.³¹

On this charge as well, Nietzsche does not absolve Judaism of blame. Indeed, he indicates that Christian hostility towards the passions is rooted in Christianity’s Jewish origins:

People like St. Paul have an evil eye for the passions . . . hence their idealistic tendency aims at the annihilation of the passions. . . . Very differently from St. Paul and the Jews, the Greeks directed their idealistic tendency precisely toward the passions. . . . And the Christians? Did they want to become Jews in this respect? Did they perhaps succeed?³²

Soloveitchik’s View

In *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik presents, within a religious framework, a highly positive view of this world very far removed from the *ressentiment* or hostility towards life that Nietzsche so despised. Soloveitchik is aware of the novelty of

³⁰ *TI* 5, §1.

³¹ *WP* §383. See also *WP* §384. As Graham Parkes points out (“Nietzsche and Zen Master Hakuin on the Roles of Emotion and Passion,” in *Nietzsche and the Gods* [ed. Weaver Santaniello; Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001] 121), the verb *ökonomisieren*, rooted in the word *oikos* (household), connotes, among other things, the domestication of the wildness of the passions.

³² *GS* §139.

his approach within a religious context and explicitly contrasts the endorsement of earthly existence characteristic of his typological Jewish hero, halakhic man, with the widespread religious approach:

Halakhic man's relationship to transcendence differs from that of the universal *homo religiosus*. Halakhic man does not long for a transcendent world, for "supernal" levels of a pure, pristine existence, for was not the ideal world—halakhic man's deepest desire, his darling child—created only for the purpose of being actualized in our real world? It is this world which constitutes the stage for the Halakhah, the setting for halakhic man's life.³³

Many religions view the phenomenon of death as a positive spectacle. . . . They . . . sanctify death and the grave because it is here that we find ourselves at the threshold of transcendence, at the portal of the world to come. Death is seen as a window filled with light, open to an exalted, supernal realm. Judaism, however . . . abhors death, organic decay, and dissolution. It bids one to choose life and sanctify it. Authentic Judaism as reflected in halakhic thought sees in death a terrifying contradiction to the whole of religious life. Death negates the entire magnificent experience of halakhic man.³⁴

In a formulation that conveys not simply the standard traditional view, that merits accrued in this world provide the entry visa to the world to come, but which in context suggests that eternal life is truly experienced in this world rather than the hereafter,³⁵ Soloveitchik declares:

It is here, in this world, that halakhic man acquires eternal life!³⁶

This Nietzschean-sounding formulation, which, with the omission of the word "halakhic," could easily be a formulation of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence, is followed by an ostensible proof-text from the Mishna:

"Better is one hour of Torah and mitzvot [commandments] in this world than the whole life of the world to come," stated the tanna [mishnaic authority] in Avot [4:17], and this declaration is the watchword of the halakhist.³⁷

³³ *HM*, 30.

³⁴ *HM*, 31. Soloveitchik contrasts the life-affirming nature of halakhic man not only with the outlook of the *homo religiosus* of other faiths, but even with other trends within Orthodox Judaism such as the early Musar movement, which "symbolized the world perspective of the universal *homo religiosus*, a perspective directed toward the transcendent . . . the nihility of this world, its emptiness and ugliness" (*HM*, 74). Even more significantly, as Allan Nadler has shown, Soloveitchik's life-affirming modernism departs radically from the Mithnagdic [anti-Hasidic] worldview of his forebears. "Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man: Not a Mithnagged," *Modern Judaism* 13 (1993) 119–47.

³⁵ Cf. *HM*, 35: "Temporal life becomes transformed into eternal life; it becomes sanctified and elevated with eternal holiness."

³⁶ *HM*, 30.

³⁷ *HM*, 30. *m. 'Abot 4:17* actually reads: "Better is one hour of repentance and mitzvot in this world . . ."

Revealingly, Soloveitchik omits from his citation of the passage in *Avot* the countervailing statements privileging life *after* death that immediately precede and follow. The immediately preceding statement, “This world can be compared to a corridor to the world to come: Prepare yourself in the corridor, so that you may enter the banquet hall,”³⁸ is referred to by Soloveitchik later in *Halakhic Man*, but only indirectly, and not in its straightforward meaning in the Mishna but as a metaphor describing the nature of the relationship between the ontological and the normative approaches to existence.³⁹ The statement in *Avot* directly following that cited by Soloveitchik reads: “And better is one hour of spiritual bliss in the world to come than the whole of life in this world.”⁴⁰

A further daring formulation constitutes what is perhaps Soloveitchik’s clearest ranking of the two worlds:

The Halakhah is not at all concerned with a transcendent world. The world to come is a tranquil, quiet world that is wholly good, wholly everlasting, and wholly eternal, wherein a man will receive the reward for the commandments which he performed in this world. However, the receiving of a reward is not a religious act; therefore, halakhic man prefers the real world to a transcendent existence, because here, in this world, man is given the opportunity to create, act, accomplish, while there, in the world to come, he is powerless to change anything at all.⁴¹

As Soloveitchik moves on to discuss the concept of holiness, one gets the sense that, had Nietzsche been a proponent of religious holiness, he would have characterized it similarly:

[T]he performance of [divine] commandments . . . is confined to this world, to physical, concrete reality, to clamorous, tumultuous life, pulsating with exuberance and strength. . . . Holiness means the holiness of earthly, here-and-now life. . . . The earth and bodily life are the very ground of the halakhic reality.⁴²

For all of his this-worldly orientation, however, halakhic man’s *Weltanschauung* is rooted in the traditional Jewish belief-system. Thus

[H]alakhic man is not a secular, cognitive type, unconcerned with transcendence and totally under the sway of temporal life. God’s Torah has implanted in halakhic man’s consciousness both the idea of everlasting life and the desire for eternity. . . . His soul . . . thirsts for the living God.⁴³

³⁸ *m. ’Abot* 4:21.

³⁹ *HM*, 63.

⁴⁰ *m. ’Abot* 4:17.

⁴¹ *HM*, 32.

⁴² *HM*, 33–34. See also, especially, *HM*, 149 n. 41, where Soloveitchik explicitly contrasts the perspective of Halakhah with what he terms the Greek, and especially Platonic, “negation of the body”; and *HM*, 46: “An individual does not become holy . . . through mysterious union with the infinite . . . but, rather, through his whole biological life, through his animal actions.”

⁴³ *HM*, 40.

Soloveitchik thus maintains a version of the traditional Jewish beliefs in the afterlife and the dualism which privileges the soul over the body. Yet these positions do not entail the denial of all value to this world, and, as we have seen, Soloveitchik is very far from issuing any such denial.

The tension between halakhic man's secular focus and his other-worldly ambitions is resolved, for Soloveitchik, in halakhic man's quest to infuse this-worldly existence with the transcendent. This project, once again, radically distinguishes him from *homo religiosus*, "a romantic who chafes against concrete reality and tries to flee to distant worlds."⁴⁴ Halakhic man, by contrast, "wishes to purify this world, not to escape from it. . . . The generation has not yet arisen that is fit to serve God through the negation of concrete existence and through casting off of the yoke of the senses and the body."⁴⁵

In *Family Redeemed*, a recently-published volume of essays drawn from unpublished manuscripts left by Soloveitchik after his death, we see spelled out some of the implications of the positive attitude towards this world developed in *Halakhic Man*. The view of the passions articulated by Soloveitchik in this work is not only unaffected by the Nietzschean critique of Judeo-Christianity outlined earlier; it is itself very Nietzschean. Soloveitchik writes:

[*P*]*assio carnis*, the suffering of the flesh . . . is not to be equated with self-torture, mortification of the flesh, or *odium mundi*, revulsion towards the world, the condemnation of natural drives or the deadening of the senses and the repression of the exercise of the natural faculties of man. Nothing of that sort was ever preached by Judaism. On the contrary, it displayed full confidence in the inner worth of the naturalness of man.⁴⁶

While Soloveitchik's claim that Judaism *never* advocated the kind of asceticism that he describes is, as we shall try to show in the section "Soloveitchik's Reading of Rabbinic Tradition" below, significantly exaggerated, what is evident from this passage is just how far his position is from the notion that "whatever is natural is considered ignoble"—Nietzsche's summation of the Judeo-Christian view cited earlier. Moreover, Soloveitchik's opposition here to the idea that the passions should be extirpated is unambiguous. In fact, just like Nietzsche, Soloveitchik believes that the passions should be harnessed and elevated rather than annihilated:

Judaism was opposed to any maiming of the natural life for the sake of some transcendental goal, since *holiness arises out of the naturalness of man* (*emphasis added*).⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *HM*, 40.

