

Chiara Carmen Scordari

University of Pisa, Department of Civilizations and Forms of Knowledge, Philosophy, Pisa, Italy  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2035-0521>  
[chiara.scordari@cfs.unipi.it](mailto:chiara.scordari@cfs.unipi.it)

## Mending a Frail Humankind: Remedial Hermeneutics and Messianic Anthropology in Joseph Soloveitchik

### Abstract

This essay focuses on Joseph Soloveitchik's re-semanticization and renewal of the Jewish concept of messianism. In his view, the idea of Messiah is personified and, at the same time, deferred, as an allegory for ceaseless and ever-changing transformations, both individual and communitarian. Biblical personae endowed with a messianic impulse, such as Abraham, Esther, Mordecai, Tamar, and Ruth, are seen by Soloveitchik as eschatological and metahistorical figures, co-redeemers and co-creators with God, and models with whom human beings may identify. In this framework, particular attention will be paid to Soloveitchik's conception of midrashic hermeneutics, as an always open process of individual and collective self-knowledge and self-redemption; and to the dialectical opposition between "revealed world" and "hidden world" as the constitutive element of Soloveitchik's vision of the humanity-to-come.

**Keywords:** Jewish philosophy, Joseph Soloveitchik, philosophical anthropology, cultural resistance and resilience.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 PL License ([creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/)), which permits redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the article is properly cited. © The Author(s), 2022.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

Editor-in-chief: Jolanta Sujecka

Conception and academic editing: Ewa Niedzialek

Throughout his life Joseph Soloveitchik (1903–1993), the philosopher-rabbi and leader of the Modern Orthodox movement, closely examined human beings in their contradictions and dichotomies. This critical and problematic groundwork runs through all his essays, from *Halakhic Man* and *The Lonely Man of Faith* to his lectures of the 1960s and 1970s. Soloveitchik strives to unearth different dichotomic types of humanity that often coexist in the same individual: winner and defeated, majestic and religious, gregarious and solitary, rational and irrational. His unexhausted and winding investigation of human complexity and vulnerability is an attempt to mend our nature, at least at the epistemic-halakhic level. In Soloveitchik, the conflict between a past to redeem and a future of reparation finds expression in the dialogic-narrative mode of his philosophy of religion. He continuously dialogues with the “dynamic, living” figures of his past and tradition, by reinterpreting them as examples of human personalities and gradations of existence, both individual and collective. For example, Adam personifies the paradox of human existence that oscillates between creativity and humility, worldliness and spiritual loneliness; Abraham is transformed into a trans-historical figure whose restless wandering is an ethico-political imperative to become partner with God in the redemption of humankind (Soloveitchik, 1993, pp. 71–72).

The biblical figure of Esther plays a key role in Soloveitchik’s anthropology of redemption: She is a comfort and inspiration figure whose continuous metamorphosis foreshadows the destiny of both the ideal man of faith and the historical Jew. Soloveitchik looks at the biblical Book of Esther as a story about a “conspiracy of silence,” with “a king, neither wicked or cruel per se” who “signed a decree to exterminate a people he did not know” (Soloveitchik, 2007, p. 28). Such absurd events, both tragic and comical, took place within the orgiastic, hedonistic Persian society ruled by King Ahasuerus. Soloveitchik refers to the Persian exile as a “non-prophetic” era in which the covenantal dialogue between man and God is laconic and enigmatic, “consisting of mysterious hints and signs, bright, dazzling flashes and intimations that mystify man, who is often lonely and feels forsaken” (Soloveitchik, 2007, p. 71). At the very beginning of her mission, as the situation worsened, Esther was perplexed and incapable of deciphering Mordecai’s cryptic messages; she was vulnerable and had no idea how to preserve herself and her people at an alien and hostile court. The Book of Esther is a puzzling narrative that contains two opposite stories: a story of human joy, hope, and salvation, and a story of human sorrow and misery. It echoes the praise of freedom, and, at the same time, it gives voice to

the cry of despair and loneliness: “The *Megillah* is a book of contradiction. It is filled with events that are unreasonable, even absurd, coincidental, pure chance” (Besdin, 2018, p. 45).

Dynamics of the same sort recur in history. What does Esther mean in the 20th century? In face of the complexity and multiplicity of meanings, Soloveitchik reads the Book of Esther as a “dialectical performance” whose dichotomies and contradictions mirror our own. What are we to do, then, when Esther-like coincidences happen today, when the world seems to turn back to a pre-creation state, to a chaotic sub-existence and suspension of God’s moral law?

