Review Essay

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Reflections on the Reinman-Hirsch Exchange

AMMIEL HIRSCH AND YOSEF REINMAN

One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and an Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues that Divide Them.

Writing in The Jewish Week to explain his reasons for discontinuing the promotional tour with the Reform rabbi Ammiel Hirsch for their jointly-authored One People, Two Worlds, the Orthodox rabbi Yosef Reinman lamented that he had not yet seen “one serious in-depth review” of the book. Indeed, media attention to the exchange between Reinman, the spokesman for Orthodoxy, and Ammiel Hirsch, the spokesman for Reform, was largely focused upon one issue—the acknowledgement of the Reform movement which Reinman’s co-authorship of the book had ostensibly implied. As Reinman himself would subsequently explain, he heeded the call of the Lakewood rashei yeshivah to abandon the tour because the book’s actual contents were only superficially addressed (most people did not, Reinman remarks, “bother to read the book”). Reinman himself became the focus in the ensuing media uproar, wrongly cast, in his own words, as “the Rosa Parks of interdenominational dialogue.” Reinman’s actual contributions to the exchange everywhere emphasize the distinction between Reform

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and Orthodoxy, indeed the incommensurability of their respective positions. Yet the very publication of the book—including the graphics on the book’s front cover—had asserted equivalence between the movements. Reinman’s assent to the rashei yeshivah was a gesture in which the incommensurability of Reform and Orthodoxy would be writ large, even for those who didn’t get past the cover of the book.

Beyond the book’s front cover, Reinman’s responses to Hirsch on a variety of issues provide a current (and future) reference for those looking for a nuanced and compelling representation of an authentic Torah approach. Reinman was certainly right to claim, even as he bowed out of further dialogue with Hirsch, that the book stands as “convincing evidence that Orthodoxy is intellectually sophisticated and compelling.” If the rashei yeshivah acknowledged “the need in our time” to “clarify the Truth of the Torah to those who have never heard it,” then Reinman’s response, when read carefully, undoubtedly helps further that aim. Orthodoxy does emerge, from Reinman’s contributions to the exchange, as a phenomenon irreducible to the common characterizations informed by either prejudice or mere ignorance. Yet notwithstanding what Avi Shafran would describe as Reinman’s “masterful” response to Hirsch’s arguments on behalf of Reform, there may be some sense in which Reinman’s rhetorical strategies may actually serve to reinforce—rather than undermine—misconceptions about Orthodoxy.

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch infamously claimed that the “trend of thought” of the Rambam of the Guide “was Arab-Greek.” Rambam, he continued, approached “Judaism from without,” and “brought to it views that he had gained elsewhere, and these he reconciled with Judaism.” R. Samson Raphael Hirsch had objected to the way in which the thought of the Guide was governed by paradigms and agendas that emerged from Greek philosophy—not the languages of Ḥazal. Reinman certainly evidences no philosophical pretensions, and would probably claim no philosophical expertise. Yet the argument between Reinman and Ammiel Hirsch about truth (which dominates the first section of the book, and appears throughout) is governed by a philosophical terminology with connotations more Greek than Jewish. To be sure, there is nothing radical in the suggestion that Hirsch’s arguments emerge from non-Jewish sources; he continually turns to enlightenment languages—both ancient and modern—in his attempt to bolster arguments on behalf of Reform. The debate, however about “absolute truth” between Reinman and Hirsch—initiated in fact by the former—revolves around the dichotomy between relativism and absolute truth, a dichotomy inherited from the Greeks, specifically from Plato and his Sophistic
antagonists. Shafran, in his defense of Reinman’s withdrawal from the promotional tour, provides just such a reading of the exchange. “In a world where relativity rules,” Shafran explains, “so unapologetically confident a stance on absolute truth is bound to ruffle feathers.” By Shafran’s lights, *One People, Two Worlds* emerges as a stand-off between the positions of “absolute truth” and “relativity.”

Reinman’s appeal to “absolute truth” may, in a contemporary world dominated by “relativity,” resonate with many unaffiliated Jews. But it may, as Shafran puts it, also “ruffle feathers”—not only, as he intended, among those unapologetic advocates of contemporary versions of relativism, but also among skeptical Jews for whom the specter of “absolute truth” brings up associations with theological visions of the world (call them, as Ammiel Hirsch does, fundamentalist) with which “Orthodoxy” itself has no real affiliation. Indeed, the term “absolute truth” has no equivalent in *Hazar*.

