

Dr. Samuel Belkin—on his 25th Yahrzeit
(as part of the "Month of Learning", May 1, 2001)

1. Introduction:

My 1st encounter: בחינה in 1945...put in his class...organized שיעורים (in יגמות)—the סך הכל...
Was his Last Class...Thereafter: swamped...I was priviled t know him as teacher, predecessor...

2. Biographical:

Born 1911 Lithuania; learned in Mir, Radun. סמיכה 17 yrs old...Year later (1929)—to US. Spoke Yiddish, Heb, Polish—no Eng; '34--enrolled Harvard, 1 yr later—fellow'p Brown; '35—Phi Beta, PhD

'35, Instructor Greek at YC; '36—also RY. '43 (<32 yrs old)—Pres YU. Transformed sm collg→major research universty ('44—just<I arrivd YC). Took ill, left Pres'y '75; served as Chancellor only a few months before succumbing in April 1976. Eulogized by Rav אבן צור זצ"ל
"a wandering Libvak" who saw his father killed before the US by Communists...left home alone"

Kind of man he was: powrf but modest; totally dedic'd YU; both visionary & builder.

Poetry...During 33-yr Pres'y, publ'd some 3-4 vols, number articles, but *much* still unpubl'd

This lecture: major ideas/ideals that emerge from his scholarly work - tribute to his memory זצ"ל אבן צור

3. Philo

Philo (c. 20 BCE-45 CE)—leading figure Alexandria; B=1 of leading scholars on Philo
During his lf-tm, he publ'd several articles. Remained--& remains--f Prof Elazar Hurvitz to publish entire series: 6 volumes, including first printed by YU Press 1989 (1st of 3 on Philo & Midrash).
Others on: Philo's sermons, his Midrashic method, Philo & Medieval Midrashic Works.
Philo was a leader in Alexandrian exegesis: symbols, allegories, references to early Greek philosophers, ideas. Philo was one of first—if not *the* first to attempt encounter Jsm/World. In other words—first TuM pers'y.

-----Here: cite passages from Naomi Cohen's Review-----

The Philosophy of Purpose

In this booklet ('58), B sets out to redirect the whole enterprise of טעמי המצוות.
Reason and Purpose. "Why" and "What For." Thus: creation:

שתי שנים ומחצה נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל, הללו אומרים: נוח לו לאדם שלא נברא יותר משנברא,
והללו אומרים: נוח לו לאדם שנברא יותר משלא נברא. נמנו וגמרו: נוח לו לאדם שלא נברא יותר משנברא,
עכשיו שנברא - יפשפש במעשיו. ואמרי' לה: ימשמש במעשיו - עירובין י"ג ע"ב.

Thus, both schools: can't discover "why" of human creation. But conclusion (יפשפש במעשיו) implies: still, we duty-bound uncover div purpose creation: fulfill'g Torah, moral, holy lives, lives of goodness.

Another example: Torah gives no reason for law (Ex 23-37):

כי יגנב איש שור או שה וטבחיו או מכרו חמשה בקר ישרם תחת השור וארבע צאן תחת השה:

But ריב"ז does elaborate the purpose:

תוספתא ב"ק פ"ז ה"י--ר' מאיר א"ר בוא וראה חביבה מלאכה לפני מי שאמר והיה העולם שור מפני שבטלו ממלאכתו משלם חמשה שה מפני שאין לו מלאכה משלם ארבעה. רבן יוחנן בן זכאי אומ' בוא וראה כמה חס המקום על כבוד הבריות שור מפני שמהלך ברגליו משלם חמשה שה מפני שטוענו משלם ארבעה

(If time: I offer in support comment of SRH on למה א-לי למה עזבתני not מדוע but א-לי למה.)

