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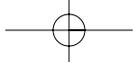
NEGATIVE THEOLOGY AND THE MEANING OF THE COMMANDMENTS IN MODERN ORTHODOXY

The purpose of this paper is to show that in its negative theology, modern Orthodoxy¹ has gone far beyond anything we find in classical Jewish thought, and that its versions of this theology threaten to empty the commandments of meaning. I start with a brief explication of Maimonides' negative theology and give two of its main interpretations. I then turn to Yeshayahu Leibowitz and I point to the great difference between his view and that of Maimonides. After a critical discussion of Leibowitz's view in which I show the religious price entailed by his assumptions, I conclude by indicating a striking similarity between Leibowitz's philosophy and Haym Soloveitchik's insight into contemporary Orthodoxy.

I. NEGATIVE THEOLOGY IN MAIMONIDES

The expression "negative theology" refers to theologies which regard negative statements as primary in expressing our knowledge of God, contrasted with "positive theologies" giving primary emphasis to positive statements. One widespread version of negative theology starts with the claim that nothing can be known about God Himself. While we might have knowledge about His actions, such as creation, and while we might have knowledge about properties that *cannot* be ascribed to God, such as death or stupidity, we have no knowledge of God Himself or His positive properties. Such a theology has been prevalent in the history of religious thought. In Jewish philosophy, Maimonides is known for holding it, though the exact nature of his view on this matter (like his view on

An earlier Hebrew version of the ideas presented here was published as "Fulfilling the *Mitsvot* in a World Emptied of Religious Meaning," *Da'at* 41 (1998), 31-45.


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many other matters) has been under dispute from the 13th century until today. In this section, I wish to briefly present Maimonides' view and to introduce one main exegetic point of disagreement. I will then look into the question of what the meaning of the commandments might be on each of these different readings of Maimonides. In the next section, I turn to examine whether and to what extent Maimonides' formulation of the relationship between negative theology and the meaning of the commandments is accepted by contemporary Jewish thinkers. If it is, then their frequent reliance on Maimonides as their guide is warranted. If it is not, then a disturbing discontinuity might exist between these thinkers and classical Jewish philosophy.

According to a well-known doctrine of Maimonides, the attributes we might meaningfully ascribe to God are of two kinds: attributes of action and negative attributes. When the Torah ascribes anger to God, this ascription cannot sensibly refer to God Himself who has no affection and who undergoes no change; hence it must be taken as referring to God's actions (see *Guide of the Perplexed* [hereafter, *Guide*] I:53), e.g., His punishment of sinners. So when attributed to God, the term "angry" really refers to His actions, not to any property of God Himself. What is meant by "negative attributes" are attributes that refer to what God is *not* (*Guide* I:58). When we say that God is one, His oneness bears no resemblance to the unity of non-divine entities, and therefore, all we might mean by ascribing this property to God is to imply that God is not many. We say that He is eternal to indicate that He is not limited in time, and we say that He exists to indicate that He is not non-existent.²

Yet in spite of the human limitations in apprehending God's true nature, at times Maimonides' *Guide* does give the impression that true knowledge of God is possible, and, moreover, that the attainment of such knowledge constitutes human perfection. These ideas are developed in the last chapters of the *Guide* in which Maimonides argues that the ultimate religious ideal is not a momentary intellectual grasp of God, but a constant effort to perpetuate this grasp, to dwell in this contemplation. "This," says Maimonides, "is the worship peculiar to those who have apprehended the true realities; the more they think of Him and of being with Him, the more their worship increases" (*Guide* III:51). This kind of worship is possible only after intensive philosophical training which guarantees that one has a true perception of God. Without such training, one would be contemplating a product of one's imagination and would thus come close to idolatry.