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch found Rambam’s “speculative investigations” foreign to Judaism. So Reinman’s appeal to “absolute truth” in his contributions to a contemporary “guide for the perplexed” may, because of his invocation of a set of terms with a provenance Greek than Jewish, with their inevitable (though unintended) connotations, partially obscure the very terms which he hopes to represent. That is to say, for all of the success of Reinman’s approach, there may be some sense that the representation of Judaism as a tradition proclaiming “absolute truth” unintentionally countenances critics like Ammiel Hirsch, who, in their attempts to discredit Orthodoxy, attempt to assimilate it to philosophical and theological models of the West. Reinman’s approach may have been the one best suited to the literary mass-market (or to the very real constraints which his e-mail exchange with Hirsch imposed), but it may not discourage those like Hirsch whose strategy of rejectionism is informed by the attempt to place all avatars of “absolute truth” under one aegis—the aegis of religious fundamentalism. The current set of reflections upon *One People, Two Worlds* emerges not only out of a scholarly desire to demonstrate the intellectual provenance of the arguments of Reinman and Hirsch (and, in the process, to provide the outline of a more philosophically rigorous response to Hirsch’s arguments), but also out of a more personal desire to reflect upon contemporary kiruv, and the potential role for Torah u-madda within that context.
One People, Two Worlds opens with Reinman initiating the discussion: “Let us begin at the beginning.” Let us,” he continues, “talk about truth.” “We believe,” he continues, that “without question that there is an absolute truth, and that it is contained in our holy Torah.” So Reinman asks Hirsch: “do you really believe that there is no absolute truth?” (5). Rather than retreat from the question, Hirsch registers Reinman’s assertion of “absolute truth,” and immediately takes the offensive. That Reinman has claimed to possess absolute truth (though he in fact does not employ the metaphor of possession) leaves him, Hirsch claims “alone at the pinnacle of piety” (6). Hirsch forwards an argument, the strategy of which remains consistent throughout: Reinman’s affirmation of “absolute truth” at the beginning of the exchange emerges, in Hirsch’s argument, as the center of a constellation of connotations—which he determinedly associates with the Orthodox position. Thus Hirsch moves from the attribution of pietism to the attribution of theological “immodesty.” “How audacious is the notion that I alone possess divine truth!” (8). Not only does the belief in the absolute evidence bad manners, but truly dangerous tendencies: “if you say that you are in possession of absolute truth, I find this most troubling—and yes—it makes those who so believe dangerous.” For “great evil,” Hirsch continues, “has been perpetrated by people who are convinced that they possessed absolute truth.” “The implication of this belief is that all other beliefs are, by definition, not true,” which, Hirsch warns, “taken seriously . . . leads to terrible consequences” (6). While Hirsch paints himself in the garb of theological modesty, acknowledging that “we humans are fallible” and, therefore, can make no claim to “possess divine truth,” Reinman manifests “the need to take on . . . ‘absolute truth’” (15). Such a need, as Hirsch tries to represent it (in the knowing tones of the cultural anthropologist) represents a well-known psychological proclivity: “Your need for truth—certainty—is not unique,” he explains; “we all want certainty” (233). In his own estimation, Hirsch and Reform have overcome that proclivity, while Reinman’s enthusiasm for “absolute truth” shows both him and the position of Orthodoxy which he represents to be “infected” with “theological arrogance.” The external symptoms of arrogance and immodesty have, Hirsch explains, a deeper root: “That’s the thing with you guys—you need, crave, and demand certainty” (15, 17); and later, “You seem to have a powerful need for absolutes.” Hirsch is not merely content to call Orthodoxy “dangerous.” In his desire to associate Orthodoxy with fundamentalist political movements of the West, he asserts an implicit connection between Orthodoxy and what he calls,
quoting from Isaiah Berlin, the “FINAL SOLUTION” (sic 7; Reinman does not actually address the perversity of the association of Orthodoxy with the Shoah).9

The extremity of Hirsch’s rhetorical tactic dovetails with other aspects of his argumentative strategy—specifically, the categorization of Orthodoxy as a “fundamentalism.” Hirsch never hesitates to reject what he calls Reinman’s “fundamentalist viewpoint,” confessing himself at a loss to understand what “ultra-Orthodox or fundamentalist people say they believe” (76, 34). In a world where ayatollas, and Al Queda (and now the Mel Gibsons of the world) dominate the evening news, the association of Orthodoxy (or what Hirsch calls “ultra-Orthodoxy”) with fundamentalism provides an assured strategy of rejection.10 While Hirsch serenely advocates a perspective of “proportion,” “moderation,” and “reason,” Orthodox fundamentalists, however, who claim that “they alone possess the absolute truth,” evidence a “scorched-earth theology,” manifesting “arrogance, intolerance and close-mindedness” (163).