### How to Write a Catastrophe

The reference to the *Megillah* is central to Soloveitchik’s Holocaust theology and anthropology. The story of Esther reflects the instability and uncertainty governing the life of human beings in general and of Jewish people in particular. It records a period of deep meaninglessness marked by the hiding of God’s face, by divine withdrawal, or *hester panim*. Talmudic sages saw in the etymology of Esther’s name what, in Buber’s terms, is called the “eclipse of God”: “Where do we hear about Esther in the Torah? ‘And I will hide, really hide [Heb. *haster ʾastir*] my face from them’ (*Deut.* 31:18)” (TB, *Hullin* 139b; Wolpe, 1997, pp. 40–43). Soloveitchik was one of the first Jewish theologians to use the notion of God’s hiddenness with regard to the Holocaust (Katz, 2007, p. 358). As early as in 1956, in *Kol Dodi Dofek*, he refers to the 1940s as a period of *hester panim*, a period of identarian uncertainty, especially for young Jews. “Fear, despair, and ignorance caused many to forsake the Jewish community [...]. A seemingly unstoppable tidal wave stood over us and threatened to destroy us” (Soloveitchik, 2006, pp. 35–36). Soloveitchik construes the notion of *hester panim* in theological and political terms. Divine withdrawal leaves human beings disoriented, incapable of explaining and elaborating what appears, *prima facie*, absurd and contradictory, not just at the historical level, but also at the highest, divine level. But “suddenly, the Beloved began to beckon to the hearts of the perplexed.” In his view, the termination of *hester panim* and the foundation of the State of Israel is such a divine knock on the door of the Jewish people. A few years later, in the early 1970s, Soloveitchik comes back to the notion of *hester panim*. The Bible offers at least two different meanings. First, it designates the “divine punishment” of *Deut.* 31:17 (“And in that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide

my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and calamities will come on them”). For Soloveitchik, this is the ultimate stage of *hester panim*, which occurs when divine justice, as a form of “measure for measure,” has been suspended. A second meaning, never explicitly mentioned in Soloveitchik, is used in *Ps. 44:24* to signify “God’s indifference.” In his *Faith after the Holocaust*, Eliezer Berkovits, the most influential sustainer of the necessity of God’s hidden presence in history, in our responsibility and freedom, devotes ample space to the paradox of divine providence. For him, the psalmist gives voice to God’s hiddenness that occurs when human suffering results “not from divine judgment, but from the evil penetrated by man,” from “the tribulations inflicted by man on his fellow” (Berkovits, 1973, p. 95). However, building on *Is. 45:15* (“Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself, the God and Savior of Israel”), Berkovits updates Maimonidean metaphysics and includes, among the 13 attributes of divine action, the attribute of self-hiding:

God’s hiding his face in this case is not a response to man, but a quality of being assumed by God on his own initiative. But neither is it due to divine indifference toward the destiny of man. God’s hiding himself is an attribute of the God of Israel, who is the Savior. In some mysterious way, the God who hides himself is the God who saves. (Berkovits, 1973, p. 101)

Unlike Berkovits, Soloveitchik looks at *Ps. 104:29* (“When you hide your face, they [all creatures] vanish”) and describes the divine hiddenness as a “catastrophic” event that involves “a temporary and partial reversion of the world to its pre-*yetzirah* state, when *tohu wa-vohu* (*hyle*) prevailed, a period without physical patterns, a state of chaotic sub-existence.” Under such circumstances, God’s moral law appears inoperative and inapplicable, and human events “go berserk” (Besdin, 2018, p. 36). However, the idea of a momentary suspension of God’s active surveillance appears, at first, incompatible with the faith in God’s ongoing care for the world. Moses Maimonides designated God as “the efficient cause of the world, its form, and its end,” who continually endows the world “with permanence and constant existence” (Maimonides, 1963, I, 69, pp. 167, 171). This means that:

If one would imagine that none of the entities aside from Him exist, He alone would continue to exist, and the nullification of their [existence] would not nullify His existence, because all the [other] entities require Him and He, blessed be He, does not require them nor any one of them. Therefore, the truth of His [being] does not resemble the truth of any of their [beings]. (Maimonides, 1983, *The Foundations of The Torah* 1:3)

Soloveitchik resolves the apparent contradiction by arguing that the *hester panim*, far from being the radical rejection of creation, is the overthrow of all earthly structures, “the undoing of the restraints and control of *yetzirah*, while God still remains the Sustainer of creation” (Besdin, 2018, p. 36). For him, the Holocaust is *hester panim* because it represents the *tohu wa-vohu* anarchy, i.e. the world’s regression to its pre-creation state.

