

Hokhmah and Narishkeit: Learning the Culture of a Declining West

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Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?
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The summer of 2018 marks the 100th anniversary of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. His "biological" theory of the rise and decline of civilizations is today regarded as quaint, but some of his insights about the weaknesses of Western culture were prescient. He was among the first to warn that societies that foster the arbitrary self-assertion of the individual would stop producing children. Like it or not, we live in Spengler's world. The consensus culture of today's West rejects its own religious and cultural foundations. Christianity itself has become a minority culture in most Western countries.

When *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures* first appeared in 1998 under the editorship of R. J.J. Schacter, the question was: Should religious Jews learn the *hokhmah* of other cultures, Western Christian culture in particular? An additional question now arises: Can we learn Western culture, even if we want to? The answer to the two questions, respectively, is maybe yes and maybe no, and sometimes yes and sometimes no.

We have far less to fear from Gentile *hokhmah* than in the past, but we also have less opportunity to learn from it. Only a generation ago, the culture of the West with its deep Christian associations still appeared as a challenge to Judaism. For nearly two hundred years the first rank of Jewish talent was decimated by defections to science (Jacobi, Einstein, Pauli, Schroedinger), poetry (Heine), fiction (Kafka), philosophy (Hermann Cohen, Cassirer, Husserl, Scheler), music (Mendelssohn), painting (Modigliani, Max Liebermann), and other Gentile cultural endeavors. Jews enriched Western culture more than Western culture enriched Jewish life. The high culture of the West presented itself as a competitor to religion, claiming that the aesthetic experience of art surpassed the experience of

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the sacred. The German “Classic” of Goethe and Schiller and its English acolytes from Coleridge to Matthew Arnold set art above religion. Three generations ago the Columbia University scholar Lionel Trilling taught Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot to young Jewish students who later founded the Neoconservative movement.¹ The German Classic is a closed book to American university students, and even its distant echo in Arnold has faded away.

Two magisterial essays form the core of the present volume: R. David Berger’s account of the Maimonidean controversy during the Middle Ages, and R. Aharon Lichtenstein *Z”TL*’s impassioned advocacy of the high literature of the West. It is good to have the volume back in print, for this material should be required reading for every educated Jew. The issues addressed by R. Berger and R. Lichtenstein appear quite different, but there is good reason to read them as two aspects of the same problem, as I shall attempt to explain below. For contemporary Jewish life, to be sure, the Maimonidean controversy seems more pressing. It remains unfinished business for Jewish philosophy, according to R. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, so much so that he justifies the effort required to formulate a distinctly Jewish philosophy on this ground. The Rav concludes his essay *The Halakhic Mind* with the thought that a Jewish philosophy

...would help us to discriminate between the living and the dead in Jewish philosophy. What, for instance, is of halakhic nature in the Guide and the Kuzari, and what merely an echo of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy? The purpose of such an analysis is not to eliminate non-Jewish elements. Far from it, for the blend of Greek and Jewish thought has oftentimes been truly magnificent. However, by tracing the Jewish trends and comparing them to the non-Jewish, we shall enrich our outlook and knowledge.

Three questions arise in this context:

- 1) Is Greek (or later Christian) philosophy *hochma* to begin with, or is it *narishkei*?
- 2) If it is indeed *hokhmah*, is it of any relevance to religious Jews?
- 3) And if it is indeed *hokhmah*, and it is also relevant to religious Jews, did our best thinkers, for example Rambam, employ this *hokhmah* in an appropriate way?

Rav Lichtenstein asks, “If some measure of cultural activity can be recognized as a legitimate need, when, then, did R. Ishma’el enjoin Ben

¹ See Gertrude Himmelfarb, “The Trilling Imagination,” in *The Weekly Standard*, February 14, 2005.

Dama from studying ‘Greek wisdom’—and this on grounds of *bittul Torah* rather than because of its inherently objectionable character?” He cites the solution offered by the Maharal of Prague: “The *hokhmat yevanit* in question is not genuine wisdom at all but an amalgam of various disciplines which are bereft of spiritual import, ‘lacking any relation whatsoever to Torah. But the *hokhmat* whose purpose is the perception of reality and the structure of the world, it is certainly permissible to study.”²

That is why philosophical questions that arise from discoveries in science and mathematics should have pride of place in Jewish study of secular sources. R. Soloveitchik reserves his deepest abhorrence for philosophy severed from science, denouncing “the antiscientific school of Heidegger and his coterie, and from the midst of which there arose in various forms the sanctification of vitality and intuition, the veneration of instinct, the desire for power, the glorification of the emotional affective live and the flowing, surging stream of subjectivity... [which] have brought complete chaos and human depravity to the world.”³ Philosophy of science anchors speculation in the real physical world. Without this anchor, philosophy breaks free of the chains of the senses only at peril of descending into mysticism or worse.

