

*SOCIO-POLITICAL READINGS OF THE RETURN TO SINAI:
IN DIALOGUE WITH DAVID HARTMAN AND JOSEPH SOLOVEITCHIK**

The exodus has been described as «a journey forward – not only in time and space. It is a march toward a goal, a moral progress, a transformation».¹ The remembrance of this collective experience has shaped the moral conscience, founding a covenantal community and developing models of the time to come. This article retraces the steps of a socio-political return to Sinai, as conceived by two exponents of “Modern Orthodox” Judaism: David Hartman (1931-2013) and Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1993). Their discourse links divine transcendence and political realism, duty to remember and need to murmur, rise to God and paths of liberation.

1. *The Path of Exodus and The Path of Sinai: Comparing Two Models*

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi points out that «memory of the past is incomplete without its natural complement – hope for the future».² In the same vein, David Hartman locates the roots of hope in the *memories* of events (such as the Exodus from Egypt and the Revelation at Sinai) that can expand «the present beyond its sense of givenness».³ Hartman identifies two types of hope. The *halakhic* hope is «the courage to bear human responsibility» even within contexts of uncertainty. This hope stems from the revela-

tion at Sinai, which enhances our capacity to act, providing the means to overcome dispiritedness and resemantizing notions such as progress and duty.

The second type of hope is the *radical* hope. It is a «mode of anticipation», «a faith that ultimately redemption will come», based on the remembrance of Israel’s exodic redemption. The Exodus experience becomes the perennial form of future liberation. It emphasizes the faith in the divine redemption, minimizing the role of human responsibility. Hartman relates here to the rabbinic view, especially of Nachmanides, according to which the Exodus dwells on the miraculous role of God. Indeed, for Nachmanides, exodic miracles, such as the splitting of the Sea and the gift of manna from heaven, demonstrate the dogma of *שׁוֹרֵהוּ* (as creation from *לֹא מֵעֵץ*): they show that everything is from God, since He brought forth “being from nothing” (*לֹא מֵעֵץ*).⁴ God is the «powerful Lord» who breaks into history, creating a chosen people from a non-people, a living covenantal community from the social chaos of Egypt. Therefore, hope is addressed to His return, when God will disclose His full power in history.

The Exodus experience is given two further shades of meaning in Hartman’s *A Living Covenant* (1986): the “evolutionary psychological approach”, based on Maimonides’ notion of

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¹ M. WALZER, *Exodus and Revolution*, Basic Books, New York 1985, pp. 16-17.

² Y.H. YERUSHALMI, *Toward a History of Jewish Hope*, in D.N. MYERS - A. KAYE (eds.), *The Faith of Fallen Jews. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and the Wri-*

ting of Jewish History, Brandeis University Press, Waltham (MA) 2014, pp. 299-317: 301.

³ D. HARTMAN, *From Defender to Critic. The Search for a New Jewish Self*, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock (VT) 2012, pp. 127-128.

⁴ See D. BERGER, *Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides*, in I. TWERSKY (ed.), *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides: Explorations in his Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1983, pp. 107-128.

«gracious ruse»,⁵ and the “political approach”, patterned on Michael Walzer’s *Exodus and Revolution* (1985).

In the first case, the Exodus is understood as a “zone of proximal development”, to use Lev Vygotsky’s words: a sort of childhood experience in which a helpless community learns to trust in the divine grace, to overcome its fear of freedom in the first person. The Exodus experience is a permanent memory (like the memory of Israel’s early relational intimacy with God), which is preliminary to the mature experience of the *mišwah*. In other words, the Exodus is the infantile stage of the development of the covenantal community.⁶ After all, Moses has been portrayed as a «nursing father» who forced his children to be free, educated them, and allowed them to make mistakes while they created history on their own.⁷

The political approach, instead, underlines the *complementarity* between the Exodus and the revelation at Sinai. The Exodus «anchors the covenant in history and in the social and political life of the community».⁸ Consequently, for Hartman «the covenant can have meaning only to the degree that the Jews enjoy freedom to organize their lives and believe they are capable of meeting the challenge placed before them at Sinai».⁹ Thus, on the one hand, the Exodus is absorbed into the Covenant; on the other hand, the *mišwah* is binding only when one has experience of living as a free individual.

2. *Towards the Covenant of Destiny: the School of the Desert*

In *Exodus and Revolution*, Michael Walzer emphasizes how the biblical description of Israel in the desert may have a *carnal* meaning, signifying the «materialism of the people» and their attachment to the fundamental biological needs.¹⁰ David Hartman adds that Israel into the wilderness is a reminder of the human vulnerability to idolatry and the attraction of slavery, developed into the כּוּר הַבְּרִזָּה, the «iron furnace» of Egypt.¹¹

Philo of Alexandria had already remarked the ambivalent role of the desert, as a cause of suffering but also as an urge to learn; a place adverse to life but also a “training” path towards God, addressed to the individual and collective soul.¹² Walzer is on the same wavelength. In *Exodus and Revolution*, he deems the “school of the desert” as the major channel for the spiritual and political growth of Israel. In the desert «the people seem less like a slavish rabble than like ordinary men and women recalcitrant in the face of God’s demand that they be something more than ordinary».¹³ To fully appreciate Walzer’s view, one must keep in mind Maimonides’ notion of «gracious ruse». As stated in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 32: «man, according to his nature, is not capable of abandoning suddenly all to which he was accustomed». Accordingly, God turns Israelites «away from the high road» and sends Moses «to make out of them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation – through the knowledge of Him».¹⁴ In other words, for Maimonides, the forty years

⁵ MOSES MAIMONIDES, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 32, tr. by Shlomo Pines, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1963, p. 528.

