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СОДЕРЖАНИЕ

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ЕВРЕЙСКИЕ ЯЗЫКИ

ОБЗОРЫ

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"THOSE WHO YEARN FOR THE DIVINE": RABBI SHMUEL ALEXANDROV AND THE RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS-PHILOSOPHICAL RENAISSANCE[1]

Abstract: The intersection between the Eastern European rabbinate and Russian religious thought has yet to be addressed adequately in academic scholarship. A key example of this intersection is Rabbi Shmuel Alexandrov (1865–1941), a maverick rabbi and intellectual whose fascinating writings are all but neglected. This article focuses on the influence of the Russian "God-Seekers" on Alexandrov's thought and on the common ground that underlies that influence. The article also examines how Alexandrov used the God-Seekers' idea of the neo-religious Übermensch to advance his own individualistic and anarchistic ideas, and how those ideas took shape in Alexandrov's later writings.

Keywords: Jewish-Christian relations, Anarchism, Shmuel Alexandrov, Vladimir Solovyov, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Nikolai Berdyaev, Friedrich Nietzsche, Übermensch.

Исаак Слэйтер, *Университет Бен-Гурион*

«ТЕ, КТО СТРЕМИТСЯ К БОЖЕСТВУ»: РАББИ ШМУЭЛЬ АЛЕКСАНДРОВ И РУССКОЕ РЕЛИГИОЗНО-ФИЛОСОФСКОЕ ВОЗРОЖДЕНИЕ

Резюме: Сходства между идеями восточноевропейского раввината и русской религиозной мыслью еще в недостаточной степени изучены в академической науке. Важным примером подобного пересечения был рабби Шмуэль Александров (1865–1941), раввин и оригинально мыслящий интеллектуал, чьи

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увлекательные сочинения никогда не оставались без внимания. В данной статье основное внимание уделяется влиянию русских «богоискателей» на мысли Александрова и общей почве, поспособствовавшей этому влиянию. В статье также рассматривается, как Александров использовал идею богоискателей о новом религиозном сверхчеловеке, чтобы развивать свои индивидуалистические и анархические идеи, и как эти идеи были сформулированы в более поздних работах Александрова.

Ключевые слова: еврейско-христианские отношения, анархизм, Шмуэль Александров, Владимир Соловьев, Дмитрий Мережковский, Николай Бердяев, Фридрих Ницше, сверхчеловек.

PREVIEW

There is direct evidence showing the impact of Russian intellectual discourse on early twentieth-century Jewish rabbinical thought. The influence of Russian thought on Hebrew literature and Jewish political thought is well documented,[2] just as some Russian thinkers used Jewish themes, mostly kabbalistic ones, in their own conceptual frameworks.[3] Rabbinical thought is usually considered to be more insular and therefore less prone to the influence of non-Jewish or non-Orthodox ideas. Studies that have addressed the influence of European ideas on rabbinical thinkers such as Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Rabbi David Cohen (known as Ha-Nazir), and Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik usually focused on the presence of German philosophy in their works while neglecting the Russian context in which all these thinkers were born and educated.[4]

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[2] See, for example: R. Lapidus: *Between Snow and Desert Heat: Russian Influences on Hebrew Literature, 1870–1970* (Cincinnati, 2003); J. Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862–1917* (Cambridge, 1981); R. Tsirkin-Sadan, *A Jewish Letter in the Pushkin Library: Yossef Haim Brenner's Philosophy and Its Connection to Russian Literature and Thought* (Jerusalem: 2013 [Hebrew]); H. Bar-Yosef, "Reflections on Hebrew Literature in the Russian Context," *Prooftexts* 16 (2): 1996, 127–149.

