

BOOK REVIEW

Eliezer Goldman, Yabadut le-Lo Ashlaya [Judaism Without Illusion], edited by DANI STATMAN AND AVI SAGI
(Jerusalem: Keter Books & Hartman Institute, 2009), 378 pp.

Reviewed by
Jeffrey Saks

Although likely never to have heard his name, readers of *Tradition*—along with all serious students of contemporary Jewish thought—will welcome the recently published, posthumous collection of essays by Professor Eliezer Goldman.

Born in Brooklyn, Goldman (1918-2002) was a prodigious youth who studied at Yeshiva College and RIETS prior to his *aliyah* in 1938, where he continued his graduate studies at the Hebrew University. In 1941 he joined Kibbutz Sde Eliyahu, where he remained throughout his life, working in agriculture and other kibbutz enterprises, including high school teaching, while completing his academic studies, and becoming a prominent intellectual within the Religious Kibbutz movement, ultimately taking up a position in the philosophy department at Bar-Ilan University. (Full disclosure: Goldman was my late father-in-law's first cousin; my youngest son is named in his memory.)

The volume contains almost fifty essays of varying lengths, written over the course of almost forty years, divided into the opening section of more conventional philosophical analyses, the middle section with shorter observations on religious life and society, and a fascinating appendix including selected letters, interview transcripts, and an interesting autobiographical sketch. The anthology is particularly significant since most of the essays are culled from unpublished materials the editors were entrusted with by Goldman, while others appeared in various publications not readily accessible to readers and researchers.

Among the topics Goldman was most engaged with were pluralism and religious life, the meaning of medieval Jewish thought for contemporary society, and the topic of “meta-halakha”—a term, it turns out, which he apparently coined in 1957. The opening essay, based on a lecture he gave that year, examines the impact of meta-halakhic principles on areas of *psak* (using *dina de-malkhuta dina* as his test case), and concludes with the exchange the young Goldman conducted with Prof. Yaakov Katz, who was present at the conference. Over fifty years later, thanks to the yeoman work of figures such as the late Profs. Isadore Twersky and Walter

TRADITION

Wurzburger, we relate to the field of meta-halakhah as a well-developed field. The reader is advised to bear in mind how innovative and pioneering Goldman's thinking must have been when he first delivered this paper.

In an intriguing thought experiment from the first part of the book (pp. 189-97), the more abstract philosophical section, Goldman examines the limits of pluralism by leading the reader through a hypothetical "parallel universe" in which certain historical events occur in Persia at the time of Ravina and Rav Ashi, leading to a series of developments until the halakhic system would look significantly different from that which we know today, yet still bear structural integrity. While recognizing that this type of philosophical "parlor game" doesn't automatically help in determining the type of normative pluralism, with its necessary red lines, that a multi-cultural society must define for itself to function in practice, he nevertheless raises essential questions of identity that each person functioning in such a society ought to consider.

However, in the second section of the volume, dedicated to contemporary issues and society, he provides a more practical analysis of religious-secular relations, interactions, and tensions, and how they play out in the modern State of Israel (pp. 291-305; but see also two essays on pluralism, pp. 189-214). The editors don't position the two pieces as companion essays, but it would have been interesting had they done so: looking at how a great mind views a problem in the abstract, and then how he draws out implications for policy and simple human interaction. What is interesting, and perhaps a bit sad, about the second essay is its timeliness. When I started reading it I didn't know when it had been authored, and from the description of the state of religious-secular interaction, assumed it must have been from the 1990s. I was surprised to discover in a footnote (added by the editors) that it was in fact penned in 1965! *Plus ça change.*

In both essays, despite their very different foci and agendas, and really throughout the entire collection, the reader is struck by Goldman's habit of demonstrating his points with concrete examples, often anecdotes drawn from his own interesting biography, which help us translate otherwise theoretical, philosophical notions into meaningful, relevant concepts. This was another lifelong preoccupation of his: that philosophy in general—and Jewish Thought in specific—are meant to have meaning for the contemporary Jew and society. (This predilection was apparent in his doctoral dissertation, *Pragmatist Ethics*—examining the *practical* consequences of the ethical theories of C.S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and C.I. Lewis.) In modern Israel, he is clear that we Orthodox bear a special burden in bringing relevance to life: "I sense that in many circles there is a growing feeling that Judaism is unable to contribute to contemporary thought. There is a certain

truth to this position, since a spiritual contribution [to contemporary thought on an array of matters facing the Jewish State] must mean a spiritual contribution which means something to people. We lack a common language, and do not know *how* to communicate with [the secular]" (pp. 301-02).