⁴⁵ *HM*, 41–43.

⁴⁶ *FR*, 75–76.

⁴⁷ *FR*, 77. It is noteworthy that another highly influential figure for modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, adopts a closely similar view: "What is holiness? . . . The character of normal life is not annulled, normal human activity, the life of the private individual and of society, etiquette and respect, are not obliterated; rather they are elevated in an ideal ascent" (R. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot HaKodesh* [Hebrew] [3 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1978] 2:292). Rosenberg,

Soloveitchik's comments concerning sexual activity clearly illustrate his thesis:

On the one hand, Judaism never recommended sexual restraint nor exalted the state of celibacy or virginity. . . . A celibate life is considered by the Halakhah and the Aggadah as an unblest state which contravenes a basic tenet of Judaism. . . . God Himself considered a self-denying solitary life of man or woman as bad. . . . On the other hand, Judaism could not approve of the natural sexual life without subjecting it to a remedial process of purification, as it was too well aware of all the evils intrinsic . . . in unharnessed and undisciplined sexual practices. . . . If it conforms to Halakhah, the catharsis of the sexual instinct justifies it completely. . . . The wedding's *nissuin* blessings, which deal with the dignity of man and his Divine charisma, are very indicative of our attitude towards a purged and remedied sexual desire.⁴⁸

Here is the "spiritualization of passion" which Nietzsche laments the lack of in *Twilight of the Idols*. To be sure, Nietzsche's conception of the spiritualization or "economizing" of the passions is located within a conceptual system and a network of objectives radically different from Soloveitchik's. For Nietzsche, economizing of the passions is a necessary condition of the secularized piety and this-worldly saintliness so central to his project.⁴⁹ For Soloveitchik, the redemption of the passions is a key component of a particular theistic way of life, the halakhic life of the Jew. Nevertheless, the commonality between Nietzsche and Soloveitchik is striking.

In a major Hebrew essay entitled, "And You Shall Seek From There," published many years before *Family Redeemed*, Soloveitchik had already expounded similar views. He asserts there that "the Torah never forbade the pleasures of this world and never demanded deprivations and afflictions."⁵⁰ Strikingly, he claims that "the elevation of the body is the entire Torah—the rest is [just] the interpretation [of this idea]."⁵¹ Again, he clearly endorses the Nietzschean thought that the passions are to be sublimated and not annihilated:

"Nietzsche and the Morality of Judaism," 337, highlights the life-affirmation common to Kook and Nietzsche. See also Smadar Sherlo, "Strength and Humility: Rabbi Kook's Moral System and Nietzsche's Morality of Power," (Hebrew) in *Nietzsche, Zionism and Hebrew Culture* (ed. Jacob Golomb; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 200) 347–74, on similarities between the two thinkers including life-affirmation and the insistence that the passions should be sublimated rather than quashed. Jason Rappoport, "Rav Kook and Nietzsche: A Preliminary Comparison of Their Ideas on Religions, Christianity, Buddhism and Atheism," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 12 (2004) 99–129, alludes to the life-affirmation shared by the two thinkers but otherwise, in our view, mostly overstates the similarity between Nietzsche and Kook.

⁴⁸ *FR*, 77–78.

⁴⁹ See Leslie Paul Thiele, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul: A Study of Heroic Individualism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990) ch. 7.

⁵⁰ *UM*, 207–8.

⁵¹ *UM*, 207.

The sanctification of the human body, the refinement of animal life with all its abundant lusts and passions and its elevation to the level of the service of God—this is the aim of the Halakhah. Yet this refinement does not take place through negation and asceticism, but by the placing of direction and purpose upon natural life.⁵²

Soloveitchik goes so far as to argue explicitly in *UM* that the Halakhah prefers sublimated physical acts, including eating and even sexual intercourse, to prayer. He points out that many acts of eating (e.g., of sacrifices) are considered to be biblical commandments by all halakhic authorities, whereas only Maimonides takes prayer to be a biblical rather than merely a rabbinic obligation, and highlights the extensive treatment accorded by halakhic literature to the laws of forbidden sexual relationships and prohibited foods in contrast to the minimal coverage of the topic of prayer.⁵³

In short, Soloveitchik's trenchant life-affirmation, anti-asceticism and advocacy of the sublimation of the passions are diametrically opposed to the ancient "priestly" conception condemned by Nietzsche. Moreover, at times Soloveitchik's reflections on these themes echo Nietzsche on both the conceptual and linguistic levels.⁵⁴

Soloveitchik's Reading of Rabbinic Tradition

Unsurprisingly, the long and rich tradition of post-biblical Judaism does not present a uniform approach to the issue of asceticism and the passions. Indeed, we can discern two broadly opposing trends. Even a brief survey of traditional rabbinic perspectives will show that while Soloveitchik's position on asceticism and the passions certainly cannot be dismissed as lacking grounding in traditional Jewish sources, his reading of those sources is nonetheless highly selective.

On the one hand, classical rabbinic Judaism, while far from sanctioning hedonism or material excess, is often hostile to the ascetic ideal. This anti-asceticism sits well with the largely this-worldly focus of the Pentateuch itself. A significant number of rabbinic sources articulate a positive attitude toward physical pleasure. Perhaps the most celebrated teaching of this sort is that cited in the name of Rav in the Palestinian Talmud: "In the future, a person will be called to account for all that

⁵² *UM*, 207.

⁵³ *UM*, 208, 213–14.

⁵⁴ It is worth noting that Nietzsche is mentioned on seven occasions in *HM*, though never specifically in connection with life-affirmation, asceticism and the passions. See *HM*, 68, 109, 114, 141 n. 4, 152 n. 64 and 164 n. 147 (two occurrences).

his eyes saw and he did not eat.”⁵⁵ Other similarly anti-ascetic statements are not uncommon.⁵⁶

Regarding the passions, a well-known rabbinic homily applies the words of Gen 1:31, “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good,” to the evil inclination, “because were it not for the evil inclination, no man would build a house, marry, have children or engage in commerce.”⁵⁷

The anti-ascetic trend in rabbinic tradition has found many echoes in subsequent Jewish thought, for example in Rabbi Judah Halevi’s insistence in the *Kuzari* that the Torah does not mandate the self-mortification of its adherents.⁵⁸ A more recent instance is the central Hasidic doctrine of *avodah begashmiyut*, “divine service through corporeality,” later endorsed in the thought of R. Kook.⁵⁹ The standard halakhic approach is that the proper intention that one should have during physical activity (e.g., eating), is to derive the strength necessary to serve God through prayer or observance of the commandments. The concept of *avodah begashmiyut* characteristically understands the corporeal act (e.g., eating), as *itself* constituting divine service if the correct meditations accompany it.⁶⁰ This is very close to the Soloveitchikian idea of harnessing and elevating the passions.

