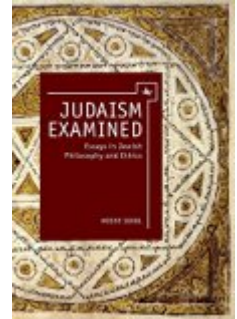


Moshe Sokol. *Judaism Examined: Essays in Jewish Philosophy and Ethics.* Touro College Series. Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2013. 518 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61811-165-4.



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Commissioned by Matthew A. Kraus (University of Cincinnati)

Judaism Examined is an excellent collection of eighteen essays that plumbs the depth of Jewish and Western thought. Moshe Sokol's work is a vital contribution to academic scholarship. Readers will gain from and enjoy this book because of Sokol's insightful analysis on a variety of topics; his vast erudition in traditional Jewish sources; and the way he integrates contemporary, secular thought into his writings. Sokol focuses on analytical philosophy, "which dominated the field of philosophy for decades in the United States and Britain, and continues to be influential," and "is nevertheless relatively under-represented in Jewish philosophy" (p. xi).

His extensive knowledge of the topic is impressive. Sokol is as comfortable with philosophers and literati (such as Baruch Spinoza, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans Gadamer, Richard Rorty, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Alfred Tennyson, Walt Whitman, and Franz Kafka) as he is with scholarship in Jewish studies (Alexander Altman, Moshe Idel, Gershom Scholem, and Edith Wyschogrod, to name a few). Reference to these philosophers, lit-

erary artists, and scholars represents a breadth of scholarly interests one rarely sees today in the culture of narrow specialization. Sokol brings from philosophy many fresh insights to rabbinic texts, themes, and problems. He engages in creative modern theology, deploying traditional rabbinic texts, including the Mishnah, Tosefta, Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, and Midrash.

The book succeeds in "bringing together the work of great Jewish thinkers in a way that approaches questions anew" (p. x).

Sokol enables us to learn "from the past" instead of merely to learn "about the past" by letting us hear the "the critical conversations" of the great Jewish minds who are brought into dialogue with secular philosophers (p. x). For example, on the problem of evil, Sokol discusses seminal essays by Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, Eleonore Stump, and George A. Lindbeck, along with the Kantian concept of radical evil laid out in Immanuel Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason* (1793).[1] The implications of

Sokol's analysis from secular and Jewish perspectives raises the question of how the Kantian moral imperative could be damningly cited by Adolf Eichmann in his trial in Jerusalem to defend his participation in the logistics of murder as a "desk murderer" as well as marshaled by Kurt Huber, the leader of the Nazi resistance group The White Rose, as the reason he resisted the Nazis and was willing to be executed for rejecting Nazi totalitarianism. Astutely distinguishing between human existence as fate (*goral*) and destiny (*yi'ud*), Sokol compellingly argues that suffering mandates a behavioral not a metaphysical response.

An essay on the Jewish view(s) of pleasure formulates a Jewish sex ethic, citing diverse perspectives ranging from Maimonides to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Sokol classifies each Jewish philosophic work within a precisely defined philosophic category representing what he means by "extreme asceticism," "moderate asceticism," "neutralism," "liberal neutralism," and "hedonism." This typological framework innovatively offers a matrix by which to conceptualize Jewish attitudes toward pleasure. Sokol argues that only four approaches to the value of bodily pleasure took root in the Jewish tradition. While I agree that his model does explain his examples, it does not do justice to the extreme asceticism of the Qumran sect.

Sokol's analysis of ritual *mitzvot* (commandments) as metaphor concludes that "the power of ritual echoes the power of metaphor, poetry, great art, and music. Just as great art long retains the capacity to stimulate fresh ways of looking, so too ritual long retains the power to stimulate new experiences, new principal subjects, new interactions, and new restructurings" (p. 138). What is innovative about this chapter is that it integrates the notion of ritual as metaphor into philosophical theory on the reasons for commandments (*ta'amei ha-mitzvot*). Unlike Isaac Heinemann's groundbreaking work (*Ta'ame ha-mitsvot be-*

sifrut Yiśra'el [1993]), however, Sokol's approach is philosophic.