5. In His Image (adapted from my review of In His Image, in Tradition Spring 1962)

B's major premises:

- 1) "It is in the Hal, therefore, that the phil-Jsm is to be sought." (Limits self to the philosophy of man.)
- 2) Sanctity of human person'y < from God's creation of man "in His image."
- 3) Jsm=a "democratic theocracy." "In Jsm," he tells us, "the recognition of the *demos*, the indiv'l & the infinite worth of his person'y, are but the necessary outgrowth of the acceptance of God's *theos* (rulership), a rel'p succinctly summed up in the phrase 'democratic theocracy.'" By "theocracy," B, like Josephus, does not intend a hierarchy ruled by a High Priest. On the contrary, it implies that only God is infallible and that, . . . , for instance even the High Priest must publicly confess his sins on Yom Kippur.

God as sole Possessor implies that no human can claim complete/unequivocal ownership of another human. Thus Pharisees (contra Saducees) did not hold master responsible for damages caused by his slave:

אומרים צדוקין: קובלין אנו עליכם פרושים, שאתם אומרים שורי וחמורי שהזיקו חייבין, ועבדי ואמתי שהזיקו פטורין; מה אם שורי וחמורי שאיני חייב בהם מצות הרי אני חייב בנזקן, עבדי ואמתי שאני חייב בהם מצות אינו דין שאהא חייב בנזקן? אמרו להם לא, אם אמרתם בשורי וחמורי שאין בהם דעת, תאמרו בעבדי ובאמתי שיש בהם דעת (שאם אקניטם ילך וידליק גדישו של אחר ואהא חייב לשלם) (ידים ד-ז)

Thus, Pharisees denied that any one man can be so completely owned by another as to be totally subject to him and bereft of his own will/resp'y. This=major principle of sacredness of the human pers'y.

Here, import'ly, B. reminds us that the Rabbis discussed issues on their own merits and did not articulate hal'c opinions merely to disguise vested interests/advance pet economic theories. B opposes socio-economic approach of contemporary practitioners of Wissenschaft, w its implied rigorous determinism. The Rabbis, he avers, really meant what they said, and that they took ideas qua ideas quite seriously. Thus, B writes:

[The Pharisees] certainly did not constitute the wealthier portion of the comm'y, nor were their views/decisions shaped by a desire t protect "vested interests." Their refusal t hold a master responsible f his slaves' actions, ∴, was not directed by econ'c considerations... [Their opinion] can be understood only in the light of their concept of the sacredness of the human personality

Same theory governs the relationships of parents and children and employers and employees. More interestingly, also denies to a man any claim to exclusive possession of his self.

Simil'y, he points out tht anyone who kills מיתה חייב כנעני הגוף. Bec קנין הגוף refers only t right of service.

That is why רמב"ם rules that just as 1mst submit t martyrdom>transgress any of the עבירות, so is one forbidden t yield his life i-o t avoid violating any of other מצוות. (I would add explanation of RaDBAZ why self-incriminating testimony is unacceptable in a J court.) Man is not ultimate master of his own body and hence cannot, by his own testimony, yield it to death, or to corporal punishment.

6. Conclusion

In sum, I wrote the following in 1962 and still believe it today with equal conviction: B. "is a master of halakhic learning. He knows his material thoroughly, intuitively its hidden philosophic resources, and has the capacity to charm them out of their legal idiom."

Charm was, indeed, one of his hidden but most powerful and attractive talents. He charmed me as a *rebbe*, as a thinker who believed devoutly—as did Philo—in TuM (in his days we called it "synthesis"), and personally. He passed away before I, his student, was elected as his successor. I believe he knew I would follow him, because he asked me to visit with him at his home when he was quite ill, and he raised the issue. I hope I have not disappointed him.

It's been my privilege to help keep his memory alive in YU, the institution to which he devoted all his prodigious talents and energies, his love and his wisdom. We arranged for the Yad Belkin in the library, the Samuel Belkin scholarships, the publication of the first of his volumes on Philo, and I have been dedicating my annual שיעור כללי to his memory every אדר (unfortunately, he died on the eve of פסח, as his great friend the Rav died on חמ"ט פסח, and so we cannot celebrate their Yahrzeits on the exact dates of their demise.) I hope that Yeshiva, under whoever my successors are, will continue to honor the memory of this giant.

I publicly express my on gratitude to him, to his memory. To paraphrase the immortal words of R. Akiva, שלי ושליכם שלו הוא.