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Rabbi Israel Salanter as a Jewish Philosopher

What is Jewish Philosophy?

To be Jewish and a philosopher is not yet to be a Jewish philosopher. One of the central works of philosophy written by a Jew is certainly Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*. Yet there is no consensus about how Jewish the work is. In the introduction to his translation of the *Guide*, Professor Shlomo Pines, one of the great Maimonidean scholars of the twentieth century, wrote:

The fact that, relatively speaking, Maimonides had so little recourse to Jewish philosophic literature is significant. It implies *inter alia* that he had no use for a specific Jewish philosophical tradition. . . . Qua philosopher he had the possibility to consider Judaism from the outside.¹

This analysis of Rambam's world view is no different from that of Maimonidean critics from within Orthodox Judaism, such as the Gaon of Vilna² or Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.³

That Rambam quoted Jewish sources such as the Bible and the Talmud in his *Guide* did not make it any more "Jewish" in the eyes of his academic or rabbinic reviewers. For it appeared to them that he had actually formulated his views from gentile sources, and only then attempted to reconcile them (or indeed buttress them) with the words of Scripture and

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the Rabbis. His philosophy, in short, did not emerge, according to this view, from the Jewish tradition itself, but from elsewhere.

To put the matter another way, many of the philosophical problems that Rambam treated would not have arisen from talmudic Judaism alone, nor can they even be stated without the vocabulary of Greek and Islamic thought. They arose only for the “perplexed”—those who perceived conflicts between the Greco-Arabic philosophical tradition and Judaism, but were unwilling to abandon either. I say not that this analysis is correct, but only that it is prevalent.

The thought of Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810-1883), founder of the Musar movement and certainly one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the last few hundred years, raises the opposite problem. R. Israel’s work is certainly Jewish: his frame of reference is almost exclusively the legal and ethical sources of talmudic culture. All of the problems he treats grow naturally from these sources. And the problems, furthermore, are problems that arise out of trying to live according to those sources.⁴ His thought was Jewish, if anybody’s was; but was it philosophy?

The question, however, may prove to be misleading.

The universal culture of traditional Jews was certainly the talmudic culture, even in lands and in climes where Jews studied non-Jewish culture as well. But the talmudic culture in general discouraged the study of gentile philosophy, and often regarded it as inimical and dangerous, as well as alien.⁵ In medieval Ashkenaz and in Eastern Europe later on, the very word “philosophy” had (and has) an evil sound to talmudic Jews. Therefore, a talmudic Jew in Kovno, such as R. Israel Salanter, would not be likely to admit to engaging in “philosophy”—even if he did.

Now there is a basic misconception which is so widespread in Jewish life, and so pernicious, that it bears refutation. Philosophy is an intellectual activity, not the reading of certain books. In fact, it is impossible for any thinking person to avoid philosophical issues, so we can assume that every talmudic great “did” philosophy whether or not he had formal study in the discipline. The question is only whether he did it badly or well, systematically or sporadically. Presumably the study of a giant like Aristotle would improve one’s own philosophical ability, but the matter is not self-evident, particularly when we judge medieval philosophers anachronistically, by modern standards. And this brings me to another important point.

Philosophy—the thing, not the word—comprises much more than the philosophical agendas of Aristotle or of the medieval philosophers. This is certainly true from the vantage point of hindsight, at least for

those who believe that philosophy has progressed through the ages. Thus, for example, we might find in the *Mishneh Torah* philosophical analyses of topics not treated at all in the *Moreh Nevukhim*, and which Rambam did not, though we do, perceive as philosophical. (In fact, there might even be conflicting treatments of the same topic, such as time, or causality, in the *Yad* and the *Moreh*, if Rambam did not perceive himself as “doing philosophy” when he wrote those portions of the *Yad*.) In other words, in writing about philosophers, we must distinguish between what the term “philosophy” meant to an historical figure, and what it means to the writer. In this essay, I will use “philosophy” in the way it is used today, even when discussing historical figures. This does not mean that I have a ready definition of a “philosophical issue.” In this essay, I will simply assume that the agreement of philosophers that X is a philosophical issue is sufficient evidence that it is.

In sum, to find instances of Jewish philosophy, i.e., philosophy that is Jewish, one must be able to identify philosophical issues and arguments, even if they are labeled as something else entirely, or are subsidiary to some other project. One must be oneself a student of philosophy;⁷ even better, a philosopher.⁸ One must also be familiar with the rabbinic-talmudic style of discourse in which philosophical arguments are disguised.⁹ Indeed, one must be familiar with talmudic law itself.

