

An Analysis of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Utilization of Dialectic

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In our lifetimes, we all undoubtedly experience moments of reflection. These existential moments often jumpstart lifelong quests for meaning and understanding of our purpose in this world as humans. Known to most as the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik devotes much of his Jewish philosophy to analyzing the experiential intricacies of human existence. The Rav was a monumental figure in his time, as well as today, as his philosophy revolutionized the methodology through which the modern world is approached through Judaism.

With a unique synthesis of intense Talmudic education coupled with a strong foundation in Western philosophy, the Rav developed a methodology that allowed him to dissect, sharpen, and create revolutionizing concepts within the Jewish framework. Aside from deriving rich and innovative insights, the Rav's unique analytical techniques allowed him to develop a deeper understanding of our lives as Jews. Exposure to the Rav's analytical insights provide not only a unique academic experience, but truly elucidate and enlighten the Jewish experience in the modern world.

Rather than solely focusing on abstract ideas and concepts, the Rav conducts his Jewish philosophy approach experientially. That is, while we may be able to acknowledge that our pain or confusion in this world is essentially good and willed by the Almighty, we nevertheless experience and must constructively interpret and respond to our undeniable human experience. In his essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*, the Rav approaches the question of theodicy, and how we are able to understand and respond to evil in the world despite God's omnibenevolence. The Rav's stance on this, which ultimately pervades his overall approach to Jewish philosophy, expresses that it is not our business to try and understand the

rationality behind the metaphysical aspects of our existence, but rather to focus on how we actively respond to them.¹ The Rav's philosophy focuses on how we act rather than how we speculate about God.² This stance corresponds with the Rav's view of Judaism as being "theo-centric but anthro-po-oriented". While our lives are centered around God, he views Judaism as focusing on Man's experiential problems. This view of Judaism opened the door for the Rav in utilizing Jewish texts to develop practical responses to inevitable experiential problems.³

A major component of the Rav's unique approach includes his understanding and usage of dialectic. Through an analysis of Jewish texts the Rav develops what he regards as a uniquely Jewish understanding of dialectic, and indeed refers to, as Judaic dialectic.⁴ He maintains that Man⁵ is a dialectical being living in a dialectical world; this assertion denotes the reality that God's will for Man is his perpetual state of ontological tension and perplexity stemming from opposing forces within himself. The Rav's outlook condemns Man to a life of maintaining these irreconcilable tensions despite any efforts to solve or tranquilize them.⁶ While this reality and an awareness of it may seem depressing or even paralyzing to the human experience, the Rav's understanding of Judaic dialectic allows for the tension to be transformed into the keystone of human creativity and purpose.

¹ Joseph Dov. Soloveitchik, David Z. Gordon, and Jeffrey R. Woolf, *Kol Dodi Dofek = Listen, My Beloved Knocks*

² Rabbi Shalom Carmy, *Kol Dodi Dofek: A Primer*

³ Ziegler, Reuven. *Majesty and Humility*, 23

⁴ Soloveitchik, Joseph B. "MAJESTY AND HUMILITY.", 25

⁵ The Rav followed the convention of his time and used the word man to refer to humankind (Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 23)

⁶ Soloveitchik, Joseph B. "MAJESTY AND HUMILITY.", 25

The Rav introduces this idea of Man as a dialectical being in his well known essay titled *The Lonely Man of Faith*. This work ultimately stands as the essential groundwork for the Rav in his approach to life as the maintenance of perpetual dialectic. This approach in understanding this aspect of the human condition is derived by the Rav in light of his interpretation of the Bible's dual account of the creation of Adam. The first chapter of Genesis lays out the seven day process of creation, including creation of Adam on day six. However, the second chapter of Genesis follows with a secondary account of creation of Adam. The two accounts raise biblical criticism given that they account for the creation of Adam twice, with disparate and contradictory details.⁷

While part of the same story in the same book, the two accounts seem to be contradictory. For example, while the second account writes that Adam's body was fashioned from the dust of the earth,⁸ the first account fails to mention any aspect of his physicality and solely expresses that Adam was created in the image of God.⁹ Additionally, while the first account commands Adam to "fill the earth and subdue it,"¹⁰ the latter suggests that Man cultivates and keeps the Garden of Eden.¹¹ On top of these differences comes the distinction that the first account describes the simultaneous creation of Adam and Eve,¹² while the latter clearly expresses that Man was created on his own from the dust of the earth,¹³ with Eve created from his limb later on.¹⁴ These apparent imperfections along with many others

⁷ Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 2

⁸ Gn 1:27 "וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמֵם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם"

⁹ Gn 2:7 "וַיִּצְרֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם, עֹפֶר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה, וַיִּפֹּחַ בְּאַפָּיו, נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם, לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה-7:1"

¹⁰ Gn 1:28 "וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם, אֱלֹהִים, וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ, וּכְבֹּשְׁהָ; וּרְדוּ בְדִגַּת הַיָּם, וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבְכָל-חַיָּה-1:28 הָאָרֶץ הַרְמִשֶׁת עַל-הָאָרֶץ

¹¹ Gn 2:15 "וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים, אֶת-הָאָדָם; וַיִּנְחָהוּ בְּגֵן-עֵדֶן, לְעִבְדָהּ וּלְשֹׁמְרָהּ-15:2"

¹² Gn 1:27

¹³ Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* 11

¹⁴ Gn 2:18 "וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים, לֹא-טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבֶדּוֹ; אֶעֱשֶׂה-לוֹ עֵזֶר, כְּנֶגְדּוֹ-18:2"

prompt biblical critics not only to suggest that the Bible wasn't written by God himself, but to even suggest its multiple authorship.¹⁵

The Rav was staunchly opposed to biblical critics with claims of this sort and combatted their claims throughout his works. However, many of his claims are not accepted by those who do not value the sanctity and validity of the Torah texts; the Rav articulates an internal Jewish philosophy. What this implies is that the Rav regards the Jewish texts of the Bible and Talmud as an a priori source of data from which he derives a uniquely Jewish philosophy. Rather than attempting to promote Judaism to a secular audience by proving its rational legitimacy, the Rav begins his philosophy from a standpoint that affirms the divine validity and authority of the Jewish texts as an a priori system.¹⁶

