

Kaplan's Civilization vs. Soloveitchik's Halakhah

“one with whom you fundamentally agree and one who challenges your current thinking”

This phrase from the paper prompt turned out to be particularly challenging for me.

Although there were certain thinkers we studied with whom I agreed, Cohen, Ahad Ha'am, the modern feminist thinkers, and others with whom I differed, Hirsch, Kook, Salanter (I think) and even Geiger, I'm not sure I “fundamentally” agreed with anyone's entire philosophy. I appreciated many aspects of the different philosophies, even those with whom I differed, yet no one completely captured my full approval. Therefore, in choosing the two thinkers to compare, I approached this process slightly differently. I chose the two thinkers with whose basic premises, their fundamental assumptions, I most and least agreed. These were Mordecai Kaplan, in the positive, and Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, in the negative.

Based on my limited readings of each thinker, primarily *Judaism as a Civilization* for Kaplan and *Halakhic Man* for Soloveitchik, both Kaplan and Soloveitchik were defining, in their minds, the essential characteristic or activity of Judaism and (for Kaplan: the) Jewish people. In other words, they were attempting to answer the existential question – At its most basic level, what is Judaism and/or what is the core of Jewish existence? In the most simplistic language, as the titles of each of their aforementioned major works suggest, for Kaplan, the core of Judaism is its existence as a civilization, while, to Soloveitchik, Halakhah is the foundation of (perhaps specifically his and the followers of modern orthodoxy's) existence as a Jew. As an anthropology major and product of the Reform Movement who certainly does not believe in any sort of conscious/active deity and even questions the existence of God, it is no wonder that I

align well with the fundamental assumptions/premise of Kaplan and completely reject those of Soloveitchik.

Interestingly enough, however, although I “fundamentally” agree with Kaplan and disagree with Soloveitchik, I find Soloveitchik’s philosophy and writing much more palatable than Kaplan’s. I believe this to be the case for two reasons. First, since I do not agree with his most basic assumptions nor premise, I have little investment in his philosophy. I do not have the hoped for emotional connection to every aspect of his philosophy, which is the opposite of my interaction with Kaplan. Due to this distance, I am able to appreciate Soloveitchik’s writing from an objective stand point, for, once his assumptions are accepted, the manner of his analysis is immensely logical and rather effective for its purpose. As such, let us begin the comparison between these two thinkers with Soloveitchik.

In order to understand *Halakhic Man*, the book, we must clearly understand Soloveitchik’s purpose in writing it and the style and philosophic attitude in which he is articulating the qualities of the Halakhic Man. The purpose of this book is most clearly defined by Soloveitchik himself in the very last paragraph of his work. Soloveitchik states, “my sole intention was to defend the honor of Halakhah and halakhic men, for both it and they have oftentimes been attacked by those who have not penetrated into the essence of Halakhah and have failed to understand the halakhic personality.”¹ In other words, Soloveitchik is not attempting to convince anyone that they ought to be or become Halakhically observant, rather he is simply attempting to elucidate others, and vindicate those like himself, in the existence of “the halakhic persona.” This conforms perfectly with Soloveitchik’s philosophic bent. He is

¹ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan, (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 137.

primarily an existentialist, focusing on what is rather than what thought dictates ought to be. Nevertheless, Soloveitchik uses the ideal categories of a typological model in attempting to explicate the characteristics of Halakhic man through a dialogic/dialectic process.² (I would use the term dialogic, but Borowitz categorizes Soloveitchik's work as dialectic.³) As Eugene Borowitz articulates, "He deals rather with pure forms of existence. These are never found in the world, for all historic phenomena are necessarily imperfect manifestation of the ideal patterns. By elucidating these ideal types, we can hope to understand the reality in which we are immersed."⁴

Thus, in *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik begins by setting up the dichotomy between *homo religiosus* and cognitive man, as ideal types, in order to relate the reality of the halakhic persona through comparison and contrast to these ideals. Soloveitchik defines the primary existence of these two types as follows:

"Cognitive man," Soloveitchik writes, "aims to solve the problems of cognition vis-à-vis reality and longs to disperse the cloud of mystery which hangs darkly over the order of phenomena and events.... He desires to establish fixed principles, to create laws and judgments, to negate the unforeseen and the incomprehensible, to understand the wondrous and the sudden in existence." To cognitive man "the alpha and omega of existence is lawfulness.... In a word, the act of cognitive man is one of revelation and disclosure."⁵

"On the contrary, *homo religiosus*," according to Soloveitchik, "is intrigued by the mystery of existence – the *mysterium tremendum* – and wants to emphasize that mystery." For *homo religiosus*, "the revelation of

² Alan T. Levenson, *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thinkers: From Spinoza to Soloveitchik*, 2nd Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 199.

Eugene B. Borowitz, *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought*, 2nd Edition (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, Inc., 1995), 230.

³ Borowitz, 229-230.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵ Soloveitchik, 5-6.

the law and the comprehension of the order and interconnectedness of existence only intensifies and deepens the question and the problem.... For to him the concept of lawfulness is in itself the deepest of mysteries.... The riddle of riddles is the very nature of the law itself. In a word, the cognitive act of *homo religiosus* is one of concealment and hiding.”⁶

In more direct terms, cognitive man wishes to know and understand the law of the universe in order to live in it, while *homo religiosus* may see the law but cares not for understanding and does not attach themselves to it. Cognitive man lives for this world focusing on the “empirical,” “physical”⁷ reality as he/she understands it, while *homo religiosus* wishes to transcend the mystery longing for another hidden reality, “a refined and purified existence”⁸.

We must remember that these are ideal typologies, and reality does not fit neatly into such categories. Halakhic man, on the other hand, despite what one might expect, is not an ideal type and, thus, does not fit neatly under either the description of cognitive man nor that of *homo religiosus*.⁹ Soloveitchik confesses this at the beginning stating that “Halakhic man is an anti-nomic type for a dual reason: (1) he bears within the deep recesses of his personality the soul of *homo religiosus*, that soul which ... suffers from the pangs of self-contradiction and self-negation; (2) at the same time halakhic man’s personality also embraces the soul of cognitive man, and this soul contradicts all of the desires and strivings of the religious soul.”¹⁰ However, these contradictions within halakhic man do not result in discord nor create a “hybrid,” rather the halakhic persona is a unique entity with “a radiant, holy personality.”¹¹

⁶ Soloveitchik, 7-8.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁹ Levenson, 199.

¹⁰ Soloveitchik, 3-4.

¹¹ Ibid.

Even so, certain key attributes of halakhic man correspond to the two ideal types already presented. First and foremost, halakhic man's approach to the universe is that of cognitive man, not *homo religiosus*. This may not be the expected primary comparison; however, Soloveitchik's continued explanation of cognitive man clarifies this similarity. In order to understand halakhic man, one must understand the dual type of cognitive man. Cognitive man approaches reality in two ways: (1) seeking an a posteriori understanding or (2) superimposing an a priori ideal. Halakhic man is specifically the second type of cognitive man. Alan T. Levenson, building off of Soloveitchik's own language, summarizes, "The cognitive style of halakhic man is not that of an experimental scientist who gathers data and then, ex post facto, devises a theory to fit the phenomena. Rather, halakhic man, like a mathematician, comes to the world with perfect formulas a priori and sees how reality matches up."¹² Halakhic man's perfect formulas, their a priori ideal is Torah, written and oral, and, thus, Halakhah. Soloveitchik explains:

"When halakhic man approaches reality, he comes with his Torah, given to him from Sinai, in hand. He orients himself to the world by means of fixed statutes and firm principles. An entire corpus of precepts and laws guides him along the path leading to existence. Halakhic man, well furnished with rules, judgments, and fundamental principles, draws near the world with an a priori relation.... The essence of the Halakhah, which was received from God, consists in creating an ideal world and cognizing the relationship between that ideal world and our concrete environment in all its visible manifestations and underlying structures. There is no phenomenon, entity, or object in this concrete world which the a priori Halakhah does not approach with its ideal standard."¹³

¹² Levenson, 199-200.