Next are a group of essays entitled "Autonomy, Freedom, and Tolerance" which again illustrates his broad range. In his discussions on personal autonomy and religious autonomy, Sokol has many insights regarding "the good": conceived either as intellectual knowledge of God as is demonstrated in Chava Tirosh Samuelson's book on happiness in Judaism; as ecstatic union with him, as illustrated by the work of Idel in Kabbalah; as a form of Tikkun Olam or making the world better as represented by the philosopher Emil Fackenheim; or as furthering Jewish national aspirations as represented by the work on Zionism and nationalism by Aviezer Ravinitzky. Perhaps this chapter should have cited the recent work edited by Martin Goodman, Joseph E. David, Corinna R. Kaiser, and Simon Levis Sullam, *Tolerance within Judaism* (2013).[2]

In chapter 10, Sokol considers issues of providence and free will with regard to the case of the bird's nest (bBer.33b). Sokol's insights into this topic are many, but he concludes that "each individual Jew may choose his own personal conception of the good, and he may choose among the myriad ways in which to carry out that conception throughout his life. Indeed the thesis of soft personal autonomy affirms the value of making that choice, and of taking responsibility for its consequences" (p. 304). Sokol proposes creative distinctions that classify the question of autonomy within precisely defined rubrics: "nomic autonomy," "epistemic autonomy," "haeretic autonomy," "soft autonomy."

In chapter 11, "The Allocation of Scarce Medical Resources," Sokol traces the rabbinic reception history of bBaba Metzia 62b--the case of two persons in the desert and one flask of water within the context of saving a life. The author shows a greater appreciation for the complexity of the questions raised by this Talmudic text and the magisterial way in which rabbis have attempted

to answer it, arguing with each other's interpretation in the "echo chamber of time" that cuts across millennia. Sokol traces how the case of Baba Metzia was interpreted by Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, Rabbi Waldenberg, Rabbi Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, the Rif, the Rosh, the Meiri, Netziv, the Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yosef Karo in the Beit Yosef, the Shakh, and Rabbi Yakov Emden.

In chapter 13, Sokol justifies an ecological ethic whereby Maimonides holds that contemplation of the wonders of the natural world leads to love and awe of God. This theistic biocentric outlook on nature is a form of transcendentalism to protect the earth's eco systems and biotic communities. Plants and animals are thus owed an obligation independent of human utility and protection from wanton destruction (*bal tashhit*). Sokol notes that we can find in the thought of Rabbis Abraham Joshua Heschel, Bahya ibn Pakuda, and Rav Kook guidance about how to morally relate to the natural world as Jews cultivate environmental virtue (*arête/Tugend*). Sokol urges theologians to examine what applied Jewish normative tradition case law has to say about environmental issues and to use that as data, attempting to construct a theology that explains or grounds these normative materials in order to provide the guidelines to sustain, protect, care, preserve, and conserve the wonders of God's creation. He typically demonstrates familiarity with current Jewish environmentalist writers, such as Steven Schwarzschild, Michael Wyschogrod, Norman Lamm, Eilon Schwartz, Rachel Elior, and Eric Katz, and more general environmentalist literature, such as the works of Neil Evernden, R. G. Collingwood, C. S. Lewis, Paul Taylor, Donald Vanderveer, Christine Pierce, and others.

The following section contains additional studies on the thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik. These essays touch on the dynamic between "halakhic man" and *homo religiosus*, which were two competing impulses in the soul of the Rav that encapsulate the values of the tensions between the

Mitnagdim of the cerebral intellectual tradition and Hasidim who privileged Romantic strong emotions and striving for negation of the self (*bitul ha-yesh*) in ecstatic *unio mystica*. Sokol brings to life the Rav's articulation of the worldview of the Litvak scholar and the nature of halakhah and its function in Jewish life as described in *Halakhic Man* (1944), while at the same time illustrating the influence of neo-Kantianism. Simply put, halakhic man is an expression, in its most pure form, of the *lomdus* (learning) of the Lithuanian Brisker Yeshivah method and master of both practical and theoretical law. This is not simply a matter of the Mitnagdim versus the Hasidim, but rather two modes of being in the world. Halakhic man celebrates *amor Dei intellectualis* (the intellectual love of God) while *homo religiosus* sees the active intellect (*sekhel hapoal*) not as a redemptive link (*kesher*) with divinity but a prison house of language that must be broken out of in order to ascend to what is beyond language. The Kantian subtext of the Rav's thought is clear. This (Kant) text/context is informed by *The Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (*Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* [1919])—a work by Hermann Cohen on which the Rav wrote his Berlin dissertation. While Soloveitchik is clearly a great example of the halakhic man, Sokol lets us see Soloveitchik's sympathies with the simple childlike naiveté of the man of faith.[3]

In chapter 15, "Ger Ve-Toshav Anokhi: 'I am a stranger and resident,'" Sokol traces the intellectual autobiography of Soloveitchik to show that the Rav's radical embrace of Berlin and radical re-embrace of Brisk constitute him as a "ger ve-toshav" (stranger and resident) in both. Here Sokol traces the differences between Soloveitchik's response to modernity and that of Samson Raphael Hirsch and the extreme followers of the Hatam Sofer. Sokol rightly predicts that we will see more of the *hiddushei Torah* (legal innovations) produced by Soloveitchik, either by his own pen or by his students.