⁶ D. HARTMAN, *A Living Covenant. The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism*, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock (VT) 1997² [1985], p. 270.

⁷ See A. WILDAVSKY, *Moses as Political Leader*, Shalem Press, Jerusalem - New York 1985; ID., *What is Permissible so that This People May Survive? Joseph the Administrator*, «Political Science and Politics» 22,4 (1989), pp. 779-788; I. SHARKANSKY, *Israel and its Bible: A Political Analysis*, Routledge, New York 1996, pp. 89-90; Nm 11,13.

⁸ HARTMAN, *A Living Covenant*, cit., p. 271.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ WALZER, *Exodus and Revolution*, cit., pp. 51, 104.

¹¹ HARTMAN, *A Living Covenant*, cit., p. 262; See Dt 4,20.

¹² *De Specialibus Legibus* II, 86; IV, 126-127; *De Decalogo* 13. Cfr. *De Vita Mosis*, in PHILO, with an English translation by F.H. Colson, 10 voll., Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1984⁵ [1935], vol. 6, pp. 274-595; I. DAVIDZON, *Il deserto nel De vita Mosis di Filone Alessandrino: possibilità di un’ascesa etica e conoscitiva attraverso i prodigi*, «Materia Giudaica» 7,1 (2002), pp. 67-73.

¹³ WALZER, *Exodus and Revolution*, cit., p. 69.

¹⁴ MOSES MAIMONIDES, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, cit., III, 32, pp. 526-527.

in the desert urge the Israelites to free themselves from their psychological slavery, acquiring the virtue of courage, for the battle against idolatry. The entire passage is worth reading:

For just as it is not in the nature of man that, after having been brought up in slavish service occupied with clay, bricks, and similar things, he should all of a sudden wash off from his hands the dirt [...] so is it also not in his nature that, after having been brought up upon very many modes of worship and of customary practices [...], he should abandon them all of a sudden. And just as the deity used a gracious ruse in causing them to wander perplexedly in the desert until their souls became courageous – it being well known that life in the desert and lack of comforts for the body necessarily develop courage whereas the opposite circumstances necessarily develop cowardice – and until, moreover, people were born who were not accustomed to humiliation and servitude – all this having been brought about by Moses our Master by means of divine commandments [Nm 9,23] – so did this group of laws derive from a divine grace, so that they should be left with the kind of practices to which they were accustomed and so that consequently the belief, which constitutes the first intention, should be validated in them.¹⁵

David Hartman finds a more theological resonance in this passage, interpreting the “school of the desert” from God’s point of view. The forty-years sojourn in the desert is emblematic of God’s patience and acceptance of the slow process of human change: from a multitude of helpless slaves, Israel is called to be a people able to assume responsibility for its *destiny*. In Hartman’s words: «God, the lawgiver and lord of history, acts in response to the human condition. Revelation is divine speech informed by the human reality».¹⁶

Accordingly, the desert, «bare of the veneers of civilization»,¹⁷ unveils man’s weaknesses, his most elementary instincts, and his innermost fears.

Small wonder, then, that the scouts sent by Moses to survey the land of Canaan express their hopelessness with these words: «And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight» (Nm 13,33). Joseph Soloveitchik interprets the Israelites’ feelings of inferiority as signs of a *persisting state of psychological or existential slavery*. This type of slavery crushes human initiative and confidence required to pursue a shared mission: «one may, existentially, be a slave in the midst of political and economic freedoms».¹⁸ However, ironically, in this dispiritedness, each Israelite discovers that he «is tethered to his nation with the bonds [עבדות] of fate [גורל] and chains [חבל] of destiny-mission [יעוד]».¹⁹ In other words, each Israelite begins to perceive the voice of freedom.

Hartman’s vision of Judaism and its anthropological-political task was deeply influenced by Moses Maimonides, Joseph Soloveitchik and Michael Walzer («my rabbi in political theory»)²⁰ Hartman was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1931 and received his rabbinical ordination from Yeshiva University (the leading institute of Modern Orthodoxy) where he studied under Joseph Soloveitchik. Like Normann Lamm (1927), Michael Wyschogrod (1928-1915), Aharon Lichtenstein (1933-2015) and Irving Greenberg (1933), Hartman belongs to a new generation of Modern Orthodox rabbis who were taught and inspired by Soloveitchik, and supported Judaism’s compatibility with the liberal-democratic values.²¹ Hartman’s own engagement in the search for a

¹⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 527-528.