The Rav compares his halakhic Jewish philosophy approach to the approach of a mathematical physicist. The Rav understands the physicist as creating an idealistic, ordered, and fixed a priori creation; the physicist then strives to apply this a priori idealistic system within the bounds of his physical reality, as he understands his experience in light of his a priori notions already at hand. Similarly, the Rav understands the halakhic texts of the Bible and Talmud as the Jewish apriori system.¹⁷

The Rav views the halakhic texts not only as a set of laws and norms, but as bearing a conceptual structure with cognitive significance. By regarding the texts as an a priori system, their application to our physical world unveils epistemological and ontological principles

¹⁵ Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 2

¹⁶ Kaplan, "THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF RABBI JOSEPH SOLOVEITCHIK", 48

¹⁷ Kaplan, "THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF RABBI JOSEPH SOLOVEITCHIK", 48

regarding Jewish existence. Just as the physicist embraces the aspects of the natural world that relate to his mathematical a priori system, so too the halakhist approaches nature in an attempt to apply his own halakhic categories to it. Just as the scientist autonomously creates abstract mathematical equations in an attempt to respond to the problems of the world, so too the halakhist autonomously creates abstract concepts in an attempt to respond to problems within the halakhic texts.¹⁸ This outlook emphasizes the interpretive potential of the Jewish texts and prompts the Rav to delve into them as a source of Jewish philosophical insight.¹⁹

With this emphasis on biblical text, the Rav approaches the disparate accounts of the creation of Adam as a source for a Jewish outlook on the dialectical human condition. Through a textual analysis he understands each account in light of its distinct details as respectively representing disparate ideal personalities coexistent within every human. The Rav respectively refers to each of these personalities as Adam the first and Adam the second. Given that they each represent an ideal personality, Adam the first represents one facet of Man, while Adam the second represents another.

Based on an analysis of the first account in Genesis, Adam the first represents Man's majesty. Given that he was created in the image of God, the ultimate creator, Adam the first is divinely embedded with the charismatic endowment of creativity. Coupled with his commandment to "subdue the earth,"²⁰ Adam the first exercises his creativity through his dominion over nature. He creatively develops an understanding of the world in terms of mathematical constructs, and goes even further to creatively duplicate them into his own world. In his constructed world, he is able to fashion and shape nature for his own purpose,

¹⁸ Kaplan, "THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF RABBI JOSEPH SOLOVEITCHIK", 51

¹⁹ Kolbrener, "Towards a Genuine Jewish Philosophy: Halakhic Mind's New Philosophy of Religion. 22

²⁰ Gn 1:28

ultimately fulfilling his commandment to subdue nature. He finds success in the dignity and majesty that arise from his creativity, allowing him to essentially be dignified.²¹ With these goals, Adam the first possesses no depth awareness of his unique self, and solely functions with a utilitarian outlook geared towards mastering nature.²²

The Rav's description of Adam the first as a dignified being can be understood in light of his simultaneous creation with Eve rather than on his own. Dignity and majesty are not internal and are rather social behavioral traits; nobody can become dignified or majestic without someone else regarding their actions as such. Consequently, these traits can only be redeemed within a setting of social interaction, necessitating the community of Adam the first. Aside from its necessity given Adam the first's identity as a dignified being, the community of Adam is described as being natural given that while he can attempt to dominate nature on his own, there is an instinctive urge to find strength in numbers when it comes to survival. His natural community is therefore born out of a feeling of mutual helplessness.²³

Contrastively, Adam the second represents a completely disparate, if not contradictory, personality present within Man. Adam the second, created from "dust of the earth" as God "breathed into his nostrils,"²⁴ represents the humility of Man that strives to surrender himself to God. The divine breath within him allows him to maintain an intimate relationship by endlessly striving for redemption, rather than dignity. Given that God is ultimately the Highest, Truest being, Adam the second redeems himself through purposefully

²¹ Soloveitchik, *Lonely Man of Faith*, 13

²² Kaplan, "THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF RABBI JOSEPH SOLOVEITCHIK," 44

²³ Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 29

²⁴ Gn 2:7

anchoring his existence and actions in serving God. This service can be understood in Adam the second's commandment to "watch and cultivate the land,"²⁵ as opposed to dominating it. The Rav refers to this submission as cathartic redemptiveness and discusses how Adam the second finds axiological security, and consequently redemption, through living a life in service to God. Unlike Adam the first who strives for success, power and dominance, Adam the second strives for submission to the Almighty which comes along with his own defeat.²⁶

In contrast to Adam the first, Adam the second has an extremely deep level of self awareness and strives to understand the ontological reality of his "I". Through his redemption, he is able to find his existential "I" only to paradoxically discover his ontological uniqueness. Once Adam the second becomes aware of his ontological uniqueness, he consequently becomes existentially lonely. Adam the second therefore must form an existential covenantal community with others who submit themselves to God in which he can find comfort in his existential loneliness.

Despite the many differences between the two Adams, given the coexistence of the contradictory biblical accounts of creation, the Rav ingeniously understands the contradictory personalities of both Adams as coexisting within Man. With their clear disparity in mental processes, goals, and interests, Man is destined to a lonely life with a perpetual oscillation between the two Adams, and becomes what the Rav refers to as the lonely man of faith. While Man may often find himself as Adam the first, focused on his teleological tasks such as developing new therapies, or improving the efficiency of his business, he is constantly subject to the interruption of Adam the second, often prompting him to pause and reflect on

²⁵ Gn 2:15

²⁶ Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 34

his existential loneliness. While there is no possibility of permanence within the state of either Adam, both personalities are equally divinely commanded. Moreover, not only are both Adams divinely embedded into every Man, but the human condition necessitates the perpetual tension brought about by their coexistence. However, aside from the inevitable tension, the Rav understands the divinely commanded *halakha*²⁷ as a response to this divinely commanded tense human condition.

