Darwin and the Rabbis: Understandings of the Divine Image in an Evolved World

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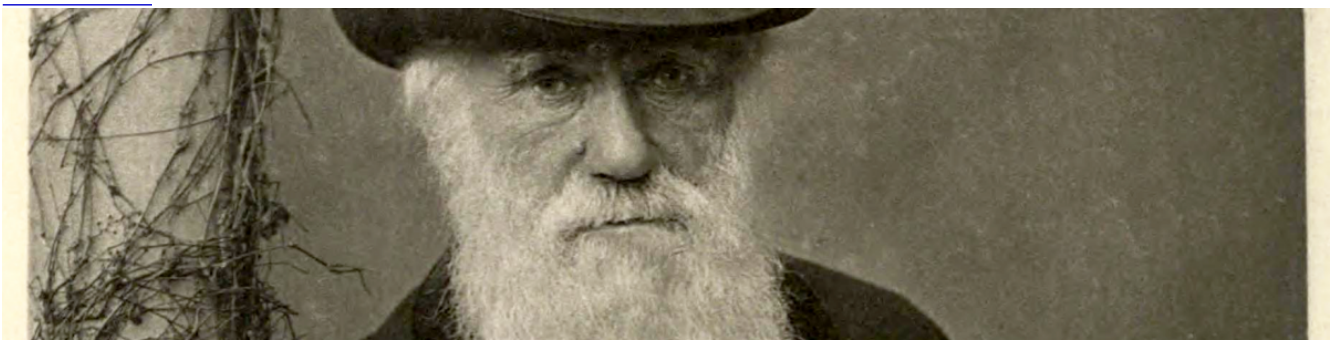

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In thinking back, I sometimes wonder if the question of "Truth, truth, truths" began burning for me as a teenager on a summer trip to Israel when I awoke in the old city of Jerusalem to the sounds of Church bells and the muezzin's call to prayer. I remember beginning to realize in that anxious moment that if I were born Christian or Muslim, my most cherished beliefs and commitments would be significantly different than they were in my actual Jewish American self. I worried that if my notions about life were in fact a result of circumstance, what relation did they have to Truth (truth, or truths)?

My mother has often pointed out that she recalls much earlier theological questions than this, and I, too, remember moments of discussion after we would light Shabbat candles together when we would ponder questions such as where the dinosaurs were in the Garden of Eden. I certainly understand the impulse to argue that the issue of God's relationship to other religions is a more powerful concern than whether Adam and Hava interacted with prehistoric fauna; however it has turned out that I have devoted more than the past decade of my life to studying perspectives related to this latter question. Indeed, it can be expanded to a larger set of questions including the following: How do the truths we learn in different disciplines, say science and religion, regarding subjects such as the origins of the universe and humanity, relate to one another? Or more specifically, What have Jewish scholars written about Darwinian evolution, and how do contemporary religious Jews relate to the subject?

Having moved to Israel, I found that ideas I had taken for granted growing up in the American Modern Orthodox community—such as the lack of conflict between Jewish thought and biological evolution—are controversial here. The Pew Report that came out last year reported that only 11 percent of *dati leumi* respondents stated that they accept evolution.[1] Although I was not certain what caused this cultural stigma against evolution to persist or even escalate decades after it has been incorporated as the bedrock of modern biology, I could think of some hypotheses.

Darwin's insights have been called a "corrosive acid" that eats away at previous assumptions about the world. The fluidity of Darwinian speciation seemed to strike a death blow to essentialist Aristotelian conceptions of the inhabitants of this planet, including humans. The late secular Jewish American paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould even argued that if the tape of life was rolled back and

then replayed, “The chance becomes vanishingly small that anything like human intelligence would grace the replay.” How could this contingency perspective, or parallel ones developed from the randomness entrenched in the modern-synthesis’ account of genetic change, be reckoned with religious sensibilities? Wasn’t all this talk of arbitrariness an attack on the understanding of the world in all its glory and biodiversity as intended by a Creator who had each of us in mind, let alone our entire species?