Notwithstanding Hirsch’s associations of Orthodoxy with “absolute truth,” Reinman remains unapologetic, even outspoken, for the concept. Not content with Hirsch’s evasions (which are indeed manifold), Reinman reiterates the question: “Is there absolute truth?” (14). While Hirsch hopes to transform Reinman into a fundamentalist absolutist, Reinman has his own strategy. Through repeating the term “absolute truth,” Reinman hopes to render Hirsch a moral relativist. Hirsch, not unaware of the strategy (“you keep on asking me…do I believe in absolute truth?”), maintains that his own possession is “not moral relativism,” asserting that Judaism does not “need to cling to a fundamentalist worldview to establish” an ethical norm (17, 20). To versions of Reinman’s attack—“you have no absolute truth, no absolute values,” Hirsch expresses his frustration: “Yosef, enough already with the ‘you have not absolute truth, no absolute value’” (60, 84). Reinman insists that Hirsch blows “hot and cold with the prevailing relativist winds,” that he is constantly looking for the “license to reject absolute truth.” Hirsch’s response is indignant: “I already wrote that I am not a moral relativist” (213, 215, 31). Here is where Reinman’s rhetorical strategy has its payoff: for if Hirsch will not assent to the “absolute truth,” he must admit his belief in the contrary, moral relativism.

Yet when Reinman invokes “absolute truth,” with the aim of condemning Hirsch to a position of moral relativism, he invokes a constellation of associations—more Greek than Jewish. Indeed, the Hirsch-Reinman debate emerges as a version of the argument between Platonists and Sophists—with Reinman occupying the place of the Platonic
philosopher, and Hirsch, though at times unwillingly, occupying the place of the Sophist. Reinman, like a precedent tradition of Platonic philosophers, claims access to an abstract, unchanging, and eternal Truth, leaving his Sophist opponent, Hirsch, in the realm of mere belief and opinions. In the world as defined by the Sophists themselves, truth is relative, determined not by any abstract notion of the right or the good, but upon what is most compelling and convincing. Such a truth is necessarily manifold, subject to change, depending on time, place, and the skills (not to mention power, a favorite Hirschian word) of interpreters. Indeed, there is no singularity of Truth, but a multiplicity of competing visions of the world. We would say, in our contemporary idiom (inflected by the languages of nineteenth-century German philosophy), that there is no such thing as a single objective Truth, but many different competing subjective truths. Against the rhetorical practice that claimed that there were different truths, subject to both time and place, the Platonic revolution established an objective abstract and eternal conception of Truth. Sophists might have opinions about the world: they might have beliefs about meanings of such words as truth or beauty or goodness. Only the Platonic philosopher however would have real knowledge, that is, absolute truth.

Within this framework, the lines of engagement are clearly demarcated: you are either a Platonist or a Sophist; you either believe in the absolute truth promised by Platonic philosophy or advocate the relativist world-view championed by the Sophists. In the terms which the Platonic model affords, it’s an all or nothing scenario: Truth or relativism, Absolutism or subjectivism. Indeed, Reinman’s strategy from the outset is to invoke the dichotomy between absolute truth and relativism: through demonstrating Hirsch’s disavowal of absolute truth, Reinman shows Hirsch to be a relativist. Hirsch may not assent to that characterization, though the position which Hirsch elaborates (a not always coherent conglomerate of political liberalism, nineteenth century philosophical idealism, and post-modern multi-culturalism), does, in fact, provide a contemporary manifestation of the Sophist perspective. Yet Reinman, driven by the desire to assert the incommensurability between Orthodoxy and Reform, invokes the term with a Western if not specifically Greek provenance, absolute truth. Is the tactic necessary? Or does, perhaps, the implicit equivalence of Orthodoxy with theologies and philosophies based upon adherence to the “absolute” compromise the very complexity of the perspective of Orthodoxy which Reinman otherwise so ably represents? Does Reinman’s strategy allow, perhaps even encourage, readers to suspect Orthodox similarity to philosophical and religious fundamen-
talisms—that is, to the denizens of the absolute, whom Hirsch, following Berlin, rightly associates with totalitarian agendas? Phrased differently, when Hirsch asserts that “the notion of absolute truth” is “not really where Judaism places its emphasis,” is he in some sense correct? (51).

To distinguish his position from the absolutist or “fundamentalist” position advocated by Orthodoxy, Hirsch routinely asserts Reform allegiance to interpretation, subjectivity, and multiplicity. Hirsch frames his “search for truth” as the “interpretation and re-interpretation of ancient texts” (77). Reinman claims a belief in absolute truth; while Hirsch asserts the importance of interpretation. Reinman’s truth is singular; the truths which Hirsch claims to advocate are multiple. Hirsch’s pluralist perspective is “modern”; Reinman’s absolutist perspective “fundamentalist” (76). Hirsch’s conception of interpretation is one which creates a multiplicity of meanings: there is he writes, “no ‘one,’ ‘authoritative,’ or ‘literal’ understanding” (161). The rabbis, he writes, claiming talmudic authority for the Reform conception of pluralism, were not “interested in presenting one, absolute truth,” and thus he quotes the rabbinic principle, “These and these are the words of the living God” as a precedent for Reform interpretive practice. Further, interpretation must be plural, because, as Hirsch explains, “reality is plural.” Not only that, Hirsch continues, but the pluralistic nature of what he calls “reality” implies a moral imperative: for “democracy, pluralism, tolerance, theological humility” are “all the building blocks of free societies.” “Remove any of these building blocks,” Hirsch warns (again asserting—obscenely—the connection between fascism and orthodoxy), “and the long shadow of the totalitarian wrecking crew appears at our door” (51).

