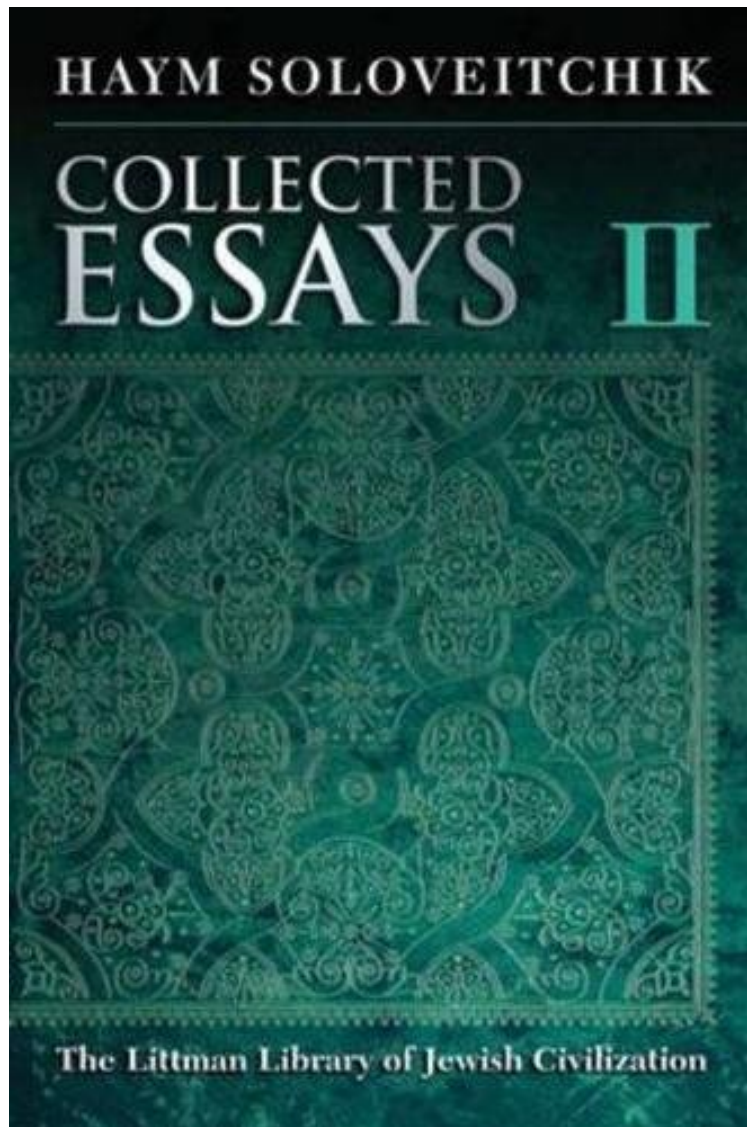


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Collected Essays: v. 2 (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization)

Haym Soloveitchik

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Haym Soloveitchik : Collected Essays: v. 2 (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Collected Essays: v. 2 (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization):

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excellenceBy Jacob D.A history of halakha by a historian and talmid hakham par excellence. This is a great book but not a relaxing read. It requires some amount of "amelut ba-Torah".3 of 4 people found the following review helpful.
Five StarsBy J. SocherAmazing.

In this second volume of his essays on the history of halakhah, author Haym Soloveitchik grapples with much-disputed topics in medieval Jewish history and takes issue with a number of reigning views. His insistence that proper understanding requires substantive, in-depth analysis of the sources leads him to a searching analysis of oft-cited halakhic texts of Ashkenaz, frequently with conclusions that differ from the current consensus. Medieval Jewish historians cannot, he argues, avoid engaging in detailed textual criticism, and texts must always be interpreted in the context of the legal culture of their time. Historians who shirk these tasks risk reinforcing a version that supports their own preconceptions, and retrojecting later notions on to an earlier age. These basic methodological points underlie every topic discussed. In Part I of the book, devoted to the cultural origins of Ashkenaz and its lasting impact, Professor Soloveitchik questions the scholarly consensus that the roots of Ashkenaz lie deep in Palestinian soil. He challenges the widespread notion that it was immemorial custom (*minhag kadmon*) that primarily governed Early Ashkenaz, the culture that emerged in the Rhineland in the late 10th century and which was ended by the ravages of the First Crusade (1096). He similarly rejects the theory that it was only towards the middle of the 11th century that the Babylonian Talmud came to be regarded as fully authoritative. On the basis of an in-depth analysis of the literature of the time, he shows that the scholars of Early Ashkenaz displayed an astonishing command of the complex corpus of the Babylonian Talmud and viewed it at all times as the touchstone of the permissible and the forbidden. The section concludes with his own radical proposal as to the source of Ashkenazi culture and the stamp it left upon the Jews of northern Europe for close to a millennium. Part II treats the issue of martyrdom as perceived and practiced by Jews under Islam and Christianity. In one of the longer essays, Soloveitchik claims that Maimonides' problematic *Iggeret ha-Shemad* is a work of rhetoric, not halakhah - a conclusion that has generated much criticism from other scholars, to whom he replies one by one. This is followed by a comprehensive study of *kiddush ha-shem* Ashkenaz, which draws him into an analysis of whether aggadic sources were used by the Tosafists in halakhic arguments, as some historians claim; whether there was any halakhic validation of the widespread phenomenon of voluntary martyrdom; and, indeed, whether halakhic considerations played any part in such tragic life-and-death issues. The book concludes with two essays on *Mishneh Torah*, which argue that the famed code must also be viewed as a work of art which sustains, as masterpieces do, multiple conflicting interpretations.

"Reading Soloveitchik is always a delight as his careful writing, perceptive insights and vast scholarship and erudition can be found on every page." -- Association of Jewish Libraries s (May/June 2015)
About the AuthorHaym Soloveitchik is the Merkin Family Research Professor at Yeshiva University in New York. He is the former Director of the School of Jewish Studies at the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and has taught at the Hebrew University, the Sorbonne, and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He has published books in Hebrew on pawn broking and usury, Jewish involvement in the medieval wine trade and the use of *responsa* as a historical source.