[3] See, for example: U. Daigin, *Kabbalah in Russian Religious Philosophy: The Impact of the Kabbalah on the Russian Sophiological Movement* (Ramat Gan, 2008); J. D. Kornblatt, "Solov'ev's Androgynous Sophia and the Jewish Kabbalah," *Slavic Review* 50 (3): 1991, 487–496; K. D. Burmistrov, "The interpretation of Kabbalah in early 20th-century Russian philosophy: Soloviev, Bulgakov, Florenskii, Losev," *East European Jewish Affairs 2007* 37 (2): 157–187.

[4] See, for example: B. Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak Ha Cohen Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism* (Albany, NY, 1993); D. Schwartz, *Faith at the Crossroads: A Theological Profile of Religious Zionism* (Leiden, 2002); T. Halperin, *Rav HaNazir as a follower of Herman Cohen* (Ramat Gan, 2015); D. Schwartz, *From Phenomenology to Existentialism: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Leiden, 2013).

Several breakthrough studies conducted by Hamutal Bar-Yosef and Konstantin Burmistrov have shown that we should widen the scope of our inquiry to consider the impact of Russian philosophy and theology on rabbinical thought, as was done vis-à-vis Jewish secular thought.[5] These studies have pointed us toward Rabbi Shmuel Alexandrov, a key figure in this interplay of ideas. Alexandrov is important because he refers explicitly to various Russian sources, providing us with clear evidence of the influence of Russian philosophy on rabbinical thought, where such connections would have to be established indirectly in other cases. But Bar-Yosef's and Burmistrov's studies only mention the phenomenon in passing. Bar-Yosef deals with it as a secondary issue of her main topic: the Russian context of modern Hebrew literature. Burmistrov focuses on the influence of Vladimir Solovyov'sideas on rabbinical thinkers, mainly on Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Alexandrov. Both studies lack a profound acquaintance with Kook's and Alexandrov's body of thought and its evolution over the years. They do not explain what might have attracted rabbinical thinkers to Russian thought, nor do they elaborate on how they employed it within their own philosophies. I would like to give a short introduction on that topic. Since the topic is so broad, I will focus on Rabbi Alexandrov and his interest in the Russian religious-philosophical renaissance of the first decade of the twentieth century.

I will start by reviewing the intellectual and historical background that made the ideas of the group known as the "God-Seekers" appealing to certain Jewish rabbinical thinkers at the turn of the century. I will follow with a few words about Rabbi Alexandrov and his philosophy to help us understand his attraction to Russian religious thought, which was perhaps stronger than that of his contemporaries. To conclude, I will examine a theme that Alexandrov borrowed from the God-Seekers — their religious interpretation of Nietzsche's Übermensch— and how he used it for his own purposes. I believe that the mixture of German philosophy in a Russian context makes it a valuable test case.

The God-Seekers are not the subject of this paper. Nor is the Russian intellectual discourse at the turn of the century, which is a broad and complex topic on its own. Instead, I will focus on a specific cultural trend within Eastern European rabbinic Judaism that has has yet to receive (proper attention) from academic scholars.

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[5] H. Bar-Yosef, "The Jewish Reception of Vladimir Solov'ev. *In Vladimir Solov'ev: Reconciler and Polemicist, Eastern Christian Studies*, vol. 2, edited by Wilven den Bercken, Manon de Courten and Evertvan der Zweerde, 363–392 (Leuven, 2000); K. D. Burmistrov, "Toward a History of Russian-Jewish Intellectual Contacts: Vladimir Soloviev and Rabbi Shmuel Aleksandrov," in *Russian-Jewish Culture*, edited by Oleg Budnitskii, Olga Belova and Victoria Mochalova, 302–314 (Moscow, 2006 [Russian]). See also M. Agursky, "Universalist Trends in Jewish Religious Thought: Some Russian Perspectives." *Immanuel* 18 (1984):49–51.