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According to this chapter, then, the theology at play is not altogether negative. The intellectual elite enjoying the benefit of a good philosophical upbringing can achieve true metaphysical and theological knowledge, thereby ensuring for themselves a kind of immortality. Much more needs to be said here by way of clarification, but for the present purpose I will limit myself to the role of the commandments in this view. As Maimonides makes clear in the *Guide* (III:27), the Torah has two aims: the welfare of the soul, i.e., intellectual perfection, and the welfare of the body, i.e., social-political flourishing. The former is more valuable and constitutes the supreme religious aim, but it cannot be achieved without the latter, i.e., without a healthy and just society. Philosophers need food, shelter, and peace of mind, among other things, and they need a political entity to provide for them. Most of the commandments aim at the welfare of the body which, if realized, would make possible the welfare of the soul. Thus, on this interpretation, a clear connection obtains between the rationality of the commandments and the ultimate religious (and human) perfection.

Although this interpretation of Maimonides is supported by many sources in the *Guide* and other writings, it seems inconsistent with the claims we started with concerning the essential limits of human knowledge about God and, indeed, about all entities above the sub-lunar world. These claims imply that philosophy is essentially a critical enterprise, seeking to delineate the boundaries of human knowledge. They lead to a different interpretation of human and religious perfection, one developed by Shlomo Pines, translator of the *Guide* into English and a leading scholar of medieval philosophy. According to Pines, notwithstanding the last chapters of the *Guide* and other sources, Maimonides' real view was that the human mind cannot transcend the knowledge of physics and cannot presume to gain knowledge of entities like God.³ Pines believes that in developing this view, Maimonides was influenced by al-Farabi, a Muslim philosopher whose views Maimonides very much valued. According to al-Farabi, as intellectual perfection is impossible, human perfection lies in the practical realm, i.e., in the moral-political sphere. Understood in this light, Maimonides denied the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and with it, the possibility of the immortality of the soul. This interpretation fits with well the closing paragraph of the *Guide*, where Maimonides refers to the verses in Jeremiah (9:23-24):

Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom . . . but let him glory in this, that he understands and knows that I am the Lord who exercises lov-

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ing-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight.

On Pines's reading of Maimonides' interpretation of this text, one cannot glory in the knowledge of God, since such knowledge is impossible. What one *can* glory in is the imitation of God's moral-political attributes, namely, by carrying out *hesed, mishpat, u-tsedaka*; acts of loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness.

Within an interpretation such as that of Pines, what is the relationship between negative theology and the meaning of the commandments? On the other interpretation I mentioned, the commandments are a means to achieving a positive religious goal, i.e., true knowledge of God followed by a constant effort of contemplation. But on the latter interpretation, that of Pines, no such positive goal is allowed. Moreover, agnosticism about God entails agnosticism about the divine origin of the Torah; meaning that the Torah must be conceived as a *human* project, not one which stems from some kind of divine revelation. What, then, is its purpose? The answer is not so far from that offered by the former view. The Torah provides us with the best possible legal system, a system which—if followed—would guarantee social stability and prosperity, and also enable a tiny fortunate minority to reach an accurate understanding of the limits of human knowledge. So while Pines's Rambam holds an extreme negative theology and is at best agnostic about the divine origin of the Torah, he nonetheless believes that the Torah provides the best legal system, one which would be irrational to reject.

Let me sum up the conclusions of this section. One of the central debates on Maimonides concerns the question of whether or not he thought that metaphysical knowledge was possible, or, to put it in other words, how radical his negative theology was. Some commentators argue that Rambam's theology was not altogether negative; others, that it was. Yet on both interpretations, distinct as they are in terms of epistemology, metaphysics, and the ideal of human perfection, the Torah essentially has the same aim and the same rational justification, namely to create a successful and flourishing society. Moreover, on both views, the rationality of the commandments is connected to the perceived religious ideal: contemplation of God, on the one hand, and political activity on the other. Thus, even the most radical understanding of Maimonides' negative theology does not deny the rationality of the commandments. Agnosticism about God does not entail agnosticism about the rationality of the Torah.