For a simple example, consider the ancient Greek debate about change and becoming. Opinions on the subject ranged from that of Heraclitus, who held that one cannot step into the same river twice (because new waters are always flowing upon you), to Parmenides who held that change is an illusion even in the case of a river. The question crucially depends upon the concept of identity through time—whether we can think of a river as “the same,” as persisting through time, even though the waters coursing through it may be “different.”¹⁰

Now the Talmud asked almost the very same question, though camouflaging it in legal terminology: if one worships (prostrates himself before) a spring, are the waters of that spring made unfit to be offered as a libation? “Is it the water before him that he worshipped, which is no longer there, or is it the [entire] stream of water that he worshipped?” (*Avodah Zarah*, 48b). The question is not simply one of the idolater’s intention, since there is no way to determine that. Rather the question is philosophical, whether or not the spring itself is an object which persists through time, and therefore could be the object of worship. We have here the beginning of an ontological discussion, despite the ostensible hostility of the Talmud to “philosophy” or “Greek wisdom.”

Questions of identity permeate the halakhic literature. The Rabbis had to decide when and whether two idols are the same deity; and at what point a sandal, undergoing alterations, becomes a different sandal.¹¹ Identity questions can decide even questions of *kashrut*.¹²

The list of philosophical issues that impact on halakhic questions is long. Elaborating further the laws of idolatry led the Rabbis into areas which today would be called philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of psychology. For example: is a depiction of an idol always an idolatrous depiction? Indeed, what constitutes idolatrous worship, or idolatrous intent to worship? Is a statue representing a merely imaginary object or power (or a dead human, such as Jesus) an idol? And what about the imaginary object itself? Two other central concepts in philosophical analysis, causality and time, are crucial to Jewish law, as all law. And Halakhah puts special emphasis on the concept of intention (*kavvanah*), another philosophical chestnut.¹³

The moral here is that we are likely to find a Jewish philosopher precisely where we are not expecting to. We are likely to find a Jewish philosopher denying his trade, or camouflaging it, or using philosophy as an end to something else. R. Israel Salanter is a prime example.

Was R. Israel Salanter a Philosopher?

From personal experience,¹⁴ I can attest to the prevailing opinion in both the yeshivah community and the academic world that few men were further from philosophy than R. Israel. In fact, R. Israel himself probably would have bristled at the thought that he was doing philosophy. Yet it is not difficult to show that R. Israel Salanter, in order to construct his system of *musar*, had to grapple with some of the oldest problems in philosophy, though for him, they arose in the context of talmudic Judaism. The results of this struggle make him, in my opinion, not only a philosopher, not only a Jewish philosopher, but an outstanding one.

When I say that R. Israel was a philosopher, I do not mean only that he raised philosophical issues, or that he had opinions on philosophical matters.¹⁵ On the contrary, I hold that philosophical issues are unavoidable, in the sense that every human being must take a position, from time to time, on one or another recognizably philosophical issue. Certainly the Rabbis, as we have seen from the examples above, confronted philosophical issues, such as the nature of identity, in their quest for ascertaining the Will of God via halakhic reasoning. But if philosophical issues are unavoidable, then addressing them cannot be a crite-

rion for being a philosopher in the narrower sense in which I claim R. Israel was a philosopher.¹⁶

What is required in addition is philosophical achievement. Instead of trying to define this concept (probably an impossible task), I propose to give examples of R. Israel Salanter's philosophical achievement.

The first example is a solution R. Israel offers to a philosophical problem to which Plato, Aristotle, and David Hume also offered solutions. I hope to make clear that R. Israel's solution is deeper than theirs; that it is an original contribution; and that it may even be true.¹⁷

It might be said, however, that individual solutions to problems, however brilliant, do not make a philosopher. To be called a philosopher, a thinker must develop a systematic approach to a number of philosophical problems. Accordingly, my second example is that of a cluster of philosophical problems which R. Israel treats with one overall analysis. The analysis shows that the problems are truly related, the mark of a good analysis.

Example One—Weakness of the Will¹⁸

In the talmudic tradition, action takes precedence over theory (at least in theory!), and the idea of disinterested philosophical reflection is discouraged.¹⁹ In the European-Christian tradition, contemplation is encouraged. In fact, among the philosophers, I can think of only one thinker, Benjamin Franklin, who gives serious consideration to the question of inculcating virtue in the individual, as distinct from the question of exploring the essence of virtue.²⁰

R. Israel was concerned with bridging the gap between religious ideals and religious practice, which is a question of therapy, not philosophy. But to construct his form of therapy, R. Israel had to analyze the illness: why do people who espouse values act counter to these values in everyday life? Debate over this question is one of the earliest in recorded philosophy, between Socrates and Aristotle. Socrates (in the *Protagoras*) held that virtue is knowledge. Or to put it as a yeshivah student would: any *hissaron* in practice reflects a *hissaron* in knowledge. Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 3) rejected this view as simplistic; his own suggestion as to how "weakness of the will" (*akrasia*) is possible—despite knowledge—will not concern us here.²¹