With respect to R. Berger’s account of the Maimonidean controversy, new critical materials have become available since its first publication that help us set the philosophical issues in context. First among these is R. Soloveitchik’s recently published lectures on Maimonides, transcribed and edited by Prof. Lawrence Kaplan. Another is a critique of the Guide’s philosophical premises by Prof. Michael Wyschogrod Z”TL, published in a German collection in 1984 but not available in English until 2004. Thanks to Lawrence Kaplan’s painstaking reconstruction of Rav Soloveitchik’s 1950-1951 lectures,⁴ we can add to Berger’s historical account a philosophical reckoning with the Rambam’s engagement with Greek philosophy.

Greek metaphysics begins with the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, who argued that differentiation and change are illusory and that all existence consists of a single and undifferentiated One.⁵ As Michael

² P. 346.

³ *Halakhic Man*, p. 141.

⁴ *Maimonides Between Philosophy and Halakhab: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Lectures on the Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. Lawrence Kaplan (Ktav; New York 2016).

⁵ For a detailed review of the issue see David P. Goldman, “The Jewish Idea of Freedom,” in *Hakirah* Vol. 20.

Wyschogrod summarizes Parmenides' paradox, "Once non-being is eliminated from our metaphysical vocabulary, difference is no longer tenable. A is different from B only because A is *not* B. But if there is no non-being, then A cannot not be B. It then follows that A is B and C and D and everything else. In short, with the elimination of non-being, an undifferentiated Absolute Being emerges in which no distinctions can be made and no change is possible."⁶

Under the influence of Greek metaphysics, the Rav observed, Maimonides advances a kind of pantheism. As Kaplan writes, "In terms of essence and existence, God and the world constitute one order. The world is thus ontically dependent upon God. It is rooted in him as a tree is rooted in soil. Indeed, the Rav concludes, Maimonides would agree with Malebranche that ontically the world exists *in* God."⁷ But an enormous danger lurks in Greek metaphysics, in which man himself strives to attain unity with God. In the Greek metaphysical framework, the Rav adds, "The simplest solution would be to say that, indeed, on this highest level there is no room left for fear."

But if man attains perfect identification with God through love of God, the halakhic obligations imposed upon man by divine will become vestigial and redundant. The Rav continues:

This raises the problem of the *mitzvot ma'assiyot*, the practical commandments in Judaism. Indeed, the status of the *mitzvot ma'assiyot* depends on how the relationship between the love and fear of God is resolved. To rephrase our earlier question: If on the highest level man draws near to God and is included in the infinite divine order of being, is there any room left for the *mitzvot ma'assiyot*? If man attains such a high degree of perfection, is there any need for the *mitzvot ma'assiyot*? Would not all these commandments, say, for example, the commandment of *tzitzit*, appear to belong only to the preliminary pedagogical stage where man prepares himself to reach the *summum bonum*? Once, however, he has attained that goal, why pay attention to such a 'trivial' matter as observing the commandments (*shemirat ha-mitzvot*)? Indeed, this antinomian conclusion was drawn by both the Sabbatians and the Frankists. Perhaps these antinomian tendencies were even discernible in Hassidim in its beginnings.⁸

⁶ See Michael Wyschogrod, "The One God of Abraham and the Unity of the God of Jewish Philosophy," in R Kendall Soulen, ed., *Abraham's Promise* (collected articles of Michael Wyschogrod); Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2004, pp. 31–34.

⁷ Kaplan, p. 32.

⁸ Kaplan, p. 57.

As Kaplan explains:

The Rav concedes that Maimonides' own metaphysical commitments would have led him to assert that the ultimate level of perfection a person can attain is that of the love of God, that level "where man draws near to God and is included in the infinite divine order of being." It is Maimonides' halakhic commitments that led him, in the Rav's view, to stress the indispensability and the critical importance of the fear of God. For the fear of God reinstates the distance between man and God that love had bridged. And that distance is necessary if the norm is not to be eliminated. As the Rav maintains, if the love of God were the last word, then oneness with God would be possible and "the imperative would be eliminated." That is, only a heteronomous norm, only a norm imposed upon man from the outside, retains its force and binding authority.⁹

Maimonides the halakhist thus "triumphed" over Maimonides the philosopher.

