

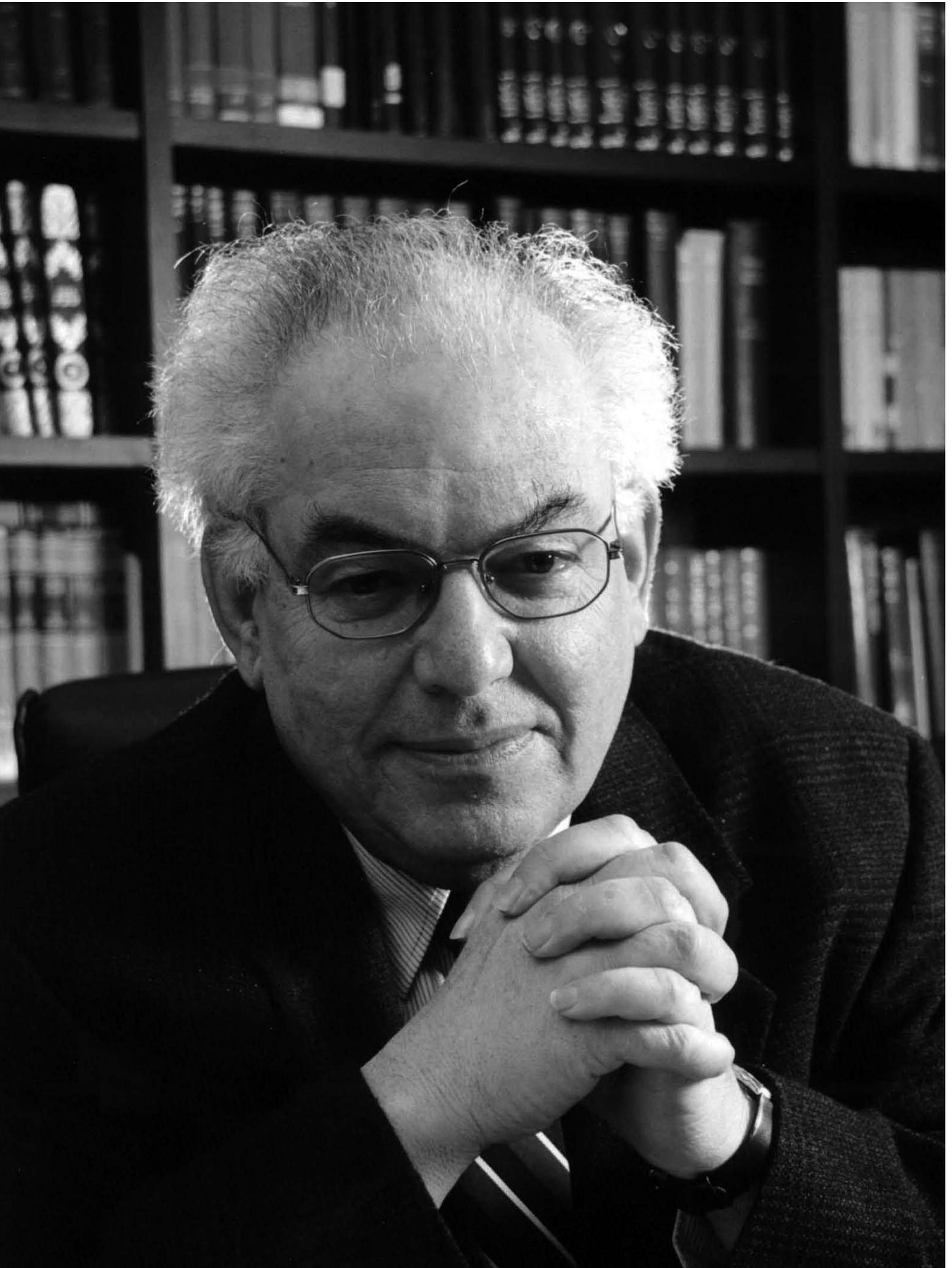
# Covenant and Moral Sensibility

An  
Interview  
with  
David  
Hartman



When Prof. David Hartman's book *A Living Covenant* was published in 1985, it marked a revolutionary advance in Modern Orthodox thought. In closely examining the relationship between divine demand and human response, and the tensions between religious tradition and modernity, Rabbi Hartman challenged the view that Judaism necessitates an uncritical obedience to law. *A Living Covenant*, which won the 1985 National Jewish Book Award, was republished in 1998 and continues to provoke interest and debate.