When discussing *Deut.* 31:17, Maimonides observed that divine providence is constantly watching over the individual who is “endowed with perfect apprehension, whose intellect never ceases from being occupied with God” (Maimonides, 1963, III, 51, p. 624). In Maimonides’ view, it is not God who withdraws from humankind, but the single human being who hides from God and surrenders to chance, because of his/her intellectual imperfection and weakness. When seen from Soloveitchik’s existential human perspective, *hester panim* symbolizes the “throw-ness” into an aimless, directionless existence. The hermeneutical, social and moral bewilderment that derives is what Soloveitchik defines as *human vulnerability*. As if the human being were a wanderer “lost in the vacuousness of the world [...]. His agonies [...] appear as satanic forces, as outgrowths of the primal chaos that pollutes the creation whose destiny was to be a reflection of the Creator” (Soloveitchik, 2006, p. 3). The authentic structure of human existence is the ability to live in the threefold reality of memory, present, and anticipation. But when a person lacks time awareness, i.e. continuity with the legacy of the past and with future projects, he/she is ontologically vulnerable, i.e. continuously exposed to the absurd and unknown (Soloveitchik, 2003, pp. 14–18, 2007, p. 5, 2008a, pp. 5–6; cf. Wolfson, 2019, pp. 40–47). Vulnerability expresses the clash between the individual as a person and as an object, as a chooser and as a victim of circumstance. The vulnerable person surrenders to a purposeless existence, an “existence of fate” (in Soloveitchik’s parlance). As Soloveitchik points out:

He [man] is a vulnerable creature whose serenity may suddenly be jarred by overpowering temptations, peculiar turns of events, unexpected political coups, an economic collapse, a terminal illness, or traumatic shocks. The Book of Kohelet portrays this unnerving uncertainty of man’s life in these words: “For man also knows not his time; as fishes that are taken in an evil net, even so are the sons of man snared in an evil time when it falls suddenly upon them” (*Eccles.* 9:12). The key word above, *pit’om* (“suddenly”), characterizes the vulnerability of man to events which befall him and which are not of his choosing. (Besdin, 2018, p. 41)

In his analysis of human vulnerability, Soloveitchik draws inspiration from Maimonides’ interpretation of *Leviticus* 26:21 (“if you walk in hostility

[Heb. *qeri*] toward me [...] I will multiply your plagues seven times”). In *Guide* III, 36, Maimonides construes the word *qeri* (“opposition”, “contrariness”) as deriving from the same root as the word *miqreh* (“chance”, “fate”), and reads the passage from *Leviticus* as an urging to deny the opinions and the actions of those who believe in the causal power of chance, because of their corrupted and unrighteous nature. As if God said: “If you consider that the calamities with which I cause you to be stricken are to be borne as a mere chance, I shall add for you unto this supposed chance its most grievous and cruel portion” (Maimonides, 1963, III, 36, p. 539). Behind Maimonides’ words, one perceives a founding principle of Jewish morality: Faith in a humanity-to-come and in God’s justice must never waver, even when catastrophic events destroy hopes and redemptive perspectives.

### Messianic Agency

Whenever man-Satan rises against the scattered and dispersed nation, another person rises to protect them. What is the name of the other person? The *sheliah ha-Shem*, the Divine agent. [...] Whenever the Almighty is about to redeem the covenantal community, He summons man to execute the scheme of redemption. Man is always the implementor or the executor of God’s will in times of redemption. [...] It happened in Shushan at the time of Esther and Mordecai, and it will repeat itself in the messianic era, when the Almighty will again summon an individual, the anointed King Messiah [...]. [...] Apparently, the twelfth article of faith requires of every Jew to believe not only in redemption, but in the Messiah’s role in the process of redemption. [...] Redemption entails agency. God is the principle, the human being the agent. (Soloveitchik, 2007, pp. 20–21)

The starting point here is the idea of messianic redemption in Maimonides’ 12th principle, as unceasing faith in the coming of the Messiah and the messianic era. In Maimonides’ view, the Messiah will be a descendent of David, he will rule over Israel as a king, he “will be a greater master of knowledge than Solomon; a great prophet, close to the level of Moses” (Maimonides, 1983, *Laws of Repentance* 9:2). And, even if his kingdom lasts for a long time, eventually he will die of natural causes and he “will be succeeded by his son and grandson” (Maimonides, 1981, 10:1). As for the messianic era, it means “the time when sovereignty will return to Israel, and the people of Israel will return to the Land of Israel. [...] Nothing that now exists will be changed, other than the fact that Israel will be sovereign” (Maimonides, 1981, 10:1).