In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, the Rav expresses his understanding of *halakha* as being a divine response, and aid, to Man's dialectical personality by providing him with commandments that embody the personalities of both Adams. Since we must obey *halakha* despite whatever Adam we are embodying at the moment, *halakha* serves as a constant reminder to ensure that we ultimately respond to the divine calls of both Adams. *Halakha* therefore engages itself in seemingly non-transcendental Adam the first realms such as agriculture, architecture, and sexuality. Because of this, when Man engages in these otherwise non-transcendental activities guided by divine instruction and limitation, he will be reminded of his ultimate subservience to God, allowing him to complement his Adam the first endeavors with an element of Adam the second. The *halakha* reminds Man whenever he is present in the community of one Adam, that he is needed and wanted in the community of the other.²⁸

Despite *halakha*'s assistance in maintaining coexistence between the two Adams, the dialectical tension created by their coexistence is nevertheless perpetual and must be

²⁷ A compilation of Jewish Laws given divinely extracted from Talmudic sources

²⁸ Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 54

maintained.²⁹ In the eyes of the Rav, this necessary coexistence results in Man's personality as being torn. In his essay titled "Majesty and Humility" the Rav specifically focuses on Man's dialectic between the ethics of majesty and humility. While they both bear equal divine standing, each one pulls man towards the opposite goals of victory and retreat. The Rav understands this necessary dialectic in light of the necessity of their counterparts as "The movement of recoil redeems the forward movement, and the readiness to accept defeat purges the uncontrollable lust for victory."³⁰ The forward movement of victory, and its underlying majestic desire, is redeemed as fulfilling a divine commandment only if Man is then willing to recoil if God demands so. While his retreat is redemptive as fulfilling the divine commandment of humility, it simultaneously allows for his advance to be redeemed as well.³¹

Along with his focus on victory and retreat, the Rav delves further into his Jewish interpretation of Man's inner dialectic, and how he can purposefully respond to it. He approaches the dialectical condition by interpreting it in light of God's commandment to Man to be a creator. The first account of creation from which Adam the first is derived expresses that God created Man in the image of God,³² essentially embedding Man with an aspect of God's creativity as one of his purposes in this world.

In this work, the Rav explains that just as Man is necessarily torn, he is necessarily a creative being as well. The Rav ingeniously developed an interplay between these two divinely willed, necessary components of the human condition and suggests that Man's

²⁹ Zeigler, *Majesty and Humility*, 56

³⁰Soloveitchik, "MAJESTY AND HUMILITY," 37

³¹Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 56

creativity necessarily stems from him being torn. In other words, Man's inner tension, or schism, due to the oppositional forces within him is the source of his necessary creativity.³³

This aspect of Man as embodying creative aspects of God, or imitating him, consequently is viewed as one of Man's most essential purposes and underlies the interpretation and response to conflicts throughout all the Rav's philosophical works. Man's imitation of God's ways, often referred to as *Imitatio Dei*, is viewed as a driving force in his human experience. The way the Rav embeds its interplay with dialectical tension throughout his works can be understood in light of the Rav's anthropo-oriented view as he allows creativity to become a practical response to dialectical pain, while fulfilling the divine commandment of creativity. By providing purpose to the pain while responding to it with purpose, the Rav's understanding of the Judaic dialectic transforms the tragic tension of human existence into the keystone of creativity and purpose.³⁴

The Rav presents this response to Man's dialectic in light of his understanding of *halakha* in the *Lonely Man of Faith*. Given that both Adams are subject to different and often incompatible goals, the Rav views *halakha*, the divine set of laws given to the Jews, as incorporating both the ethic of majesty as well as humility. Aside from enabling Man to incorporate both ethics into life, *halakha* acts as a practical and creative response to Man's inner dilemmas, embodying the Rav's interplay discussed in "Majesty and Humility."

In his essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*, the Rav discusses his view of the Jewish approach to suffering. With an understanding of God as being omnibenevolent, or all good, the existence of evil and suffering raises philosophical contradictions between a religious understanding of

³³ Soloveitchik, "MAJESTY AND HUMILITY," 25

³⁴ Zeigler, *Majesty and Humility*, 51

God's attributes, and their manifestation understood through the human intellect and experience. According to the Rav, philosophical understandings of evil and suffering are inadequate on an intellectual level given our finite human logic, as well as on an emotional level due to the fact that they would deny the human experience of suffering. However, a halakhic approach allows for the focus to be geared towards creativity as the *halakha* mandates our active repentance as a response to suffering. Rather than being overtaken by unanswerable metaphysical questions, *halakha* prompts us to respond to our inner dilemmas through creation and action, as opposed to being paralyzed by their dichotomies. While its response to suffering provides one example of this, *halakha* provides Man with a framework to help him negotiate and sanctify his internal strife through active and creative responses.

This interplay and its focus on creativity as a response to perpetual tension can be seen as an underlying tenet driving the Rav's outlook on life, expressing itself throughout his works. In his book *The Halakhic Man*, the Rav applies this creative interplay as he discusses its application to halakhic scholarship as well. Resembling the ideal personalities present in *The Lonely Man of Faith*, the Rav creates a religious paradigm which he calls halakhic man, that is composed of the two ideal personalities of cognitive man and *homo-religiosus*.³⁵ Cognitive man is intellectual and scientific, interested in cognitively mastering the universe based on reason, and his autonomous investigation of the world. *Homoreligiosis* on the other hand is driven by a metaphysical drive to transcend the limits of his world and understand the mysteries of the universe and his own existence. This contrast between the two personalities

³⁵ "Joseph B. Soloveitchik Halakhic Man Review by Benjamin Samuels, 2008."

creates dialectical tension with each personality attempting to force the other out of its realm.