Michael Wyschogrod attended the Rav's Talmud *shiur* at Yeshiva University during 1946-1952. I do not know whether he heard the Rav's lectures on Maimonides, but his 1984 essay offers a complementary account of incompatible, contending elements in the Guide. Wyschogrod argued that both Saadia Gaon and Maimonides applied Parmenides' argument to the Oneness of the biblical God, with self-contradictory results. Wyschogrod added that "Saadia's polemic against causing any increases or mutability in God's essence" is a paraphrase of Parmenides. And: "For Maimonides, as for Saadia, the absolute internal oneness of God is critical." But absolute oneness in Greek understanding eliminates all differentiation, which means that we are unable to speak of any attributes of God.

The difficulty, Wyschogrod adds, is that "if no attributes can be predicated of God, then we simply cannot say anything about him, not even that he exists and that he is one, for existence and oneness are also attributes. Maimonides concedes this. Speaking of God, he writes that 'His essence does not have an accident attaching to it when it exists, in which case its existence would be a notion that is superadded to it.' Similarly, God is one without possessing the attribute of unity. Pushed to its logical conclusion, we arrive at a position that denies the possibility of any speech about God."

Wyschogrod detects a deep paradox in Maimonides' argument. Whereas the Rav speaks of the Rambam's pantheism, Wyschogrod contends that Greek metaphysics put the Rambam at risk of agnosticism: If

⁹ Kaplan, p. 61.

God is everything and everything is in God, then God is nothing in particular and nothing can be said of him. But Wyschogrod adds that Rambam “saves himself from agnosticism by advancing that view that while it is not possible to say what God is, it is possible to say what he is not... When we say that he is living, we mean that he is not dead and when we say that he is eternal, we mean that there is no cause that has brought him into being.”

Wyschogrod concludes:

The paradox, from our point of view, is that Maimonides uses non-being to rescue himself from a problem originally generated by the Parmenidian claim that non-being cannot be thought and therefore cannot be. With non-being eliminated, Parmenides is left with an undifferentiated plenum of being from which all change, temporality and differentiation is eliminated. Maimonides applies this to God whose total undifferentiation expresses itself in his absolute unity which precludes all attributes since the possession of any attributes beyond God’s simple essence would contradict his absolute unity. But because this reasoning drives Maimonides to the edge of agnosticism, he modifies his viewpoint by resorting to a negative theology according to which only statements that assert what God is not are theologically admissible. But because discourse reflects ontology, negative statements about God are possible only because non-being in some ways intersects with the being of God. And if that were so, the absolutely undifferentiated nature of the divine being would not have to be assumed.

“I can only conclude,” Wyschogrod writes, “that Maimonides was not altogether clear about the Parmenidian roots of his metaphysics and the underlying ontology which fed his theology of an absolute divine unity.”

Wyschogrod’s critique of Maimonides complements R. Soloveitchik’s. The Rav emphasizes the danger that unity with God through love will make superfluous divinely mandated commandments. Wyschogrod emphasizes the risk that a Greek understanding of the Oneness of God leaves us incapable of any thought or speech about God. Both approaches point to a common conclusion. Greek ontology fails to account for differentiation, a problem that plagues Western philosophy from Parmenides through to modern set theory. The Greek concept of Oneness is alien to the rabbinic understanding of the unity of God. Finally, in reading Tanakh through the lens of Greek metaphysics, Rambam applied Greek *hokhmah* to a task for which it was ill-suited. R. Soloveitchik and Prof.

Wyschogrod suggest, Rambam himself did not fully grasp the implications of this error.¹⁰

In parallel to the historical drama of Maimonideans and anti-Maimonideans during the Middle Ages, another drama emerges from the critiques of R. Soloveitchik and Prof. Wyschogrod: A struggle within the mind of the greatest Jewish thinker of the past thousand years, who wrestles with Greek *hokhmah* and *halakhab* and ultimately stands with *halakhab*. Even though Greek metaphysics is superseded by modern logical analysis, even if (as R. Lichtenstein observes) Aristotle's metaphysics is a museum piece, we cannot follow the high drama of the Guide without learning the Greek philosophy with which Rambam wrestled. If secular universities stop teaching classical philosophy, we shall have to learn it for ourselves.