Soloveitchik gives Maimonidean messianism an ideological and anthropological twist. For him, the *ge’ulah*, the redemption, of the Jews is always

achieved by human beings: No miracle, or divine intervention, is to be expected. For, following Maimonides, “the expectation is for a personal Messiah and not merely a Messianic era” (Besdin, 2018, pp. 184–185). As David Shatz points out, especially in his later works, Soloveitchik refers to redemption as “a process that takes place within the human being, the individual inner redemption” (Shatz, 2015, p. 296). Accordingly, Soloveitchik’s stress on the personal Messiah and his role in the redemptive process can be understood in two ways. First, according to Shatz, it can be understood as the modern Orthodox response to the messianism (without Messiah) of Reform Judaism and the Zionist movement. Soloveitchik is deliberately drawing attention to human potential and responsibility, to protect his co-religionaries from false messianic consciousness and counteract the ideological faith in the messianic character of the State of Israel. As Maimonides declared, “Israel will not be redeemed except through repentance”: In the 1970s there had been no collective repentance, nor any extraordinary personalities who matched the Maimonidean description of the Messiah.

At a deeper level, though, the emphasis on the redeemer Messiah as a divine emissary may be a consequence of Soloveitchik’s philosophical anthropology. At first glance, Soloveitchik seems to uphold a gnostic apocalyptic vision of the days of the Messiah, according to which a redeemer will arise to destroy satanic forces that work through vulnerable human beings. In fact, what Soloveitchik is stressing is the performative nexus between the appearance of a redeemer, be he the Messiah or another divine agent, and the time of *hester panim*, as the darkest moments of Israel’s history.

The figure of the *sheliah ha-Shem*, the emissary of God, is a recurring theme in Soloveitchik’s lectures on Purim and the metamorphosis of monotheism, dating to the first half of the 1970s. The Hebrew term *shaliah* (lit. “the one who is sent”) is used in Talmudic and rabbinical literature to designate one who is appointed to act as another’s representative in matters of law and ritual (Berlin, 2011, p. 24; Levinthal, 1922, pp. 117–191). In a broader sense, *shaliah* is used to signify the millennia-old tradition of itinerant emissaries, who traveled around the world to involve Diaspora communities in the support of Jewish communities of Eretz Israel (Medoff-Waxman, 2008, p. 175). Soloveitchik broadens the notion of agency by arguing that its effects are visible not only on the political but also on an existential level. For him, principal and agent are merged into one personality, thereby sharing concerns and aspirations: “They are one person. That is what the Almighty suggested to Moses: I want to appoint you as my agent. ‘Come now and I will send you’” (Soloveitchik, 2007, p. 20).



Soloveitchik includes among the agents of God not only the Messiah and Moses but also Abraham, Esther, and Mordecai. These figures share the same destiny, the same mission: They are all elected for a redemptive purpose, i.e. the salvation of human beings in general and Jewish people in particular, in both the prophetic and non-prophetic era. They are charismatic personae and lonely individuals, physically and spiritually segregated from the rest of the world (Soloveitchik, 2007, p. 73). Accordingly, Soloveitchik argues:

When God chooses man, He prefers the individual to the multitude. He does not select a group of individuals. Instead, he pulls someone out of the multitude and tells him to be the messenger. [...] God wants the agent not only to deliver a message but to become a co-redeemer, a fellow creator with Him. This is true of the election of the lonely Abraham, segregated from the rest of the world, as well as for Moses [...]. [...] Hence loneliness is bestowed upon the *shaliah*. (Soloveitchik, 2008a, p. 38)