COMMON GROUND

What do Eastern European rabbinical thought and Russian neo-idealist philosophy have in common? We should not overlook the obvious: they share the same political framework and therefore some cultural elements, mainly the Russian language. Russian was the first non-Jewish language of many Jewish people, and knowing it enabled a man like Alexandrov to follow the vibrant public discourse of the Russian intelligentsia.[6] Another point of correlation that is usually ignored is the anti-mechanistic view of nature that both parties shared. The Russian religious thinkers viewed nature in energetic and spiritual terms. They were opposed to atomistic and mechanistic physics that secular thinkers asserted could and ought to apply to society and personal life.[7] As for the rabbinical thinkers, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, many Hebrew books and pamphlets on popular science described the physical world in terms of energy rather than mechanics. This trend became popular among religious writers, and by the end of the nineteenth century we find rabbis who dealt with scientific matters as part of their theological thought and considered natural phenomena such as light, sound and electro magnetics as divine forces pulsating throughout the physical world.[8] Thus, by the first decade of the twentieth century, such rabbinic thinkers could easily identify with the neo-idealist trend in Russian discourse that adopted similar views, though with more complexity and nuance.

This brings us to the most important aspect of the interplay between Russian and rabbinic thought. The Russian religious-philosophical renaissance was created by a wide variety of intellectuals, all of whom were opposed to using positivism and materialism as explanations of the world or as guides for living.[9] The rise of positivism in the second half of the nineteenth century did not go unnoticed by the Jewish public, and by the end of that century its rising

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[6] On the distribution of Russian language in the Jewish population, see Y. Slutsky, *The Russian-Jewish Press in the Nineteenth Century* (Jerusalem, 1970), 35–36. Both Alexandrov and Kook studied at the famed Volozhin yeshiva, where, according to various memoirs, students read Russian-Jewish newspapers. See S. Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning* (Oxford, 2012), 156–165 and 199–209.

[7] See A. Walicki, *The Flow of Ideas: Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to the Religious-Philosophical Renaissance* (Frankfurt am Main, 2015), 138–140, 721–748.

[8] See M. Zalkin, "Scientific Thinkingand Cultural Transformationin Nineteenth-Century East European Jewish Society," *Aleph* 5 (2005): 249–271. Hayyim Selig Slonimski, the most famous Hebrew science author of the time, tried to prove the immortality of the soul scientifically. See H. S. Slonimski, *Mezi'ut ha-nefesh ve-kiyumah mi-hutz la-guf* [On the Immortality of the Soul] (Warsaw, 1880).

[9] See A. Walicki, *The Flow of Ideas,* 721–796; B. G. Rosenthal, "Russian religious-philosophical renaissance," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8, edited by Edward Craig, 422–428 (London and New York, 1998).

popularity threatened the future of Orthodox Judaism in Russia.[10] For Alexandrov, the fight against Marxism became, after 1905, the main purpose of his intellectual activity.[11] The sophisticated manner in which the "God-Seekers" tackled that challenge and their religious tendencies appealed to him so greatly that even its Christian character did not bother him.

SHMUEL ALEXANDROV: AN UNUSUAL THINKER

Born in 1865 in the city of Borisov, Shmuel Alexandrov lived most of his life in the nearby city of Bobruysk until he was murdered by the Nazis when they invaded the city in 1941. His thought is a unique combination of mysticism, anarchism, and aspiration for a cultural renaissance.[12] He received rabbinical ordination at the famed Volozhin yeshiva, was a Zionist and a member of the Mizrahi national-religious party, and remained a devoutly observant Jew all his life.[13] Nevertheless, he developed a doctrine that opposed territorial separatism and strove for the abolition of the mitzvot — the religious commandments, the "nomos" of the Torah.