Rav Lichtenstein writes in his essay "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict," "Philosophy's most significant role...as well as its most controversial—clearly concerns its serving as a complement to Torah. Within a context of deeply rooted commitment, the process of inquiry not only sharpens and amplifies faith but purifies it."¹¹ In a remarkable way, R. Soloveitchik's investigation of Maimonides strengthens R. Lichtenstein's case for learning literature. Fear intrudes upon Greek metaphysics and disrupts Rambam's efforts to reconcile Torah and Greek *hokhmah*, forcing him to choose between philosophy and *halakhab*. Within the seemingly dry language of the Guide, there occurs a great contest between two worlds. No theatrical piece could generate greater tension than this philosophical drama, whose protagonists are the love and fear of God. Yet we recognize these concepts as *dramatis personae* only after we have learned to love and learned to fear, after the experience of love and fear in our own lives has taught us that approaching the divine in love evokes the fear that our sense of self will dissolve.

That is why R. Soloveitchik begins his definitive exposition of Jewish philosophy, *And From There You Shall Seek*, with poetry, specifically with the dialectic of love and fear in *Shir HaShirim*. The Rav's presentation of *Shir HaShirim* is explicitly poetic rather than allegorical as in Rashi and other medieval commentators, as R. Shalom Carmy observed in an important (and underappreciated) essay.

¹⁰ It should be added that Leo Strauss also detected an inherent tension in the Guide between Jewish and Aristotelian elements, but argued that Rambam's "esoteric" message was atheist. R. Soloveitchik vehemently rejected an esoteric reading of Maimonides. See David P. Goldman, "Rav Soloveitchik's New World View," in *Hakirah* Vol. 24.

¹¹ P. 317.

As R. Carmy writes:

If poetry can be defined as that which eludes the net of prose paraphrase, Song of Songs is perhaps the most poetic book of the Bible. And if exegesis always risks losing the poetry in explication, Song of Songs is where the exegesis is most liable to fall short.

Reason in all its multiple forms is the human being's seeking; revelation is God's confronting. The drama of Song of Songs, of the lovers who seek each other passionately and nevertheless elude each other again and again, reminds us that life with God embraces both contradictory impulses. The imagery provides a model or analogy of religious experience rather than an allegory of it.

To the text of *Shir HaShirim*, the Rav adds his own poetic account of the state of mind of the Beloved who cannot rouse herself to admit her Lover, who stands at her door and says:

Now I have arrived. I have kept my word. I have fulfilled the vision. Your desire has been fulfilled, your longing has not been in vain. I have yearned for you: I, the companion of your youth, am now here. You shall follow me and never be separated from me.

The beloved awakens from her sleep and listens to the gentle voice of her lover. His voice burns its way into her heart, kindling there an ancient flame. It is suffused with both enchantment and desire.

Nevertheless, the beloved refuses to rise from her bed and open the door to her lover. The cold of the moonless, starless night, deep weariness, laziness, and fear combine to paralyze her will and bind her legs. Why should she refuse to undo the latch and open the door to her lover? Hasn't she been pursuing him, . . . suffering insults, blows, and spiritual torment on his behalf? . . . Does desire no longer permeate her being, is the urgency no longer alive within her?"¹²

R. Carmy comments, "We should not dismiss Rabbi Soloveitchik's strategy of introducing Song of Songs via Sabbath-eve prayer as merely a literary frame for his discussion. By rooting the encounter with God in a quasi-liturgical performance, the Rav insinuates into his essay, at the very outset, the idea that the personal encounter with God draws on, and embraces, concrete historical experience appropriated into a social setting. The philosophical quest for God is too often pictured as a solitary affair of logical argumentation or mystical culture."¹³

The English translation of the Rav's magnum opus appeared ten years ago. When I read these lines my heart missed a beat. The Rav had me at

¹² R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *And From There You Shall Seek* (Ktav 2008), p. 3.

¹³ Shalom Carmy, "Perfect Harmony," in *First Things*, Dec. 2010.

page 3; the next Shabbat I *davened* at an Orthodox shul after many years of attendance at Conservative synagogues, and never left. Whatever I may have learned about the Rav's philosophy and his sources began with a heart-stopping moment in which I knew the fear that the Rav portrayed.

Our lives afford us few moments in which we find ourselves in the grip of love or fear. Without existential fear and impassioned love, the foundational concepts of Jewish philosophy will be abstract, if not entirely inaccessible. R. Soloveitchik's resort to poetry makes a definitive if indirect case for literature, where we relive love and risk vicariously.