Other rabbinic teachings, however, pull in the opposite, ascetic direction. The very same Talmudic passage that criticizes fasting and the Nazirite reports the

⁵⁵ y. *Kiddushin* 4:12. Louis Jacobs in *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999) 216, argues that this passage has been widely misunderstood and that Rav means simply that one must look after one’s health and not refrain from wholesome food. Jacobs’s evidence is the context of the passage, which appears soon after another teaching by Rav which focuses on the importance of protecting one’s health and well-being, namely that it is forbidden to live in a city which has no physician, bathhouse and courts to maintain law and order. The teaching of Rabbi Jose that one should also not live in a city with no vegetable garden comes next, followed by our passage. However, Jacobs ignores the possibility of thematic development. It is plausible that the intention of our passage is to go further than the statements that precede it by asserting that not only ought one to look after one’s health from the religious perspective, but one should make the effort to positively enjoy permitted food as well.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., *Gen. Rab.* 45:5 on the barrenness of the Matriarchs as a divine device for rendering them more physically attractive to their husbands; *b. ‘Erub.* 54a on taking what physical pleasure is available in brief human existence; *b. Ta’an.* 11a (the statement of Samuel concerning fasting, and the view of Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar concerning the Nazirite; R. Eliezer’s statement also appears in *Sifre*, Num 30, *b. Ned.* 10a and elsewhere); the various statements endorsing relative freedom of sexual expression within marriage in *b. Ned.* 20b; the statement in the name of R. Yitzhak in y. *Ned.* 9:1, criticising the adoption of any prohibitions beyond those mentioned in the Torah; and the statements in *b. Yebam.* 62b about the deprivations suffered by an unmarried man.

⁵⁷ *Gen. Rab.* 9:7.

⁵⁸ *Kuzari* 2:50. Halevi expands on this theme in the same passage. See also *Kuzari* 3:1 and 3:5. In 3:1 Halevi states that the religious Jew “loves the world and length of days,” though this love is based on the radically non-Nietzschean grounds that these facilitate one’s portion in the world to come.

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Kook, *Orot HaKodesh*, 3:292.

⁶⁰ See Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1999) ch. 9; Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 84–87.

dissenting view of R. Elazar, who praises the practice of fasting (at least for one who is able to withstand the fast), the Nazirite, and those who deny themselves pleasure from the physical world.⁶¹ Many other pro-ascetic statements can also be found in rabbinic literature.⁶²

During the medieval period, powerful ascetic trends also emerged in Jewish thought, most notably Bahya ibn Pakuda's *Hovot Halevavot* (The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart)⁶³ and the Hasidei Ashkenaz, the twelfth-century Franco-German pietists. Moreover, an important ascetic trend developed among the mystical pietists of sixteenth-century Safed, and was emphasized particularly in the works of Rabbi Isaac Luria's main disciple, Rabbi Hayyim Vital. A positive orientation towards the concept of *perishut* (asceticism) was a recurring theme in much of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century pietistic and ethical Hebrew literature. In response to Hasidism, *mithnagdic* literature was strongly ascetic. More recently still, an ascetic note was often sounded by the teachers of the nineteenth and twentieth-century Musar movement.⁶⁴ The active infliction of pain on oneself in order to facilitate repentance or self-improvement—practices such as self-flagellation and frequent fasting—has also been endorsed and practised by various groups at different points during the course of Jewish history, including some of the groups mentioned here.⁶⁵

⁶¹ *b. Ta'an.* 11a–b. A positive view of the Nazirite's asceticism is also provided in *Sifre Zuta* 6:8. Interestingly, Soloveitchik follows neither side of the classical rabbinic debate about the Nazirite. Rather, he denies outright that the Nazirite is an ascetic figure. See *UM*, 213.

⁶² See, e.g., the negative statement of R. Yitzhak concerning a *seudat reshut* (any meal not mandated as a mitzvah) in *b. Pesah.* 49a; *b. 'Abot* 6:4, which recommends a life of physical deprivation focused on the study of the Torah; the statement of R. Judah HaNasi in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* ch. 28 that the pleasures of the world to come are granted only to one who rejects the pleasures of this world. Ancient Judaism also included some ascetic groups at the margins, e.g., the Essenes and the Therapeutae. Asceticism is also a major theme in the writings of Philo. A frequently cited scholarly debate concerning asceticism in rabbinic Judaism is that between Yitzhak Fritz Baer, *Israel Among the Nations* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1955) chs. 2–3, and Ephraim E. Urbach, "Ascesis and Suffering in Talmudic and Midrashic Sources," (Hebrew) in *Yitzhak F. Baer Jubilee Volume* (ed. Salo W. Baron, Ben Zion Dinur, Samuel Ettinger and Israel Halpern; Jerusalem: Historical Society of Israel, 1960) 48–68. As Fraade has pointed out (Steven D. Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism," in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages* [ed. Arthur Green; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986] 253–88), Baer and Urbach base their respective analyses on very different understandings of asceticism. It is Urbach's article that is more germane to the present discussion.

⁶³ For examples of ascetic statements in the writings of other medieval Jewish thinkers whose ideas, like R. Bahya's, were influenced to a greater or lesser extent by Sufism, see Moshe Z. Sokol, "Attitudes Toward Pleasure in Jewish Thought: A Typological Proposal," in *Reverence, Righteousness and Rahamanut: Essays in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung* (ed. Jacob J. Schacter; Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1992) 297.

⁶⁴ See above, n. 34, for Soloveitchik's opposition to the Musar movement's negative stance towards this world.

⁶⁵ See Sokol, "Attitudes Toward Pleasure in Jewish Thought," 295–96. For a more detailed discussion, and references to the scholarly literature, concerning many of the ascetic trends mentioned in this paragraph, especially *mithnagdic* asceticism, see Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim*, ch. 4.

Maimonides, probably the most important post-Talmudic rabbinic thinker, famously wrestles with these opposing motifs in rabbinic tradition. In *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides, in a passage concerning the qualities of the prophet, forcefully expresses his disdain for the

bestial things—I mean the preference for the pleasures of eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, and, in general, of the sense of touch, with regard to which Aristotle gave a clear explanation in the “Ethics,” saying that this sense is a disgrace to us. How fine is what he said, and how true it is that it is a disgrace! For we have it in so far as we are animals like other beasts, and nothing that belongs to the notion of humanity pertains to it.⁶⁶

In other works, however, Maimonides makes some statements that are far less sympathetic to asceticism. In his great legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*, he writes:

Perhaps a person may say: “Since envy, lust, honour and the like constitute an evil path . . . I shall separate myself from them extremely and distance myself as far as possible,” so that he goes so far as not eating meat, drinking wine, marrying, living in a pleasant home, or wearing proper clothing, but rather [wears] sackcloth, coarse wool and the like as do the idolatrous priests—this too is a bad path and it is forbidden to follow it. One who follows such a path is termed a sinner. . . . Therefore the Sages commanded that a person refrain only from things which the Torah has withheld from him . . . and concerning all these things and their like, Solomon commanded: “Do not be righteous overmuch.”⁶⁷

It is clear from the continuation of Maimonides’s discussion in *De’ot* 3:2 and 3:3 that he does not consider eating, drinking, sexual relations, etc., to be valuable *per se*, but rather emphasizes their importance because they are necessary conditions of good health, which in turn is a pre-requisite of the intellectual contemplation necessary to know God. Nevertheless, the *Hilkhot De’ot* passage is not obviously reconcilable with the pro-ascetic sentiments expressed in the *Guide*.⁶⁸ Maimonides also strongly

⁶⁶ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (trans. S. Pines; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) part 2: chapter 36, page 371. Maimonides repeats his citation of Aristotle’s disdain for the sense of touch in several other places in the *Guide*: see 2:40, 384; 3:8, 432; and 3:49, 608. See also Maimonides’s ascetic first rationale for circumcision at 3:49, 609, and his remarks concerning eating, drinking and sex at 3:8, 434.

⁶⁷ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot De’ot*, 3:1. The translation is our own.