¹⁶ D. HARTMAN, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition. An Ancient People Debating its Future*, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) 2000, p. 77.

¹⁷ *Id.*, *A Living Covenant*, cit., p. 262.

¹⁸ J.B. SOLOVEITCHIK, *Reflection of the Rab. Lessons in Jewish Thought*, adapted from lectures of R. Joseph Soloveitchik by A.R. Besdin, KTAV Publishing House, New York 1993² [1979], pp. 197-198; *Id.*, *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah* [1973], «Tradition: Journal of Orthodox Thought» 17,2 (1978), pp. 55-72: 60.

¹⁹ *Id.*, *Kol Dodi Dofek* [1956-1961], tr. and an-

not. by D.Z. Gordon, KTAV Publishing House, New York 2006, p. 51. In 1956 Soloveitchik delivered this address in Yiddish at the Yeshiva University in New York, for the eighth anniversary of the foundation of the State of Israel. Subsequently, he re-wrote in Hebrew and published it in 1961.

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vANF-cZhXtBM> (2010): last checked Jul. 15, 2019.

²¹ In America, Modern Orthodox Movement spread gradually during the 1940s and 1950s and reached its peak in the 1960s. As Avraham Weiss puts it, «Modern Orthodoxy is open to secular stud-

spiritual and dialectical synthesis between revelation and modernity was fashioned also in response to Strauss's «way of dualism», i.e., as a specific hermeneutical approach to Maimonidean thought.²² Contrary to Strauss's interpretation, Maimonides followed the *way of integration*, since he was aware that «the free search for truth [...] can live harmoniously with a way of life defined by the normative tradition of Judaism».²³ Accordingly, Hartman insisted on the urge to renew the social and religious values of the Sinai, in order to give a shared Jewish reply to the contemporary demands of freedom of conscience and religious pluralism. Sinai represents «the ultimate place to which man constantly returns – even when he soars to the heights of metaphysical knowledge».²⁴ However, it must be kept in mind that Hartman chose to make Aliyah in Israel, following the events of June 1967.²⁵ In his eyes, the foundation of the State of Israel represented an opportunity to live a life of holiness in the private and the social spheres, and to renew the remembrance of the Sinai:

ies and views other than those of their rabbis; open to non-Jews and less observant Jews; open to the state of Israel as having a religious meaning; open to increased woman's participation; open to contact with Conservative, reform, and Reconstructionist movements; and open to public protest as a means of helping our people», A. WEISS, *Open Orthodoxy! A Modern Orthodox Rabbi's Creed*, «Judaism» 46 (1997), pp. 409-421: 417-418. For a more detailed account of American Modern Orthodox Judaism, see: J. WERTHEIMER, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2018, pp. 143-260; Z. ELEFF, *Modern Orthodox Judaism. A Documentary History*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 2016; M. GIULIANI, *Teologia ebraica. Una mappatura*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2014, pp. 165-188; Z. ELEFF, «Viva Yeshiva!» *The Tale of the Mighty Mites and the College Bowl*, «American Jewish History» 96,4 (2010), pp. 287-305; K. CAPLAN, *The Ever Dying Denomination: American Jewish Orthodoxy, 1824-1965*, in M.L. RAPHAEL (ed.), *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008, pp. 167-188.

²² D. HARTMAN, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest*, Varda Books, Skokie (IL) 2001 [1976], p. 22; M. HELLINGER - A. COHEN, *Liberal-Democratic Jewish Modern Orthodoxy after 1967: The Thought*

[...] there are no privileges without demands. Sinai requires that the Jew believe in the possibility of integrating moral demands of the prophet with the realism required for political survival. Politics and morality were united when Israel was born as a nation at Sinai. The rebirth of Israel can be viewed as a potential return to the fullness of the Sinai Covenant – to Judaism as a way of life. [...] Moral seriousness and political maturity and wisdom must come to our nation if we are to be judged by the way we struggle to integrate the Sinai Covenant with the complexities of political realities.²⁶

Joseph Soloveitchik (widely known as “the Rav”) was born in Pruzhan (Poland) in 1903. After receiving his doctorate from the University of Berlin, in 1932 he moved with his wife to Boston. He was often considered as the intellectual founder of American Modern Orthodox Judaism.²⁷ His thought was deeply rooted in European sources that interweave traditional Lithuanian talmudism and Marburg idealism à la Hermann Cohen,²⁸ Kierkegaard's existentialism and religious Zionism of Rav Abraham

of David Hartman and Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, in M. HATINA - C. SCHUMANN (eds.), *Arab Liberal Thought after 1967. Old Dilemmas, New Perceptions*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2015, pp. 215-236.

²³ HARTMAN, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest*, cit., p. 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Id.*, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition*, cit., p. 124.

²⁶ *Id.*, *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices Within Judaism*, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock (VT) 1999, p. 263.

²⁷ W. WURZBURGER, *Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post-Modern Orthodoxy*, «Tradition: Journal of Orthodox Thought» 29,1 (1994), pp. 5-20.