With their dynamism, these “cryptic figures” reflect the dialectical nature of Judaism, at the same time particular and universal, individual and covenantal. As Soloveitchik emphasizes, Mordecai “is not just an individual, a lonely, single Jew, but Mordecai the nation, Mordecai the multitude. [...] The same is true of Esther. [...] Esther was the nation; Esther was the people. She was Israel” (Soloveitchik, 2007, p. 78). Probably looking at Jehudah Halevi’s particularism and Cohen’s eschatology, Soloveitchik introduces his “paradoxical analogy” between the individual messengers of God and the Jewish people: As every redeemer belongs to the Jewish people and lives on forever through it, inspiring and shaping its deepest nature, so the Jewish people belongs to the world, being “obligated to be [...] its heart,” that is, to use Halevi’s words, the most vulnerable and healthiest component of humanity (Halevi, 1905, IV, 36; Soloveitchik, 2007, p. 76). As Soloveitchik remarks: “A Jew is not satisfied with his redemption unless everybody will be redeemed with him” (Soloveitchik, 2007, p. 77). This emphasis on the universal and cosmic value of Jewish historical experience echoes Cohen’s view on the mission of Judaism. For him, Israel’s historical fate of suffering also causes its historical mission, i.e. to participate in the divine education and redemption of humankind (Cohen, 1995, pp. 234–235, 283). However, while Cohen’s Messiah “represents the time of the future, that is, the infinite development of the concept of the human soul,” Soloveitchik’s divine agents bear ambiguous features. On the one hand, they personify the belief in “man’s power to renew himself, to be reborn” (Peli, 2004, p. 182); on the other hand, they enter the scene as metahistorical personalities who



continuously shape the ethical character of Jewish people. It is noteworthy that Soloveitchik's halakhic man of the 1940s, the halakhically observant Jew, endowed with an autonomous, rational and scientific spirit, is indifferent to the eschatological, otherworldly future or the individual's eternal life. His messianic hope is deeply rooted in, and emanated from, the mundane experiences of the material life (Nadler, 1993, p. 124; cf. Schwartz, 2007, pp. 132–140). In Soloveitchik's words, his eschatological "tomorrow" is "linked with the simple, dismal 'today'" (Soloveitchik, 2008b, p. 83). In the 1970s, however, the halakhic man's rigorism and worldliness gave way to a thinly veiled skepticism concerning the human being, who suddenly can turn into both a non-rational, hedonic individual and an irrational, arrogant person. Hence the need for charismatic personalities as examples of human resilience, hope, and redemption, to reexperience.

### Hidden Messiahs

The core of Soloveitchik's messianic anthropology is the juxtaposition of God's hiddenness and the redeemer's birth. The stress on Abraham's birth as the first stage of "the great messianic miracle of liberation" (Soloveitchik, 2008a, p. 37) is emblematic, and can be interpreted in two ways: first, as a sketch of the main figures of Jewish redemptive history (including the Messiah); second, one can extrapolate from the biblical story an ideal type of co-redeemer, with whom contemporary human beings identify, to avoid falling in *hester panim*.

In his lectures on the miracle of Hanukkah (i.e. the miracle of elevating evil), building on the Talmudic and biblical stories about the birth of David, Soloveitchik provides an explication of the historical biographical foundation of the House of David and the King Messiah. He bases his analysis on the dichotomy between the two opposite natures that dwell in the Davidic House: the "revealed world," visible and known to everyone, and the "hidden world," always active but also always concealed beneath the glamour of past glories. Soloveitchik here remarks on the existence of a hidden strength that keeps alive the revealed royal existence of Israel, represented by David and the Messiah. Such a view is reminiscent of the legend, widespread in Jewish folklore, of the 36 Tzaddikim, or just men, who "live in each and every generation" to ensure the survival of the world (TB, *Hullin* 92a). In analyzing the broad diffusion of the legend throughout Europe, from Hasidic sages to contemporary authors (such as Ernst Bloch and S. Y. Agnon), Gershom Scholem points out:

Hasidic authors speak frequently of the two categories of Tzaddikim: those who are hidden and keep to themselves, and those who are known to their fellow men and to some extent fulfill their task under the critical eye of the public. The just man of the first type is called *nistar*, i.e. hidden; the one of the second type *mefursam*, i.e. known. The hidden just men belong to a higher order because they are not subject to the temptation of conceit which is virtually inseparable from public life. (Scholem, 1995, p. 255)