⁶⁸ In his Introduction to his translation of the *Guide* (Ixii), Pines writes of Maimonides that “qua philosopher, though not qua teacher of the halakhah, he favored asceticism.” Isadore Twersky, (*Introduction to the Code of Maimonides [Mishneh Torah]* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980] 464–65) endorses this judgement and adds instructively: “Halakhah, which is antiascetic, imposes certain inescapable constraints, but what we are dealing with is divergent emphasis rather than contradiction.” However, even when writing in halakhic mode, Maimonides sometimes gives expression to ascetic sentiments: see, e.g., Maimonides’s characterisation of the body at the end of *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva*, 8:2. Significantly, despite the ambivalence of the Maimonidean texts, Aharon Lichtenstein has recently noted that Soloveitchik attempts to enlist Maimonides as a supporter of anti-asceticism. See Aharon Lichtenstein, “Of Marriage: Relationship and Relations,” *Tradition* 39 (2005) 7–35, at 30.

opposes asceticism (beyond what is involved in observing the commandments of the Torah) in Chapter 4 of the *Eight Chapters*, where, *inter alia*, he criticizes those who believe that through ascetic practices they will become closer to God, “as if the Holy One, blessed be He, hates the body and desires its destruction.”⁶⁹

This brief overview of traditional sources shows that Soloveitchik has chosen to emphasize one strand of the tradition at the expense of the other. Moreover, Soloveitchik articulates his perspective in unusually bold, sometimes almost Nietzschean terms. It seems to us likely that the emphasis on this-worldliness, life-affirmation, and anti-asceticism characteristic of modernity and represented by Nietzsche’s views determined to a significant extent the adoption and development by Soloveitchik, a modern Orthodox thinker, of the anti-ascetic as opposed to the ascetic motif in earlier Jewish thought.

■ Repentance

We now turn to the topic of repentance. The focus of the high holy days and a central motif in their liturgy, repentance affords us a window on a whole cluster of Jewish theological concepts which Nietzsche held in contempt: sin, guilt, punishment, and the afterlife. We will begin this part by discussing the most influential Jewish view of repentance in the medieval period, one that would vindicate Nietzsche’s critique of religion. Next, we will show that Soloveitchik forges a conception of repentance that mirrors his general anti-asceticism and life-affirming *Weltanschauung*, thus sidestepping the Nietzschean critique of traditional religious teaching concerning these themes. Finally, we will demonstrate that Soloveitchik’s view, in fact, echoes prevalent readings of Nietzsche’s famous doctrine of Eternal Return.

Repentance in Traditional Jewish Thought

Nietzsche’s distaste for religious world-views that obsess over guilt and atonement is a theme that runs throughout his writings. Thus, for example, in the *Genealogy of Morals*, we find that man

has seized upon the presupposition of religion so as to drive his self-torture to its most gruesome pitch of severity and rigor. Guilt before *God*: this thought becomes an instrument of torture to him. . . . In this psychical cruelty there resides a madness of the will which is absolutely unexampled: the *will* of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a degree that can never be atoned for.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ The translation is ours, from the Hebrew edition of Maimonides’s introductions to his commentary to the Mishna, *Hakdamot LePerush HaMishna* (ed. Mordekhai D. Rabinowitz; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1961) 176. For a detailed and nuanced discussion of Maimonides’s views on asceticism, particularly in the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Eight Chapters*, see Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, 459–68.

⁷⁰ *GM* 2, §22.

But such an approach would appear to be prevalent in medieval Jewish thought, as can be seen from a brief analysis of one of the most influential medieval discussions of repentance, namely Rabbi Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi's (1180–1263) *Sha'arei Teshuvah* (The Gates of Repentance).⁷¹

Though the concept of repentance is explicitly present in both biblical and early rabbinic literature, where its power and importance are recurrent themes,⁷² we find only schematic descriptions of the mechanics of repentance; it is only in medieval times that we find a detailed and systematic theology of repentance being formed. The topic of repentance is taken up in such well-known works as Saadia Gaon's *Emunot V'Deot* (The Book of Beliefs and Opinions) and Bahya's aforementioned *Hovot Halevavot*. R. Jonah's *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, however, is dedicated in its entirety to developing a consistent theology of repentance.

In the "First Gate" of *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, R. Jonah discusses the twenty principles of repentance. The general tone is set in the elucidation of the third principle—*da'agah* (sorrow)—where we are told that "the levels and degrees of repentance correspond to the magnitude of bitterness and the intensity of sorrow."⁷³ Sorrow over the acts one has already committed is compounded by the fifth principle of worry over the consequences of one's action, a principle that appears inexhaustible for R. Jonah such that one is never sure whether or not one has worried sufficiently to atone for one's sin:

Sorrow pertains to the past and worry to the future. He must worry too, lest he has fallen short in repentance; in suffering, bitterness, fasting and weeping. And although he may have suffered and wept much, he must tremble and fear that he may have sinned over and against this and that with all of his suffering, weeping and fasting, he has not paid his debt.⁷⁴

In R. Jonah's work, suffering is the primary focus and serves the purpose of instilling the fear of heaven into the sinner. Though he does, like Soloveitchik, write

⁷¹ For more on *Sha'arei Teshuvah*'s influence see Israel Ta-Shma, "Hasidut Ashkenaz bi-Sefarad: Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi – ha-ish u-fo'olo," (Hebrew) in *Galut ahar golah: mehkarim be-toledot Yisra'el muggashim le-Professor Hayim Bainart li-melot lo shiv'im shanah* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1988) 165–94, esp. 182–84.

⁷² For example, repentance is given foundational status when listed as one of the seven things created before the creation of the world (*b. Pesah* 54a); there appears to be an assumption that *talmidei hakhamim* repented every night for any sins committed (*b. Ber.* 19a); and the greatness of repentance is explicated at some length at *b. Yoma* 86a–b, where it is said to heal the world and bring near the redemption, to mention just two of many functions presented there. As Urbach writes, the rabbis extol repentance with "extravagant praise"; Ephraim Urbach, "Redemption and Repentance in Talmudic Judaism," in *Collected Writings in Jewish Studies* (ed. Robert Brody and Moshe D. Herr; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999) 264–80, at 278.

⁷³ R. Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi, *The Gates of Repentance* (trans. Shraga Silverstein; Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1967) Gate 1: chapter 13, page 21. Hereafter *ST*, followed by Gate, chapter, and page numbers.

⁷⁴ *ST* 1:16, 23–24.

of man's suffering serving "lofty purposes,"⁷⁵ the fact remains that in R. Jonah's work suffering is almost celebrated as a form of penance for one's sin, and the sinner is encouraged to drive his or her sorrow and worry to ever greater depths.

On this foundation, R. Jonah constructs a view of repentance that is a mirror image of the Nietzschean critique. The links among sin, guilt and punishment, for example, are a constant thread that runs throughout the entire work. Almost half of the Second Gate, entitled "To Teach the Ways by Which One May Awaken Himself to Return to God" deals with the connections among these various ideas. Thus, R. Jonah counsels reflection on the punishments incurred as the means of driving home the gravity of one's situation—the longest section of the book, the "Third Gate," is entitled "The Stringency of *Mitzvoth*, the Exhortations, and the Different Kinds of Punishments."

He must investigate, know, and recognize the magnitude of the punishment for each of his transgressions . . . so that he may be aware of the greatness of his sin when he confesses it.⁷⁶

But along with the stick of punishment comes the potential carrot of the afterlife. Of course the afterlife, as the stage for the ultimate judgement of death, itself acts as a stick, impelling one to repent for fear of the repercussions of not doing so, and R. Jonah's work talks at length about this final judgement on the day of one's death. Failure to hold the day of one's death constantly in mind betrays, in R. Jonah's mind, an animal-like inability to grasp the concept of delayed gratification:

There are those who are not impelled by the thought of death to lay up provisions for the way or to correct their deeds, and into whose hearts the thought of their day of death does not enter until its arrival. They are likened to beasts.⁷⁷

Should one succeed in holding this vision constantly before the mind's eye, though, thus providing the motive to repent, the moment of death will be transformed and paradoxically become the crowning glory of one's life in the reward it heralds for the penitent man.

The tendency of such an otherworldly fixation to lead to a devaluation of this world in favour of the next is the final piece in the anti-Nietzschean jigsaw:

[O]ne who wishes his day of death to lead to eternal life will resolve within himself that since he is destined to leave the earth and his bodily desires and, in the end, to despise and abjure them, he will abandon them in his lifetime

⁷⁵ *ST* 2:4, 77.

⁷⁶ *ST* 1:37, 51. Bahya also advises that "fear of God's speedy punishment" is a condition of remorse, together with the "weeping, wailing and crying" that R. Jonah discusses under the conditions of sorrow and worry. See Bahya Ben Joseph Ibn Pakuda, *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart* (trans. Menahem Mansoor; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) 335–36.