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Unlike the lonely man of faith who is condemned to a life of existential loneliness, the Rav portrays halakhic man as an ideal hybrid that is able to respond to this dialectical tension with creativity, specifically within the halakhic realm. “The halakhic man shares a priori religious beliefs with *homo-religiosus*, but merges them with a cognitive approach by “superimposing his a priori ideal system upon the realm of concrete existence.”³⁷ Halakhic man merges his two facets by allowing his concrete world to be creatively analyzed according to the scientific approach of cognitive man, within *homo-religiosus*’ system of *halakha*. For example, when confronted with a bubbling spring, halakhic man is able to cognize the natural reality through the lens of Jewish law by viewing it as a halakhic construct of a ritual immersion pool.

Halakhic man is consequently able to creatively develop new insights, or *hidushim*, within his world by viewing it through the lens of *halakha*.

The Rav’s consistency in his focus on the experiential aspect of Judaism allows for halakhic man’s worldliness to sanctify his earthly existence.³⁸ His subjective experience then allows him to continuously contribute to new *hidushim* within the a priori realm of *halakha*. The Rav discusses this continuous aspect of the subjective experience in another work of his titled, *The Halakhic Mind*; he writes about how subjective stages are not ultimate, and that “We may always proceed further and discover yet a deeper stratum of subjectivity.”³⁹

³⁶ Nadler, "Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man: Not a "Mithnagged",”120

³⁷ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 18

³⁸ Nadler, "Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man: Not a "Mithnagged",”122

³⁹ Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind*, 74

Because every human experiences personal dynamic subjective experiences, the amount of insights that can be applied within the halakhic realm is therefore infinite. The Rav views this ongoing, infinite possibility within the realm of *halakha* as an advantage as it allows for each and every individual to continuously embody their creativity, while allowing their religious experience to become personal and subjective.

The Rav's purposeful approach to dialectic pervades his writing as he focuses on the constant dialectical tensions that we must experientially face, coupled with the constant potential for purposeful creativity. Aside from its purposefulness, the Rav's approach to dialectic can be viewed as focusing on the theme of perpetuity in relation to the human condition. While *The Lonely Man of Faith* focuses on the perpetual dialectic that Man is faced with due to his human condition, "Majesty and Humility" implies its necessity for the potential of perpetual creativity. *The Halakhic Mind* and *The Halakhic Man* on the other hand focus on the perpetual subjectivity of Man that ultimately allows for the perpetual creativity to ensue.

Additionally, within the perpetual dialectic, an analysis of "Majesty and Humility" raises the question of whether either side of our dialectical morality is considered primary in regard to the other. While victory is redeemed through defeat, it is unclear whether defeat serves any other purpose besides for purifying the desire for victory. On the other hand, the interplay can be viewed inversely with advance only serving as a means for one to accept defeat. This analysis raises the question of whether Judaism ultimately views the final step of Man as being victory or retreat.⁴⁰

⁴⁰Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 56

While the Rav is clearly consistent in regard to his focus on the perpetual aspects of the human condition, his view on their overall impact is seemingly contradictory. While the lonely man of faith seems to be deemed to a perpetual life of irreconcilable existential loneliness, the Rav presents halakhic man as ideally merging his inner tensions, allowing himself to lead a life of perpetual creativity and purpose. The lonely man of faith suggests a negative existential view on life within the human condition, while halakhic man seems to suggest a positive view with a possible reconciliation of dialectic within this world. In “Majesty and Humility” on the other hand, the Rav seems to create even more ambiguity by inconsistently implying that Man’s ultimate goals may be both his victory and defeat. While the works of the Rav are seemingly cohesive and consistent in regard to his definitions and methodology, his stance on the effect of dialectic on the human condition is unclear.

While the Rav’s formulation of Judaic dialectic is uniquely Jewish in its methodology and application, he was nevertheless influenced by many of his philosophic and rabbinic predecessors in its formulation. While his understanding and approach may not coincide with any one specific influence, an analysis of the Rav’s predecessors in regard to their influence on Judaic dialectic may help shed light on its ambiguities.

The Rav was exposed to an extensive philosophical education in his youth that exposed him to a world of western philosophical thought and methodology at a level that was uncommon to most of his contemporary rabbinic scholars. Rav Joseph Ber Halevi Soloveitchik was born in 1903 in Pruzhan, Poland to a family of Torah and Talmudic giants. By looking at his predecessors with their intense scholarship and leadership, we find that, to use a cliché, that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Between his father and mother’s

families, the Rav himself had the honor of being related to almost all of Lithuania's prominent scholars such as Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda of Berlin (the Netiv), and of course his own grandfather Rav Hayyim Soloveitchik of Brisk. The Rav's mother, Rebbetzin Pesia, was ironically a daughter of one of Rav Hayyim's biggest disputants on public policy, Rav Eliyahu Feinstein of Pruzhan.⁴¹

The Rav spent most of his childhood in Khoslavitch, Belorussia where his father served as a rabbi. Because most of the Hebrew education in this area was focused on the learnings of the Chabad culture, which the Rav's family did not adopt, the Rav began to be homeschooled by his renowned father Rav Moshe Soloveitchik. It was during these crucial formative years spent with his father that the Rav intensely learned the art of the *mitnagged*⁴² Brisker method of Talmudic study and became well versed in halachic rationale.⁴³ The Brisker method is an analytic approach to the study of Talmud that revolutionized Talmudic study in Lithuania in the early 20th century. While it may have had its beginnings beforehand, the Rav's grandfather Rav Hayyim Soloveitchik of Brisk (1853-1918) is credited with the development, refinement, and teaching of this revolutionary approach.⁴⁴

The Brisker method approached and analyzed arguments within the Talmud by assuming their scientific character, and strove to shed light on patterns and constructs within this constructed scientific Talmudic world. Using this method, Rav Hayyim and his students were able to uncover novel insights, known as *hiddushim*, resembling the Talmudic

⁴¹Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*,25-26

⁴² an orthodox opponent of Chassidism (Collinsdictionary.com)

⁴³ Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*,25-26

⁴⁴ Shapiro,. "The Brisker Method Reconsidered.",78

scholarship of the Rishonim.⁴⁵ While maintaining the base of the sacred Jewish texts and the works of his predecessors, Rav Hayyim's analytical approach allowed for the unveiling of inner concepts within the Talmud and *halakha* that revolutionized the way many Jewish texts were approached.⁴⁶