However, it is far more likely that Soloveitchik takes his cue from the midrashic narrative on David's birth, where it is said that David was "found" in Sodom, i.e. King David was a descendent of Lot, via Ruth the Moabite: "R. Yitzhak said: 'I have found David my servant' (*Ps.* 89:20) Where did I find him? In Sodom" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 41:4). Similarly, among the agents of the concealed world, Soloveitchik includes Lot's daughters, Tamar, and Ruth, without whom no king or Messiah could ever be born: "Lot's daughter begat Moab (*Gen.* 19), eventually leading to the birth of Ruth, David's great-grandmother; Tamar begat Perez (*Gen.* 38), who led, nine generations later, to David" (Soloveitchik, 2007, p. 150). However, Soloveitchik is not interested in a genealogical account of the Messiah's ancestry; rather, he is interested in stressing how the biblical grandmothers, unlike Abraham and Esther, were co-creators with God in shaping the personality of the Messiah. They foreshadow "the finest most beautiful elements concealed in the depth of mankind," i.e. the heroisms with which the Messiah must be endowed: the heroism of universal commitment and "faith in tomorrow and in a kingdom of justice"; the heroism of "waiting and hope," the heroism of "loneliness" and "absurd loyalty" (Soloveitchik, 2008a, pp. 176–183).

Despite the constant references to the personal Messiah as the descendant of King David, once again Soloveitchik's approach is profoundly anthropological. For him, "the personality of the King Messiah is not monotonic. [...] The messianic soul is iridescent, multitalented, rich in thought-filled volition, and will be endowed with talents that seem mutually exclusive" (Soloveitchik, 2008a, p. 177). In emphasizing the role of the hidden female co-creators with God, Soloveitchik is sketching an ideal type of messianic personality, whose major aim must be

to change the status quo, to revolutionize concepts and opinion, to transform our outlook on life. He will defy evil, oppose ruthlessness, challenge injustice, "and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the land with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked" (*Is.* 11:4). (Soloveitchik, 2008a, p. 181)

*Isaiah* 11:1–16 has traditionally been read as an eschatological prophecy, anticipating a radical *novum* in which a future redeemer from the House of David (“the shoot of Jesse”) will gather the exiles, restore political sovereignty, and establish the hegemony of Israel, a *pax aeterna* over the nation: “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the shoot of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious” (*Is.* 11:19–20). While Maimonides saw the extraordinary effects of the messianic era in this same passage, Soloveitchik puts all the emphasis on the Messiah’s personality which, in many respects, resembles that of Abraham. Soloveitchik’s Abraham echoes Maimonides’ Abraham: the wandering activist prophet who “wreaks havoc” in the pagan world and establishes new moral and religious values, by overpowering the idolaters with demonstrations and teaching the people that “the world has but one God, who alone ought to be worshipped” (Maimonides (1983), *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry* 1:3). In the same vein, Soloveitchik’s Abraham is the archetype of the “charismatic person,” an *ante litteram* example of “civil disobedience” and “moral resistance,” i.e. a more human Abraham, endowed with an “anarchic,” “freedom-loving” and “anti-authoritarian” nature. Abraham’s soul permeates all historical eras and stretches infinitely into an everlasting community:

Abraham exceeds the boundary line of individual, temporal existence [...]. Abraham immortalizes himself in the continuous historical series which he sponsored. He lives in the community and in the covenant. [...] [The charismatic person] transplants his existence into that of historical process. He identifies with its separate phases [...]. He measures his imaginary personality with the real one which is to be found on the concrete level and tries to bridge it by establishing communion between the concrete world and the anticipated. [...] The historical Abraham as a historical personality attained immortality. Yet Abraham did not conquer death in the metaphysical, transcendental sense. His immortality is through and through historical; immortality which consists in the charismatic proximity to a distant future and closeness to a remote past. (Soloveitchik, 2005, pp. 167–169)

Besides being a premise to the Messiah, Abraham’s birth is seminal and influential up to the present times, as Soloveitchik underscores in discussing Maimonides’ *Laws of Idolatry*. Maimonides argues that “on this path the world continued its course of circuitry [Heb. *holekh u-mitgalgel*] until the birth of the firmest pillar of the world, Abraham our father” (Maimonides, 1983, *Laws of Idolatry* 1:2). And Soloveitchik here focuses on the word *mitgalgel* (lit. “he/it rolls”), stressing its allegorical sense: “*Mitgalgel* means aimless, directionless [...]. In other words, *mitgalgel* means man’s

surrender to the elemental, external forces that push him from the outside, when man becomes an object. [...] *mitgalgel* means unsupervised, non-directed, purposeless, and destinationless motion drifting toward disaster” (Soloveitchik, 2008a, p. 35). Soloveitchik appropriates Maimonides’ account of the origin of monotheism out of Abraham, interpreting it as a report on the existential-ontological status of humankind before Abraham’s appearance: “Maimonides says that before Abraham was born, man was not a persona. He was an object surrendered to the blind mechanical forces of the environment” (Soloveitchik, 2008a, p. 35). Like Esther and Mordecai save the Jewish people from physical, spiritual and identarian destruction, Abraham redeems human beings from inauthentic existence:

Apparently, it was immediately with Abraham’s birth that the world stopped rushing down into a yawning abyss. The significance of his birth consists in the certitude that greatness in a human being cannot be suppressed or destroyed. [...] Once Abraham was born, it was quite certain that he would redeem the world. (Soloveitchik, 2008a, pp. 35, 39)

Through the figure of Abraham, Soloveitchik gives voice to the need for charismatic personalities (whether individual or collective) as an antidote to totalitarian drifts in human regimes. Abraham takes off the clothes of Maimonides’ prophet. Nor does he foreshadow Kierkegaard’s knight of faith. Soloveitchik’s Abraham personifies a metahistorical personality, continuously regenerating into single individuals or national collectivity. The stress on the redeeming role of God’s emissaries raises important questions about Soloveitchik’s existential hermeneutics: not only a tool for understanding biblical narratives, but also a constitutive component of Jewish ethics of memory; an open heuristic process of individual and collective self-knowledge and self-redemption. Soloveitchik acknowledges the dialectical and redemptive role of collective memory: “To live historically means to live through *all* phases of history, both past and future. [...] The historical community extends into both the past and the future. Its membership includes the living, the dead, and the not-yet-born. Historical awareness is multi-temporal” (Soloveitchik, 2005, pp. 164–165). Faced with the paradoxical experience of history, he “transports himself, with all his thoughts, beliefs and traits, into the Biblical situation or into the person of the Biblical hero” (Peli, 1988, p. 15). In doing this, he creates new *midrashim* for biblical stories, more fitted to contemporary contingencies. He reexperiences ancient characters and transforms them into metahistorical agents of redemption, to look to when the world is running down, to mend it.

## References

- Berkovits, E. (1973). *Faith after the Holocaust*. KTAV.
- Berlin, A. (2011). *The Oxford dictionary of the Jewish religion* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199730049.001.0001>
- Besdin, A. R. (Ed.). (2018). *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish thought adapted from lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*. KTAV.
- Cohen, H. (1995). *Religion of reason out of the sources of Judaism* (S. Kaplan, Trans.). Scholars Press.
- Halevi, J. (1905). *Kitab Al-Khazari* (H. Hirschfeld, Trans.). George Routledge & Sons.
- Katz, S. (Ed.). (2007). *Wrestling with God: Jewish theological responses during and after the Holocaust*. Oxford University Press.
- Levinthal, I. H. (1922). The Jewish law of agency. *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 13(2), 117–191. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1451278>
- Maimonides, M. (1963). *The guide of the perplexed* (S. Pines, Trans.; Vols. 1–2). University of Chicago Press.
- Maimonides, M. (1981). *Maimonides' commentary on The Mishnah: Tractate Sanhedrin* (F. Rosner, Trans.). Sepher-Hermon Press.
- Maimonides, M. (1983). *The book of knowledge: From the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides* (H. M. Russell & R. J. Weinberg, Eds. & Trans.). KTAV.
- Medoff, R., & Waxman, C. I. (2008). *Historical dictionary of Zionism* (2nd ed.). Scarecrow Press.
- Nadler, A. (1993). Soloveitchik's Halakhic man: Not a *mithnagged*. *Modern Judaism – A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience*, 13(2), 119–148. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mj/13.2.119>
- Peli, P. H. (1988). Hermeneutics in the thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik – Medium or message? *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, 23(3), 9–31. <https://traditiononline.org/hermeneutics-in-the-thought-of-rabbi-soloveitchik-medium-or-message/>
- Peli, P. H. (Ed.). (2004). *On repentance: The thought and oral discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Scholem, G. (1995). The tradition of the thirty-six hidden just men. In G. Scholem, *The messianic idea in Judaism and other essays on Jewish spirituality* (M. A. Meyer, Trans.). Schocken.
- Schwartz, D. (2007). *Religion or Halakha: The philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (B. Stein, Trans.; Vol. 1). Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004157668.i-376>
- Schatz, D. (2015). The muted Messiah: The aversion to messianic form of Zionism in modern Orthodox thought. In M. L. Morgan & S. Weitzman (Eds.), *Rethinking the messianic idea: New perspectives on Jewish messianism* (pp. 274–315). Indiana University Press.
- Soloveitchik, J. B. (1993). Sacred and profane: *Kodesh* and *Chol* in world perspectives. *Jewish Thought: A Journal of Torah Scholarship*, 3(1), 55–82.