⁷⁷ *ST* 2:17, 99.

and make use of the earth only in the service of the exalted God. Then, his day of death will lead to life without end.⁷⁸

For death, too, is good in that it humbles spirits, causes hearts to fear God, and acts against one's coming to regard this world as uppermost.⁷⁹

In summary, the sinner, guilty before God, must engage in a level of soul-searching that constitutes extreme mental self-mortification, driving ever onwards to greater levels of psychological torment through meditation on the terrible punishments that await. Ignoring the evil temptations of physical desire in this world and meditating instead on death in which this ultimate judgement might be meted out is the primary method of saving our souls and propelling us towards those levels of repentance, that, should we achieve them and thus avoid punishment, will enable us to enjoy death's great gifts to the full.

Soloveitchik's View

Soloveitchik's conception of repentance is a particular application of his more general life-affirming *Weltanschauung* outlined earlier, as is immediately apparent from his headline definition of the term:

Repentance is not "remorse" or "acknowledgement" and does not depend upon depression or a sense of despair. Repentance is "return," "restoration."⁸⁰

As Lawrence Kaplan notes, his view of repentance "reflects and expresses his basic religious sensibility and outlook."⁸¹

Soloveitchik's first written formulation of his view can be found in *Halakhic Man*.⁸² In this work, repentance is primarily associated with the concept of creativity, a prominent theme in his thought more generally. For Soloveitchik, "repentance, according to the halakhic view, is an act of creation—self-creation."⁸³ This creative emphasis remains in the fore of his writings, including the later collection of his

⁷⁸ *ST* 2:17, 103.

⁷⁹ *ST* 2:25, 113.

⁸⁰ Pinchas Peli, *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1984) 93. Hereafter *OR*, followed by page number.

⁸¹ Lawrence Kaplan, "Hermann Cohen and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on Repentance," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 13 (2004) 213–58, at 241. We are grateful to Professor Kaplan for allowing us to see this article prior to publication. Pinchas Peli has also written that Soloveitchik's Repentant Man "may be legitimately viewed as inhabiting the highest rung of [Soloveitchik's] typological ladder"; see Pinchas Peli, "Repentant Man—A High Level in Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Typology of Man," repr. in *Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (ed. Marc D. Angel; Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1997) 229–59, at 230. Our selective presentation is geared towards the particular argument of this paper; further analysis of Soloveitchik's view can be found in these two articles.

⁸² The year following *HM*'s original publication in Hebrew in 1944 saw the appearance of similar brief reflections on repentance in the original *SP*.

⁸³ *HM*, 110.

annual lectures, transcribed and published by Pinchas Peli as *On Repentance*, in which Soloveitchik presents a whole plethora of overlapping but non-identical categories of repentance. Though not always consistent to the letter, nonetheless, as Kaplan has argued, the view “presented from the 1940s to the late 1960s is, despite minor variations and inconsistencies, very closely knit and forms a coherent whole.”⁸⁴

Reflecting his fundamental methodological starting point that Jewish philosophy can only be fashioned from within, via the descriptive reconstruction of the ideas that lie at the foundation of its central halakhic texts, Soloveitchik’s view is drawn from an analysis of Maimonides “Laws of Repentance.” Without entering into the details of the analysis, in *Halakhic Man* this yields two aspects of repentance—atonement (*kapparah*) and purification (*taharah*), which are linked in turn to the dual effects of sin.

To an extent, Soloveitchik reaffirms the link between sin and punishment. When one sins, one has incurred a debt to be paid through punishment, a debt that needs to be cancelled out in order for the punishment to be avoided. Repentance therefore acts as a form of atonement like any other that leads to absolution or acquittal from punishment. This traditional motif is given greater emphasis in *On Repentance*, where we are told

No sin goes without its retribution, whether it be meted out by a terrestrial or a celestial court. The belief in reward and punishment is fundamental to Jewish belief.⁸⁵

This is the central focus for the *homo religiosus* of *Halakhic Man*, who “views repentance only from the perspective of atonement, only as a guard against punishment, as an empty regret which does not create anything, does not bring into being anything new.”⁸⁶ Moreover, this type of repentance, whereby one is throwing oneself on the mercy of a God who is not obliged to forgive one’s sin, can only be seen as “a wholly miraculous phenomenon made possible by the grace of the Almighty.”⁸⁷ This idea that repentance is, as Bahya Ibn Pakuda writes, “God’s special favour,”⁸⁸ recalls one of Nietzsche’s great concerns, that religion had “debased the concept ‘man’; its ultimate consequence is that everything good, great, true is superhuman and bestowed only through an act of grace.”⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Kaplan, “Hermann Cohen and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik,” 258. Kaplan usefully tabulates the various different concepts and categories in order to draw the connections that exist among them at 223.

⁸⁵ *OR*, 50.

⁸⁶ *HM*, 112.

⁸⁷ *HM*, 113.

⁸⁸ Bahya, *Book of Directions of the Duties of the Heart*, 329. The central role of grace is explicit in Bahya’s discussion.

⁸⁹ *WP* §136.

However, Soloveitchik writes that “Spinoza . . . and Nietzsche . . . from this perspective—did well to deride the idea of repentance.”⁹⁰ For despite its prominence in much previous Jewish writing, ultimately in *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik’s attitude towards such repentance is little short of hostile, though his attitude towards this “repentance out of fear” is more temperate in *On Repentance*, where it has a role to play, albeit inferior to that of “repentance out of love.”

In contrast, Soloveitchik’s “halakhic” definition of repentance reflects “the most fundamental principle of all . . . that man must create himself,” an idea that in Soloveitchik’s view, “Judaism introduced into the world.”⁹¹ This concept of repentance as an act of self-creation is linked to the second aspect of sin—that it has a defiling quality leading to a metaphysical change in the status of the person who has sinned, and thus becomes a *rasha*, a wicked person. Repentance, on this account, purifies man, enabling a change of status back to spiritual wholesomeness.

This idea of purification, which is “far superior to absolution,”⁹² is not motivated by fear or meditation on punishment, nor by reference to any otherworldly rewards. Indeed, the discussion of repentance found in *Halakhic Man* does not contain a single reference to the afterlife, and punishment is only mentioned in relation to the object of his criticism—the “peripheral”⁹³ atonement aspect. Even the more traditional *On Repentance* pays it very little attention. Indeed, in the discussion of the higher process of purification found there, the defilement of sin is “not a form of punishment, or a fine, and is not imposed in a spirit of anger, wrath or vindictiveness.”⁹⁴ With repentance of purification, “sin is its own true punishment.”⁹⁵ Thus the more traditional assertion cited above that “no sin goes without its retribution” reflects the perspective taken by the *homo religiosus*. For halakhic man, however, sin and punishment are here understood in a more naturalistic vein.

Returning to the afterlife, other than the reference to possible punishment in a celestial court cited earlier, out of over three hundred pages in *On Repentance*, there is only a single two-page section entitled “The Resurrection of the Dead and the Immortality of the Soul.”⁹⁶ Even in this section though, the discussion of the soul simply posits an inner core element, said to be its immortal aspect, which acts as the substantial self that anchors personal identity and allows a person to shed his or her sinner’s personality whilst remaining the same penitent person. In marked contrast to the traditional emphasis on punishment, death and the afterlife in discussions of repentance, these concepts therefore play no *motivational* role in Soloveitchik’s penitential economy.

⁹⁰ *HM*, 114.

⁹¹ *HM*, 109.

⁹² *SP*, 30.

⁹³ Soloveitchik’s term. See *HM*, 112.

⁹⁴ *OR*, 52.

⁹⁵ *OR*, 64.

⁹⁶ *OR*, 184–86.