R. Lichtenstein's essay reviews the halakhic status of secular learning from Hazzal through the *risbonim* and some *apharonim*. His defense of secular learning remains the state of the art. But R. Lichtenstein makes the leap from defense to impassioned advocacy in a few passages that are as frustrating as they are persuasive. He writes, for example,

For sheer insight, can Locke or James compare with Dickens or Dostoyevsky? The comparison is perhaps unfair. The psychologist, practicing or theoretical, must perforce resort to technical jargon, sophisticated abstractions, and schematic bifurcations. The artist, for his part—particularly, the dramatic artist—melds precision and sensitivity, intuition and acuity, to perceive and portray concrete personal and social reality. But the fact remains; and it underscores the spiritual value of great literature... Art speaks through the whole man and to the whole man in tones that generally elude the logician. Recognition of this fact need not, of course, issue in anti-intellectual Romanticization. Philosophy, rigorous philosophy, certainly has a place in the world of moral discourse. But not the sole—perhaps not even the primary place.¹⁴

The comparisons seem unfair. Locke, with his *tabula rasa* empiricism and quaintly English notion of a social contract formed by isolated individuals in a mythical state of nature, is perhaps the most remote of all philosophers from the human condition. Would R. Lichtenstein say the same of Kierkegaard, the great expositor of existential *angst*? Locke's philosophy is "destitute of clear logical foundation," as Lord Russell observed.¹⁵ Although Kierkegaard's style of presentation is ironic and conversational, he succeeded more than any other modern philosopher in formulating a consistent metaphysics of Being, in the view of Michael

¹⁴ P. 315.

¹⁵ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (Simon and Shuster, 1945), p. 614.

Wyschogrod.¹⁶ Without denying Dostoyevsky's literary genius, I cannot help but read the sociopath Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* as a theological construct whose purpose is to fit the Christian notion of unmerited grace.

These are quibbles, to be sure; we might substitute Shakespeare for Dostoyevsky and agree with R. Lichtenstein wholeheartedly. R. Lichtenstein praises great writers and passes on without quite explaining what makes them great, assuming that this will be self-evident to the reader who engages them. That no longer can be taken for granted. R. Lichtenstein earned his doctorate at Harvard nearly sixty years ago when the American academy still honored Western classics. Now Western culture is on the defensive, if not on the verge of defeat. The cultural left dominates the universities, and it has wrapped the Western past in a black legend of racism, colonialism and misogyny.

Jewish Action published an exchange between R. Lichtenstein and Prof. William Kolbrenner of Bar-Ilan University in its Spring 2004 issue. Wholly in sympathy with R. Lichtenstein's position, Kolbrenner nonetheless warned that the hostility of modern universities to Western classics made it virtually impossible for religious students to reproduce R. Lichtenstein's course of study two generations earlier. Kolbrenner warned:

The hermeneutics of suspicion reigns. One cannot help but point out the irony that a postmodern multiculturalism, ostensibly representing a commitment to cultural difference, entails nothing like a real openness to different cultures. Rather than actually being receptive to the voice of different cultures, some of the advocates of multiculturalism simply repeat their critical mantras—gender, race and class—imposing their own values on texts which they never really encounter. A pedagogy that pretends engagement with difference and with other cultures is narcissistically enclosed and disengaged.

R. Lichtenstein replied to Kolbrenner insisting that the benefits of learning Western literature justified the effort even in adverse conditions: "Even advocates of Dr. Kolbrenner's position can acknowledge the need to keep the home fires burning in hope for better times... We, in the interim can, minimally, 'only stand and wait,' yearning for a fresh dawn. Even if winter's here, might we not, with inspired vision and informed counsel, anticipate the spring?"

We might, and we should. But in the intervening decade and a half, the position of Western classics in the universities has descended from

¹⁶ Kierkegaard and Heidegger: *The Ontology of Existence* (Routledge Keegan Paul, 1954), pp. 129–131.

isolation and suspicion to outright persecution and ridicule. R. Lichtenstein's essay in the present volume first appeared in 1997, three years after Yale literary critic Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* appeared on the bestseller lists. Bloom chose twenty-six Western authors from Dante Alighieri to Samuel Beckett as exemplars of a self-selecting literary tradition. "Canon-formation," Bloom argued, "is performed by neither critics nor academics, let alone politicians. Writers, artists, composers themselves determine canons, by bridging between strong precursors and strong successors."¹⁷ Bloom's Western literary canon is a deracinated *mesorab* of sorts, the self-selecting product of generations of writers reflecting on their predecessors and informing their successors. Bloom's personal attitude towards Judaism was toxic. But in one respect he was right: Our ability to understand great literature depends on our knowledge of its antecedents. All literature of importance arises from intergenerational dialogue, and the student must know a great deal of the canon in order to read any part of it.