In chapter 16, Sokol identifies Romanticism in the writings of the Rav, including such themes as nostalgia, heroizing, subjectivity and individualism, creativity, and the importance of the emotional (*Stimmung*). Sokol points out that for the Rav, biblical Abraham was a Romantic who embodied themes of individualism, heroic rebellion, creativity, and spontaneity. He suggests that Romanticism allowed the Rav to live with and even nurture the tension between the halakhic man of cerebral intellectualism with the emotional mystic “lonely man of faith” by recasting this tension as the Romantic task of *Storm und Drung* (storm and stress).

In part 5, chapter 17 focuses on a philosophy of halakhah generally and the nature of halakhic truth in particular. *Eilu ve-eilu divrei Elohim hayyim* (these and these are the words of the living God) suggests that two conflicting opinions can both be true. Sokol asks how the *ba’alei asufot* (masters of additional legal decisions), i.e., those sages who sit in groups studying the Torah, some declaring impure and others pure and some forbidding and others permitting, all be right if there is only one divine truth? Sokol claims that in rabbinic theology there can be a cacophony of different opinions that sound like a symphony orchestra tuning itself before its performance. All answers eventually are reconciled with contradictions since they are debates (*machloqot*) “for the sake of heaven.”[4]

In chapter 18, Sokol asks: “What happens when secular and religious consciousness together collide onto a religious text?” (p. 486). With the alienation that arises from modernity’s smashing of the “givenness of the text” (p. 497), we get the sense, via an analysis of Peter L. Berger’s work, that Sokol, like Leo Strauss, considers the medieval enlightenment of Maimonides and Gersonides superior to the modern Enlightenment.[5] The medieval enlightenment assumed the authority of the text. This explains why, with the rise of industrial capitalism, bureaucracy, technological

revolutions, the influence of mass media, historical relativism, nihilism, and the fragmentation of life worlds, modernity has lost much of the religious certainty that characterized the medieval enlightenment.

The book is recommended for scholars, laymen, rabbis, and ethicists; academics in the fields of Jewish studies, philosophy, comparative religion, and cultural studies; and anyone eager to grow in their understanding and knowledge of Western philosophy and Judaism. Space limits for this review do not allow me to do full justice to the richness, depth, and extreme importance of this book. It should serve as a benchmark in the field as an outstanding example of what it means to be a scholar of Jewish studies, a cultured human being open to the best in the Western secular tradition, and a rabbinic scholar.

Notes

[1]. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds. *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Eleonore Stump, “The Mirror of Evil,” in *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 235-247; and George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Technology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

[2]. HavaTirosh-Samuelson, *Happiness in Pre-modern Judaism: Virtue, Knowledge, and Well-being* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2003); Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); Avi’ezer Ravitski, *Erets-Yisra’el ba-hagut ha-Yehudit ba-et ha-hadashah* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben-Tsevi, 1998); and Martin Goodman, Joseph E. David, Corinna R. Kaiser, and Simon Levis Sullam, *Toleration within Judaism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013). The evidence presented in this most recent book of such toleration over the centuries has important implications for writing both

the history of Judaism and the history of religions more generally. However, these recent findings are mere footnotes considering the seminal definition and exploration of this complicated subject in Sokol's previous publications: *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy* (Lanham: Jason Aronson, 1993); and *Tolerance, Dissent, and Democracy: Philosophical, Historical, and Halakhic Perspectives* (Lanham: Jason Aronson, 2002).

[3]. See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Remnant of Scholars," in *Shiurei ha-Rav*, ed. Epstein (New York: Hamevaser, 1974), 16; cited by Sokol in regard to Soloveitchik's portrayal of the simple man of faith, the man child, as a religious ideal "who is not viewed as totally adult.... He remains the young and playful child, naïve curiosity, natural enthusiasm, eagerness and spiritual restfulness have not abandoned him. Only the child with his simple faith and fiery enthusiasm can make the miraculous leap into the bosom of God" (p. 442).

[4]. Sokol's mastery of sources is impressive: he draws on bEruvin 13b, TB Ketubot 57a and ySanhedrin 4:2, the Ritva, Avodat Ha-Kodesh by Meir ibn Gabbai (a Turkish Kabbalist), the Maharshal (R. Shelomo Luria of Poland), the Maharal of Prague, the Hasidic R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, and the Musar leader R. Israel Salanter.

[5]. Peter L. Berger's analysis of modern consciousness and its impact on religion appears primarily in three books written over a six-year period between 1963 and 1969: *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967); *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969); and with Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 1963).

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