Of course, there have been many leaders from all religions who saw no conflict between an evolutionary and devoutly spiritual outlook on the world. In our tradition, the writings on this topic by R. Kook are perhaps the most well-known, powerful, and accessible. Darwin himself made a note in his diaries that he received a letter from a religious Jew, Rabbi Naphtali Levy, along with a Hebrew treatise Levy wrote entitled *Toledot haAdam* in which he expounded upon the congruencies of evolution and the Torah. In fact, in a surprising twist, the most prominent rabbi rejecting Darwin’s ideas regarding transmutation of the species in the 1860s was not Orthodox, but Reform leader Abraham Geiger.[2] And in debates between the emerging American Reform movement and American Traditionalists in the 1880s, Rabbi Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes, leader of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City, and others argued that Reform Judaism, in its eagerness to reinvent the religion, violated Darwin’s principle of gradualism by suggesting that religion should progress rapidly, in great leaps, rather than incrementally. Rabbi Mendes and his colleagues suggested that the American traditionalist camp better reflected Darwinian understandings of gradual evolution applied to a tradition’s adaptation to contemporary environments. The subsequent rabbi of Shearith Israel, Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool, similarly espoused a theistic evolutionary perspective.[3]

And yet in the twenty-first century, we have evidence that anti-evolution sentiment has continued and even increased among religious populations around the world[4]—again why? When I first came to write my dissertation on Jewish receptions of evolution, my advisor counseled me that I should look for social rather than just theological answers to this question. Since in all religions there have proven to be resources that could lead to the acceptance of theistic evolution, the fact that certain religious communities and individuals choose not to take this path indicates that more is likely at play. What other issues, questions, and problems has evolution been associated with that complicate the matter of embracing theistic evolution? Another mentor I spoke with at the time agreed that sociology and anthropology were important for cracking the historical conundrum of religious opposition to evolution, but also added not to forget about the deep theological matters involved. In the subsequent years, I have tried to listen to both pieces of advice and not marginalize either the social or philosophical questions involved in the interface of evolution and Judaism.[5]

One element of the task that has been very enjoyable but also challenging is encountering Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s writings in his posthumously published work entitled *The Emergence of Ethical Man (EEM)* edited by Rabbi Dr. Michael Berger. The Rav, of course, has always been a larger-than-life figure in the imagination of those in my generation, and attempting to digest his approach is daunting. In the pages that follow I review some of the key points in R. Soloveitchik’s argument regarding the concept of *tselem Elokim* (divine image) in *EEM*, and highlight a number of the novel contributions R. Soloveitchik offers to the conversation about Jewish perspectives on evolution.[6]

II. Man-as-Animal Needs Religious Faith

A. The Naturalness of Man

In his introduction, Rabbi Berger directs the reader's attention to R. Soloveitchik's interest in "religious anthropology, the doctrine of man, within the philosophical perspective of Judaism." Indeed, it is with the theme of divergent views of humanity that R. Soloveitchik began the notebooks that are now *EEM*. In the tradition of talmudic learning, R. Soloveitchik launched his project by setting up a "*hava amina*," a perspective that may be commonly held but that will be rejected as false later in the discussion. The "*hava amina*" at the beginning of *EEM* involved the relationship between the "anthropology," or view of man, put forward by three philosophies: the biblical, the Greek, and the scientific.

R. Soloveitchik posited that most would think that the biblical and Greek have more in common with each other than with the scientific, because the first two are thought to "set man apart from other forms of organic life." After arguing the theoretical merits of this *hava amina*, and even stating that many Jewish medieval scholars held this view, eventually R. Soloveitchik concludes that this perspective is erroneous. In explicating his own view, he wrote,

> Man in the story of creation does not occupy a unique ontic position. He is rather a drop of the cosmos that fits into the schemata of naturalness and concreteness. The Torah presents to us a successive order of life-emergence and divides it into three phases; the last of those living structures is man. (p. 12)

If we didn't understand his position yet, he then spells it out for us clearly: "The (Jewish) viewpoint is very much akin to modern science (p. 12)."

As one of many proof texts for this point, R. Soloveitchik accentuated the simple idea that even the name *Adam*, which comes from the Hebrew word for earth *adama*, speaks to humanity's similarity with the other creations, and not about humanity's uniqueness. R. Soloveitchik further contended that a "plant-animal-human continuum" exists, [7] and labored to bring many biblical and halakhic sources that illustrate the deep affinity between man and the rest of nature.