²⁸ See A. RAVITZKY, *Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik on Human Knowledge: Between Maimonidean and Neo-Kantian Philosophy*, «Modern Judaism» 6,2 (1986), pp. 157-188; R. ERLEWINE, *Judaism and the West: From Hermann Cohen to Joseph Soloveitchik*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (IN) 2016, pp. 129-157; D. SCHWARTZ, *Religion or Halakhah: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, tr. by B. Stein, Brill, Leiden (NL) 2007; D. SINGER - M. SOKOL, *Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith*, «Modern Judaism» 2,3 (1982), pp. 227-272; M. KRAH, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2018.

Kook,²⁹ Bergsonian terminology and haggadic literature.³⁰

Indeed, for Soloveitchik, the Covenant is born through the dialectic of suffering and the contradiction of a shattered existence.³¹ Accordingly, the suffering in Egypt had the role «to refine and cleanse the Jewish character, to remove the dross of moral impurities and to heighten their ethical sensitivity».³² This perspective is supported by the enigmatic prophecy addressed to Abraham, which marks the beginning of Israel's national history: «Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years» (Gn 15,13). Through the suffering (first experienced in Egypt and then in the desert), Israel is called to become an history-making people.

Soloveitchik emphasizes that God concluded two covenants with Israel: the “covenant of fate” (ברית גורל), concluded without the consent of the people, after the redemption from Egypt, and the “covenant of destiny” (ברית יעוד) that God offered to Israel at Sinai through Moses. The covenant of fate is a Divine act of grace and benevolence that provokes four reactions in the Israelites: (I) the awareness of a shared fate, that leads (II) to share suffering, (III) to share duty and responsibility, and (IV) to the obligation to cooperate. Such covenantal sense of cooperation, responsibility, and equality builds a *people* with a common future mission. From this merging, a new social identity arises: the «individual-people» or the «lonely man-community».³³

Fate does not distinguish between nobility and common folk, between rich and poor, between a prince dressed in royal purple velvet and a poor man who goes begging from door to door, between

a pious Jew and an assimilationist. Even though we may speak a mix of different languages, even if we are citizens of different lands, even if we look different (one being short and black, the other tall and blond), even if we live in different economic systems and under different living conditions (the one living in a royal palace, the other in a humble cave), we have but one fate.³⁴

Regarding the Covenant of Destiny, instead, its founding charter may be located in the list of divine deeds of Ex 6,6-8:

I am the Lord, and I will bring you out (וְהוֹצֵאתִי) from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out (וְהִצַּלְתִּי) of their bondage; I will redeem you (וְגִאֲלֶתִּי) with a stretched-out arm, and with great judgments [...]. I will take you (וְלָקַחְתִּי) to me for a people [...]. I will bring you in (וְהִבֵּאתִי) unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for a heritage.

Here, two events of Israel's history are interweaved: the end of the slavery and the vision of a new social identity to be founded on the shared Covenant of Mission. God aims at transforming a multitude, bereft of direction and purpose, into a “nation”, into His people. However, the incomplete action, expressed in the passage by the imperfect tense, leaves room for the human initiative: the Israelites are called to elevate their shared fate from communal-political suffering to halakhic and moral responsibility.³⁵

In the same existentialistic vein, the image of Israel wandering through the desert might somehow recall the condition of Job: a defenseless man who complains about his own suffering and demands justice. As Michael Walzer observes, no political stance is embodied in Job; he just

²⁹ D. SCHWARTZ, *From Phenomenology to Existentialism: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, vol. 2, tr. by B. Stein, Brill, Leiden (NL) 2013; ID., *Faith at the Crossroads: A Theological Profile of Religious Zionism*, tr. by B. Stein, Brill, Leiden (NL) 2002; J. SAKS, *Rabbi Soloveitchik meets Rav Kook*, «Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought» 38,3 (2006), pp. 90-96; D. SCHWARTZ, *Kol Dodi Dofek: A Religious-Zionist Alternative*, «Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought» 38,3 (2006), pp. 59-72.

³⁰ See W. KOLBRENER, *The Last Rabbi: Joseph Soloveitchik and Talmudic Tradition*, Indiana Uni-

versity Press, Bloomington (IN) 2016, p. 147.

³¹ J.B. SOLOVEITCHIK, *Out the Whirlwind*, D. SHATZ - J.B. WOLOWELSKY - R. ZIEGLER (eds.), KTAV Publishing House, New York 2003, p. 120.

³² ID., *Reflection of the Rav*, cit., p. 189.

³³ See *The Megillat Esther Mesorat HaRav. Commentary based on the Teaching of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, OU Press - Koren Publishers Jerusalem, New York - Jerusalem 2017, pp. 86-87, 102-103, 108.

³⁴ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Kol Dodi Dofek*, cit., p. 55.

³⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 58-59.

represents a man lacking national identity and responsibility toward his own community.³⁶ Not surprisingly, the figure of Job is emblematic of Soloveitchik's existentialistic interpretation of the suffering as an experience of redemption, which urges man to *return* to God within the covenantal fence of *Halakhah*. In his *Out of the Whirlwind*, Soloveitchik identifies three stages in the redemption of Job: (I) God reveals Himself to Job through abundance and wealth, but Job ignores the divine message. Thus, (II) «the cosmic address was supplanted by the apocalyptic address»:³⁷ when questioning the intelligibility of his suffering and the divine silence, Job is unaware that the true function of his suffering is to convey God's disclosure to man; (III) in his final prayer, Job shares his suffering with the community and God accords him the redemption: «He began to live a communal life, to feel the community's hurts, to mourn its disasters and rejoice in its moments of celebration. [...] and God's wrath was assuaged».³⁸

By transposing existential categories from the individual to the social, Job's story may foreshadow Israel's redemption and emergence as a free people.³⁹ (I) In Egypt the Israelites were slaves and unable to know the *experience of suffering*. They lived in total silence: no cry, no protest, no uttered demand for justice (this applies to the spiritual reality of those who lose their existential security or dignity, as in the case of illness or public humiliation).⁴⁰ (II) However, according to *Ex* 2,23, as soon as Moses assumes his leading role, «the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage». Then, especially during the journey through the desert, they found themselves *vis-à-vis* their suffering. Cry and murmuring took over from silence, and the redemption began. Finally, (III) only at Sinai,

Israelites grasped «the logos, both as word and as knowledge [...]».⁴¹ They tethered themselves to God, sharing not just suffering, but also a vision of future whose realization was dependent upon them. Thus, the *creative activity* of the covenant of destiny, rooted in the covenant of fate, flowed from «man's rebellion against an "as is", factual existence, and from the longing that impels him to more enhanced and sublime forms of existence».⁴²

3. *The Paradoxical Experience of Freedom*

Almost bringing out the covenantal ego of Israel from the enslaved self of the Israelites, in *A Living Covenant*, David Hartman writes that the Exodus from Egypt

describes how human beings are to be weaned from the helpless condition of slavery and their initial terror of freedom and uncertainty. The Exodus and the desert signify that the only after the total need for unilateral grace and miracle has been left behind is the community ready to enter the Promise Land and begin to face the responsibility of building a covenantal society.⁴³

In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, an essay first appeared in «Tradition: Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought» 7,2 (1965) and shaped as a «philosophical exegesis of the Bible», Soloveitchik emphasizes the paradoxical character of the experience of freedom.⁴⁴ It is paradoxical because it implies both the surrender to God as His servants and the burden of the responsibility for what one intends to be or to do in the future.⁴⁵ As Soloveitchik argues: «Liberation, therefore, meant throwing off man's yoke and willingly embracing God's yoke».⁴⁶ Probably, Walzer had in mind these words, when he wrote:

³⁶ See M. WALZER, *In God's Shadow. Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) 2012, pp. 161-165.

³⁷ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Out the Whirlwind*, cit., pp. 139-140; see also ID., *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah*, cit., p. 59.

³⁸ ID., *Kol Dodi Dofek*, cit., p. 19.

³⁹ D. SCHWARTZ, *From Phenomenology to Existentialism: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, vol. 2, tr. by B. Stein, Brill, Leiden (NL) 2013, p. 209.

⁴⁰ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah*, p. 57.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 60.

⁴² ID., *Kol Dodi Dofek*, cit., p. 66.

⁴³ HARTMAN, *A Living Covenant*, cit., p. 272.

⁴⁴ J.B. SOLOVEITCHIK, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Doubleday, New York 1992 [1965], pp. 44-45.

⁴⁵ K. SEESKIN, *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2001, p. 30.

⁴⁶ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Reflection of the Rav*, cit., p. 205.

And there a kind of bondage in freedom: the bondage of law, obligation, and responsibility. True freedom, in the rabbinic view, lies in servitude to God. The Israelites had been Pharaoh's slaves; in the wilderness they became God's servants – the Hebrew word is the same; and once they agree to God's rule, He and Moses, His deputy, force them to be free.⁴⁷

Additionally, Soloveitchik's *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah* centers around the notions of slavery, redemption, and freedom. Slavery is «a mute life»; redemption is «identical with communing», and freedom signifies a «speech-endowed life».⁴⁸ Soloveitchik, then, distinguishes two kinds of slavery, located in the “the political slave” and “the existential slave”, respectively. In a previous essay, *Reflections on Freedom and Slavery* (1970), he had discussed the twofold nature of political slavery: private and corporative. Private slavery entails a subordination that does not necessarily become subjugation, since it admits some form of human relationship between the slave and his master (such as feelings of sympathy or trust). On the contrary, corporative slavery does not leave room for human emotion, because the oppression is «faceless» and depersonalized.⁴⁹ This was the status of Israelites in Egypt before the redemption. They were owned by the Egyptian kings' reign and reduced to useful cogs, unable to rebel. Their liberation and the redemption from Egypt were in the hands of God. They had no choice but to rely on Moses: the only one capable of helping them to move from the silent periphery to the great center.⁵⁰ In *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah*, instead, the focus is mostly on the “existential slavery”, which can be distinguished by two features: *anonymity* and *ignorance*. The anonymity expresses itself «in the tragic reality of being forgotten»;

the ignorance is the erroneous self-perception of one's destiny.⁵¹ The hope, in this case, is directed toward the Covenant of Egypt and Covenant of Sinai, as the most powerful antidotes against the slavery of *ignorance* and *anonymity*. By transposing once again existential categories from the individual to the social, Soloveitchik looks to Isaac Leib Peretz's short story *Bontshe shvayg* [*Bontsha the Silent*] (1894) as an example of a people forced to live in anonymity and ignorance (i.e. in “existential slavery”).