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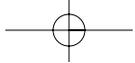
II. NEGATIVE THEOLOGY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ

With this historical background in mind, I turn now to examine the kind of negative theology which we find in contemporary Orthodox thought. Though I limit the title of my paper to “modern” Orthodoxy, nothing of much importance hangs on this limitation. My main purpose is to point to a significant stream in contemporary religious thought, a stream characterized by a radical negative theology. I believe that such a theology is especially prevalent in modern Orthodox circles,⁴ but if I’m wrong, then all the better (or all the worse—depending how one evaluates this stream of thought).

The central figure in the stream I am referring to is Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who passed away ten years ago at the age of 93. While relatively unknown outside of Israel, in Israel, for the last forty years, Leibowitz has been a leading intellectual and moral voice, often described as the “conscience of Israel.” His enormous influence on public discourse had to do not only with the clarity and sharpness of his ideas, but with his exceptional commitment to spreading these ideas in lectures, interviews, and letters to the press. His home was always open to anyone who wanted to talk to him about democracy, God, or science, and he replied to thousands of letters on philosophical and religious questions. He was a “public figure” in the fullest and most positive sense of the term. Leibowitz was Orthodox, strongly committed to the observance of Jewish law, and throughout the years he wrote dozens of articles explicating his views on the meaning of halakha and the meaning of Jewish religiosity in general. These views influenced many Orthodox Jews in Israel, especially among the intelligentsia and among the members of the religious kibbutzim, and also expressed the worldview of many believers. Among his prominent followers one could mention Eliezer Goldman⁵ and Asa Kasher.⁶

What, then, is Leibowitz’s theology? In his article “On History and Miracles,” Leibowitz criticizes those who consider miracles the basis for religious belief and who contend that human history is where God reveals Himself. Among other things, he says:

The concept of the “God of history” endorsed by believers who regard human history as “the finger of God,” entails a terrible devaluation of religious faith. Such believers do not worship God *qua* God, who is beyond the contingent existence of the world and of humanity, but rather worship Him *qua* manager of human affairs.⁷


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Superficially, this argument might be taken merely as a warning against a religious attitude that sees God as a servant of man (and woman) instead of seeing man as a servant of God. But Leibowitz has a much more radical view in mind here. On his view, believers who interpret historical events as divine acts manifest not only a kind of religious *hutspa*, but also make a grave theological mistake. They assume that God is revealed in history, while the truth of the matter is that, as Leibowitz puts it, “God did not reveal Himself, neither in nature, nor in history.”⁸ One cannot exaggerate the radicality of this claim and its departure from the biblical and talmudic traditions. It amounts to no less than a denial of divine revelation, because if God does not reveal Himself in nature or in history, then He does not reveal Himself in the actual world, which has nothing else but nature and history.

The fact that God does not reveal Himself in the world means that the world is void of all divine elements. Hence, “the world we grasp by scientific knowledge does not make any difference for faith and tells us nothing in regard to values.”⁹ No natural happening, nor any historical event, can be seen as the finger of God, even if the event is very impressive or moving, like the conquest of the holy places in the Six Day War. Such conquest is a human act, and to understand it we would need to refer to human, psychological, sociological, or military explanations. God is not and cannot be part of such an explanation.

This theology is accepted by Eliezer Goldman too, who says,

Common to Leibowitz and myself is a radical conception of divine transcendence, that denies all kinds of immanence, or of immanent holiness. The world is determined by its internal causal structure.¹⁰

The radical implication is that, in Goldman’s words, “the world and human beings, as they exist for themselves, have been emptied of any religious meaning.”¹¹

If knowledge of God is impossible and if the world is void of any divine presence, the conclusion is that religious faith has no cognitive content. As Leibowitz repeats again and again, “For Judaism, faith is nothing but its system of Mitsvoth.”¹² This view has significant consequences for believers. It means that *qua* believers, they do not have a special view regarding any scientific question about the world, be it in cosmology, astronomy, history, biology, or what have you. There are no doctrines or claims about the world that believers are *committed* to accepting, or even have any special *reason* to accept, just because they

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are believers. The only difference between the believers and the non-believers is that the former accept the yoke of God, which the latter reject or deny.