In the Rav's view, this issue highlights a significant difference between Judaism and Christianity. Christianity conceptualizes man as a transcendental being who should aim to escape the sin of this world and connect to the next world. In contrast, Judaism understands man as a natural being who is a part of this world and should not aim to flee his home. This account raises the question that will occupy many pages of *EEM*: Is there no difference between humans and other natural beings? What about the "divine image" that the Torah said was bestowed upon humanity, and only humanity? What does this transference of "image" mean, how did that happen, and is it congruent with the scientific view of human's evolutionary development? In the words of R. Soloveitchik,

> The conclusion we have reached in our inquiry is both a very simple and very paradoxical one…Man is a simple creature ontically, but a very complicated one ethically. In order to obtain a clear view of the Jewish interpretation of man, we must first find the transition between…Adam and *tzelem E-lokim.* (p. 13)

B. The First Stage of Divine Image—Self-Awareness

To begin to answer this question, R. Soloveitchik draws our attention to the last third of chapter 1, and compares the blessings that God gave to animals with those God gave to humans (1:22, and 1:26–30). The Rav contends that in a profound sense the blessings to both groups are the same. They both are blessed with *peru u-revu*, "be fruitful and multiply," which relates to their shared biological drive for reproduction.

> We must understand this blessing of multiplication, uttered at the creation of animal and man…That instinctive drive to multiplication, synonymous with sexual hunger and tension, was God's blessing to the zoological realm….The objective of copulation in both animals and humans is the need for expansion and multiplication of the species (pp. 70–71).

Still, despite this very important and basic similarity, key differences can already be observed in these very verses. The most significant difference, according to the Rav, has nothing to do with the nature of the blessing being bestowed, but rather with the divine decision to turn to humans and share with them the content of their blessing—to make them aware of their biological drive towards reproduction, and as later verses indicate, the drive to eat as well. This unique relationship does not develop with the rest of the natural realm but is initiated by God only in relation to humans.

> While the Divine blessing to animal is described as *va-yevarekh otam E-lokim* (God blessed them), in the blessing to man a new term was introduced, namely, *va-yomer lahem* (He said to them. "And God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply'" (1:28). The simple word *va-yomer* (He said) sheds a new light upon man, and upon his role and task. *Va-yevarekh* (He blessed) denoted the embedding into the organic frame of existence…But in the case of man, God also spoke to him. He informed him of his biological propensities and tendencies. Through His speech to man, God registered in the latter's mind the necessity of this automatic drive thus transforming it. (p. 74)

For R. Soloveitchik, the first stage of *tselem Elokim* developed because God communicated with humanity, and began a relationship with Adam by informing him about his biological drives, with which he, like the animals, was blessed. Due to this communicative encounter, humanity developed the new and unique capacity for self-awareness. The Rav contended that this awareness is in fact the first stage of obtaining divine image. He also made explicit the connection between his exegesis of these verses and Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue:

> By the mere fact that he was confronted by God and spoken unto, the I-thou relationship emerges. The thou makes the I self-conscious; he comes into contact with the other one. The knowledge of otherness makes him aware of his ego existence. Yet in this case, the thou is not a being similar to him, but God Himself. (p. 75)

R. Soloveitchik goes out of his way to explain that this is only a preliminary stage of *tselem Elokim* —that there is as of yet no ethical law and that in fact "Adam is still an animal crawling in the jungle, still the ape which is aware of its needs" (p. 76). There is another stage required to complete the

relational process that has begun.

C. The Second Stage—The Emergence of Ethical Man

Just as the first stage of *tselem* in R. Soloveitchik's formulation is attained through a form of communication from God to humanity, so, too, is the second. In chapter 2 of Genesis, the text introduces a new form of communication that was not previously used in chapter 1: *va-yetzav*, and He commanded. After we already encountered the forms of communication of blessing (*va-yevarekh*) and direct speech (*va-yomer*), we now for the first time encounter a verse that states, "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat: but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it (2:16)." Due to R. Soloveitchik's perpetual emphasis on halakha, one might already have an inkling that this is going to be a significant leap. As R. Soloveitchik expressed it,

> *Va-yomer* signifies that God informed man of a factual situation, of something which is. In our case, He told him about the biological drive….*Va-yetzav*, on the other hand, means command. A new law in all its uniqueness was imposed on him. This cannot be experienced in the beating of his heart but in a new area of his existence….With the *va-yetzav* of divine command, with the dawning of the ethical experience, man begins to experience his selfhood, his personalistic existence. (pp. 87–88)

R. Soloveitchik observed that it was precisely after this new element of "command" was introduced that readers of Genesis see a significant rupture in the plant-animal-human continuum. Specifically, in verses 19 and 20 of chapter 2, Adam is called to name all of the animals, and most significantly "there was not found a help to match him." This is a big shift from the picture R. Soloveitchik has painted until now:

> Suddenly he stops marching with nature in the same direction; he turned to face nature (in the opposite direction) and began to wonder, to examine, to reflect and to classify. (p. 90)

In R. Soloveitchik's reading, all of this was due to humanity's most recent exposure to the third and last stage of divine communication, which triggered the second stage of the divine image to emerge within humanity: Adam now has the opportunity to decide to not always follow his basic instinct for food in order to follow God's will.