Alexandrov saw Zionism primarily as a cultural movement whose goal was to make a radical change in the Jewish way of life. Although he believed that religious observance in day-to-day life, based on obedience to and fear of a transcendent deity, was an essential component of the fight against idolatry, he felt that the time had come for Judaism to go beyond that. His goal was a national-religious consciousness that would recognize the divine source of human selfhood and conscience and view such selfhood and conscience as divine revelation. Obedience to one's authentic self — itself a divine imperative — obviates the need for Jewish religious law or any other heteronomous set of laws. As Alexandrov wrote: "There can be no commandments without

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[10] On the rise of Marxism and socialism in the Jewish community, see J. Frenkel, "Jewish Socialism and the Bund in Russia," in *The History of the Jews in Russia: From the Partitions of Poland to the Dismantling of the Tsarist Autocracy, 1772–1917*, edited by Ilya Luria, 253–262 (Jerusalem, 2012). It is hard to know how serious the threat was to the future of Orthodox Judaism in Russia, but a sense of crisisis evident at the turn of the century. See, for example, Alexandrov, *Mikhteve meḥḳar u-viḳoret*, vol. 1 (Vilna, 1907), 17–19, 21–22.

[11] See Alexandrov, *Mikhteve meḥḳar u-viḳoret,* vol. 1, 17–18, 21–23; vol. 3, (Jerusalem, 1932), 5–21, 63–79.

[12] On Alexandrov, see G. Bat-Yehuda, "Rabbi Shmuel Alexandrov," *Sinai* 100 (1987): 195–221 (Hebrew); E. Luz, "Spiritualism and religious anarchism in the teaching of Shmuel Alexandrov." *Daat* 7 (1981), 121–138 (Hebrew); I. Slater, "Religious Cultural Zionism: Religion and Nationalism in the Thought of Shmuel Alexandrov." *Daat* 82 (2016), 285–319 (Hebrew).

[13] Alexandrov tried to convince Rabbi Kook to join the Mizrahi party, but to no avail. See *Mikhteve meḥḳar u-viḳoret,* vol. 1, 6–7, 12–13, 16–17.

a god that commands them, but God sits deep in our hearts…Therefore, the commandments will be abolished."[14]

Alexandrov links these ideas explicitly to the philosophy of anarchists such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Leo Tolstoy. As in many other instances, he is not concerned with the specifics of their ideas, but rather with pointing out what they have in common— faith in humanity's inherent good nature.[15]

Alexandrov's references to non-Jewish thinkers are consistent with his views on the relationship between the Jewish people and other nations. He believed that the Jewish renaissance he yearned for would be shaped through discourse with neighboring cultures. Such discourse, he felt, was vital to the evolution of Jewish thought and as important as spreading monotheism among the nations and fighting heresy — a significant issue in Alexandrov's stance against Marxism. Since he believed that a good neighborly relationship was essential to that discourse, he opposed territorial separatism.

He did not see exile as an unfortunate event that needed to be rectified, but rather as a divine plan that was crucial to the Jewish people's God-given mission. He believed that the Jewish people in exile had learned science and philosophy from their neighbors and integrated these disciplines into their own religious thought even as they spread monotheism among the nations. Alexandrov even claimed that territorial separatism would lead to the degeneration of Jewish culture.[16]

Alexandrov had an interesting argument about that view with Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. Rabbi Kook established a yeshiva in Jaffa, hoping that it would help promote his version of national-religious renaissance. Alexandrov had high hopes for Rabbi Kook's yeshiva and expected that it would teach both Jewish and non-Jewish literature. He claimed that Christian thought represented a theological tradition that went back many centuries, while Judaism all but neglected that field.[17] On the other hand, Rabbi Kook believed that every non-Jewish theology was nothing but a falsification of the pure and original Jewish ideals. Jewish revival needed nothing but to return to itself — or, as he wrote in a letter to Alexandrov: "Not to Kant shall we return, but to Yam Suf, to Sinai and Jerusalem, to Abraham, to Moses, to David," continuing the list of prominent Jewish personalities throughout history.[18]

While Alexandrov systematically points out correlations between Jewish sources and modern European thinkers, he never commits to a narrow defini-

[14] Alexandrov, "Esh dat ve-ruah leummi" (Religious Fire and National Spirit), in *Ha-Magid* (May 21, 1891): 155 (Hebrew). This discourse is appended in full to my forthcoming article, "Spiritual Religious Zionism: Religion and Nationalism in the Thought of Shmuel Alexandrov," *Daat* 82 (2016), 285–319 (Hebrew).