R. Israel's solution is given, if only by implication, in the first words of his *Iggeret ha-Musar*. R. Israel suggests not only a solution to the problem of *akrasia*, but a deeper one than that of either Plato or Aristotle:

The imagination of Man is free; his reason is bound. His imagination leads him astray . . . so that he fears not the certain future . . . when he will suffer harsh judgments. No one else will be caught in his stead—he alone will bear the fruit of his sin; he is one, the sinner and the punished. . . .²²

R. Israel's explanation for the failure of the good man to live up to his beliefs goes far beyond the mere invocation of the "evil inclination." The question is what the evil inclination is, and how it functions. R. Israel's answer is that the believing sinner becomes alienated from his future self, so that he becomes as indifferent to his own future suffering as most of us are to suffering in a faraway land. It is therefore the task of *musar* to bring the future to the present, so that the sinner feels the punishment already in his imagination. The philosophical analysis suggests a program of therapy, and this therapy R. Israel calls "learning *musar*."

But the problem is not just the "remoteness" of the future state. R. Israel's disciples, for example R. Isaac Blaser, reported that their teacher explained that the problem is (or is aggravated by) the great difference between our bodily existence and our eternal one, a difference so great that we find it difficult to identify ourselves altogether in the unimaginable bodiless state. So we cannot act on our belief in divine punishment after death.²³

R. Israel's view, as attributed to him by disciples, bears a striking resemblance to that of the famous atheist, Hume, who expresses mock horror at

. . . the universal carelessness and stupidity of men with regard to a future state. . . . There is not indeed a more ample matter of wonder to the studious, and of regret to the pious man, than to observe the negligence of the bulk of mankind concerning their approaching condition. . . . A future state is so far removed from our comprehension, and we have so obscure an idea of the manner, in which we shall exist after the dissolution of the body, that we are never able with slow imaginations to surmount the difficulty. . . . And indeed the want of resemblance in this case so entirely destroys belief, that except those few, who upon cool reflection on the importance of the subject, have taken care by repeated meditation to imprint on their minds the arguments for a future state, there scarce are any, who believe the immortality of the soul with a true and established judgment. . . .²⁴

Though the resemblance to R. Israel's analysis is obvious, R. Israel's is still the deeper. Hume presumes that sinners simply do not believe what they profess, on account of the weakness of the idea humans can have of a future state. Thus, in the end, Hume's diagnosis is a variant of

Socrates': a defect in action presupposes a defect in belief. But Hume's diagnosis is based on a superficial account of the nature of belief itself, as constituted by a vivid idea—an account refuted by Thomas Reid in Hume's own lifetime, with the simple objection that we can have the most vivid hallucination without believing in its veracity.²⁵ R. Israel, on the other hand, locates the problem not in believing in a future state, but in locating ourselves in the future state and relating to our future state as ourselves.

Example Two: Humility, Rationality and the Emotions

In this section I will argue that R. Israel is a “systematic” philosopher in that he shows how to deal with a number of problems in a unified way. It is important to state at the outset, therefore, that his writing on these matters leaves much to be desired in the way of organization and clarity. R. Israel adopts the style of *derush* and *pilpul* in all his writing. He interrupts the flow of argument every few paragraphs to explain a difficult biblical verse or talmudic dictum; raises a slew of difficulties at the beginning of a long essay; yet postpones their final resolution to the very end, and so on. R. Israel's convoluted exposition creates difficulties of understanding for the modern reader, in addition to the difficulties I summarized above.²⁶ Furthermore, he does not always treat problems in their logical order, and on occasion relegates the most important philosophical issues to footnotes (below we will discuss a *ten page* note on the Houses of Shammai and Hillel). Accordingly, in the following exposition of R. Israel's philosophy—based largely on his magnificent (but labyrinthine) essay, *Berurei ha-Middot* (125-159), I have taken the liberty of jumping back and forth, rather than following the order of the author, in order to improve the exposition of his ideas.²⁷

One philosophical problem tackled by R. Israel is that of humility, a subject to which analytic philosophers have recently turned (or returned) their attention.²⁸ The *musarite*, of course, wants to inculcate humility, but before he can do so, he must first understand the virtue itself, for it appears to be irrational. For humility apparently involves self-deception, insofar as the humble person is to believe falsehoods about himself. For example, Moses—according to R. Israel (136)—believed sincerely that his own spiritual achievements were no greater than those of others, a patent falsity. No Greek philosopher, to my knowledge, regarded the inculcation of falsehood as a possible virtue.