Today, at the age of 76, David Hartman persists in his vigorous philosophical battle for a version of Judaism to which he has dedicated his life. In a recent interview, he considers both the past and the future in the unique spirit of inquiry that has always animated his work.

**Q** More than twenty years after your magnum opus *A Living Covenant*, has the basic philosophy of the book remained the same, or have you experienced major upheavals in your thought?

**A** I was influenced to write *A Living Covenant* as a response to the Zionist revolution. The perception of Judaism from Spinoza onwards fostered the claim that Judaism develops an obedient person, one prepared to live with the conditions of history as an unalterable process. The hope for radical change was limited to the belief in the messianic redemption. The historical paradigm for Jewish liberation was grounded in the Exodus story, in which the crucial figure that brings about a liberation from slavery to freedom is God. The plagues, the confrontations of Moses with Pharaoh and the escape from Egypt all support the notion that God interferes in history as it relates to the people of Israel. Thus, the heroic-passive Jew believed, regardless of the processes of history, that the suffering of the Jewish people would end when, once again, God would act as the great liberator of Israel and bring them back to their homeland as a precursor to the messianic era. Jews waited for this historical moment with patience, hope and courage.

The Zionist revolution, in contrast, was fueled by the yearning to bring about a change in Jewish history without relying on the Exodus paradigm. The early Zionists felt compelled to take responsibility for the future of the Jewish people. My book, *A Living Covenant*, offered a religious anthropology, in which the Jew moves from

a passive posture to an activist response to history. Although respectful of the spirit of early Zionism, my book argues that one can remain loyal to the tradition while still developing an independent spirit of responsibility for the future.

I am now concerned not so much with confronting the Zionist revolution, but rather with tackling the inability of those loyal to the Jewish tradition to express their individual moral spirit. Abraham's surrender to God in the *akedah* (the binding of Issac) has become the model of genuine religiosity. Abraham's ability to violate his deepest ethical values and bring his son as a sacrifice to God exemplified for traditional Jews the need to reject their deepest moral principals when they seem to contradict the halakhah. While they may feel sympathy, for example, for an *aguna*, nevertheless they surrender their moral outrage to halakhic authority. Yet when halakhah violates essential principles of justice, moral outrage is a far more appropriate response than passive acceptance of the authority of tradition.

How can one act on the basis of his/her independent moral intuitions even if they seem to negate the halakhic authority and yet remain rooted in the tradition? Does the tradition demand the quelling of subjective morality in the face of the objective halakhic system? These are the questions that now occupy me.

Abraham, it seems, can be read as the archetype of the morally informed, active Jew, challenging God's decision to destroy Sodom, and also of the submissive Jew at the *akedah*. Can we resolve these two seemingly opposed pictures of Abraham? Or must we be content with accepting the paradox?

The two models don't contradict each other but give expression to two distinct moments in religious life. The Sodom model is the empowering, activist model. Here Abraham is the man who confronts God, saying, "Shall the judge of the earth not

do justice?” In the *akedah* model, Abraham is the submissive person who is not critical of God. The *akedah* stands for the unintelligible, tragic moments in religious life in which one decides to maintain loyalty to the tradition despite life’s incomprehensibility. When these moments occur, the human being has to call on internal resources and declare: “Even though I don’t understand, even though history makes no sense, even though the Holocaust remains permanently a tragic, incomprehensible experience, I decide to continue to be a Jew and live my covenantal life.”

Incomprehensibility is an important aspect of life. Not all of life is clear; we are often thrown into experiences in which the human being stands dumbfounded, unable to speak. This is the essence of the Job experience. At the end of the Book of Job, Job once again decides to have children even though he experienced the tragic death of his first children. Job cannot understand the reason for his suffering or the death of his children but, in spite of the arbitrary nature of life, he decides to go on. Similarly, the Jews decide to continue being Jews. Despite history, the Holocaust and the vulnerabilities to which membership within the Jewish people exposes them. The *akedah* is thus the will to go on in the midst of the unintelligible. It is the deep impulse that declares: “I am not going to give up in the face of tragedy and suffering. Rather, I continue to maintain an open belief in the possibilities of life.” Both the Abraham of Sodom and the Abraham of the *akedah* have much to teach us about being a covenantal Jew. For me, the building of Israel after the Holocaust expresses the courage of the Jewish people to fully embrace all aspects of life and not be paralyzed by the horrible tragedy and memory of the Holocaust.