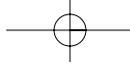
If theological propositions have no cognitive content, if they tell us nothing about God or about the world, what is their meaning? Leibowitz's answer is that although such propositions appear by their structure to express statements which have truth-value, they really do not. Replying to a question of mine on this matter in 1980, he says:

In the world of the religious thought of Judaism, the religious [*emunit*] meaning of propositions "about God" is not information on God (who is transcendent and has no attributes). Such propositions express, in the specific theological language, man's consciousness regarding the imperative he acknowledges: the worship of God. In other words, by their meaning, not by their formulation, propositions "about God" express man's recognition of his status vis-à-vis God.

For example, the first verse in the Bible—"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"—seems at first sight to say something about God and about the world; namely, that God created the world. But, argues Leibowitz, the readers of this verse are unable to derive from it any factual data which their minds are capable of grasping. Hence, this verse ought not to be taken as conveying scientific knowledge of some kind, but as teaching us a religious lesson: "What I learn from this verse is the great principle of faith, that the world is not God—the negation of atheism and pantheism."¹³

Clearly, on this view, no conflict or even tension can arise between religion and science. As religion teaches nothing about the world, it cannot conflict with what science teaches. The believer has no cognitions, *qua* believer, that might conflict with Darwinism, psychoanalysis, or any other scientific theory. Religion is about how to live in the world, not about what to believe about it.

So far, Leibowitz's negative theology seems reminiscent of that of Maimonides, especially on the more radical reading of the latter. Nothing meaningful can be said about God Himself, and propositions that seem to do so must be interpreted as claims about the world, about man's consciousness, or better, as disguised religious-normative claims. Leibowitz's interpretation of the first verse in the Torah and of other verses is not more radical than the allegorical interpretations offered by medieval philosophers to most theological propositions in the Bible. It is no surprise that Leibowitz, like the other thinkers in the group under



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discussion, are all devout admirers of Maimonides who was praised repeatedly by Leibowitz as “the greatest believer” (*gedol ha-ma’aminim*). Maimonides for them is *the* example of how to be both totally committed to science and philosophy, while at the same time totally committed to the worship of God. However, when one turns to the meaning of the commandments, one sees in Leibowitz and his followers a profound departure from Rambam, as I hope to demonstrate in the next section.

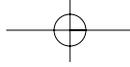
III. THE MEANING OF THE COMMANDMENTS IN MODERN ORTHODOXY

I start this section with an idea developed by Evelyn Underhill, according to which “the character of worship is always decided by the worshiper’s conception of God. . . . It always has a theological basis.”¹⁴ This makes perfect sense: since religious practices are directed in some sense toward God—serving Him, imitating His perfect ways, expressing admiration, getting close to Him—the nature of these practices must reflect the nature of God. If, for instance, God is pure intellect, then appropriate worship of Him would have to do with some kind of intellectual perfection or contemplation. The religious justification of laws or rituals must refer to the way they aim at (or serve, imitate, etc.) God, which in turn necessitates some account of this God: a theology.

We have already seen an example of this connection between theology and the meaning of religious practices in Section I, where I outlined the views of Maimonides. According to one interpretation of his philosophy, God is intellect, hence human and religious perfection consist of intellectual perfection. “The intellect,” says the *Guide*, “which overflowed from Him toward us, is the bond between us and Him” (III:51). Accordingly, the role of most of the commandments is instrumental; they are educational and social means to creating a society in which true perfection can be realized. On this interpretation of Maimonides, a clear connection obtains between the nature of God, the nature of worship, and the rationality of the commandments.

What about the other interpretation of Maimonides we considered, according to which theological knowledge is impossible and no ontological connection between human and divine intellect can exist? Though, within such a view, the laws of religious observance cannot be seen as means for getting close to God, they still have an essential political role to play in facilitating a stable and just society. In a sense, this is a





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religious ideal too, because according to the last page of the *Guide*, religious perfection rests in the imitation of God's attributes of action. God reveals Himself to us as a ruler whose ways are those of *hesed*, *mishpat*, *u-tsedaka* (loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness) in the earth. Hence, the ultimate perfection for human beings is to imitate these attributes by seeking excellence in the political sphere.