R. Israel, however, in a move of great philosophical acuteness (131ff.), regards the problem of humility as a special case of a general problem—the asymmetry of virtue (*davar ve-hippukho*). That is, certain virtues operate differently when they are focused on the agent himself as opposed to focusing on someone else. It may be laudable to avoid too many luxuries—for oneself. But the *mizvah* of hospitality involves showering these very luxuries upon one’s guest. Honor is something to be shunned, say the Rabbis, for oneself.²⁹ Yet it is the greatest virtue to bestow honor upon others. So too with humility. It is said that when, at a conference, thousands of Jews rose to honor the Ḥafeẓ Ḥayyim upon his entrance, he instinctively turned around to see which great man they were greeting. This action decisively captures the paradoxical asymmetry of humility—his humility prevented the Ḥafeẓ Ḥayyim from realizing that thousands of Jews were performing an elementary *mizvah* (of honoring the *talmid ḥakham*) which he himself would never dream of neglecting! To put the matter another way—if the Ḥafeẓ Ḥayyim knew that the author of *Mishnah Berurah* had entered the room, but he had suffered amnesia to the extent that he did not know that he himself had authored this work, the Ḥafeẓ Ḥayyim would surely have castigated any man who failed to honor the author. How then, asks “philosophy,” could the mere “detail” that he, R. Yisrael Meir Kagan, had written the *sefer*, make any difference to the *mizvah* of honoring the wise? Why should one discriminate against oneself?

For Kant, who attempted to ground morality on rationality, this problem would have been unsolvable. Rationality is universal; it doesn’t respect persons. What is a rational argument for one must be valid for all. But R. Israel can be seen as putting forth a Jewish alternative to Kantian ethical theory, a virtue-based ethics.³⁰

For, avers R. Israel (137), the virtues involve not only reason, but the emotions. The effect of certain actions, when performed on behalf of others, is totally different from their effect when performed on oneself. Whereas Kant regarded only the good will as having moral value, R. Israel sees the entire personality as in the sphere of morality. In this, he joins the ranks of many Jewish writers in the talmudic tradition, such as Naḥmanides³¹ (with whom R. Israel often dialogues). Humility is not so much a matter of what one believes, but rather of the emotional charge attached to the belief. The humble person can well know his greatness (and in fact, the Ḥafeẓ Ḥayyim never forgot who he was, often applying the laws regulating the conduct of the *adam gadol* to himself). But the

humble person gets no emotional charge from the knowledge of his accomplishments:

Man has the ability to increase the emotional affect [*hitpa'alut*] in his soul over his own shortcomings . . . and to the extent that this affect gives saliency [*koah*] to his shortcomings, so too will his sensitivity [*hergesh*] to his own good qualities die down. This is [not only] the means of arriving at humility, but its very essence [*mishpatah*] (149).

So it is not a question of belief, but of the saliency of the belief. Nevertheless, a problem still remains: the goal of reaching humility seems to require concealing from oneself certain truths, at least at certain times. For example, the way to achieve humility (for the person who wishes to develop the virtue) is to train oneself to downplay one's own achievements in relation to those of others—so R. Israel notes (136), citing R. Baḥya's *Hovot ha-Levavot*. And great leaders from Mosheh Rabbenu to the Ḥafez Ḥayyim, as we have seen, indeed deprecate their own achievements—in all personal contexts, unconnected to their roles as leaders. While the goal of this is certainly noble, namely, protecting oneself from emotional corruption, it still remains true that the means to the goal is the adoption of an irrational posture.

There are, indeed, religious irrationalists, who glorify religion as “higher than reason.” R. Israel himself agrees that humility can be called “above reason”—*le-ma'alah min ha-sekheh*:

There are two kinds of mending [*tikkun*] of the [evil] inclination: the first, to mend the powers of the soul so that they desire only the good as dictated by reason . . . and the second, to raise them to a lofty stage [*madregah*], far above the scope of human rationality. And virtually the entire basis of the virtue of humility is in this category of beyond human reason. (136)

Unlike these superficial thinkers, however, R. Israel recognizes that adopting an irrational cognitive policy requires rational justification—otherwise, why is this particular irrationality “higher” and not “lower” than reason? Just as in the issue of moral weakness, R. Israel did not rest content with the superficial response, “it's the doing of the Evil Inclination,” so too here he demands a rational motive for what appears to be the irrationality of humility:

The Rabbis said (*Niddah* 30b): “Even if the entire world says to you, you are righteous, be wicked in your own eyes”; yet this is . . . something that reason does not dictate. But then what can generate [humility], since the power to achieve higher levels of virtue depends upon reason, and how can one transcend his own reason? (137)

R. Israel has an answer to this as well. In a brilliant discussion (138-148) of the phenomenon of “schools” in Judaism (for example, the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel), he asks: how can there be “schools” in Halakhah? Each *talmid ḥakham* should judge each issue on its own merits according to the pure dictates of rationality (*sekhel*). Rationality is universal—a valid argument is valid for everybody, or for nobody. Moreover, the Talmud tells us that Rabbis were attracted to the two Houses by personal considerations, such as the character traits associated with the Houses (*Eruvin* 13b). That is, the House of Hillel was reputed to have certain virtues, and the House of Shammai others. How, demands R. Israel, is such a bias legitimate?

R. Israel’s reply antedates the work of the inductive logicians of the 20th century. R. Israel regards talmudic scholarship and jurisprudence not as “legal reasoning,” but as aiming at the true Will of God, much as the scientist aims at the true laws of nature. Talmudic reasoning, however, is not deductive in the manner of geometry (as Naḥmanides points out in the introduction to his *Milḥamot Hashem*). That is, a talmudic argument can only make a conclusion probable. Indeed, there can be arguments for each side of a question, and the scholar must weigh those arguments; the halakhic conclusion is that which the arguments make most probable—in contrast to the definitive proofs found in mathematics.

One may think that while talmudic reasoning is not deductive, it is *formal* in that there is no room for dispute concerning the *relative weight* given to an argument from evidence. That is, given the same evidence, two rabbis would rationally be compelled to render the same decision, for they would necessarily assign the same weight to each of the arguments. This “optimistic” position, in fact, had been espoused by Rudolf Carnap in the philosophy of science.³² He eventually concluded that two completely rational beings, given the exact same information, might not derive the same belief structure.³³

And this is precisely R. Israel’s view, for talmudic reasoning is a skill to be internalized, as much as it is a doctrine to be learned. Tacit knowledge, particularly the ability to weigh one argument against another, is necessary to reach concrete halakhic conclusions. R. Israel thus concludes that the human being cannot be left out of the picture in discussing Halakhah. The rational decision in matters of halakhah is the product of not only valid arguments, based on correct data, but also of the tacit or internalized ability to use the arguments and weigh them:

In the ability to recognize evidence, all humans are equal, if they only have the intelligence to understand the evidence. But in the weight they give to the evidence, human beings differ from one another greatly. . . . And it was precisely over the weight to give arguments that the Houses of Shammai and of Hillel differed. . . . (142)

Since the virtues are what make the human, the emphasis on different moral and intellectual virtues will necessarily influence halakhic decisions. This situation is perfectly legitimate, because unavoidable. As Carnap put it, there is a veritable continuum of formally correct inductive methods. R. Israel's point is that in Torah reasoning, the human virtues rightly play a role in choosing which of the methods to bring to bear on a particular case:

Let us not wonder at the source, the cause of the spectacle of the scholars of the Houses of Shammai and Hillel agreeing each with his own society [*havurah*]¹—what does society have to do with it? For the reason for their dispute was the difference in their temperaments, which cannot be completely separated from reason . . . and this is the explanation of what the Rabbis said (*Eruvin* 13b): “these and those are the words of the Living God,” because (as we have said) there is no such thing as a *contradiction* between the different powers of the soul [i.e., one cannot say that one is “right” and the other “wrong”] (147).

Thus, the personality traits of the halakhist unavoidably and therefore validly play a role in rational decision making—the role of determining how to weigh evidence. The Houses of Shammai and Hillel, which attracted men of different personality traits, maintained that the different kinds of personalities that they each cultivated made for a superior halakhist. This is a dispute that could never, on pain of circularity, be adjudicated (since it is a dispute about tacit knowledge), and in fact, only the Voice from Heaven could end it.

R. Israel's position might be mistaken for halakhic relativism, the idea that the halakhah on any matter could be anything. This is erroneous. Rather, R. Israel holds that halakhic judgment is a skill that cannot be reduced to book knowledge. The skill, itself, however, is Torah and based on Torah virtues. The character traits as well as the values that make up the halakhic personality, or what is now called “the gadol,” are themselves part of the tradition. Without these traits, the clever but perverse expositor can make any text mean anything at all (the tradition calls this *gillui panim ba-Torah she-lo ka-halakhah*).