Reinman is not content to accede to Hirsch’s appropriations. Yet, to Reinman’s rejoinder that “there is pluralism in Orthodoxy” (133), Hirsch is triumphant:

I laughed out loud when I read your assertion that “there is pluralism in Orthodoxy.” Here is a wonderful example of the contributions of the Reform movement to the entire Jewish people. . . . We have been so successful in persuading Jews of the centrality of pluralism that even Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews feel that they must measure and justify their approach to Judaism through the concept (146).

This may be the rhetorical high-point in the exchange for Hirsch, for he sees Reinman as forced to acknowledge the superiority and prece-
dence of the Reform position on pluralism. A careful reader would cer-
tainly detect, as Reinman does, Hirsch’s acontextual readings of texts, and his general failure to situate the manifold midrashim which he quotes within the broader frame of Torah she-be-al-peh. Yet Hirsch may himself succeed in giving the sense that Reform is the true bearer of a tradition based upon pluralism (and interpretive modesty) while Reinman, and his Orthodox compatriots (who are really advocates of the absolute) turn to the languages of pluralism as part of a post facto, and politically correct, means to justify their position.

Reinman’s responses do register both protest and dismay at the extent of the appropriations (“You do this again and again. You bring quotations from the Talmud out of context and you distort them . . . . You have a serious problem” [58]). Yet Reinman has been so committed to the language of “absolute truth,” that he fails to fully represent the conception of pluralism inherent in Orthodoxy. When Reinman does claim orthodox pluralism, what he calls “a rainbow coalition,” he asserts a sociological multiplicity without dealing sufficiently with the more fundamental issues of interpretation and truth which might underlie that conception of multiplicity (133). This is to say that Reinman seems so concerned with rejecting the subjectivist extremes of Hirsch’s position (showing them to be outside of the “Orthodox umbrella”[ 133]) that he fails to sufficiently elaborate the interpretive perspective of pluralism which is in fact inherent within Orthodoxy. Reinman does provide an explanation of the principle, “these and these,” but within the contexts of the assertions of absolute truth, the brief assertion that “conflicting opinions . . . are all truth,” comes as a mere after-thought (211). Hirsch persistently invokes subjectivity, plurality, and interpretation, as if by the repetitions he can convince his readers that their true province is within the Reform movement. Would it be surprising, given Reinman’s appeals to the absolute, if some—novice—readers were actually convinced by Hirsch’s argument?

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Both Hirsch and Reinman, governed by the Greek parameters of the argument, refuse to emphasize fully the dialectical relationship between absolute truth and interpretation. Hirsch may pretend to deal with such a dialectic, but all of his talk about the importance of what he calls “change and continuity” is betrayed by his version of interpretation in
which he claims, “we must stand on the shoulders of our predecessors and add our own interpretations” (19, 54; emphasis added). Hirsch has no interest in transmission—what he calls “continuity”—for the interpretations of contemporary Jews “become normative” at “the expense of previous interpretations” (emphasis added; 54). Hirsch’s conception of interpretation is one of addition, not engagement with precedent traditions and texts, that is, interpretation as the arbitrary sway of the subjective, where texts are held in captivity to the prejudices of contemporary interpreters. Such a hermeneutics, informed by what Hirsch himself calls power, results not in his vaunted “theological modesty,” but the (arrogant) super-imposition of his own preferences and presuppositions upon an antecedent tradition. Without such a precedent recognition of the Torah (to the words of which all interpreters are ultimately accountable), interpretation is reduced, as pace Hirsch, to the inter-generational power-play. Reinman, on the other hand, may emphasize correct modes of interpretation (his own paraphrase of Torah li-shemah), but usually only to scold the interpretive excesses which Hirsch’s perspective entails. Indeed, Reinman frames the terms of the argument from the outset as a means towards rejecting contemporary modes of pluralism; as a result, his own efforts to represent the models of pluralism implicit in Hazal are severely constrained.12