[15] Alexandrov, *Mikhteve meḥkar u-viḳoret,* vol. 2 (Cracow,1910), 8–11.

[16] Alexandrov, "Takhlit ma'ase shamayim va-aretz" (The purpose of the creation of heaven and earth). *Ha-Eshkol* 4 (1902): 268–270.

[17] Alexandrov, *Mikhteve meḥkar u-viḳoret,* vol. 1, 27–28.

[18] A. I. Kook, *Igrot ha-re'iyah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1985), 48.

tion of Judaism. According to his views, Judaism supported liberalism and individualism, but within that scope it was capable of absorbing a wide variety of ideas. After all, he held that anyone who believed in the existence of God was in many ways Jewish already.[19]

Nor was Alexandrov picky when it came to the Russian religious-philosophical renaissance. Although he was aware of the wide variety of ideas and doctrines that this revival contained, he connecting it with Judaism while avoiding commitment to one specific doctrine, saying: "The truth is that you can find it all [in Judaism]: a little anarchism, a little liberalism, a little of the ideas of Vladimir Solovyov and his disciples, the new idealists, who find in anarchism the basis for seeking God."[20] So when we come to examine the way that Alexandrov used Russian thought, there is no use in focusing on one specific doctrine. Instead, we ought to think about the themes he borrowed from the Russian thinkers and used for his own purposes.

I would like to examine one such theme: the Russian religious interpretation of Nietzsche's Übermensch. For this purpose I must say a few words about Nietzsche's reception in Russia.

THE CHRISTIAN ÜBERMENSCH

Various political and artistic groups in the early twentieth century used Nietzsche's ideas and interpreted them according to their own causes. Some Marxists used his atheist "revaluation of all values" to promote revolutionary activity, including violence. Russian symbolists used his individualism and esthetics to demand that art be free from subjugation to social and political purposes. At the same time, some religious thinkers used Nietzsche to pave the way for a new Christianity.[21]

In this essay, I will focus on three prominent thinkers who contributed to that religious-philosophical renaissance: Vladimir Solovyov, the precursor of this renaissance; Dmitry Merezhkovsky, co-founder of the St. Petersburg Religious-Philosophical Society; and Nikolai Berdyaev, one of the movement's best-known representatives. Although they rejected Nietzsche's atheism, they accepted his criticism of Christianity in one way or another. They saw in the idea of the Übermensch the yearning for a new religion that would transcend the idea of good and evil. Such a religion would not limit human creativity, but exalt it to the level of the divine.

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[19] Alexandrov, *Mikhteve meḥkar u-viḳoret*, vol. 2, 8–1, 38–40.

[20] Alexandrov, letter to Palti'el Katznelson, February, 1910. Gnazim: The Asher Barash Bio-Bibliographical Institute, Tel Aviv. Shmuel Alexandrov archive (143), 4439 — כ.

[21] See B. G. Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism* (Pennsylvania, 2002), 27–115.

Solovyov argued that Nietzsche's Übermensch expressed the longing for the trans-human, for divine humanity (*Bogochelovechestve*). As he saw it, Nietzsche's main sin was pride. He sought to find the way to become trans-human using human power alone, without divine aid, and failed to recognize the need to follow the way of Jesus Christ, the God-Man (*Bogochelovek*). Solovyov was the first to portray Christ as the religious alternative to the Übermensch. As the real trans-human, only Christ could reconcile matter and spirit, church and state, sacred and profane. From that perspective, Nietzsche's apostasy, though driven by just aspirations, posed the biggest threat to that reconciliation. Toward the end of his life, Solovyov identified Nietzsche with the Antichrist.[22]