While Rabbi Soloveitchik's exegesis in *EEM* continued for several more chapters to cover the third chapter of Genesis and male-female relationships, prophecy, and more, we already have encountered the stages he contended are part of the development of the divine image within humans. First, humanity was like the rest of the animal kingdom, only endowed with biological impulse and technical intelligence, as is represented by their common blessing of "be fruitful and multiply." Then, God decided to turn to humanity, begin a relationship with us, and inform us of our biological nature—this direct speech brought us to the first stage of *tselem Elokim*, self-awareness of ourselves as biological creatures with instincts. Finally, God developed the relationship with humans further, and decided to gradually reveal to us His will. He bestowed upon us our first command. While our

biological nature goaded us to eat from every tree in the garden, God asked us to refrain from eating from one. This new relationship with God caused humanity to rise to the final level of our current status as bearers of the divine image, creatures unlike any other in the natural world in our ability to be aware of biological desires and then choose to channel them in order to serve God and follow the ethical commands that God has placed upon us.

We can now understand way R. Soloveitchik claims that evolution and *tselem Elokim* need not be in conflict in any way. Indeed he believes they are dependent on one another:

> …I wish to emphasize that the widespread opinion that within the perspective of anthropological naturalism there is no place for the religious act, for the relatedness of man to eternity and infinity, is wrong. Perhaps more than man-as-a-divine-person, man-as-an-animal needs religious faith and commitment to a higher authority. God takes man-animal into His confidence, addresses him and reveals to him his moral will. (p. 5)

III. Discussion

We have now reviewed the fairly non-intuitive argument put forward by R. Soloveitchik in *EEM*—his understanding of the affinity between the Jewish and the scientific views of humanity, both of which consider humans to be natural, non-transcendental beings. The Jewish view adds the element that despite our likeness to the rest of the animal kingdom (and in fact to the rest of the entire created world, and our vast distance and dissimilarity from God), God decided to communicate with humans and develop a relationship with us. This communication, which also can be called revelation, in turn produced the effect of triggering the development of the unique human personality that is signified with the term *tselem Elokim*.

While R. Soloveitchik does not argue that this additional element is in any way indicated by science, it is important to note that this element is not necessarily contra-indicated by science either. Therefore, in the Rav's argument, the ethical element of humanity, which in his view is an element of the most vital importance, is one that developed parallel with, and perhaps more precisely, chronologically following the basic biological evolution of the physicality of humans. R. Soloveitchik does not go into detail as to how the biblical text and the scientific evidence relate to one another specifically regarding stages of evolutionary development, and this is likely absent on principal in order to avoid the pitfalls of this type of explication.[8] In general, R. Soloveitchik's analysis may be said to raise more questions than it provides neat answers for—a characteristic that will be appreciated by some and bemoaned by others. In the spirit of probing possible implications of R. Soloveitchik's view of *tselem Elokim*, in the coming section, I will specify three ideas/ideals that have emerged as meaningful to me over the course of thinking about the material presented in EEM: one theological, one educational, and one that could be termed social.[9]

What is one of the boldest theological benefits of a view of humanity in which the "divine image" within each of us is not a static spiritual gift from God via a physical act of "ensoulment" but rather a potential to act in accordance with the will of the ultimate Other who wants to be in close relation with us? One significant benefit might be the profound responsibility placed upon each of us to fully actualize our divine image in every act of every moment. On the one hand, this is quite a heavy

burden to bear; we have not arrived at humanity by being born—we need to struggle to attain it every second. On the other hand, it also makes theological room to understand that there are those who actualize this potential more and those who actualize this potential less. In addition to offering a challenge to every human to live out their humanity, this view broadens our conceptions of revelation, the religious act, and the religious personality to a point where it encompasses the totality of human activity.