Written in Yiddish as a political polemic, the story begins with a view on Bontsha's earthly existence of poverty and suffering; then it continues in Paradise, before the great court of justice, where the whole life of Bontsha is on trial. The verdict, pronounced by the heavenly judge, in a «loving, tender» voice, is:

“You never understood yourself. You never understood that you need not have been in silent, that you could have cried out and that your outcries would have brought down the world itself and ended it. You never understood your sleeping strength [...] but here in Paradise is the world of truth, here in Paradise you will be rewarded. You, the judge can neither condemn nor pass sentence upon. [...] No, for you there is everything! Whatever you want! Everything is yours!” [...] and Bontsha smiles for the first time: “Well then, what I would like, Your Excellency, is to have, every morning for breakfast, a hot roll with fresh butter”.⁵²

At first glance, *Bontsha the Silent* looks like the anti-Jobean hero, the slave who prefers silence to protest. This is confirmed by the refrain: «...אפילו ווען (he still kept silent, even when...)». For such reason, the story has been interpreted, particularly in the American environment, as «a heavy dose of Yiddish sentimentalism».⁵³ However, it is to be no-

⁴⁷ WALZER, *Exodus and Revolution*, cit., p. 53.

⁴⁸ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah*, cit., p. 56.

⁴⁹ ID., *Reflection of the Rav*, cit., p. 204.

⁵⁰ ID., *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah*, cit., pp. 55-72. See also SCHWARTZ, *Faith at the Crossroads*, cit., p. 102.

⁵¹ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah*, cit., p. 61.

⁵² I.L. PERETZ, *Bontsha the Silent* [1894], tr. by H. Abel, in I. HOWE - E. GREENBERG (eds.), *A Treasu-*

ry of Yiddish Stories, Andre Deutsch Ltd., London 1955, pp. 223-230: 229. For the original Yiddish, see I.L. PERETZ, *Bontshe shvayg*, in ID., *Ale verk*, vol. 5, Kletskin, Vilna 1925, pp. 118-129: 128. See N. MORRIS, *The Golem in Jewish American Literature: Risks and Responsibilities in the Fiction of Thane Rosenbaum, Nomi Eve and Steve Stern*, Peter Lang, New York 2007, pp. 93-94.

⁵³ S. PINSKER, *The Schlemiel As Metaphor: Studies in Yiddish and American Jewish Fiction*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale (IL)

ticed that the strength of Bontsha's story lies in the «tension between the radical and the conservative impulse», between the sense of the “grotesque” and the innermost holiness, the earthly cry for action and the heavenly hallelujah.⁵⁴ In fact, the final statement addressed to Bontsha by the heavenly court is «your outcries would have brought down the world itself and ended it». The step beyond that Bontsha could have taken is the open commitment to *activities* and *words*.⁵⁵

Thus, Soloveitchik's brief quote from Peretz's story is meaningful in several regards. First, it reflects Soloveitchik's contribution towards a spiritual and concrete redemption, as «a movement by an individual or a community from the periphery of history to its center», from being a “non-history making entity” to becoming a “history-making people or community”.⁵⁶ Soloveitchik identifies the authentic Jew with the *man of destiny*, who, «viewing his suffering as a challenge and call to action, asks only one question: “what should I do now?”». ⁵⁷ It is a call to bring the divine into this world, by emphasizing a this-worldly spirituality.

Aaron Wildavsky's words come to mind: the Israelites in the wilderness are still slaves of Pharaoh because they «lack memory; each murmuring is a complaint of the moment». ⁵⁸ However, unlike Wildavsky, Soloveitchik sees the desert as the background of the spiritual experience of suffering. Into the wilderness, the suffering gives voice to «the loud protest, the cry, the unuttered question, the wordless demand for justice and retribution». ⁵⁹ The voice of human existence prevails over the silence of slavery, paving the way toward redemption and freedom. And yet, by insisting on the necessity of cry and suf-

fering as channels of redemption, Soloveitchik seems to anticipate the role of Israel's murmurings as sketched in *Exodus and Revolution* by Michael Walzer. However, it must be said that, in his remarks on Israel's murmuring, Walzer drew inspiration from many sources, including Soloveitchik. For example, Walzer combines a poem by Anthony Hecht with Maimonides' notion of «gracious ruse»;⁶⁰ or, elsewhere, he compares the murmuring Israel to a «Sambo in the wilderness»,⁶¹ i.e., the typical plantation slave who is incapable of being trusted with the full privileges of freedom because he is accustomed to living into a closed system of slavery.⁶²