Merezhkovsky and Berdyaev developed Solovyov's reading of Nietzsche further and juxtaposed the *Bogochelovek*, or spiritual trans-human, with the earthly Übermensch, the *Chelovekobog* (Man-God).[23] In the early twentieth century, Merezhkovsky formulated his vision of "new religious consciousness," aiming at reconciling the Christian "truth of Heaven," represented by the *Bogochelovek*, with the pagan "truth of earth," represented by the *Chelovekobog*. He claimed that while Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and Solovyov had identified both, they had always preferred one of them and failed to understand that they complemented one another. They had not realized that both were two sides of the same coin and together shaped the original image of Christ, which the church had distorted throughout history.[24] In the view of both Merezhkovsky and Berdyaev, both the *Bogochelovek* and the *Chelovekobog* were the key for the second coming of Christ, the creation of a new human race that transcended good and evil, and the reconciliation of the spirit and the flesh.[25]

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[22] In a mysterious story that he completed several months before his death, Solovyov predicted the rise of the Antichrist and his gaining control over the world, followed by the final battle between good and evil and the second coming of Christ. See N. Grillaert, *What the God-seekers Found in Nietzsche: The Reception of Nietzche's Übermensch by the Philosophers of the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Amsterdam and New York, 2008), 97–105. Of course, Nietzsche himself adopted that nickname in his book *Antichrist*, but he saw it as a virtue. See W. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, 1974), 337–390.

[23] The term *Bogochelovek* was attributed to Jesus Christ in the Russian religious discourse to denote Christ incarnate. The term *Chelovekobog* was first used by Dostoyevsky to describe an anthropologic model entrenched in a worldview devoid of God, as opposed to the Christian model of the Bogochelovek. See N. Grillaert, *What the God-seekers found in Nietzsche*, 107–137.

[24] See B. G. Rosenthal, "Stages of Nietzscheanism: Merezhkovsky's Intellectual Evolution," in *Nietzsche in Russia*, edited by Bernice Glazer Rosenthal, 83–93 (Princeton, 1986); idem, "A New Spirituality: The Confluence of Nietzsche and Orthodoxy in Russian Religious Thought," in *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia*, edited by Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Colman, 340–344 (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2007); Walicki, *The Flow of Ideas*, 765–773; N. Grillaert, *What the God-Seekers Found in Nietzsche*, 145–167, 177–188.

[25] See Walicki, *The Flow of Ideas*, 739–742; Grillaert, *What the God-Seekers Found in Nietzsche*, 212–237, 247–248.

SPIRITUAL INDIVIDUALISM

Hebrew and Yiddish literature rarely discussed this trend of giving Nietzsche such a religious interpretation. The only ones who discussed it were usually its opponents — the proponents of Jewish socialism.[26] The common Jewish views on Nietzsche's thought were either that it called for a secular rebellion against the old traditions, as expressed in the dispute between Ahad Ha'am and Micha Josef Berdyczewski,[27] or that it was a sign of Europe's moral degeneration, as Max Nordau wrote in his work *Entartung* (Degeneration).[28] Alexandrov disagreed with both interpretations. In an unpublished letter to Benyamin Menashe Levin, he asserted that individualism and idealism could lead to religious consciousness, which was very close to Judaism. As proof he mentioned "those idealists who yearn for the divine," who published the symposium *Problemy Idealisma*, and considered them "followers of Solovyov."[29]

Alexandrov addressed the idea of the Übermensch in another letter in which he laid out his anarchistic ideas. He wrote that some of the anarchists believed that human beings could become supermen through moral and spiritual evolution, and that the Jewish nation shared this hope. He quoted the Talmud as saying that the righteous would be called by the name of God as per Isaiah 4:3: "He who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy." He added: "Of course this man will be superior in his moral consciousness, not in his physical traits, as some of the new anarchists claim."[30]

This paragraph contains the key features of Alexandrov's Übermensch, the *adam ha-elyon*,[31] who is righteous by virtue of his moral spirit, equal with God, and participates in the creation of world and of the Torah. The idea of *talmidei hakhamim* (Torah scholars) participating in the creation of the Torah can be found throughout Alexandrov's thought. It is a traditional idea that was originally used to strengthen the status of rabbinic leaders. But in Alexandrov's creative interpretation, the judicial power turns into the power to change the face of Jewish culture. In his discourse *Esh dat ve-ruah leummi* (Religious Fire and National Spirit), where he presents his idea of the abolition

[26] H. Bar-Yosef, "The Jewish Reception of Vladimir Solov'ev, 363–364.