For Soloveitchik, purification, as essentially an act of creation, is effected without reference to anything other than man's creative capacities. A creative act initiated by man, this form of repentance is also completed by man. The feeling of defilement elicits a need to create a new "I," and this act of creation is itself the act of repentance. There is no need for recourse to a forgiving God since in this form of repentance the sinner is not throwing himself on God's mercy out of fear, but is rather attempting to effect a change in his own status. It is what Soloveitchik will later term, in *On Repentance*, repentance out of love, which he believes corresponds to Maimonides's perfect repentance performed out of free choice. This repentance is something that is achieved, not granted. As Soloveitchik puts it, "the act is not supernatural but psychological."⁹⁷ Thus, Soloveitchik's penitent man does not look heavenwards for an act of grace, nor does he dwell on either the rewards or punishments of some speculative afterlife in order to wallow in his own sinfulness.

Nonetheless, purification involves remorse and shame over one's sin. One feels "self-degradation and abnegation"⁹⁸ in acknowledging one's sin, and Soloveitchik certainly believes in a tortuous struggle of the soul as a necessary component of the process of purification, a process that demands extreme self-sacrifice. Purification cannot be procured by anything other than the suffering of genuine personal repentance.⁹⁹ Thus, Soloveitchik does "seize upon the presupposition of religion" and has a concept of sin that includes guilt before God and suffering on account of it.¹⁰⁰ And yet, whilst Soloveitchik does not dismiss the element of struggle and suffering in repentance—on the contrary, conflict and struggle are essential components of his world view—in purification these elements are not connected to fear of punishment or the afterlife. Instead, suffering plays a crucial role in the economy of repentance as the springboard for the creative gesture at its centre.

⁹⁷ *SP*, 28. Blau, who points out Soloveitchik's debt to Max Scheler, similarly notes how "the Schelerian understanding of repentance shifts the focus from God's activity to that of man." Yitzchak Blau, "Creative Repentance: On Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Concept of Teshuvah," repr. in *Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (ed. Marc D. Angel; Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1997) 263–74, at 270.

⁹⁸ *OR*, 239.

⁹⁹ *OR*, 52–53

¹⁰⁰ Worthy of note, and deserving of further analysis, is Soloveitchik's definition of the feelings of disgust at one's sin as aesthetic in nature rather than moral or religious: "The feeling generated by sin is not a moral sensation; the moral sense in man is not such a powerful force . . . the feeling of sin which drags a person to repentance is an aesthetic sensation" (*OR*, 197). Soloveitchik's attitude towards the aesthetic is complex and ambivalent, and in an interesting article, Zachary Braiterman has argued for an aesthetic appreciation of mitzvah that can be drawn from Soloveitchik's writings. Braiterman characterizes his interpretation as a misreading, but one for which Soloveitchik himself provides the basis. In our opinion, Soloveitchik's writings on repentance provide further support for such a picture and perhaps even indicate that it is less of a misreading than Braiterman thinks. See Zachary Braiterman, "Joseph Soloveitchik and Immanuel Kant's Mitzvah-Aesthetic," *AJS Review* 25 (2000/2001) 1–24.

It is the struggle with one's sin and its elevation that is central to achieving the highest form of repentance. For Soloveitchik, however, the focus is on what Peli terms the "constructive value of suffering which purifies man and refines and sanctifies him."¹⁰¹ Much like Nietzsche, suffering is salutary: Soloveitchik's repentant man is elevated by his suffering to the peak of religious achievement. As Peli notes:

If suffering creates, enobles and toughens, and brings the soul nearer to the object of its yearning, then "Repentant Man" is the type which comes closest to attaining man's goal, for his conception and maturation owe everything to suffering.¹⁰²

Soloveitchik thus places Golomb's "patterns of positive power" at the centre of his philosophy of repentance, though it is in Soloveitchik's discussion of the dynamics of repentance out of love that his view becomes most Nietzschean.

A Nietzschean Perspective: Eternal Return and Repentance of Love

First encountered in *The Gay Science's* "The Greatest Weight," Nietzsche's doctrine of Eternal Return is put into the mouth of a demon who presents us with the following thought:

This life, as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence.¹⁰³

There are those who take eternal recurrence seriously as a cosmological thesis and subject Nietzsche's unpublished proofs of the theory¹⁰⁴ to serious analytical dissection.¹⁰⁵ Without denying the possibility of a literal interpretation, its greater significance seems to us to be found in a non-literal interpretation of the doctrine

¹⁰¹ *OR*, 202. This is said in relation to what Soloveitchik terms emotional rather than intellectual repentance. Though in this case Soloveitchik himself does not adjudicate their relative status in the repentance hierarchy (see *OR*, 206), and notably this pairing is missing from Kaplan's table, for Peli it is emotional repentance, identified as repentance out of love, that is the greater, with intellectual repentance categorized as repentance out of fear (Peli, "Repentant Man," 235–27). Nonetheless, during the discussion of intellectual repentance we are told that the intellect agrees that sin is attractive and therefore leads to a "strenuous battle of the will" (*OR*, 206). It appears that Peli's general summation cited below in the main text is therefore apt for both forms of repentance.

¹⁰² *OR*, 14.

¹⁰³ *GS* §341.

¹⁰⁴ Though some saw the light of day in *WP* §1053–1067.

¹⁰⁵ For examples of such views, see Arthur Danto, "The Eternal Recurrence," in *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays* (ed. Robert Solomon; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973) 316–21; Ivan Soll, "Reflections on Recurrence," in *ibid.*, 322–42; Arnold Zuboff, "Nietzsche and Eternal Recurrence," in *ibid.*, 343–57; Bernd Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); and Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, ch. 5. Neither Magnus nor Nehamas accept such a reading though.

on which the demon does not simply teach a cosmological theory, if indeed he does that at all. The stress both in this passage and in many of the presentations of the doctrine in *Zarathusthra* is on one's *reaction* to the demon's idea. Nietzsche's demon confronts one with the question of whether one would "gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?" or would answer "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine."¹⁰⁶ It is unclear why we would react so violently to Eternal Return as a purely cosmological thesis. Given our blissful ignorance of all that will occur in our life despite its supposed repetition, such a theory is likely to leave us unmoved.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, a non-literal view of eternal recurrence, in varying forms, appears ever more the norm. Thus, for Bernd Magnus the doctrine in fact "is a visual and conceptual representation of a particular attitude towards life,"¹⁰⁸ whilst for Nehamas it ultimately presents a view of the self.¹⁰⁹ Weaver Santaniello makes more of the quasi-religious nature of the doctrine in her assertion that Nietzsche's concept of Eternal Return is his replacement for the Christian concept of redemption and individual immortality, while in a detailed rereading of the central texts, Alan White argues that the key to understanding Eternal Return is found in the references to Zarathustra's soul.¹¹⁰ In a similar vein, Kathleen Higgins argues that eternal recurrence is specifically aimed against the Christian doctrine of sin.¹¹¹ Not only does the non-literal interpretation of eternal recurrence seem to us the most convincing reading of Nietzsche, but by reading the doctrine in this light, we find marked parallels with Soloveitchik's highest form of repentance.

At the most basic level, linguistic parallels with Nietzsche's doctrine abound. We have already noted Soloveitchik's identification of repentance with the idea of return. The cyclical picture of time that Nietzsche paints also recalls the very etymological significance of the term "repentance" for Soloveitchik, which "bears the connotation of completing a circle . . . repentance signifies circular motion."¹¹² But in order to understand how Soloveitchik's repentance corresponds to eternal recurrence, let us turn to Nietzsche's doctrine itself and its most sustained treatment in *Zarathustra*, where the quasi-religious nature of his writing is most explicit.

¹⁰⁶ GS §341.

¹⁰⁷ This response of indifference is made by Soll as a critique of Nietzsche's position (Soll, "Reflections on Recurrence," 339), and by Higgins as an argument for her non-literal reading of the doctrine (Higgins, *Reading Zarathustra*, 163–64). See also Alan White, *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) ch. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*, 142.

¹⁰⁹ See Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, ch. 5.

¹¹⁰ See Santaniello, *Nietzsche, God and the Jews*, 83 and White, *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth*, ch. 6.

¹¹¹ See Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) ch. 6.

¹¹² OR, 89.