The Brisker method is a method of Talmudic study focused on incisive analysis, exact definition, and precise classification. It was focused at its core on investigating and attempting to understand all the possible conceptual approaches within a Talmudic issue rather than completely focusing on one view under attack. The two sides of the dialectical argument were regarded as the two legitimate and necessary sides of what they referred to as a *hakirah*. *Hakirah*, or investigation, refers to a hermeneutic tool that the Brisker method utilized by conducting intense categorical analyses of contradictions, in an effort to unveil latent conceptual ideas. Through *hakirah*, the contrasting arguments within each debate were approached with sensitivity in an attempt to unveil their practical ramifications⁴⁷ and their underlying principles.⁴⁸ By legitimizing and categorizing the underlying concepts and principles within the arguments, this approach shed light upon patterns of disagreement that were often otherwise viewed as case specific, and allowed for the legitimization and understanding of the rejected views of Talmudic predecessors.⁴⁹

⁴⁵(Heb. רִאשׁוֹנִים; lit. "the early authorities"), a term with many connotations—chronological, literary, ethical, and halakhic—serving to indicate the standing and authority of preceding scholars in relation to the scholars of the time in the domain of halakhic ruling and interpretation of the Torah. ("Rishonim ." [Encyclopaedia Judaica](#))

⁴⁶ Shapiro, "The Brisker Method Reconsidered.", 78

⁴⁷ These practical ramifications in Talmudic study are referred to a *Nafka Minah*

⁴⁸ Gelfman Schultz, "The Methodology of Brisk."

⁴⁹Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 27

While this method may seem impractical, especially given that a halakhic conclusion was eventually required, the Brisker method allowed for a revolution in Talmudic study that influenced the Rav's entire method of thought. With a newfound sensitivity to complex issues and their equally legitimate approaches, the Brisker method influenced the Rav in his view of the world through the lens of irreconcilable dialectical tensions. Evident in his works such as *The Lonely Man of Faith*, *Halakhic Man*, and *Majesty and Humility*, the Rav revolves his philosophical works around dialectical pairs of ideas and the insights that arise from their contradictions.⁵⁰ Not only was the Rav not afraid of a contradiction, but even believed that the whole truth can only be revealed through the dialectical interplay of conflicting approaches.

Aside from the Brisker influence on the Rav in regard to dialectical tension, Rav Hayyim's focus on the conceptual analysis of the texts can be seen as influencing the Rav as well; Rav Hayyim's focus on unveiling the latent concepts within the text resembles the Rav's view of the halakhist in *The Halakhic Man*. Just as Rav Hayyim focuses on the conceptual ideas within halakha, the Rav similarly regards halakha as an a priori system through which Jewish philosophy can be extracted.⁵¹ Overall, while it's unclear exactly how the Rav's intense exposure to the Brisker method influenced his ideas, it's likely that their method played a crucial role in the Rav's view of the necessity of irreconcilable dialectical tensions, as well as his method of Jewish philosophy.

Aside from the rabbinic influence of his Talmudic upbringing, the Rav received an intense secular education as well. After teaching and guiding the Rav in his childhood

⁵⁰Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 28

⁵¹ Kolbrener, "Towards a Genuine Jewish Philosophy: Halakhic Mind's New Philosophy of Religion," 22

education, the Rav's father, Rav Moshe, sensed the latent leadership potential within his child. As he continued to groom him to be a future leader of the Jewish community, Rav Moshe began to realize that with changing times, familiarity with secular knowledge was necessary for a Jewish leader as well. Despite Rav Moshe's personal disapproval of secular study, in his late teens the Rav began to be tutored privately in secular subjects.⁵² After receiving the equivalent of a high school secular education, the Rav was sent off to the Free Polish University of Warsaw for three semesters. With a desire to enhance his secular knowledge, the Rav then ventured out to spend six years in the University of Berlin until he earned his PHD in 1932. Despite the secular introduction into his life, the Rav's foundation and commitment to Jewish tradition allowed him to maintain his deeply religious foundation, while complementing it with new ideas.

Berlin in the 1920's was a site of intellectual breakthrough and growth. The Rav was immersed in this new world of science and humanities, and confidently sought out to master new schools of thought and confront their challenges. He studied physics and mathematics, but focused mostly on the study of philosophy, and wrote his thesis on the epistemology of the Neo-Kantian Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen.⁵³ His exposure to these philosophical fields impacted his way of thinking, and expressed itself in how the Rav methodologically approached his own Jewish Philosophy.

In regard to dialectic, while its usage widely varied among philosophers, the Rav's exposure to their methods nevertheless may have had an impact on his formulation of Judaic dialectic. The word dialectic can be defined as "the art of investigating or discussing the truth

⁵²Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 29

⁵³ Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 30

of opinions.”⁵⁴ Its original utilization stems back to Socrates, the well known ancient Greek philosopher, who used dialectic as a conversational mode that made use of argumentative dialogue to help stimulate critical thinking. During his implementation of his well regarded Socratic method, Socrates led his discussions as logical debates, questioning his interlocutors. His goal in doing so was to stimulate humility and *aporia*, or doubt, in the interlocutors as they often found themselves in contradictions from these questions. The result of this utilization of dialectic was often the interlocutors humbling themselves while uncovering more precise and refined definitions of their original claims.⁵⁵

Plato famously utilized Socrates’ usage of dialectic by applying it to his own unique philosophical agenda. He maintained dialectic as a conversational mode, challenging students with the hope of sharpening their ideas. Platonic dialect differs from Socrates’ in the sense that it doesn’t primarily focus on questioning as the method by which to attain its end, but rather utilizes other methods as well such as analogy⁵⁶ and hypothesis. Additionally, Platonic dialectic takes on a more meaningful role as it becomes involved in our goal as humans.⁵⁷

According to Plato, philosophic inquiry is Man’s road to experiencing and seeing the highest reality or form of knowledge, which is the good. This good can only be grasped intuitively and momentarily until it evades us. Dialectic is a propaedeutic or preliminary step towards this goal as it allows us to view the ultimate truths of the world from a distance.