By now most readers can see the next move in my argument. While Leibowitz and his followers share with Maimonides his radical negative theology, they depart from him, indeed from any thinker of classical Jewish philosophy, in their perception of the meaning and the rationality of the commandments. This departure marks a sharp discontinuity between contemporary Orthodox thought and classical thought, the significance of which is rarely fully noticed.

On Leibowitz's view, conceiving the commandments as serving any kind of human interest is a grave religious mistake:

Any attempt to ground the mitzvot in human needs—cognitive, moral, social, and national—deprives them from their religious meaning. If the commandments were expressions of philosophical cognition, had a moral function, or were directed at the perfection of the social order or the conservation of the people of Israel, the observant Jew would be doing service to himself, to society, or to the nation. Instead of serving God he would be utilizing God's Torah for his own benefit as an instrument for satisfying his needs.¹⁵

Thus, contrary to classical Jewish thought, the Torah is not the ideal legal system or the best way to establish a healthy society, nor do its commandments prepare the believer for the attainment of ultimate human perfection. The only purpose or meaning that can be ascribed to them is religious. But the religious aim achieved by observance is not getting close to God in any metaphysical meaning, as in the more moderate interpretation of Maimonides, nor is it purifying one's soul to enable some kind of an ontological contact, or union, with the divine presence. On Leibowitz's view, the religious achievement is nothing separate of the observance itself:

Performance of the mitzvot is man's path to God, an infinite path, the end of which is never attained and is, in effect, unattainable. A man is bound to know that this path never terminates. One follows it *without advancing beyond the point of departure*.¹⁶



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If, after years of observance, the observant individual stands at the same point at which he or she stood when he or she embarked on this voyage, what meaning can this voyage have? It is bad enough if the commandments do not lead to any earthly achievement, such as harmony of the soul, stability of society, or intellectual perfection. But if they do not even realize a religious goal, what is the point—the *religious* point—in observing them? To this Leibowitz replies as follows:

The aim of proximity to God is unattainable. . . . What, then, is the substance and import of the performance of the mitzvot? It is man's *striving* to attain the religious goal.¹⁷

At this point, one naturally asks: why is keeping the laws of kashrut or of Shabbat the right way to “strive to attain the religious goal?” To this Leibowitz would presumably reply by saying that these laws are God’s commandments, hence observing them is the only way to express one’s effort to attain the religious aim. Yet, this answer is not easy to reconcile with Leibowitz’s claim that “God revealed Himself neither in nature, nor in history.” If nothing positive can be said about God, in particular if it cannot be said that at some time and place He delivered His law to some human beings, then the divine origin of the Torah becomes somewhat problematic. Furthermore, I mentioned above that on Leibowitz’s view, religious believers, *qua* believers, are committed to no special propositional beliefs, hence they can accept any scientific theory without religious reservation. Now let us imagine that historians of ancient Israel discover new and overwhelming evidence that the book of Leviticus was edited by a person who utilized extracts of the local laws of his society and other familiar traditions in creating that book. According to Leibowitz, there would be no religious impediment for believers to fully accept this scientific discovery. But if they did, could they still maintain that by observing the laws of Leviticus they are *worshipping* God, or striving to attain a *religious* aim?

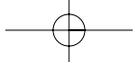
Once again, note how radical this view is in comparison to even the most radical interpretation of Maimonides. On Pines’s interpretation, Maimonides held an extreme negative theology, implying total agnosticism about God. This agnosticism about God necessarily entails agnosticism about the divine origin of the Torah. So the Torah must be conceived as a *human* project, not one stemming from any kind of divine revelation. But on Pines’s reading of Maimonides, this human nature of the Torah does not undermine its status as the ideal legal-political sys-

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tem. Its genius legislator, Moses, constructed it to guarantee the best conditions for social stability and prosperity, conditions which would also enable a tiny minority to reach intellectual perfection. But on Leibowitz's view, this last part of the argument is missing. While he is forced to concede the possibility of the Torah being man-made, he denies that it might achieve any kind of social, political, or intellectual purpose. How problematic the religious meaning of the *mitsvot* becomes within this view is easy to realize. Religiously speaking, one might say, the *mitsvot* come from nowhere and go to nowhere: They *come* from nowhere, because one cannot say that they originate in God and express His will. They *go* to nowhere, because one cannot say that by observing them—regardless of their origin—any religious (or indeed any other) aim is achieved.