[27] On this dispute, see A. Lipsker, "Revolt: An Invented Historical Narrative?" *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 22 (2008): 3–29 (Hebrew).

[28] Steven E. Aschheim, "Max Nordau, Friedrich Nietzsche and Degeneration." *The Journal of Contemporary History* 28 (4) (1993): 643–657.

[29] Alexandrov, Letter to Benyamin Menashe Levin, May, 1910. Gnazim: The Asher Barash Bio-Bibliographical Institute, Tel Aviv. Shmuel Alexandrov archive (143), 4439 — כ.

[30] Alexandrov, *Mikhteve meḥkar u-viḳoret,* vol. 2, 9.

[31] The term *'ha-adam ha-elyon'* (the superior man), first used by David Neumark (1866–1924), was the common Hebrew translation of *Übermensch* until the second half of the twentieth century. The term *al-adam* (superman) is considered a better translation. See D. Neumark, *Friedrich Nietzsche: 'Mavo le-torat adam ha-elyon'* (Introduction to the theory of the Übermensch), *'Mi-mizrach u-mi-ma'arav'* 1 (1894): 115–124.

of the mitzvot, he writes: "One cannot deny that sometimes we force the divine to accept our Torah."[32]

This idea is based on Alexandrov's view of Moses's prophecy. Moses, who attained to the highest spiritual level that a human being can reach, used this divine knowledge to formulate the Torah as Jewish law and to shape Jewish religious culture. In Alexandrov's view, the religious framework is man-made and reflects the divine will only partially. As I mentioned above, Alexandrov urges Jewish culture to set aside the religious framework gradually and evolve toward what he sees as a better understanding of God's will and presence in the world, in which he believed that the human creative powers were deeply rooted. The righteous person, the moral and spiritual *adam elyon*, is the one in whom the divine will and human creativity are realized. Guided by these forces, the *adam elyon* has the freedom and the power to create a new culture and a new Torah.[33]

But this kind of trans-human is created not only through spiritual and moral evolution, but also through upheaval. This element is already implied in Alexandrov's interpretation of the verse in Isaiah quoted above: "He who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy."[34] "He who is left" refers to one who will survive the period of socio-economic chaos that the prophecy describes; he is the one who will be called holy. The apocalypse takes center stage in Alexandrov's later writing, which he produced while the Soviet Union's repressive regime was in power. The government's persecution of clergy members of all faiths in the late 1920s caused many to leave their positions. Several young rabbis contacted Alexandrov, asking for spiritual and theological support. They were searching for a reason to keep their positions and to keep fighting for Judaism that they feared was dying.

Alexandrov uses the above-mentioned themes to formulate his theological answer. He claims that God can accept the destruction of the whole world as long as one righteous human being survives to help him create the world anew:

> Since the Divine is infinite, there is no difference between how one man is measured relative to the Divine and how the whole world with all its creatures is measured relative to it. Both are finite facing infinity… The Talmudic phrases "The whole world was created for me" and "The whole world exists in the merit of one righteous human being" are not empty words; they possess real meaning. Devout believers and honest religious philosophers can sense that meaning. This doctrine has a solid base in the theory of the individualists in general and in Nietzsche's theory of the Übermenschin particular. That is the doctrine of Judaism in all its various aspects throughout history. According to it, God can destroy many worlds and create better ones, assisted by the

[32] Alexandrov, *Esh dat ve-ruah leummi*, 155.
[33] Alexandrov, *Mikhteve meḥḳar u-viḳoret,* vol. 3, 51.
[34] Alexandrov, *Mikhteve meḥḳar u-viḳoret*, vol. 2, 9–12.