⁵⁴ “Dialectic: Definition of Dialectic by Lexico.”

⁵⁵ Kinney, “The Meaning of Dialectic In Plato.”

⁵⁶ An *analogy* is a comparison between two objects, or systems of objects, that highlights respects in which they are thought to be similar. *Analogical reasoning* is any type of thinking that relies upon an analogy. An *analogical argument* is an explicit representation of a form of analogical reasoning that cites accepted similarities between two systems to support the conclusion that some further similarity exists. (Bartha, Paul, "Analogy and Analogical Reasoning".)

⁵⁷ Kinney, “The Meaning of Dialectic In Plato.”

Engaging in dialectic embodies a deeper purpose for Plato, as it allows for those engaged in it to strive for and slightly experience the momentary glimpse of true good, which is the ultimate goal as a human.⁵⁸

The Rav's utilization of dialectic can be understood as bearing resemblance to dialectic's original form in the sense that when faced with a contradiction, the Rav utilized the art of dialectical tension by breaking down issues into distinct opposing categories. Through an understanding of the oppositional components, the overall issue is clarified in a deeper categorical manner. Just like Socrates' dialectical dialogues, the Rav's dialectical methods evoked humility amidst the unveiling of more precise and refined definitions of the original claims. Moreover, just as Plato regarded dialectic as a key component of what he referred to as Man's purpose, so too the Rav regards dialectic as being the keystone for Man's purposeful creativity.

As philosophers continued to build on each other's works and develop their own methods and theories, the name and game of dialectic was developed as well. Philosophers began to broaden the scope of what could be argued using dialectic. Rather than being attributed to a method of dialogue between people, dialectic began to define the contradictory process between opposing sides. This redefinition of what dialectic can embody broadened the scope of discussion from argumentative dialogue between a student and teacher to an infinite array of subject matters such as sociology, economics, and even religion.⁵⁹

This redefinition of dialectic is mostly attributed to G.F.W. Hegel, who broadened the scope of dialectic in new spheres while developing his own theory of dialectical thinking.

⁵⁸ Kinney, "The Meaning of Dialectic in Plato"

⁵⁹ Maybee, "Hegel's Dialectics"

Stemming from Plato's mode of dialectic in which views developed linearly into more sophisticated ones, Hegel's dialectical process does the same. In what he refers to as a speculative mode of cognition, he argues against earlier views and argues for the later more sophisticated views.⁶⁰

Hegel's method of dialectical thinking allowed him to be a pioneer of modern philosophy in the 19th Century as his dialectical method is often regarded as being more elite than Plato's. That is because Plato's dialectic operated according to the logic of a traditional *reductio ad absurdum* argument which argued that if an argument results in a contradiction, its premises were deemed to be false. Consequently, contradictions constantly left the interlocutors endlessly waiting for a new relevant arbitrary piece of information or realization to continue their quest for truth. Hegel's model rather includes old determinations that were contradicted within a final synthesis, as opposed to beginning at square one each and every time an argument is faced with a contradiction.⁶¹

Hegel's speculative mode of cognition begins with a thesis determination, a speculative moment of fixation in which everything is stable with no apparent contradictions. The second stage is a stage of antithesis. This stage occurs when a contradictory statement arises that either negates the original determination, or combines with it to create a more refined truer determination. This organic rather than mechanical process is referred to as sublation, or *Aufhebung*, expressing the stage in which the old determination is overcome while simultaneously preserved. After sublation, arises the synthesis, a new determination that includes the old contradicted determinations.

⁶⁰Maybe, "Hegel's Dialectics"

⁶¹ Maybe, "Hegel's Dialectics"

Hegel's mode of cognition was consequently viewed as being simpler than Plato's given its embodiment of contradictions because when an argument was confronted with contradictions, it wasn't confronted with the enduring cycle of being deemed as false. This simpler method of dialectic, coupled with its ability to be utilized as a method of cognition as opposed to an argumentative dialogue prompted many philosophers to engage in it. This adoption of Hegel's method of cognition essentially revolutionized the philosophical usage of dialectic, resulting in many philosophers after Hegel to develop theories on a multitude of topics.⁶²

In *Majesty and Humility*, the Rav explains that "Judaic dialectic, unlike Hegelian dialectic, is irreconcilable and hence interminable."⁶³ The Rav contrasts his understanding of Judaic dialectic to Hegel's views by explaining that unlike Hegel's mode of cognition, Judaism accepts a dialectic consisting only of thesis and antithesis, without the final Hegelian stage of reconciliation. He attributes the sole power of reconciliation to God himself and accepts that while complete reconciliation may be an eschatological vision, the conflict in our world is absolute. He contrasts his understanding of dialectic to Hegel by explaining the fact that while Hegel's models focused on the reconciliation of abstract ideas, Judaism views Man as a living reality. While synthesis is conceivable in the world of abstractions, the living condition of Man thwarts any possibility of harmony.⁶⁴

Despite his rejection of certain aspects, the Rav was clearly exposed and directly influenced by the ideas and methodologies of his philosophic predecessors, especially Hegel. The Rav's stance on the reconciliation of dialectic as being an eschatological vision directly

⁶²Maybe, "Hegel's Dialectics"

⁶³Soloveitchik, "MAJESTY AND HUMILITY," 25

⁶⁴Soloveitchik, "MAJESTY AND HUMILITY," 25

rejects Hegel's approach to a harmonious world, and supports the existentialist approach to dialectic seen in *The Lonely Man of Faith*. However, the Rav seems to act in accordance with Hegel's view in *The Halakhic Man*, as he allows for the dialectical tension between cognitive man and *homo-religiosus* to be synthesized within halakhic man while respectively maintaining their contradictory natures. The Rav's apparent utilization as well as rejection of Hegel's dialectic supports the claim regarding his ambiguousness in regard to his utilization of dialectic.