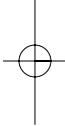
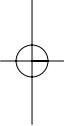
To this critical analysis, Leibowitz might respond by saying that it fails to appreciate the importance of the fact that our fundamental value judgments are a matter of decisions which logically never follow from any facts. As David Hume presumably taught us, no “is,” namely, no descriptive proposition, entails an “ought,” a normative proposition. Thus, one's decision to worship God does not depend on the truth of any claims about the world or about God. Yet while such claims might not logically entail a duty to observe the *mitsvot*, they do seem necessary to ground the meaningfulness of such observance. The very fact that God created the world and issued a set of commandments to His people does not logically entail that one ought to obey these commandments. But the religious basis for such obedience does seem rather shaky if God cannot be said to have created the world, nor to have given the Torah.

By way of summarizing my argument, let me offer the following observation. According to Leibowitz and other contemporary Orthodox thinkers, (a) theological knowledge is impossible; (b) the believer's knowledge of the world is no different than that of the non-believer's; hence (c) religious faith has no cognitive content; and (d) religious faith is merely a matter of decision, or, as it is so often referred to nowadays, a matter of “personal decision.” This view brings with it good news and bad news. The good news is twofold. First, religious commitment becomes totally immune to any kind of empirical, scientific refutation. As religion makes no claims about the age of the world, the history of ancient Israel, or the psychology of the prophets, no scientific discoveries can undermine it. This assumed irrelevance of science to religion enables believers to be full participants in the scientific community, often making significant contributions in fields that were considered in


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the past a threat to religion. Second, the view under discussion coincides very well with the liberal ideas of tolerance and pluralism. According to Leibowitz, observance of the *mitsvot* achieves no social, moral, or intellectual aim; hence refraining from such observance cannot, in itself, be seen as damaging or harmful to the individual or to society. It is also not the case that believers—and not heretics—hold the true view about the world, because, as we saw, religious belief has no cognitive content. The assumed compatibility of religion with both science and liberalism is thus a great source of attraction of the view under discussion for modern Orthodoxy, because the term “modern” in the expression “modern Orthodoxy” refers primarily to a positive attitude toward science and liberalism.

So far for the good news. The bad news is that the above compatibility is achieved at the price of emptying religion from theology, indeed from any kind of propositional beliefs, which has the consequence of making the very religious meaning of the *mitsvot* problematic. As formulated earlier, they come from nowhere and go to nowhere. Whether or not the good news is good enough to compensate for the losses incurred by the bad news is a question I will not go into here. Let me, instead, turn to the last part of my paper where I seek to connect the conclusions of this philosophical analysis with a well-known sociological observation.



IV. LEIBOWITZ AS EXPRESSING THE ZEITGEIST OF MODERN ORTHODOXY

In a 1994 article in this journal, which has become a classic by now, Professor Haym Soloveitchik offers a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Orthodoxy in America, or, as the title of his article indicates, of the *transformation* of contemporary Orthodoxy.¹⁸ The article is one of the deepest and original analyses of its topic, written by a man who is at the same time an insider—a member of the Orthodox camp and son of one of its eminent leaders—as well as an outsider—a trained social historian applying his professional skills to understanding the society in which he lives. According to Soloveitchik, the uprooting of Jews from the *shtetls* and communities in Eastern Europe to liberal, scientific, and capitalist America caused a deep crisis, a “rupture” as he puts it, in Orthodox beliefs, sensibilities, and practices. One central aspect of this rupture concerns the sense of divine presence. In the old world, Jews had a deep and immediate sense of God’s presence, and they took His