In the pedagogical realm, I have had the experience that teaching R. Soloveitchik's view reinforces for students our appreciation of novel ideas and interpretations. Despite how traditional R. Soloveitchik contended his interpretations of Genesis and the human personality were, their divergence from common belief cannot be denied. For instance, even if we compare R. Soloveitchik's view to another pro-evolution view expressed in the twentieth century, the one put forward by the then Chief Rabbi of England, Joseph Hertz, and famously propagated through its inclusion in the Hertz Humash, we see important differences. While R. Hertz saw no problem with the idea that God chose to create the world through evolution, he, like many others, still emphasized the differences between animals and humans. R. Hertz designated these differences as "differences in kind rather than degree" (Hertz 1929, 56). This is in contrast to R. Soloveitchik, who emphasized that "all organic existence," including humanity, "is on one continuum" and that the differences between humans and animals is "only in degree, not in kind" (Soloveitchik 2005, 44–45).[10] As we mentioned above, all of creation in R. Soloveitchik's understanding have more in common with each other and are separated by an abyss from their Creator—although humans through revelation, and not because of creation, are able to traverse this chasm. R. Soloveitchik also stated explicitly that his views are contrary to medieval Jewish philosophers, who he argued were influenced by Christian theology. To share a view that challenges trends within medieval Jewish philosophy in addition to current day common assumptions sends a message to students that they may not take "the religious view" for granted, but must search out all positions that should be studied before constructing their own position.

A social message that reverberates from R. Soloveitchik's approach comes from the focus on relationship. If the way that God created in humanity the divine image was by beginning a relationship with us, it speaks profoundly about the value and impact of reaching out and creating relationships with others. Elsewhere R. Soloveitchik argued that Genesis has first and foremost a halakhic message: that human beings in their primary obligation of following in God's ways must learn from the creation narrative to be creators (*Halakhic Man*, pp. 100–101). From *EEM* it seems plain that what we must also be, if we want to follow in God's ways, is relationship builders. As God decided to form a bond and dialogue with us, so must we do so with others. To add an additional layer that also seems implied, while we can each easily stay comfortable by finding others very much like ourselves and create our social universe by conversing and being with people like us, I believe we might take R. Soloveitchik's exegesis in a direction that could lead us to seek out those we are more distant from and see if perhaps we could form a bond with them—finding their divine image and revealing ours to them.

IV. Conclusion

Although from earlier published works and private conversations R. Soloveitchik's positive view of evolution was apparent (e.g., Feit in Cantor and Swetlitz), the publication of *EEM* gave the contemporary student of Jewish views of evolution a wealth of new material for consideration. I have reviewed some of it here in the hope of fostering further discussion.

By way of conclusion, I would now like to share some of my experiences teaching R. Soloveitchik's thoughts from *EEM* in a seminar offered to teachers and students in Israel over the past

three years.[11] In the spirit of "*eilu v'eilu*" I have offered R. Soloveitchik's words alongside rabbis who were respectively presenting the perspectives of R. Kook, who as mentioned earlier embraced evolution, as well as the view of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who wrote strongly against the compatibility of evolution and Judaism.[12]

I have to admit that as much as I am a proponent of the 70 faces of Torah, I have also found the experience difficult. Hearing my friend and colleague Meir Klein present the Rebbe's view and make a case for rejecting evolution still raises my blood pressure and gets my heart pounding despite having heard the arguments dozens of times. I sometimes need to remind myself that I believe that there is a value in being confronted again and again with a view I disagree with, presented in a convincing manner, instead of putting issues behind me. In this case there is the added element of my great respect, esteem, and gratitude to the Lubavitcher Rebbe for all he did for the Jewish people, as well as for a special connection to my family.[13] The confluence of admiration for a person while struggling to understand why and how they believed could be said to offer an ideal circumstance for stretching oneself to appreciate a contrasting point of view. One contribution of the Rebbe's perspective could be described as a deep skepticism toward naturalistic process and explanations that many of us take for granted—especially when this acceptance makes us feel more distant from God and mitzvoth.