So, for example, two short essays from the 1980s examine the meaning of R. Kook's writings for the modern reader, including an accounting of some of the problems of "translating" R. Kook's corpus—his views, the issues he dealt with, his sensibilities, etc.—to our generation. Essays on R. Soloveitchik's thought toe a similar line, including what appear to be Goldman's own notes to himself, or maybe an outline of what would have been a fuller essay, trying to correlate the Rav's philosophy of halakha as it appears in *The Halakhic Mind*, *Halakhic Man*, and *The Lonely Man of Faith*. (Goldman had studied with R. Soloveitchik prior to the Rav's arrival at Yeshiva University as Rosh Yeshiva, in the first undergraduate philosophy course he delivered. The editors report, p. 9, that among Goldman's papers they found a copy of the final exam which dealt with, among others, Hegel and Marx. See also pp. 359-60 for Goldman's account of the course.)

Not limiting himself to modern figures, Goldman also wrote a great deal on Jewish medieval philosophers, especially Maimonides and R. Saadia Gaon—the first section of his prior collection of essays, *Mehkarim ve-Iyunim* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), being dedicated to those two monumental figures. In an essay examining the pedagogical challenges of teaching medieval Jewish philosophy in high schools (pp. 70-79), he argues that presenting the classical texts "as is" is bound to fail the relevancy test. Rather, the *Hovot ha-Levavot*, *Emunot ve-Deot*, or *Kuzari*, e.g., must be curricularized so as to mine the material contained therein, which *can* speak to the modern student, allowing it to be heard. By way of example, he points out that any discussion of *yir'at shamayim* which hopes to make use of the classics needs to bear in mind that the modern student lives in a world which seeks scientific causalities for the phenomenon encircling him. This attitude is largely foreign to the medievalists, who saw, or at least sought, God's eminent hand in the world around them. (Although, he points out, a thinker who limits active *hashgaha*—such as Maimonides—might actually cohere quite well with the modern viewpoint.)

This poses a serious educational challenge to anyone who thinks he can answer a student's questions by presenting the classical bookshelf in an unmediated manner. Rather, "we must take as our starting point our own problems which occupy us, and not the texts of [medieval] thinkers. We must first clarify the questions for which we seek answers, and around them organize the material" which the great Jewish thinkers have provided for us (p. 77). Again, while such discussion might not be uncommon

TRADITION

now (though we need more educators who carefully bear these points in mind), we marvel to think that Goldman wrote this essay in 1955, when the level of pedagogical deliberation was far from what it is today.

However, it was Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz's attempt to make Jewish Thought a central element in the design of Israeli life and culture, social policy and polity, which seems to have especially engaged Goldman (the appendix contains letters from Leibowitz to Goldman). Of Leibowitz (1903-94), the outspoken philosopher and controversial social critic, Goldman says (p. 355), "He stood on his own two feet regarding Judaism, but also in the sciences and contemporary philosophical thought," acknowledging that Leibowitz was a type of modern Maimonidean figure and role-model, yet one he disagreed with on various matters. This volume contains insightful pieces on Leibowitz's views on multi-culturalism and the interplay of religion and ethics. The interested reader will like to know that Goldman edited the only collection of Leibowitz's essays in English, which appeared as *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1992), the prefatory essay being the best introduction to Leibowitz's thought in English.

Goldman asserts that since "modernity" as we know it first sprang up within a Christian context and intellectual culture, Judaism encounters modernity as something foreign and external, leading Jewish thinkers to approach questions and issues from an impulse of either compromise or synthesis. The significance of figures like Leibowitz and R. Soloveitchik lies in the fact that "they think like contemporaries and do not relate to categories of modern understanding as if they were absorbed from outside sources. They are able to make free use of them in their explorations of Judaism." (p. 367)

The editors, Profs. Statman and Sagi, have provided a fitting tribute to their teacher by presenting this collection to the public, as well as by expounding Goldman's thought in their own scholarship and writing. Readers will find this volume to be original and insightful, and should welcome the opportunity to acquaint themselves with Eliezer Goldman, a thinker deeply engaged with Jewish life and learning in the light of major trends in twentieth century philosophical thought.

REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE

RABBI JEFFREY SAKS is the Director of ATID—The Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions in Jewish Education, in Jerusalem, and an editorial board member of *Tradition*.