Yet, Soloveitchik's quote from Peretz's *Bontsha the Silent* suggests something more: it seems to unveil Soloveitchik's rootedness in the spiritual world of the East European Jewry. He was born into an illustrious Polish dynasty of Talmudic scholars, who played a crucial role in promoting the “Litvak” or “Mitnagged” outlook of Lithuanian Jewry: intense Talmudism and ceaseless study of the Torah.⁶³ Suffice it to consider his monograph, *Halakhic Man*, in which Soloveitchik sketches his religious patterns merging neo-Kantianism and Litvak tradition. After all, the monograph was «written in the early 1940s, at a time when Lithuanian Jewry was being destroyed by the Nazis, and when Soloveitchik was still mourning the death of his father, a supreme Litvak». ⁶⁴ This might be the reason for his frequent use of anecdotes about his ancestors, to illustrate the nature of the halakhic man. Some scholars classified these tales under the genre of oral stories, typical of the Hasidic tradition.⁶⁵ However, Soloveitchik employs the anecdotal material to portray Litvak intellectualism (as opposed to Hasidic religi-

1991, p. 58.

⁵⁴ R.R. WISSE, *I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 1991, p. 47; See also MORRIS, *The Golem in Jewish American Literature*, cit., pp. 93-94.

⁵⁵ PINSKER, *The Schlemiel As Metaphor*, cit., p. 59.

⁵⁶ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah*, cit., p. 55.

⁵⁷ SINGER - SOKOL, *Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith*, cit., p. 253.

⁵⁸ WILDAVSKY, *Moses as Political Leader*, cit., p. 161.

⁵⁹ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud*

Torah, cit., p. 59.

⁶⁰ MOSES MAIMONIDES, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, cit., III, 32, p. 528.

⁶¹ WALZER, *Exodus and Revolution*, cit., p. 50.

⁶² See S.M. ELKINS, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1959, pp. 85, 133-139.

⁶³ SINGER - SOKOL, *Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith*, cit., pp. 229-230.

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 257.

⁶⁵ KRAH, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, cit., p. 115.

osity) in a positive light, re-constructing its ideal of life entirely infused by *Halakhah*. Suffice it to refer to a story, told in *Halakhic Man*:

The Gaon of Wilna, R. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, his son, R. Hayyim, his grandson, R. Moses, R. Elijah Pruzna [Feinstein] never visited cemeteries and never prostrated themselves upon the graves of their ancestors. The memory of death would have distracted them from their intensive efforts to study the Torah.⁶⁶

It is not the purpose of this article to engage in the discussion about the meaning of the anecdotal presence of Litvak intellectualism in Soloveitchik's work.⁶⁷ It was defined by scholars, such as Singer and Sokol, as «so radical, so extreme, as to make his presumed heroes seem grotesque».⁶⁸ What is particularly interesting for our purposes is the fact that, almost like a storyteller,⁶⁹ Soloveitchik gives voice to some key-characters of East European Judaism. Furthermore, in his *Reflections on Freedom and Slavery*, Soloveitchik portrayed Rabbi Akiba, Maimonides, and Rashi as guiding figures for the present:

History becomes part of our present time-awareness. Memory is more than a storehouse; it can become a present-day experience, a part of the "I" awareness. Rabbi Akiba is not a figure of the past; he guides us in the present, as do Maimonides and Rashi. They are daily companions and they vivify our everyday lives. Tragically, many Jews nowadays, ignorant of their past, find themselves rootless, alienated, and adrift. They are Jews who live only in the present.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ J.B. SOLOVEITCHIK, *Halakhic Man*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1983 [1944], p. 36; see KRAH, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, cit., p. 115; SINGER - SOKOL, *Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith*, cit., p. 259.

⁶⁷ See SINGER - SOKOL, *Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith*, cit., pp. 258-259; A. NADLER, *Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man: Not a "Mithnagged"*, «Modern Judaism» 13,2 (1993), pp. 119-147; KRAH, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, cit., pp. 110-119.

⁶⁸ SINGER - SOKOL, *Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith*, cit., p. 259.

⁶⁹ D. STERN - M.J. MIRSKY, *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Lit-*