Even regarding R. Kook and R. Soloveitchik, despite their clear agreement on many aspects concerning their positive perspectives on evolution, their differences on certain ontological issues can be considered over-arching, i.e., understandings of God's immanence and transcendence. While presenting R. Kook's perspective, my colleague Dov Berger gave the analogy that the world is like a fetus in the womb of God, to indicate that all of existence is a phase of the divine. R. Soloveitchik's view, as presented in *EEM*, was quite different from this: The Rav indicated that the baby was born, the delivery is over, the world was created, and now if the divine wants to share with the world it must be done through communication, which is revelation.[14] The students often realized that each of these positions have different strengths when it comes to answering theological questions. Sometimes the discussion of theistic evolution brought us to questions regarding the expression of divine will in nature, on the one hand, and humans' ability to be agents with real free will, on the other. R. Kook's view seemed to allow a simpler understanding of the former, whereas R. Soloveitchik's a clearer explanation of the latter.

One of the most important lessons to be learned about these conversations is that rather than singling out the compatibility of religion and evolution as a particular challenge, it can be seen instead as an example of many broader debates. For instance, when someone recovers from an illness, is that because of prayers that were uttered or medicine that was taken? When the Israeli War of Independence was won, did that indicate that the generals had devised exceptional battle plans or that God willed the creation of a modern Jewish State? We are unaware of the nature of interaction between divine will and natural processes in so many realms, why do we single out the tension between evolution and religion for concern?

While I know that these ontological issues are often beyond our human capacities to determine, I also experience the yearning to understand the world we live in just a little bit better. In these moments of confrontation yet again with questions about "Truth, truth, truths," I sometimes think of the words of the historian of religion Karen Armstrong, who has argued that our conception of religious truth has been harmed by the rise of science in the last 400 years. Until that time, she claims, people viewed religious experience as an opportunity to revel in the greatest mysteries of existence—in all that we do not know and understand. Since the scientific revolution however, people have expected from religion the kind of truth we have come to know from science. This turn, to elevate scientific truth as the only kind of worthwhile truth, she argues is a big mistake that must be undone. In its stead, she believes we must cultivate the awareness that we can benefit greatly from being able to encounter different kinds of truth in our lives, and appreciate each for the unique gifts it bestows.

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[1] See http://www.pewforum.org/files/2016/03/Israel-Survey-Full-Report.pdf; only 3 percent of *hareidi* respondents and 35 percent of *masorati* respondents said that they accept evolution, pp. 145–146).

[2] Swetlitz and Cantor, p. 12.

[3] Pear 2015.

[4] Numbers, p. 399.

[5] For an analysis on a different subject that seems to take a similar approach see Jeremy Brown’s *New Heaven and a New Earth* (2013) for an enlightening history of the rocky reception of Copernican ideas by traditional Jewish thinkers.

[6] I have troubled many of the Rav’s students to discuss his ideas with me. I will not mention them here so as not to indicate their agreement with my analysis, but I am always searching out further conversations so if someone reading this is willing, please be in touch. Additionally, I would like to note that I am publishing some of the material in this article as part of a book chapter entitled “'Man-as-animal Needs Religious Faith': Rabbi Soloveitchik on Evolution and Divine Image in *The Emergence of Ethical Man*,” in Seckbach, J. & R. Gordon, Eds. (2018). *Theology and Science: From Genesis to Astrobiology*. Singapore, World Scientific Publishing.

[7] E.g., p. 47.

[8] For critiques of such contemporary phenomena see for instance Shai Cherry's "Crisis Management via Biblical Interpretation: Fundamentalism, Modern Orthodoxy, and Genesis," in Cantor and Swetliz, as well David Shatz's "Is There Science in the Bible: An Assessment of Biblical Concordism."

[9] Also see the chapter on Darwin in Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' *The Great Partnership: Science and Religion and the Search for Meaning* (2011), which offers inspiring extensions of R. Soloveitchik's perspective.

[10] For more on R. Hertz's view, see Pear 2012 and 2015.

[11] I would like to gratefully acknowledge the Binah Yitzrit Foundation for the financial support that enabled this endeavor.

[12] See Pear, Klein and Berger 2015.

[13] See http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/livingtorah/player_cdo/aid/424367/jewish/It-Wasnt-Me-It-Was-Him.htm for a description of my family's connection. One explication of the importance of being confronted by different perspectives can be found in the philosophical framework developed my postdoctoral adviser Prof. Hanan Alexander termed the "pedagogy of difference."

[14] For a fascinating treatment of the family heritage R. Soloveitchik received regarding the issues of God's transcendence and immanence see Shaul Magid "Deconstructing the Mystical: The Anti-Mystical Kabbalism in Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin's *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim*" (1999) and sources therein.