- Soloveitchik, J. B. (2003). *Out of the whirlwind: Essays on mourning, suffering and the human condition* (D. Shatz, J. B. Wolowelsky, & R. Ziegler, Eds.). KTAV.
- Soloveitchik, J. B. (2005). *The emergence of ethical man* (M. S. Berger, Ed.). KTAV.
- Soloveitchik, J. B. (2006). *Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen – my beloved knocks* (D. Z. Gordon, Trans.). KTAV.
- Soloveitchik, J. B. (2007). *Days of deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah* (E. D. Clark, J. B. Wolowelsky, & R. Ziegler, Eds.). KTAV.
- Soloveitchik, J. B. (2008a). *Abraham's journey: Reflections on the life of the founding patriarch* (D. Shatz, J. B. Wolowelsky, & R. Ziegler, Eds.). KTAV.
- Soloveitchik, J. B. (2008b). *And from there you shall seek* (N. Goldblum, Trans.). KTAV.
- Wolfson, E. R. (2019). *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden gnosis and the path of poiësis*. Indiana University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpb3w4r>
- Wolpe, D. (1997). *Hester Panim* in modern Jewish thought. *Modern Judaism*, 17(1), 25–56. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mj/17.1.25>

---

---

## Riparare l'umanità fragile: ermeneutica correttiva e antropologia messianica in Joseph Soloveitchik

In Joseph Soloveitchik l'esperienza dell'umanità post-Shoah, negativa e difettiva, suscita la contro-immagine di un'umanità futura da riparare e riconciliare. Coniugando il messianismo naturalistico-restaurativo di Maimonide con l'idea coheniana di tempo futuro ideale, Soloveitchik trasforma l'attesa in un Messia personale in progetto antropologico, sviluppando un'idea di redenzione intra-mondana, immanente all'uomo e alla storia. In questa cornice, le figure bibliche di Abramo, Ester, Mordecai, Tamar e Rut sono *ri-vissute* e *ri-esperte* come modelli escatologici e metastorici di resistenza e creatività umana, e tappe del processo di continua scoperta e attuazione di sé, nei diversi tempi e luoghi della storia, individuale e nazionale. Da qui l'idea di un'ermeneutica che si fa modalità di rivelazione e auto-comprensione storica ed esistenziale, nonché strumento di redenzione e progettazione dell'umanità-a-venire.

**Parole chiave:** filosofia ebraica, Joseph Soloveitchik, antropologia filosofica, resistenza e resilienza culturale.

## Naprawa kruchej ludzkości: hermeneutyka naprawcza i antropologia mesjańska u Josepha Soloveitchika

U Josepha Soloveitchika doświadczanie człowieczeństwa po Shoah, negatywne i ułomne, wzbudza antyobraz przyszłej ludzkości, którą należy naprawić i zaprowadzić wśród niej zgodę. Łącząc naturalistyczno-restauracyjny mesjanizm Majmonidesa z kohenowską ideą idealnej przyszłości, Soloveitchik przekształca oczekiwanie na osobowego Mesjasza w projekt antropologiczny, rozwijając ideę wewnątrzświatowego zbawienia, immanentnego zarówno dla człowieka, jak i historii. W tym ujęciu biblijne postacie Abrahama, Estery, Mordechaja, Tamar i Rut są ponownie przywoływane i doświadczane jako eschatologiczne oraz metahistoryczne modele ludzkiego oporu i twórczości – etapy w procesie ciągłego poznania i aktualizacji własnego ja, które zachodzą w różnych czasach i momentach historii tak indywidualnej, jak i narodowej. Stąd idea hermeneutyki, która staje się modalnością historycznego i egzystencjalnego objawienia i samorozumienia, ale także instrumentem odkupienia i planowania przyszłej ludzkości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** filozofia żydowska, Joseph Soloveitchik, antropologia filozoficzna, opór i odporność kulturowa.

Przekład z języka włoskiego  
*Ewa Niedziałek*

### Note

Chiara Carmen Scordari, University of Pisa, Department of Civilizations and Forms of Knowledge, Philosophy, Pisa, Italy.

chiara.scordari@cfs.unipi.it

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2035-0521>

The preparation of the article was self-funded by the author.

No competing interests have been declared.

### Publication history

Received: 2021-02-04; Accepted: 2022-05-24; Published: 2022-12-21