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 17a) asserts that no one could be appointed

to the *Sanhedrin* unless he could give one hundred fifty arguments to prove that the rat is a kosher animal. Despite the skill of these arguments, however, anyone who ate rodents on the basis of them had no place in the world of Torah and *Musar*. Protagoras (“Man is the measure of all things”) is certainly not the spiritual father of R. Israel. On the contrary, I think, R. Israel’s view derives from Nahmanides’ commentary on Leviticus 19:2. And in further contrast to Protagoras, R. Israel has influenced the yeshivah world today in its formulation of “*Da’as Torah*” as a philosophical doctrine, since that approach resembles Michael Polanyi’s conception of “tacit knowledge”³⁴ as well as the Wittgensteinian notion of “following a rule.”³⁵ If this hypothesis is true (and I will not stop to document it here), it shows that R. Israel is actually working within a Jewish philosophical tradition.

Let us apply this idea to humility. R. Israel claims that there is no violation of rationality in applying different standards in judging oneself as against judging someone else, or in judging oneself at one time as against judging oneself at another time, as long as the standards are coherent. What looks like concealing the truth from oneself, or even lying to oneself, is just a matter of applying a different standard of judgment to oneself, something which *Musar* demands and rationality—at least the way R. Israel sees it—does not forbid. In assessing one’s own achievements, therefore, one weighs the evidence according to a different system from the one by which we weigh others. Furthermore, one strives for apathy with respect to those achievements, however assessed. The primary goal is to avoid the corruption of the soul.

At times, however, particularly in the public sphere, humility is not appropriate. Misplaced humility, says the Talmud, resulted in the destruction of the Temple (*Gittin* 56a). Consider R. Israel himself. R. Israel originally had no intention of leading the Jewish community. His teacher, R. Zundl Salanter, never accepted any official position, and R. Israel had intended to follow suit. Presumably the threat by the Haskalah to Orthodoxy caused him to reveal himself to the masses and to assume leadership.³⁶ He then had no choice but to assess his own capabilities objectively, with no concern of moral corruption—reserving the virtue of humility for the private sphere. And though he never did accept any formal rabbinical position, he certainly became one of the major leaders of Lithuanian Jewry, in fact a “king-maker”: he was responsible for the appointment of R. Isaac Elchanan Spektor as rabbi of Kovno.

We see, then, that R. Israel Salanter went far beyond problem-solving in philosophy. He was systematic; he constructed an entire theory of

rationality and virtue, of the relationship between them, and of their relationship with the emotions. His theory, moreover, grows out of struggling with halakhic texts and with the evil inclination. R. Israel engages in true dialogue with these texts and with other writers in the talmudic-ethical tradition, such as Naḥmanides and R. Baḥya.³⁷ Finally, the quality of his thought is very high, even when judged by contemporary standards. My own belief is that one of the greatest Jewish philosophers has hitherto been unrecognized, even by himself, for what he was.

Notes

I thank David Shatz for his enlightening suggestions.

1. "Translator's Introduction," in Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago 1963), cxxxiii. Even Howard Kreisel, who regards Pines's judgment as too extreme, admits that "A study of his medieval Jewish sources probably will add little to our understanding of the main currents of his philosophy." See Howard Kreisel, "Judah ha-Levi's Influence on Maimonides: A Preliminary Appraisal" in *Maimonidean Studies*, ed. Arthur Hyman (New York, 1991), 121.
2. Cf. *Bi'ur ha-Gra, Yoreh De'ah* 179:6, #13.
3. S. R. Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*, trans. Karin Paritzky (Jerusalem, 1995), letter 18.
4. For example, the Talmud (*Sukkah* 52a) asserts, "If one is greater [in Torah] than another, his evil inclination is greater too." R. Israel raises the bold problem: if so, it is better not to study Torah! Cf. Mordechai Pachter (ed.), *Kitvei R. Yisrael Salanter, Sifriyat Dorot* (Jerusalem, 1972), 103ff.
5. For exceptions to this generalization, see the contributions of Berger, "Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times" and Leiman, "Rabbinic Openness to General Culture in the Early Modern Period in Western and Central Europe" to Gerald J. Blidstein, David Berger, Shnayer Z. Leiman, and Aharon Lichtenstein, *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale, New Jersey 1997). A few comments are in order concerning their findings. In the modern period, of course, there were luminaries such as Rabbi S. R. Hirsch and his grandson and intellectual heir, Rabbi Dr. Joseph Breuer, who actually studied philosophy at a university—as Leiman points out. Yet, when I told R. Breuer that I had studied philosophy, he remarked that he could recommend studying only the history of philosophy, not philosophy, since only the former demonstrates the emptiness of man-made intellectual schemes. I also think it significant that even those talmudic giants, *geonim* and *rishonim*, who elevated the study of "philosophy" to the status of one of the 613 Commandments (and it is undeniable that they existed: R. Saadyah, Rambam, R. Baḥya) did not introduce the study of philosophy into the talmudical academy itself, as did the Christians into the universities. I believe, therefore, that it may be a useful abstraction to distinguish talmudic culture itself from participants in it.