Admittedly there may be no market for dialectic, and the shorthand of “absolute truth” and “relativism” may be the most suitable terminology for a contemporary mass readership. But my own experience, in formal and informal settings in the frameworks of the synagogue and the university, shows that there may be an audience for whom such paraphrase is not only appealing, but mandatory. If not only the secular media, but the world of the university and higher learning (where many of Hirsch’s assumptions are promulgated) reinforce conceptions of Orthodoxy as fundamentalist, then more aggressive efforts may be needed to show the extent to which Torah and Orthodoxy are irreducible to the Western philosophical and theological categories from which they are often viewed. In a world where hozerei bi-teshuvah are sophisticated in the languages of Western philosophy, while totally ignorant of the mechanisms of their own tradition, emphasizing precise definitions of terms may in fact be necessary. This may entail, for such an audience, foregrounding the dichotomous extremes between absolute Truth and relativism which dominate Western consciousness as a pre-requisite for understanding Jewish conceptions of truth. This is Torah u-madda, not as synthesis, but as means of becoming conscious of habitu-
al—and Greek—patterns of thought. For some of the unaffiliated (and I am thinking particularly of the context of the university), such an approach may represent a possible entrance to the world of Jewish thought. In my own experience, the appeal to Western languages (to show what is distinctive about Jewish thought) has elicited from audiences—unaffiliated, Reform, and even Orthodox—a response which I can only describe as relief. Relief that Orthodoxy is distinct from those movements which Isaiah Berlin rightly describes as totalitarian; relief, as one older ba’al teshuvah told me, that Orthodoxy is not the “Moral Majority”; relief, very simply, from the recognition that Orthodoxy is not a fundamentalism.

Indeed, one can use Western categories—specifically the opposition between absolute truth and interpretation played out in the Reinman-Hirsch exchange—to demonstrate how the languages of Ḥazal, in fact, resist those very categories. Hirsch continually comes back to the principle “elu ve-elu”—as if Ḥazal were advocating the conception of pluralism which Hirsch himself continually celebrates. Reinman’s combination of exasperation and sarcasm may be, on some level, effective (“Do you really think even one Sage of the Talmud would have validated the Reform interpretation that it is sufficient to keep the Sabbath...‘in the spiritual sense’ alone? So what do we with the entire Tractate Shabbat...? Toss it into the wastebasket?” [203]). Ammiel Hirsch’s pretense to philosophical sophistication—his facility with the languages of liberal post-modernism—may, however, demand a more philosophically rigorous response, especially his appropriation of “elu ve-elu” for Reform conceptions of pluralism.

The beginnings of such a response might start with the rishonim who do not respond to Hirsch’s alleged proof-text in the way in which Hirsch’s post-modern agenda would seemingly demand. In their investigation of the principle, Tosafot, and Ritva who elaborates their question, wonder how sometimes contradictory perspectives can both be the “words of the living God.” To Hirsch, who articulates his own liberal version of pluralism, the question would—and could—never emerge; for in Hirsch’s multi-cultural version of Judaism, contradictory perspectives are always applauded. Yet nonetheless Ritva states the question: “The rabbis of France asked how is it possible that they are both the words of the living God, [when] this one [says it is] prohibited and this one [says it is] permitted?” To this question, Ritva provides the answers of Tosafot:

When Moses went up to the Above to receive the Torah, it was shown to him on every matter forty-nine ways to prohibit, and forty-nine ways to
permit. And [Moses] asked the Holy One Blessed be He about this, and He said that this will be passed to the Sages of Israel of every generation, and it will be decided according to them.\(^{14}\)

From Ritva’s perspective, using the shorthand which we can adopt from the Hirsch-Reinman exchange, there really seems to be an absolute truth, and it was handed down (in its multiplicity) to Moshe at Sinai. Absolute truth, as Reinman asserts, does exist; it was given at Sinai.

But the insufficiency of the Western philosophical shorthand reveals itself in the commentary of Maharshal. For while Ritva emphasizes a truth emerging from the experience at Sinai itself, Maharshal would emphasize the role of the interpreter—seeming to provide a precedent for the subjectivism of Hirsch’s perspective. In apparent disagreement with Ritva, Maharshal asserts that differences between the sages emerged because “each perceived the Torah from his own perspective in accordance with his intellectual capacity as well as the stature and unique character of his particular soul.”\(^{15}\) From the perspective of Maharshal, difference of perception—purely subjective or interpretive criteria—constitutes an integral part of the Sinaitic revelation. Maharshal is not, however, advocating the extremes of Hirschian subjectivity (his legal commentaries which manifest an engagement with antecedent texts and traditions evidence as much), but his perspective represents a complement to the perspective articulated by Ritva. I would even suggest that Ritva himself alludes to the corollary interpretation of Maharshal when he asserts that, in addition to the explanation that he had already given, and “according to the ways of truth,” there is yet another “hidden explanation of the matter.” Such an explanation would almost certainly refer to the subjectivist aspect which Maharshal emphasizes (for how else do the different perspectives, received by Moses at Sinai, manifest themselves in history?). The disagreement between Ritva and Maharshal, emerges, in this reading, as an example of the very principle that they come to discuss: “these and these are the words of the living God.” Neither pole—subjectivist interpretation or absolute truth—suffices on its own. For both of the commentators, interpretation does not compromise the revelation of Sinai, but it is the means through which that revelation—Torah—becomes manifest in the world. Absolute truth and interpretation do not, as they do in the Greek context, represent mutually exclusive perspectives, but exist, rather, in productive—and dialectical—relationship.\(^{16}\)