In “On Redemption,” Nietzsche describes the most profound form of vengeance against the passage of time: “‘It was’—that is the name of the will’s gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past . . . ‘that which was’ is the name of the stone he cannot move.”¹¹³ Nietzsche here presents an attitude towards the past whereby we are helpless and passive spectators with respect to what has happened or has been done. And on such a view therefore, each sin makes an indelible mark on the self that the passage of time ingrains into the very fabric of our being, provoking our disgust with the self as an irredeemable sinner deserving of eternal punishment. Such is the view taken by Zarathustra’s Pale Criminal who “always saw himself as the doer of one deed,” and as such “the lead of his guilt lies upon him.”¹¹⁴

This is what Soloveitchik’s *homo religiosus* “understands” when viewing repentance solely as a guard against punishment for the sin that has been committed and can never be wiped out. On what Soloveitchik, following Max Scheler,¹¹⁵ terms the quantitative view of time, whereby past and future “are connected with one another and with the present only through the law of causality,”¹¹⁶ the past is over once and for all, irretrievably lost, and thus “the erasure of man’s sins is, from the rational standpoint, incomprehensible.”¹¹⁷ What is done is done, and since one cannot do anything to change it, all one can do is throw oneself on God’s mercy, leading one to the view of repentance that Soloveitchik so derides in his earlier work.¹¹⁸ And Zarathustra’s reaction to this? “Madness I call this: the exception now becomes the essence for him.”¹¹⁹

For Soloveitchik, though madness might be too strong a word, the psychological harm caused by such an approach is a central concern, for redemption, according to this view, can only be gained at the price of excision. The repentance out of fear, in which one does gnash one’s teeth against the sinner one has essentially become, involves ridding oneself of the mark of sin, and thus the punishment it entails, by excising that period from one’s life entirely. Such repentance out of fear in which sin is blotted out, though possible, can cause estrangement from ties formed during that period and means that the sinner’s “past shrinks and his personality is dwarfed.”¹²⁰

¹¹³ Z 2, §20.

¹¹⁴ Z 1, §6.

¹¹⁵ See Blau, “Creative Repentance” and Kaplan, “Hermann Cohen and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik.”

¹¹⁶ *HM*, 114.

¹¹⁷ *SP*, 27.

¹¹⁸ This is precisely the sort of Christian doctrine that is the object of Nietzsche’s critique according to Higgins, who gives an excellent summary of the view in which sin “indelibly marks [the sinner] as one who deserves punishment . . . except for God’s mercy, the sins we commit would doom us to eternal torture in hell.” Higgins, *Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, 167.

¹¹⁹ Z 1, §6.

¹²⁰ *OR*, 250. It is interesting that despite his very different approach to repentance, Bahya actually also privileges repentance out of “man’s strong understanding of his Lord” over repentance “when

It is this perspective that garners reactions of horror at eternal recurrence. A traditional religious conception of time treats time in a linear, quantitative fashion, leading up to a final judgement by God. According to such a conception, one is bound to be cast as a sinner, for no human can go through life without sin, and this sin can be redeemed only by the grace of God at the end of time. For one holding such beliefs, the endless sequential repetition of eternal recurrence symbolizes a world without meaning and purpose and without the possibility of redemption by God at some end-point. At the most basic level, therefore, rejecting eternal recurrence is a rejection of the world it depicts, a world devoid of a God and an afterlife that would supposedly give our lives purpose. Thus the “truth” of the picture is indeed “abysmal” for those of a certain disposition, as Zarathustra recognizes. Yet the “meaning” that is embodied in the abhorrence of this eternal recurrence and clinging instead to the linear conception of time represents the sickness, weakness, and general life-denying views that both Nietzsche and Soloveitchik criticize.

What then is the alternative? How can eternal recurrence be embraced? It will be instructive to look first at Nehamas’s view for important parallels with and ultimately contrasts to Soloveitchik. For Nehamas, Eternal Return asserts the following conditional—“if my life were to recur, then it could recur only in identical fashion,”¹²¹ which is explained by reference to the view of the self that ultimately, for Nehamas, is what Eternal Return teaches us. Rejecting the notion of the thing-in-itself in any form, Nietzsche rejects, as a particular instance of it, the idea of the substantial self, the unchanging substratum within which change occurs. A person for Nietzsche is simply the totality of his experiences and actions:

There is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming. “The doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything . . . our entire science still lies under the misleading influence of language and has not disposed of that little changeling, the “subject.”¹²²

That being so, it follows that all properties of a person are equally “essential” to the “self” and therefore, if any of the properties of a person were different, the “subject,” who is simply the totality of those properties, would have to be different too. Thus, if my life were to recur, it could only do so in identical fashion. Any change, and it would not be the repetition of *my* life. Moreover, given that for Nietzsche this holism applies beyond the self to the world in its entirety, the demon is therefore asking us to accept or reject the world in its entirety, since to want a single event to be different would be to want the whole to be different. It is this conception that Eternal Return presents in Nehamas’s view, and this is why its acceptance is the ultimate symbol of life affirmation.

a man realizes God’s trials and His severe punishment.” See Bahya, *Book of Directions of the Duties of the Heart*, 339–40.

¹²¹ Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, 153.

¹²² *GM* 1, §13.

At first glance, this belief appears to reinforce the view of the Pale Criminal. If each act is essential to the self, I am therefore essentially defined by each act that I do. If I sin, I am a sinner and that is the final judgement. However, the other side of this holistic view is that if each act I perform is equally essential to the self that I am, the past ceases to assert its hegemony over the present and future. For on this view, as each act is equally part of the self, that “self” cannot be finally evaluated until it is seen in the context of the other elements of “the self” yet to come (i.e., one’s future acts). This, however, means that the idea of the Eternal Return represents an opportunity to reinterpret one’s past actions that are indeed essential to one’s “self,” but in light of the way that they holistically interact with the actions that one continues to do that are equally “essential.” This allows for the affirmation of one’s past actions in the context of the narrative that one forms in the continuing construction of the self. Of most significance for the theme of redemption alluded to earlier, if all one’s actions can be constantly reinterpreted in this way since they are all equally constitutive of the subject, affirming one’s present self is equivalent to affirming the past actions that are essential to it. One can redeem the past in light of the present and future. As Zarathustra states it:

I taught them to work on the future and to redeem with their creation all that *has been*. To redeem what is past in man and to re-create all “it was” until the will says, “Thus I willed it! Thus I shall will it”—this I called redemption and this alone I taught them to call redemption.¹²³

This ability to affirm the self who performs these past actions rather than blot it out is precisely what one finds in Soloveitchik’s highest form of repentance—repentance out of love. Thus, Soloveitchik writes that when one looks back at one’s sins, whether they are specific sins or a period of time in which one felt oneself immersed in sin, one has a choice. One can continue to identify with the person that committed the sins, or can attempt to blot out that period and thus not affirm the actions taken during it. Repentance out of love requires taking the former route, which rectifies and elevates the sin rather than blotting it out. Soloveitchik appeals in support of this view to the classic Talmudic dictum of Resh Lakish, whose statement “Great is repentance, for because of it, premeditated sins are accounted as errors,” is revised when speaking of repentance out of love to “Great is repentance, for premeditated sins are accounted as though they were merits.”¹²⁴

For Soloveitchik, the “negative” emotions and forces such as jealousy and hatred are dynamic and aggressive, unlike the largely static and passive “positive” forces such as love. As such, they must be retained, but sublimated in order to be positively channelled in the direction of self-creation. In repentance out of love Soloveitchik

¹²³ Z 3, §12.

¹²⁴ *b. Yoma* 86b.

explains: “He has not forgotten his sin—he must not forget it. Sin is the generating force, the springboard which pushes him higher and higher.”¹²⁵

For Soloveitchik, therefore, rather than gnashing one’s teeth at one’s irredeemable past, “there are many different paths, according to this perspective, along which the cause can travel. It is the future that determines its direction and points the way.”¹²⁶ In this way, man is able to affirm the Eternal Return of this life in its entirety and can thus embrace the demon’s hypothesis, since it presents the opportunity for the creative reinterpretation of the self at the centre of Soloveitchik’s view of repentance. For Nehamas, one is presented with the question of whether the self, which must eternally recur, in the sense that we cannot will it to be any different if it is to be “my” life, is one that one can affirm. A life-denying view, as represented by the linear perspective, would cause a highly negative reaction. But if one properly understands the self in this holistic fashion, with the cyclical structure that reveals the opportunity for re-creation, then one’s reaction could be emphatically positive. One should note, though, that the thought might remain “abysmal” even at this level. Self-creation is no easy process for Soloveitchik, and as Nehamas correctly understands, neither is it for Nietzsche, who understands “how intense and painful a self examination is necessary”¹²⁷ for one to achieve this process without self-deception.