6. When I tell talmudic Jews that I engage in philosophy, the reaction is almost invariably a query concerning my ability to reconcile philosophy with Judaism or concerning my ability to withstand its corrosive effects.
7. Many of those who have written about the “philosophy of the Rabbis” have themselves been relatively ignorant of contemporary philosophy, or have identified “philosophy” with the theological issues which were commonly addressed in philosophy of religion in the Middle Ages. I am happy to report that this is changing, as philosophically-trained Jewish scholars begin to turn their attention to texts of their own religion.
8. I will express my prejudices here: though philosophy can be rightly called Greek, or Jewish, or Christian, philosophy as a discipline transcends boundaries (otherwise I wouldn’t bother writing this article, in which I recommend that all, including gentiles, study R. Israel’s writings), because problems which are isomorphic can arise in many cultures. Creative philosophers are best suited to spot such problems if they have struggled with them themselves. Granted, there is the danger that a creative philosopher might project his own concerns into a foreign text; but my point remains. Compare S. Chandrasekhar, *Newton’s Principia for the Common Reader* (Oxford, 1995), in which a great mathematical physicist is able to spot remarkable mathematical insights in Isaac Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*, a 17th century work, which historians, even mathematical historians, have failed to see.
9. For more on this point, see below.
10. I recently participated in lectures on this very concept of persistence through time by the eminent philosopher Saul Kripke, which clarified my understanding of these matters.
11. *Shabbat* 112b: a ritually unclean sandal becomes pure if it changes to the extent that it is no longer the same shoe. Cf. Eli Hirsch’s pathbreaking essay on this subject, “Identity in the Talmud,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy 22: New Directions in Philosophy* (Oxford, 1999), 166-80. Hirsch, a philosopher at Brandeis University who has previously written on questions of identity, has recently turned to study questions of identity in the Talmud.
12. The priestly portion of dough, *ḥallah*, can (outside the Land of Israel) be separated retroactively: after the dough is baked into bread and eaten, what is left over is made *ḥallah*, retroactively permitting the non-priest to *have eaten* the rest of the bread in the first place. (For a non-priest to eat the priest’s portion is a serious violation.) But since, in retrospect, the bread that was baked contained the priestly portion, why do not the standard rules of *kashrut* dictate that the bread is made unkosher, just as if it had been baked while touching a forbidden substance? On examination, the question turns on subtle issues of identity: are the flavor particles which allegedly contaminate this bread truly one with the *ḥallah* retroactively separated? It turns out that this is a dispute between the *Taz* and his father-in-law, the *Bah*: the *Taz* in fact says that in any case of retroactive *ḥallah* separation, the rest of the dough must be more than sixty times the volume of *ḥallah* separated. See *Taz*, note 15 to *Yoreh De’ah* 325.
13. Incidentally, there is no privileged class of “philosophical” concepts, reflection on which constitutes “philosophy.” The concept of idolatry, fundamental to Jewish law and religion, itself provides Jewish thinkers with endless opportunities for elaboration. Only bias would deny the honorific (in Western culture) title “philosophy” to these elaborations. Thus, the book by

Avishai Margalit and Moshe Halbertal, *Idolatry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), is a book on philosophy, though it deals with a concept somewhat foreign to European philosophy.