As dialectical thinking developed utilizing Hegel's method, its insertion into theological realms spurred the dialectical theology movement in the 1920's. With traditional dialectical thinking utilizing contradictions to arrive at a rational refined conclusion, Emil Brunner and Karl Barth led the movement by utilizing dialectic theology in their attempt to rationalize faith. Contradictions posed within dialectical theology were then synthesized, or refined, by the introduction of faith. In this movement, Brunner and Barth strove to protect faith from the erosive forces of society by identifying it as being outside social or liberal culture and even religion itself. They created a dichotomy between faith and human culture by claiming that not only was faith separate from the social world, but that it was non-communicable as well.⁶⁵

Rather than trying to understand God's transcendence in human terms, this dissociation between faith and the social realm allowed for the focus of faith to be on God's transcendence as opposed to our understanding of it through the limited human terms of sciences and humanities. Barth focused his dialectical theology on humility before the divine.

⁶⁵ Brill, "Elements of Dialectic Theology in Rav Soloveitchik's View of Torah Study." 265

He asserted that while humans are permitted to approach biblical texts with philosophical and critical exegetical lenses, we must “subordinate the text and the meanings found there to God’s self, who is always “other than” the words we humans use to express God's will.”⁶⁶ This example of the paradoxical reality of the human trying to grasp God’s objectivity is responded to by the introduction of faith.⁶⁷

The dialectical theology movement redefined Hegel’s speculative mode of cognition by allowing faith to become *Aufhebung*. The incessant contradictions posed by religion were now able to be dissolved through faith, an internal religious concept. Rather than finding themselves limited to general theological terms, Brunner and Barth utilized uniquely Christian concepts within their dialectic. Their insertion of dialectical thinking into the theological realm not only challenged the previously accepted traditional theologies, but also created a precedent that opened up the doors for other religions to utilize internal terminology within their dialectical theologies.

While the Rav’s utilization of dialectic theology differed from those of his Christian predecessors, their precedent nevertheless expanded the literature on dialectic theology, likely prompting the Rav to develop his own Jewish perspective. In reference to Barth, aside from his influence in laying the groundwork for dialectical theology, he was likely to have had another impact on the Rav in regard to his utilization of biblical texts as a source for his dialectic analysis. The Rav admiringly referred to the Protestant theologian in an introduction to his book *Halakhic Man*,⁶⁸ prompting scholars to assume the influence of Barth on the Rav in other places as well. As seen throughout his works, specifically *The Lonely Man of Faith*,

⁶⁶ Brill, “Elements of Dialectic Theology in Rav Soloveitchik’s View of Torah Study.” 267

⁶⁷ “Dialectical Theology, What Is It?” Compellingtruth.org, n.d.

⁶⁸ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, Introduction

the Rav bases his philosophical analysis in the biblical texts. Given his admiration for Barth, it is likely that the Rav was inspired by Barth's well regarded utilization of biblical texts as a springboard for dialectical discussions. While this influence is also often attributed to Maimonides in his similar methodology in *Guide of the Perplexed*, Barth nevertheless provided the Rav with a more modern utilization of the method.⁶⁹

During the rise of the dialectical theology movement, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard began to spread his own development of dialectical theology. While influenced by his dialectical predecessors, Kierkegaard's method of dialectic theology embodied its own stance in its relation to religion. Kierkegaard wrote prolifically across his lifetime, covering a large array of fields, including philosophy, theology, psychology, as well as literary criticism. His unique robust mixture of discourses allowed for his works to penetrate the hearts and minds of his readers within his social critiques. Amidst building on the ideas of and critiquing his philosophical predecessors, specifically Hegel, Kierkegaard contributed a vast array of original conceptual ideas on existentialism within his works and was eventually referred to as "the father of existentialism".⁷⁰

In regard to his dialectical theology, Kierkegaard took a clear jab at Hegel's method, and developed his own inversely understood version of dialectic as it relates to faith. In an attempt to renew and revitalize faith within Christendom, Kierkegaard attempted to remove faith from the bounds of rationality that Hegel had imposed upon it. One of Hegel's trademark claims was that "Reason is reality and that the only reality is reason."⁷¹ Hegel's mode of cognition revolutionized the scope of dialectical thinking because his prioritization

⁶⁹ Singer, David, and Moshe Sokol. "Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith," 227

⁷⁰ McDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard"

⁷¹ González, "Protestant Theology," 391

of reason allowed him to propose a science of knowledge that can ultimately open the doors towards absolute knowledge in any area.⁷²

Hegel viewed the logical structure of the universe as equivalent to the mind of God; accordingly, anyone with the capacity to follow Hegelian logic would have access to the mind of God. Kierkegaard viewed this assertion as a modern attempt to build the tower of Babel,⁷³ and firmly opposed society egotistically assuming that they can access God's mind. With his discomfort with the implications of Hegel's dialectic, Kierkegaard sought to create his own inverted dialect that challenged Hegel's prioritization of reason and objectivity. Rather than finding his redemption through scientific knowledge, Man's scientific knowledge would become his biggest obstacle in the face of redemption. While Hegel sought to give people more knowledge, Kierkegaard sought to take away what passed for knowledge.

What Kierkegaard argued was that while knowledge is able to stem from reason and objectivity, absolute truth necessarily stems from unique individual subjectivity.

“An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person.”⁷⁴ Kierkegaard understands absolute truth as stemming from what he refers to as a subjective leap of faith.

⁷² McDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard"

⁷³ The tower of Babel represents a biblical narrative in which the people of a town called Babel attempted to build a tower into the heavens and fight against God. God famously punished this act of hubris by giving the people of Babel different languages, hindering their ability to build the tower. Kierkegaard compares this story to Hegel's outlook on the knowledge of God and refers to it as *scala paradisi*—a dialectical ladder by which humans can climb with ease up to heaven

A..“Tower of Babel,” February 6, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tower-of-Babel>.

B. McDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard"

⁷⁴Baird, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript.”, 977.