**Q** One of your metaphors for the covenantal relationship is the teacher/pupil dynamic. Does your teacher/pupil relationship with your own teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, enhance or undermine the use of this metaphor?

**A** Well, both. On one level, Rabbi Soloveitchik never demanded unconditional surrender to his ideas. His teaching was conducted in the spirit of an invitation to think independently, to take responsibility for your own philosophical worldview. He didn’t want students to constantly need approval from him in order to take an independent path. On the other hand, he was not an easy human being; he didn’t really encourage that sense of independence, so you only developed it if you had a sense of your own strength. He wasn’t authoritarian, but he inspired terror in the classroom. Nevertheless, he created an invitation to intellectual stimulation and freedom. He thus had both elements to him.

**Q** It struck me, when reading your book, how the Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Rabbi Soloveitchik and you, all students of Maimonides, come to such diverse and even opposed interpretations of his worldview. Is this openness something built into his texts, or does every interpreter approach Maimonides with his own worldview and read it through that lens, or both?

**A** You can never separate the reader from himself. It is important to understand that Maimonides was very ambiguous, very suggestive, and sometimes contradictory. Thus he can invite different responses depending on where you want to place your emphasis. Maimonides was a complex thinker; sometimes his halakhic rhythm would dominate, and sometimes his philosophical rhythm would dominate. You never knew what moment of Maimonides’ life you were meeting. So

in a sense, Maimonides himself was full of contradictions; this allows for different responses to his writing.

**Q** In the book you write that - “the task of covenantal Jews now is to show that we can build a Judaic society not by resorting to dogmatism and legal coercion, but by means of the compelling example of the way we live our daily lives.” The culture war in Israel has intensified in the two decades since you wrote these lines. Are covenantal Jews doing their part by living an exemplary life?

**A** No! They are still far from bearing witness to Torah as the way of pleasantness, as the way of love, as the way of gentleness and tolerance. A great deal of fanaticism and arrogance still exists in the

religious community, so we have a long way to go. I still live with the hope, however, that Judaism will shape a different moral sensibility, a different feeling of the way we live in the world. We are presently living in a mode of narcissism. This is the “Jew and the elephant” problem, whereby we are always the focus. For example, a rabbi recently told a newspaper that we Jews do not have a responsibility to Darfur. I don’t know why he felt the need to publicly make that statement. Though I understand that we must look after our own, this does not necessitate blindness to the needs of those who are not members of our community. The unique feature of Judaism has always been its ability to create solidarity within the community, without developing a moral blindness to people who are outside it. Yet we have not learned how to nurture particular passion,



particular intensities and, at the same time, be open to that which is beyond our particularity. We still have a long way to go; therefore I pray to God to grant me many more years to write and to instruct, and that the Shalom Hartman Institute should continue creating a spirit of dialogue between the universal and the particular. We need to continue to teach that tolerance and pluralism are not antithetical to a serious commitment to Judaism.

**Q** Maybe what you are talking about is the dichotomy that exists between the Reform and Conservative Jews, who are constantly looking out at the universal, the human, tikkun olam, or Darfur, and the Orthodox who are always looking inwards to their own.

**A** This is exactly the tragedy of dividing the Jewish world. One side chooses the family, while the other chooses the world. I never felt that conflict. When I left America, I chose to strengthen my particular family identity and live an intense Jewish life. This did not blind me to the significance of that which is other. On the contrary, it enabled me to listen sympathetically because I had roots in my own particularity. My strength in my particularity made me far more universal than if I did not have my own roots. Being a rooted Jew enables me to hear sympathetically the rootedness of a Catholic, Muslim or secular person. I am not frightened of someone else's particular passion, because I enable a particular passion in my own life. This is extremely important, but we are still far from living in that spirit. ■



In front of the  
shoemaker's  
/// Shargorod,  
Ukraine, USSR, 1989