Hirsch, as Reinman maintains, disregards the absolute altogether. In his attempts at interpretive modesty, Hirsch claims that we “cannot
place ourselves in the mind of God” (233). The response may be typical of those brought up in a Western (and thoroughly Platonized) tradition, where acknowledging the impossibility of possessing the absolute truth leads to despairing of the truth altogether. Hirsch may be right to be skeptical of what a contemporary literary critic calls the “God-trick,” in which a particular “subject-position” masquerades in the authority of a “disembodied, all-seeing, hidden eye.” But Reinman never claims to occupy that position, nor does he claim to “possess” the truth as Hirsch claims throughout (though Reinman’s Platonic language of absolute truth may have, unintentionally licensed such a charge). Reinman does, in any event, fail to make the requisite distinction between participating in the interpretive processes through which absolute truth is revealed, and actually possessing that truth. Having appealed to a philosophical vocabulary with specific connotations, Reinman does not go the distance—which would entail a more rigorous philosophical rendering of the principle of truth which he tries to represent. To be sure, a philosophical background is not the prerequisite for kiruv, but once the challenge of philosophy (and its terminology) is raised, it needs to be pursued to its end. If one translates Jewish concepts into what the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls the “language of the Greek,” then one must show a willingness to employ a lexicon which accommodates the complexities implicit in the original tongue.18

The very question of the absolute and its relation to Jewish concepts has, however, been raised—most notably by R. Soloveitchik in Halakhic Mind. By mentioning R. Soloveitchik, I am emphatically not suggesting that his Halakhic Mind represents some kind of centrist antidote to Reinman’s approach. I would argue rather that R. Soloveitchik’s approach provides the unarticulated philosophical underpinnings for Reinman’s more prosaically-rendered argument throughout his contributions to One People, One World. Even a brief (and necessarily superficial) approach to Halakhic Mind, demonstrates—in a philosophical register—the infelicities of assimilating the pluralism of HaZal to a liberal conception of pluralism.19 In relationship both to scientific and religious thought, R. Soloveitchik demonstrates how pluralism is linked, in the former context to what he calls objective reality, and in the latter to something resembling Reinman’s conceptions of absolute truth. R. Soloveitchik asserts that though what he calls “absolute reality” exists, it is only revealed, and “in manifold ways” through a methodology informed by pluralism. Such a pluralism does not deny the “absolute,” but, as R. Soloveitchik argues, aspects of the absolute can only be revealed (not possessed) through a
variety of interpretive approaches. That is, the argument of Halakhic Mind asserts, first in relation to the history of science, and then to Torah, the validity of a multiplicity of interpretations, while maintaining fidelity to the authority of the “absolute.”

For R. Soloveitchik, in both contexts, the bifurcation between subject and object had led to methodological errors. There is no absolute distinction between subject and object, but R. Soloveitchik argued, following advances in quantum physics, that they are reciprocally defining. Further, there is no such thing, in scientific inquiry, as the “pristine object,” but only an objective phenomenon which emerges through, as he puts it, its merger with the subject. As R. Soloveitchik explains “the reciprocal relation of phenomenon and experiment,” demonstrated by the quantum physicist, “must remit the entire classic relation of subject-object for reconsideration.” Subject and object, like matter and form in Aristotelian philosophy were not two disparate realms, but “methodological arrows.” So, by extension, the processes of subjective interpretation of the halakhic mind within his sphere of inquiry (the “absolute truth” of Torah) are mutually dependent. Meaning that, though, as the philosopher John Searle has argued, “absolute reality does not have a point of view,” such a reality (we call it Torah) does exist, and exist for us, through processes of interpretation. We can never possess it in its fullness (that would mean something like inhabiting the mind of God); but we can represent Torah through the processes of interpretation. This is probably what Reinman means when he asserts, in a non-philosophical terminology, that “we cannot,” in our search for absolute truth, “simply open to, let’s say, page 134 and check it out” (14). More philosophically stated, absolute truth reveals itself to a manifold of interpretive perspectives, provided those perspectives are in fact genuinely engaged with the object—whether it be Torah or reality—which they claim to represent. The talmid hakham, who as Reinman writes spends a “lifetime” in his quest for truth, may be said to attempt to inhabit, in the course of that lifetime, as many of these perspectives as possible (14).