By transposing Max Scheler's theory of the time-consciousness of past, present, and future (as experienced in life-communities) inside the halakhic fence, in *Sacred and Profane* (1945) Soloveitchik construed the figures of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and Maimonides, as «dynamic, living heroes who visit the Jew from time to time, bringing him comfort, inspiration, and hope».⁷¹ Small wonder, then, that in his *Reflection on Freedom and Slavery*, among the psychological effects of slavery, Soloveitchik includes the slave's inability to observe time-related *mišwot*, because he lacks time-consciousness. «Time-awareness» - he writes - «suggests that we have the freedom to make decisions and the moral commitment to intervene. We derive from retrospection the moral imperative to act now in order to realize our visions for the future».⁷² These words echo Etienne de la Boétie's *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*: only the free man, who fights to retain his liberty, will have before his eyes «the blessings of the past and the hope of similar joy in the future».⁷³ In the same vein, the slave's condition is characterized by «loosely and meaninglessly structured» time. For the slave, time is a curse that prolongs his oppressive bonds and accustoms him to carelessness and unconsciousness: «In the morning thou shalt say "Would God it were even!", and at even thou shalt say "Would God it were morning!"» (*Dt* 28,67). On the contrary, the free man «moves from reminiscing to expectation, from memory to visions. To live satisfactorily in time requires

erature, Varda Books, Skokie (IL) 2001, pp. 351-352; A. RAKEFFET-ROTHKOFF, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, vol. 1, KTAV Publishing House, New York 1999, p. XIX. See also M.J. MIRSKY, *My Search for the Messiah. Studies and Wandering in Israel and America*, Macmillan Publishing, New York 1977, pp. 69-93.

⁷⁰ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Reflection of the Rav*, cit., p. 201.

⁷¹ ID., *Sacred and Profane* [1945], cit. in S. WEISS (ed.), *Insights of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Discourses on Fundamental Theological Issues in Judaism*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham (MD) 2005, p. 40.

⁷² *Ivi*, p. 201.

⁷³ E. DE LA BOÉTIE, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, tr. by H.

a past that is worthy of being remembered and a promising future». ⁷⁴ Such a man is aware of the continuity and interdependency between the glories of mythical antiquity and the emerging present. Accordingly, in the *Lonely Man of Faith*, appeared more than twenty years after *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik writes:

In the covenantal community man of faith finds deliverance from his isolation in the “now”, for the latter contains both the “before” and the “after”. Every covenantal time experience is both retrospective, reconstructing and reliving the bygone, as well as prospective, anticipating the “about to be”. In retrospect, covenantal man re-experiences the rendezvous with God in which the covenant, as a promise, hope, and vision, originated. In prospect, he beholds the full eschatological realization of this covenant, its promise, hope, and vision. ⁷⁵

The notion of קדושת זמן («the sanctity of time») emphasizes the “qualitative approach to time”, to use Henri Bergson’s terminology. Indeed, for Soloveitchik, the true freedom is reached by cultivating the experience of the “qualitative time” and understanding the creativeness of the “fleeing moment” as the interrelation between past, present, and future. ⁷⁶ An inextricable bond links memory, freedom, and storytelling. In Soloveitchik’s words:

The free man bears a message, has a good deal to tell, and is eager to convey his life story to anyone who cares to listen. No wonder the Torah has [...] emphasized the duty of the father – a liberated slave – to tell his children, born into freedom, the story of his liberation. ⁷⁷

The longing to convey a shared past to an audience is here related to the achievement of freedom and to the «paradoxical time awareness», by which the covenantal man reenacts to carry out the vision of the future. The events of Exodus and Sinai never cease to permeate the present, enhancing a covenantal existence. Similarly, for Hartman, the collective memory of the Sinai shapes a *halakhic hope* that «liberates action» and focuses on human responsibility and self-sufficiency in the redemptive process. Whereas the wandering in the desert mirrors human weakness and fallibility, the Sinai represents the divine acceptance of such human limitation within a covenantal experience in which God, «as a comrade and fellow member» (*sic!*), ⁷⁸ speaks while humanity «listens, decides, and responds». ⁷⁹

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Kurz, The Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn (AL) 2008, p. 43.

⁷⁴ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Reflection of the Rav*, cit., p. 201.

⁷⁵ ID., *The Lonely Man of Faith*, cit., pp. 70-71; see SINGER - SOKOL, *Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith*, cit., p. 240.

⁷⁶ See W. KOLBRENER, *The Last Rabbi: Joseph*

Soloveitchik and Talmudic Tradition, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (IN) 2016, p. 147.

⁷⁷ SOLOVEITCHIK, *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah*, cit., p. 56.

⁷⁸ ID., *The Lonely Man of Faith*, cit., p. 45.

⁷⁹ HARTMAN, *From Defender to Critic*, cit., p. 149.

SUMMARY

This article compares the socio-political models patterned on the *return* to Sinai, as envisaged by Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1993) and David Hartman (1931-2013). For Hartman, Sinai – the *collective memory* of the *place* to which man constantly returns – shapes halakhic hope and responsibility, urging to combine prophetic morality and political demands into a covenantal perspective. Whereas Hartman’s reflection is *engagée* in so far as it looks to the complexities of Israeli political reality as the background of a renewed Jewish Covenant, Soloveitchik understands the return to Sinai within a more existentialistic framework, bringing a blend of East European Jewry outlook and German philosophical tradition into the American debate. He aims at intellectual, spiritual, and identitarian resistance. Particular attention is paid to the complementarity between the Exodus experience and Sinai revelation; the transition from a *covenant of fate* into a *covenant of mission*; the interweaving between freedom, slavery, time-awareness, and storytelling.

KEYWORDS: Joseph Soloveitchik; David Hartman; Covenant at Sinai; Exodus.