14. I have taught university courses on the philosophy of R. Israel Salanter many times and have spoken to many philosophers and talmudic scholars concerning my interest in his work.
15. It is noteworthy, however, that the academic community unanimously regards the pre-Socratics as philosophers, even though all that has come down to us of their writings amount to no more than philosophical pronouncements. Perhaps the *originality* of these pronouncements (such as Parmenides' paradoxical view that change is impossible) is what motivates this judgment. Similar remarks would have to be made about Chinese philosophers like Hui Shih, whose reputation in the West as a philosopher rests solely on paradoxical utterances like, "The greatest has nothing within itself and is called the great unit, the smallest has nothing within itself and is called the small unit" (cf., "Hui Shih," *Encyclopedia Britannica* CD 98).
16. There is another conclusion here which may be of interest to the readers of this journal. That is that philosophical activity, being unavoidable, cannot be proscribed by any authority. For example, the novellae (*hiddushim*) of R. Hayyim Soloveitchik contain numerous discussions which analytic philosophers will find familiar, such as the *ad hominem/ad rem* (Aramaic: *gavra/ hefza*) distinction. What can be forbidden is the study of a particular philosophy, such as the Greek. Whether this is a good thing is another matter, but I will not take it up here.
17. Can you think of another "Jewish philosopher" of whom these three things can be said of even one of their solutions to philosophical problems?
18. My remarks on this subject are not meant to supersede Tamar Ross, "R. Israel Salanter's Solutions to the Problem of Weakness of the Will" (Hebrew), *Mehkerei Yerushalayim be-Mahshevet Yisrael* 11 (1992-3), 139-85, which, so far as I know, is the first treatment of R. Israel's thought by a philosopher, but rather to motivate other philosophers to study R. Israel's work and to appreciate studies such as Ross's.
19. Maimonides, indeed, characterized contemplative Aristotelian philosophy as Torah, but he was attacked for doing so. None of the other Rabbis whom we today call "*rishonim*," including those who regarded the study of philosophy as a "*mizvah*," went so far. The *mizvah* involved in the study of philosophy was not Torah study, but rather the Unity of God. For them, in Berger's pregnant phrase, "It was the Torah that constituted Torah" (p. 67; see also p. 83).
20. Ironically, some of Benjamin Franklin's material found its way into the *Musar* movement. The so-called *Thirteen Middot* of R. Israel, which graces many homes in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak, are actually Franklin's, as the reader can check by consulting Franklin's *Autobiography* (New York, 1989), 79-90. How this happened is of no concern here; cf. Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Beginning of the "Musar" Movement* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem, 1982), 137-139. And Franklin influenced, if anything at all, R. Israel's psychology, not his philosophy.
21. For a treatment of Aristotle's view, see James J. Walsh, *Aristotle's Conception of Moral Weakness* (New York, 1963).
22. Pachter, 114. Subsequent page references to R. Israel's writings are to this edition.

23. See R. Isaac Blaser, *Kokhevei Ohr* (Jerusalem, 1973-4), 51-52.
24. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford, 1978), I: III: x.
25. Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind: On the Principles of Common Sense* (University Park, PA, 1997), II: v.
26. By reading R. Israel Salanter, one develops a renewed appreciation for the revolution in exposition which R. Ḥayyim Soloveitchik of Brisk created in writing Torah.
27. Nevertheless, I maintain that what follows are R. Israel's ideas, not mine. That is, though it took me many close readings of R. Israel's work to understand the philosophical points he made, and though without my philosophical training I would not have understood them, *they were points that had not occurred to me prior to reading his essay*. Furthermore, whenever I thought of an objection to his ideas at a given point, I found a response to the objection somewhere else in the essay. The circuitous route he takes in *Berurei ha-Middot*, I conclude, is nothing but stylistic—as I say, R. Israel deliberately writes in the classic style of *derush* and *pilpul*. Someone might argue by counterexample, that Saul Kripke, in his *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA, 1982) read things into Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe [Oxford, 1968]) that were not there, even though, like me, he had not thought of the ideas he attributed to the author before reading his work. But that argument does not cut any ice with me, because I think that the ideas Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein are really there! (In any case, I am only changing the order of R. Israel's ideas, a much milder transformation.)
28. E.g., Julia Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy* 86, 4 (1989): 373-84.
29. E.g., *Avot* 4:4, 10, 21; 6:4, 6.
30. According to Pachter, 65, the articles containing what I call R. Israel's "virtue-based" ethics appeared in Germany in 1861-2; R. Israel was by then also living in Germany. On the (reasonable) assumption that R. Israel had by then read some of Kant's work, or at least had heard an account of it, R. Israel may have been consciously rejecting Kantian ethics. If so, R. Israel was defending Jewish ethics, rather than merely expounding it. By no means was he attempting to *reconcile* Judaism with the dominant gentile philosophy, a motive which has been attributed to Maimonides, Saadyah, and other medieval Jewish philosophers. [For further discussion of virtue-based ethics in Judaism, see Yitzchak Blau's article in this issue—Ed.]
31. Commentary to Lev. 19:2, Deut. 6:18.
32. Rudolf Carnap "On Inductive Logic," *Philosophy of Science* 12(1945): 72-97 and Carnap, "The Two Concepts of Probability," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5(1945): 513-42.
33. Rudolf Carnap, *The Continuum of Inductive Methods* (Chicago 1952).
34. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago 1962).
35. Wittgenstein, §§179-202.
36. For these and other details of R. Israel's life, cf. Pachter, Introduction.
37. Other writers whom R. Israel engages—in the essay *Berurei ha-Middot* alone—are R. Ḥayyim Vital (126), Maimonides (129), R. Nissim (*Ran*, 145), R. Isaac Arama (*Akedat Yizḥak*, 138); page references are, as elsewhere, to R. Israel.