Niels Bohr, the Danish physicist, plays a crucial role in Halakhic Mind, precisely because, I think, R. Soloveitchik found it useful in providing a corrective to the notion of pluralism advocated in liberal or pragmatist contexts (of which Hirsch’s is just the latest version). Bohr’s classic experiments with light demonstrated how interpretive perspectives (what Thomas Kuhn would later call paradigms) “must affect their object by their very act of observing.” Bohr had shown that, depending upon the experimental context which he employed, light behaved some-
times as a wave, and sometimes a particle. From these experiments, Bohr developed his conception of “complementarity,” in which complementary, though sometimes contradictory, descriptions of physical entities combine to describe “the complex of reality.”25 Bohr was not giving philosophical license, as some humanists have wrongly deduced, to unbridled subjectivity; for in his experiments, the observer is still constrained by the phenomena which he observes. Light behaves as either a wave or a particle, not, however, as a vector. Indeed, the theory of “complementarity” could stand as a perush for the halakhic principle “elu ve-elu.” In both the contexts of Torah and science, “elu ve-elu,” emerges as not only an inclusive, but also as an exclusive principle. Indeed, Hirsch, in his appropriation of the “elu ve-elu” for Reform, fails to show himself proficient in one of the most basic modes of talmudic exegesis: the inference. Elu ve-elu does indeed imply an exclusion: “these and these,” but not those. Bohr’s scientific reality, like Torah, does not license all interpretations. Engagement with a precedent reality, and proficiency in its interpretive mechanisms, are the pre-requisite for any interpretation which will fall under the aegis of elu ve-elu—in both the physical sciences, and in Torah.

For Hirsch, as Reinman’s rhetorical strategies reveal, the precedent reality of Torah—the absolute—is a mere phantom, a remnant from an ostensibly totalitarian past, now vanished, thus licensing the interpretive excesses which Hirsch advocates throughout One People, Two Worlds. There is no absolute truth—or less philosophically-stated, no commitment to the constraints of Torah—to limit his subjectivist excesses.26 Reinman certainly exposes the relativism of the Reform perspective—not without, however (given his emphasis on “absolute truth”), the risk of acquiescing to those who may wish to frame Orthodoxy as another in a long list of political and theological fundamentalisms. By emphasizing “absolute truth,” Reinman may be assured that a reader who actually does more than look at the cover of One People, Two Worlds will understand that Reform is moral relativism, and outside of the “umbrella” of authentic Judaism. But with that emphasis, Reinman may occlude the fact that a genuine Jewish pluralism—emphasizing interpretation, subjectivity, and the multiplicity of truth—does exist, but within Orthodoxy, that is, for those for whom the principle of Torah mi-Sinai is primary.

To be sure, the languages of Greek philosophy, not to mention the intricacies of Halakhic Mind, are too sophisticated for many—if not most—of the potential readership of One People, Two Worlds. If, however, the languages or concepts of madda are to be invoked (and absolute
truth certainly fits under such a rubric), they should be invoked with full awareness of their connotations. There are, of course, alternatives: one such alternative would begin not with the proclamation of belief in "absolute truth," but rather the non-philosophical assertion that certain beliefs are held absolutely. For it is less problematic to assert that we believe, absolutely, in Torah mi-Sinai, than to assert a belief in a philosophical conception of absolute truth. Indeed, the whole concept of "absolute truth" may be—even when properly contextualized—misleading. Ibn Ezra, in a philological note to Bereshit 24:49, asserts that Emet has the same root as Emunah—meaning that truth and faith are intertwined. From this perspective, truth emerges not as a function of philosophical speculation, but rather through a relationship created by faith. This relationship (what Levinas understands as the "proximity" to the divine) is antecedent to philosophical discourse, producing a conception of truth entirely different from the speculative efforts of the philosopher. Ibn Ezra’s note suggests that truth and faith are interdependent, "absolute truth" becomes irrelevant, as the languages of philosophy yield to a knowledge based upon a relationship—that relationship forged between God and the Jewish people at Sinai.

Notes

I am grateful to the following for their help in conceiving this piece: R. Matis Greenblatt, R. Emanuel Feldman, and R. Gidon Levenson. The perspective represented here, however, does not necessarily reflect their views.


2. Reinman, “Don’t Judge A Book By Its Cover.”

3. Reinman throughout the book stresses this disagreement, writing, “I admit that we may never find an accommodation that will satisfy both sides. I admit that after all our correspondences we may just agree to disagree.” Hirsch, by contrast, in order to justify the equivalence of the different “movements” in Judaism, insists on the commensurability of Orthodoxy and Reform, emphasizing ostensible points of agreement. A line from Hirsch’s concluding entry is typical: “You and I agree on many things—
more than you care to admit” (5, 309) All further citations from One People, Two Worlds are cited parenthetically within the body of the text.