Soloveitchik’s more traditional view of the soul actually precludes him from following Nehamas in his view of repentance. The non-substantial view of the self that Nehamas presents as the essence of Eternal Return is one that Soloveitchik does not accept,¹²⁸ despite the fact that Soloveitchik’s substantial soul is little more than a featureless substratum for the self’s real characteristics, thus embodying an understanding of substance that has been the object of sustained philosophical critique since the time of Leibniz and Locke. Soloveitchik bases his view instead on an interpretation of time that allows for the reinterpretation of our past actions. And significantly, though Nietzsche’s view of the self is as Nehamas paints it, in interpreting the doctrine of Eternal Return, it plays the cart to the horse of time. As Higgins notes, “a number of Nietzsche’s big themes come together in Zarathustra’s doctrine.”¹²⁹ But the confluence point that is Eternal Return reads more naturally to us as a perspective on time, engendering life-affirmation through “reconciliation with time.”¹³⁰

¹²⁵ *OR*, 261. Similarly, “He strives to convert his sin into a spiritual springboard for increased inspiration and evaluation” (*SP*, 28).

¹²⁶ *HM*, 115.

¹²⁷ Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, 163.

¹²⁸ And is also, according to the Kaplan, one of the underlying reasons for certain differences between Soloveitchik’s view of repentance and that of Cohen. See Kaplan, “Hermann Cohen and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik,” 246–47.

¹²⁹ Higgins, *Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, 188.

¹³⁰ *Z 2*, §20.

Though Eternal Return is presented as the idea that the content of time recurs eternally, Zarathustra's presentation of the theory is also, as Alan White has noted, a statement about the form of time.¹³¹ Thus, in revealing his abysmal thought to the dwarf in "Of the Vision and the Riddle," Zarathustra tells us

"Behold this gateway, dwarf!" I continued. "It has two faces. Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And the long lane out there, that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths; they offend each other face to face; and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: 'Moment.' But whoever would follow one of them, on and on, farther and farther—do you believe, dwarf, that these paths contradict each other eternally?"¹³²

The idea presented here is that each moment is symbolic of an eternity inasmuch as it is inextricably linked with the entire past and especially the future. As Zarathustra immediately goes on to say, "are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it *all* that is to come?"¹³³ But it is this view of the moment, as a gateway to the future and the past, that allows for the constant interaction between these three temporal qualifiers. It is the idea that the past is not dead, since it is linked to the present and future, that Soloveitchik uses in his appropriation of Scheler's qualitative view of time. And it is this that allows the sinner to view the past as a living past that can continue to be affected by the future. As Soloveitchik puts it:

Both "cause" and "effect" appear in active-passive "garb"; both act and are acted upon; each influences and is influenced by the other. The future imprints its stamp on the past and determines its image.¹³⁴

For Higgins, this "present centeredness," as she terms it, is Nietzsche's central point: "the causal connectedness of past, present, and future is the precondition of the present moment's *potency* in the time series."¹³⁵ And Soloveitchik, in constantly emphasizing the *future* orientation that the present mediates, argues similarly that past and future "act and create in the heart of the present and shape the very image of reality."¹³⁶ One cannot literally undo the past, but according to this view one can affirm one's past through the constant reinterpretation that the cyclical qualitative perspective on time allows.¹³⁷

¹³¹ White, *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth*, 88.

¹³² Z 3, §2.

¹³³ Z 3, §2.

¹³⁴ *HM*, 115.

¹³⁵ Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 177.

¹³⁶ *HM*, 114. According to Kaplan, it is in this future orientation that Soloveitchik differs from Scheler, for whom recalling the past itself is the method of transformation. See Kaplan, "Hermann Cohen and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik," 236ff.

¹³⁷ This, White argues, is the essential idea of eternal return, leading him, as if quoting Soloveitchik,

According to this picture, what we affirm in blessing the demon is the eternal recurrence of the moment that embodies one's entire past and future at every step. The past and future eternally recur in "each" present in the opportunity afforded for their re-evaluation. And it is this attitude towards time that allows Soloveitchik to speak of reinterpreting one's past sinful acts and utilizing them positively rather than excising them from one's past. So for Soloveitchik, though there is a substantial inner "self" that preserves personal identity, the qualitative conception of time allows for the non-essential definition of the acts of that self that in turn facilitates the sinner's transformation of the sinful actions that clothe it. The fundamental idea is that the descriptions that attach to our past actions are constantly subject to reinterpretation in light of the future direction that we take. Soloveitchik can thus circumvent the more radical implications that Nietzschean holism would have for his traditional notion of the soul, and yet still reject the image of the pale criminal that one might expect it to yield and turn instead to his view of repentance as self-creation. Soloveitchik's repentant man thus appears in Zarathustran guise as "a willer, a creator, a future himself and a bridge to the future."¹³⁸ And thus repentance of love can act as Soloveitchik's highest formula of life-affirmation.

In the context of our focus on the Nietzschean critique of Judaeo-Christian religion, then, the overriding theme of Soloveitchik's view of repentance is his refusal to focus on guilt, punishment and the afterlife so as to devalue this world, substituting instead his insistence on a creative, this-worldly and future-oriented approach both to repentance and to religion in general. Our analysis shows how Soloveitchik is determined to move away from the entire thrust of R. Jonah's medieval classic. Views such as R. Jonah's were certainly not absent from the tradition in which Soloveitchik was raised and indeed the *mithnagdic* tradition in which he was reared reflects precisely the sort of other-worldliness and pessimism that characterizes R. Jonah's work.¹³⁹ This makes it all the more striking that Soloveitchik formulates a doctrine of repentance remarkable both in its Nietzschean tone and in its fundamental reshaping of the classical Jewish perspective.

■ Conclusion

In focusing on Nietzsche and Soloveitchik as representatives of modernity and modern Orthodoxy respectively, we have argued that Soloveitchik's perspective on this world, the passions, and repentance forges a distinctive theological path through Jewish tradition that not only parries Nietzsche's potent critique of Judaeo-Christian religion but also resonates with some key Nietzschean concerns. While certainly rooted in traditional texts, Soloveitchik's position does not hesitate either to privilege some sources over others or to refashion traditional concepts. Thinkers

to argue that it is a vision of "resurrection as self creation" (White, *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth*, 100). White's reading is actually startling in its similarity to Soloveitchik's view of repentance.

¹³⁸ Z 2, §20.

¹³⁹ See Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim*.

like Soloveitchik thus develop their religious worldview in a manner that simply does not conform to Nietzsche's depiction of religion as a life-denying crutch for the weak and insipid. Rather, they write of a religion that is life-affirming and gives expression to many central Nietzschean "virtues" such as courage, creativity and the sublimation rather than extirpation of the passions.¹⁴⁰ Such attempts to appropriate modernist critiques of religion in the service of religion itself might be construed, to appropriate a further Nietzschean image, as having "made danger your vocation."¹⁴¹ Rather than turning in his grave, however, one hopes that, of all thinkers, Nietzsche might have enjoyed the irony.

¹⁴⁰ It is no surprise, therefore, that some of Soloveitchik's intellectual heirs have taken these life-affirming themes rather further than Soloveitchik himself would have been prepared to countenance. David Hartman, for example writes, "I am grateful that the secular spirit of the modern world has made the medieval option of fear and punishment spiritually irrelevant. . . . I never saw Judaism as necessarily weakened by the modern emphasis on the significance of the present or by people's indifference to or distaste for the terrifying descriptions of divine retribution awaiting the sinner." David Hartman, *A Living Covenant* (New York: The Free Press, 1985) 302.

¹⁴¹ Z, Prologue, §6.