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involvement in human affairs for granted. But the world to which the uprooted came was one of modern science, a world which had reduced nature to an immutable nexus of cause and effect, and which left little room for divine intervention. The absorption of this new outlook, argues Soloveitchik, has been momentous. At the end of the 20th century, he makes the following claim:

I think it safe to say that the perception of God as a daily, natural force is no longer present to a significant degree in any sector of modern Jewry, even the most religious. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that individual Divine Providence . . . is no longer experienced as a simple reality. . . . It is this rupture in the traditional religious sensibilities that underlies much of the transformation of contemporary Orthodoxy.¹⁹

This is a rather amazing observation about the nature of contemporary Orthodoxy. But there is still more to come. The loss of the perception of God as a “daily, natural force” must somehow be compensated. The breach opened up by the loss of the sense of divine providence must be closed up by some other religious element to make possible the continuation of religious life. On Soloveitchik’s view, what closes this breach is an increasingly strict loyalty to the laws of halakha. In the closing sentence of his article, he makes the point succinctly, beautifully, and powerfully: “Having lost the touch of His presence, they seek now solace in the pressure of His yoke.”²⁰

This view, which I find deep and accurate, must sound familiar to you by now. In fact, it seems very close to what Leibowitz argues about the nature of Judaism. How interesting it is that the philosopher and the social historian have come up here with more or less the same picture, each from his own angle! As a philosopher of Judaism, Leibowitz argues that no knowledge of God is possible, hence—in principle—no “touch” of divine presence is possible; hence Orthodoxy is nothing other than the acceptance of the yoke (*ol mitsvot*). As a historian of Jewish Orthodoxy of the last century, Soloveitchik maintains that most Jews have lost the touch of His presence and, as a result, what constitutes their religious world is the pressure of His yoke. If all this is correct, then far from being an eccentric philosopher with radical views, Leibowitz seems to express, in philosophical terms, the true *zeitgeist* of contemporary Orthodoxy. The discontinuity between his views and those of classical medieval Jewish philosophers to which I alluded in the earlier parts of my paper is just another aspect of the general “rupture and transformation” of contemporary Orthodoxy.

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Can Orthodoxy survive this rupture? In particular, can it survive it without a rejection of modernity? A proper examination of these questions lies beyond the limits of the present paper and, most probably, beyond the capabilities of the present writer.

NOTES

1. I'll be using the expression "modern Orthodoxy" in quite a loose and undefined manner. I realize that my characterizations of this group do not fit all of those who identify themselves, or are identified by others, as belonging to it. How large the stream I'm describing is, and how influential the ideas I ascribe to it are, is something that only a thorough empirical survey could assess.
2. For a brief presentation of Rambam's views on divine attributes, see Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed* (New Jersey: Behrman House, 1991), ch. 2.
3. Shlomo Pines, "Translator's Introduction: The Philosophical Sources of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).
4. Cf. *supra*, note 1.
5. For a collection of his main essays, see Eliezer Goldman, *Mehkarim ve-Iyyunim*, ed. Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1997).
6. See his recent *Yahadut ve-Elilut* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Press, 2004).
7. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Emuna, Historiya va-Arakhim* (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1982), 166-167 (the translation from the Hebrew sources is mine—D.S.).
8. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Yahadut, Am Yehudi u-Medinat Yisrael* (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1975), 240.
9. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the State of Israel*, trans. and ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 137.
10. Interview with Eliezer Goldman, *Gilayon* (1995).
11. Goldman (*supra* note 5), 311.
12. *Judaism, Human Values, and the State of Israel*, 38.
13. *Ibid.*, 140.
14. Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper, 1957), 60.
15. *Judaism, Human Values, and the State of Israel*, 17-18.
16. *Ibid.*, 15-16 (italics added).
17. *Ibid.*, 16.
18. Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Tradition* 28:4 (1994), 64-130.
19. *Ibid.*, 102-3.
20. *Ibid.*, 103.