Bloom predicted that his Western canon would all but perish at the hands of what he dubbed the School of Resentment: "We are destroying all intellectual and aesthetic standards in the humanities and social sciences, in the name of social justice...After a lifetime spent in teaching literature at one of our major universities, I have very little confidence that literary education will survive its current malaise."¹⁸ He added, "What are now called 'Departments of English' will be renamed departments of 'Cultural Studies' where Batman comics, Mormon theme parks, television, movies, and rock will replace Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens."¹⁹ He lamented that "nothing ever will be the same because the art and passion of reading well and deeply, which was the foundation of our enterprise, depended upon people who were fanatical readers when they were still small children."

The fate of Western literary classics in today's universities is if anything more ignominious than Bloom imagined in his gloomiest moments. The share of bachelor's degrees awarded in the humanities by U.S. colleges fell from about 17% of the total in 1967 to only 5% in 2015.²⁰ The School of Resentment has triumphed in most major universities. Even where English literature is still taught, the focus has shifted to feminist,

¹⁷ 522.

¹⁸ P. 517.

¹⁹ P. 519.

²⁰ <https://humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=34#fig197>.

ethnic and post-colonial studies rather than classics; according to one recent study, Shakespeare is required reading at only four of the top 52 American universities.²¹

Should we now learn Shakespeare, Milton, and Keats even though the Christian world has stopped learning them? And if we do, who will teach us? Shall we train Jewish specialists in English poetry to teach Jewish students an art that the Gentile world has almost abandoned? Shall we create our own schools of literary criticism to determine which of the pearls of Gentile poetry are worth preserving? In that case, religious Jews would become the last curators of some parts of Western civilization, like Catholic monks in the Middle Ages preserving the *hokhmah* of pagan Greece and Rome. And if the religious Jewish world were to undertake such an effort, by what criteria would we judge secular literature? One wishes that R. Lichtenstein had given us more guidance.

R. Lichtenstein urges caution about the consideration of Torah in Western art. “Even when instructive light is cast upon an aspect of Torah, the shading may be questionable. Caravaggio’s portrait of Avraham at the *‘akedah* is profoundly sensitive. But not all would agree that the fusion of fright, awe and determination captured in those piercing eyes corresponds to the Avraham they envision.”²² One wonders what he would have thought about Rembrandt’s biblical paintings. R. Lichtenstein’s reticence with respect to Gentile responses to the Torah is well founded, but there may be exceptions from which we can learn. One is Goethe’s *Faust*, by far the most important literary creation of the modern era, and a source for Kierkegaard among many others. Large parts of *Faust* paraphrase Kohelet and Job.²³ I do not think a full understanding of R. Soloveitchik’s sources in Western philosophy, Kierkegaard in particular, is possible without taking into account Goethe’s engagement with the Bible.

There are some innovations in Western high culture, though, that the Jewish world would be unwise to ignore. Western poetry and—even more so—classical music has the capacity to disrupt the listener’s internal sense of time, and with it to evoke a presentiment of mortality. That is a topic in itself; in another location I attempted to show that the high *Hazzanut* of Ashkenazic Judaism drew on the Western classical techniques in order to create a uniquely Jewish sense of time.²⁴


²¹ https://www.goacta.org/images/download/The_Unkindest_Cut_Shakespeare_in_Exile.pdf.

²² P. 355.

²³ See David P. Goldman, “A Yeshiva Curriculum in Western Literature,” *Hakirah* Vol. 15.

²⁴ <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/music/184773/jewish-music-holy>.

Poetry can alter the perception of time. By transforming our perception of time through rhythmic and metrical variation it evokes creation itself. As Rambam taught, time itself is among the created things, for God created time itself as he created the world. That was his answer to the Greek contention that the world must have existed forever. The rabbinic assertion that man can become a co-creator with God proceeds from the createdness of time: “A person who recites [the blessing] *Vayekhulu* on eve of Shabbat is considered as if he were a partner with God in the work of creation.”²⁵ Halakhic action creates time. Poetry and music merely play with the *illusion* of creating time, but nonetheless may open the mind to the possibility of creative thought, especially through liturgy.

All of these are minor considerations next to R. Lichtenstein’s challenge to the Jewish world. We are further from the goal of *torah u-madda* than we were when this excellent volume first appeared. It remains to be seen if, when and how we shall address it. 

²⁵ *Shabbat* 119b.