This leap of faith according to Kierkegaard is a deeply individual commitment to an objective truth not by the virtue of reason, but by the virtue of the absurd. He understands absolute truth as stemming from the individual leap of faith, beyond the realm of reason, that the religious man experiences.⁷⁵ Kierkegaard explains this assertion in light of paradoxes within Christian dogma that are offensive to reason such as how the eternal, infinite, transcendent God simultaneously became incarnated as Jesus, a temporal finite human being. A belief in this paradoxical dogma is impossible by virtue of reason, and must be by virtue of the absurd, ultimately providing Man with what Kierkegaard regards as absolute truth. Kierkegaard's understanding of the absolute truth stemming from a paradoxical, unreasonable leap of faith translates into his assertion that not only do contradictions exist in our world, but they are necessary for absolute truth.

Kierkegaard's understanding of these necessary irreconcilable contradictions resembles the Rav's existential understanding of the Judaic dialectic in the sense that not only are irreconcilable tensions present in this world, but their tension creates the potential for otherwise impossible things. While Kierkegaard allows absolute truth to rely on the embracement of paradoxical absurdity, the Rav allows for the divine fulfillment of *Imitatio Dei* to rely on the embracement and response to dialectical tensions.⁷⁶

This comparative analysis of the Rav's predecessors in regard to their understanding of dialectic sheds light upon the ambiguities within the Rav's dialectical stance. The ambiguities regarding whether or not the Rav adopts an overall harmonious or existential stance can ultimately be understood as a meta-dialectic between Hegelian and

⁷⁵ "Kierkegaard: A Leap of Faith."

⁷⁶McDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard"

Kierkegaardian dialectic. While the Rav's harmonious stance on dialectic as seen in *The Halakhic Man* can be viewed as representing a Hegelian dialectic, his existentialist expression of irreconcilable tension in *The Lonely Man of Faith* and "Majesty and Humility" can be viewed as representing a Kierkegaardian dialectic. The Rav adopts this meta-dialectic, extending the perpetual dialectical condition onto itself in regard to its dual utilization.⁷⁷

An understanding of this meta-dialectic as representing the contrasting views of Hegel and Kierkegaard may in fact provide insight as to how the Rav methodologically incorporated the ideas of western philosophy into his Jewish philosophical works. While the Rav was clearly exposed to an array of Jewish and secular influences that likely pervaded his works, an understanding of this meta-dialectic as almost directly paralleling the conflict between Hegelian and Kierkegaardian dialectic suggests their direct influence in the Rav's dialectical theology.

Despite the Rav's clear utilization of halakhic texts as his a priori system, his seeming direct parallelism of these western philosophers suggests that along with halakhic texts, the Rav regarded western philosophical terminology as a secondary a priori system. While this claim may seem antithetical due to the fact that the Rav explicitly explains that his philosophy is internally Jewish, this analysis suggests that the Rav did in fact attempt to philosophize Judaism through the a priori lense of western philosophical concepts as well.⁷⁸ While this loose secondary lens is merely a means through which to elucidate the halakhically based concepts, it nevertheless allows the Rav's works to relate to those of his western philosophical predecessors, while engaging his philosophically acquainted Jewish

⁷⁷Zeigler, *Majesty and Humility*, 408

⁷⁸Kolbrener, "Towards a Genuine Jewish Philosophy: Halakhic Mind's New Philosophy of Religion. 22

readers as well. This analysis sheds light on the fact that while the Rav was not bound to the terminology of western philosophy, he is consistent in his methodology as he often utilizes it as a loose secondary a priori system.

Aside from his utilization of western philosophy, the Rav's meta-dialectic sheds light onto his overall stance on his view of dialectic, as well as his conceptual consistency throughout his works. While the Rav does seem to maintain both harmonious and existentialist views on dialectic throughout his works, the meta-dialectic in itself forces the Rav to ultimately maintain an existentialist stance. This assertion can be understood through an analysis of *The Lonely Man of Faith*, in which Man's loneliness stems from his perpetual oscillation between the two⁷⁹ Adams. While respectively striving to redeem himself through majesty and humility, this perpetual oscillation leaves Man unredeemed.⁸⁰ His movement between the two communities of majesty and humility result in existential Man feeling homeless and lonely.

Similarly, the meta-dialectic in itself thwarts man from ever finding solace within either version of dialectic, ultimately prompting an understanding of the Rav's overall stance on dialectic as Kierkegaardian. While this oscillation of the Rav between the two contrasting utilizations of dialectic may seem inconsistent, it is in fact what allows for the consistency of the Rav throughout his philosophical works.

The Rav's philosophical works each represent a component of the Rav's overall Jewish approach to the human condition. Throughout his philosophical works, the Rav is able to develop a consistent interplay between foundational concepts such as the dialectical

⁷⁹Zeigler, *Majesty and Humility*, 408

⁸⁰Kaplan, "THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF RABBI JOSEPH SOLOVEITCHIK,"47

human condition, and its relation to creativity and halakha. The Rav focuses on perpetuity in regard to the interplay as he connects the perpetual human dialectical tension and subjective experience, to the perpetual opportunity for creativity within the halakhic system. While this interplay requires all of its components, it's standing ultimately relies upon Man's perpetual inner dialectic expressed in *The Lonely Man of Faith* because of its necessary role in Man's creativity.⁸¹

Consequently, the Rav's extension of Man's perpetual dialectic condition to the meta-dialectic can be understood as representing the Rav's consistency in his emphasis on perpetuity in regard to Man's dialectic condition. Its extension exemplifies that while human scholars and philosophers may attempt to harmonize the human condition through an understanding of dialectical thinking, there is ultimately no escape from the perpetuity of dialectical oscillation. Given that the Rav's perpetual interplay relies on this Man's perpetual dialectic, the Rav's meta-dialectic between Kierkegaard and Hegel can be understood as legitimizing the philosophical interplay throughout the Rav's works.

Overall, the Rav maintains his ambiguity in his dialectical utilization in an effort to maintain consistency in its application. As we perpetually oscillate between victory and retreat, we ultimately do not know in which ethic our cycle ends. Nevertheless, while this exhaustive analysis may have ended in defeat, there is always halakha to turn to to cheat.

⁸¹Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility," 25

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