adam elyon who survived the upheaval, because the *adamelyon* works with God to create the world.[35]

I believe that this paragraph (and many others), together with its apocalyptic nature, show the influence of Russian discourse. In Alexandrov's writings, these ideas are also connected to various kabbalistic sources, though their mystical character hides a more prosaic meaning. The upheaval referred to is not the destruction of the entire world, but rather the destruction of religious Judaism in Russia. The creation of a new world is a hope for the rise of new culture from the ruins of the old one. From this perspective, the creation of a new world and a new Torah are one and the same: the creation of a new culture that transcends nations and religions, a culture of faith and freedom, a culture that would be simultaneously divine and earthly.

But Alexandrov is talking about the present. He and his fellow rabbis are the ones who can fulfill the ideal of the *adam elyon*. Only those who know that the eternal essence of Judaism is not a mere set of religious laws but a moral and spiritual essence are the righteous few who will survive the destruction to create a new world.

The most radical implication of the power of the individual can be found in Alexandrov's letter to Rabbi Yosef A. Guttmann from the summer of 1926. The letter is part of an intensive correspondence between the two, in which Alexandrov tried to convince Guttmann to keep his position as the rabbi of Pavlograd (in present-day Ukraine). Following a long and elaborate discussion, Guttmann confessed that his rational perception of reality could not allow him to believe in the existence of God.[36] Alexandrov's response to Guttmann's confession was a surprising suggestion: "Make yourself a God to follow! With your own powers, make yourself a God and worship him!"[37] Alexandrov uses several kabbalistic sources to strengthen his extraordinary assertion that the *adam elyon* does not merely participate in the world's creation, but also has the power "to be a creator of God, so to speak."[38] The phrase "so to speak" is, of course, significant. Alexandrov never doubted the existence of a metaphysical God that human beings could never know completely. In his view, this divine entity is revealed in the beauty, glory and splendor of creation —phenomena that Guttmann cannot deny. As Alexandrov saw it, only rational skepticism prevented Guttmann from accepting these phenomena as divine manifestations.

Alexandrov's solution was that one should create an innovative image of God, associate it the sublime phenomena of nature, and believe in the image's creative power while being aware of its limited validity. For Alexandrov, this was not merely a mental exercise. He believed that human beings, as the only

[35] Alexandrov, S. *Mikhteve meḥḳar u-viḳoret*, vol. 3, 5.
[36] Ibid., 49.
[37] Ibid., 50.
[38] Ibid.

intelligent creatures, were the only ones who could recognize God and adore him. But they could also deny God and, by so doing, create a world supposedly without God.[39] Drawing upon the work of Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, another German thinker who was very popular in Russia, Alexandrov described the *adam elyon* as an artist capable of seeing infinite divine beauty in finite matter and describing it with his extraordinary creative power. By creating this new image of the divine-within-creation and spreading it throughout the world, the *adam elyon* could reintegrate creation and elevate it to its purpose — knowing and praising God. Thus, "In his work of art, the artist creates God."[40]

CONCLUSION

The East European rabbinate and Russian religious thought had not only historical and intellectual common ground, but also a common adversary. The intersection between the two requires further research, but we can point to direct influence in the case of Rabbi Shmuel Alexandrov and the Russian God-Seekers. As we have seen, Alexandrov was deeply influenced by their neo-Christian philosophy and passionately advocated studying their writings. We also examined a way in which Alexandrov used these ideas to advance his own purposes, as he developed their idea of the neo-religious Übermensch. The influence of modern Russian theology on Alexandrov's writings is clearly evident even when he discusses Nietzsche's ideas. I believe that further research will help us understand the ways in which Russian philosophical discourse influenced other religious Jewish thinkers in the twentieth century even when they discussed classical western philosophy.

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[39] Ibid , 51.
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