7. Shafran, “When the Medium is a (Misleading) Message.”

8. Other non-Orthodox critics of Reinman have noted the latter’s appeal to “absolute truth,” and provided a similar diagnosis. David Wolpe in his “Spiritual Agoraphobia Perpetuates a Shallow Judaism” Jewish Bulletin, November 22, 2002, (www.jewishsf.com/bk021122/comm2.shtml) writes, that the assertion of the possession of absolute truth is in fact symptomatic of “a deep and unwarranted insecurity.”

9. Terry Eagleton in his The Function of Criticism: From Spectator to Post-Structuralism (London, 1984), shows how post-modern literary critics, writing under what he calls “the minatory shadow of the holocaust” would reject all belief systems as fascist (100-101). Hirsch distinguishes himself for associating Orthodoxy with totalitarian movements (though of course anti-semitic attacks against Israel now almost habitually associate the Jewish State with fascism and totalitarianism).


11. Reinman, in fact, notes Hirsch’s partiality to the term: “what’s this power fixation?” (206).

12. Reinman attacks Hirsch for assigning “validity to conflicting points of view,” asking, “how can we both be right if we disagree?” Ḥazal themselves are guilty of trespassing the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction, though of course, as Reinman himself argues, they would not tolerate the application of their principles to the pluralism espoused by Hirsch (10). Here again, Reinman’s rhetorical strategies set a limitation on the extent to which he can explore the complex notion of Truth as it emerges within Ḥazal.

13. It may not be, however, only philosophers, or even philosophy students who need to be disabused of such assumptions. As Maharal, Ner Miẓvaḥ, (Jerusalem, 2002) wrote, “the primary attribute of Greek culture was its attribute of wisdom, and it was characterized, through its universality and its omnipresence” (33). A Westerner, especially someone who has attended the university, does not need to expend any energy to think Greek; it comes naturally. On my own strong hesitations about advocating Torah u-madda as a le-kha-ṭeḥillaḥ ideal, see my “Torah u-madda: A Voice from the Academy,” Jewish Action 64 (2004): 25-33.

14. Ḥiddushei Ha-Ritva al Ha-Shas, Eruvin, 13b.

15. Introduction to Yam Shel Shlomo, Bava Kamma.

16. For an extended account of the arguments of Ritva and Maharshal, in the context of contemporary debates about literary hermeneutics, see my


20. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Mind* (New York, 1986), 16. R. Soloveitchik distinguishes, however, between kinds of pluralism. While “operational pluralism, in its essence, is positivistic and annuls the idea of the absolute,” epistemological pluralism, associated with both the methodology of the quantum physicist and the halakhic man “does not deny the absolute character of Being” (16).


24. We should be careful to note that when R. Soloveitchik refers to the role of subjectivity in scientific research, he certainly does not mean simple prejudices or desires (or Ammiel Hirsch’s favorite term, “power”); what he may refer to are those experimental and cognitive models deployed by the scientist in his search to describe reality. They are subjective not in that they represent the prejudices of a single individual, but in that they are models—paradigms—that serve the scientist in his research. For the claim that R. Soloveitchik misunderstood the quantum revolution, and as a consequence gave license to a relativism associated with “post-modern philosophers,” see Avram Montag’s letter to the editor in *Tradition* 31 (1997): 90-91 (a response to my “Towards A Genuine Jewish Philosophy”); for a further elaboration of the perspective elaborated here, see my response to Montage, 92-94.


26. Interestingly, R. Soloveitchik himself traces the philosophical underpinnings of Nazi thought to such subjectivist excesses. Without the “piecemeal contact with reality,” presupposed in the world of the classical scientist, the modern metaphysician in his “romantic escape” from reason was left to wander in the “wilderness of intuitionism,” falling into the trap of “excessive philosophical hermeneutics.” Where “reason,” R. Soloveitchik writes, “surrenders its supremacy to dark, equivocal emotions, no dam is able to stem the rising tide of the affective stream” (*Halakhic Mind*, 52, 60, 53). Indeed, the “pseudo-scientific” attitude of the “humanist” lead to both “scientific laxity” and “moral corruption,” and eventually the “racial theories” espoused by the Third Reich (46, 54, 53).

27. Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 175. Levinas similarly rejects the agendas implied by certain forms of philosophy, arguing that the “the relation to God called faith does not primordially mean adhesion to certain statements that constitute a knowledge for which there is no demonstration” (170).

28. Reinman does in fact elaborate such an argument in his paraphrase of the arguments of the *Kuzari*; see 124-131.