¹³ Soloveitchik, 19-20.

This paragraph is the essence of the halakhic persona. This is Soloveitchik's answer to the question, what is Judaism / what is the core of Jewish existence?

This paragraph introduces two key characteristics of Soloveitchik's philosophy which I have yet to address: the halakhic man's role in creation and the importance of study. The first half, one's role in creation, is the result of the halakhah, yet the second half, study, is the foundation of the halakhic persona. Soloveitchik states surprisingly straight forward, "The study of Torah is not a means to another end, but is the end point of all desires. It is the most fundamental principle of all."¹⁴ He continues by quoting the *Ruah hayyim*, "the primary purpose of study is ... to comprehend, through the Torah, the commandments and laws, and to know each and every matter clearly, both its general principles and its particulars."¹⁵ This is the end point. Halakhic man is primarily concerned with "determining the Halakhah or ideal norm."¹⁶ This is the first of two types of action which Soloveitchik expounds out of the Rabbinic maxim "Great is study, for study leads to action." The second action is the aforementioned result of the halakhah, "implementing the ideal norm in the real world," i.e. halakhic man's role in creation.¹⁷ Nevertheless, one cannot actively implement the halakhah without comprehending it, even if done "piously". As Soloveitchik explains, "piety that is not based upon knowledge of the Torah is of no consequence in [halakhic man's] view. There can be no fear of God without knowledge and no service of God without the cognition of halakhic truth."¹⁸

Finally, with regard to Soloveitchik's philosophy, both of these actions of halakhic man, the primary, determining the halakhah, and the resultant, implementation of the ideal, are

¹⁴ Soloveitchik, 87.

¹⁵ Ibid., 88.

¹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 89.

focused on this physical reality not on bringing about or reaching a transcendent one. This is the key distinction between halakhic man and *homo religiosus*. Halakhah is unconcerned about metaphysical speculation, nor does halakhic man, as a part of this physical existence, yearn for a transcendental reality.¹⁹ However, according to Soloveitchik, neither is Halakhic man so much like cognitive man to be “unconcerned with transcendence and totally under the sway of temporal life.”²⁰ Instead, he explains that the difference between halakhic man and *homo religiosus* is a matter of direction. While *homo religiosus* wishes to ascend to a higher, transcendent realm, “halakhic man ... longs to bring transcendence down into this valley of the shadow of death – i.e., into our world – and transform it into a land of living.”²¹ Therefore, Soloveitchik states, “the ideal of the halakhic man is the redemption of the world not via a higher world but via the world itself, via the adaption of empirical reality to the ideal patterns of Halakhah.”²²

On the whole, I really appreciate Soloveitchik’s philosophy. The ideal typologies which he sets up, *homo religiosus* and cognitive man, apply beyond his specific claims of halakhic man, as does his further typology of cognitive man into a posteriori and a priori approaches. Since they are ideal types, they allow one to evaluate one’s own identity with relationship to these two forms, providing insight into one’s own character. Soloveitchik’s description of halakhic man (although not as an ideal type) and the interpretation of Jewish tradition he provides, also permits the reader to evaluate their specifically Jewish identity, their relation to God, to Torah, to halakhah, and even their purpose as a Jew. Moreover, in my opinion, Soloveitchik absolutely

¹⁹ Soloveitchik, 49.

²⁰ Ibid., 40.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 38.

fulfills his purpose in writing this book, “to defend the honor of Halakhah and halakhic men.”²³

The precise description of halakhic man not only lauds the value and use of approaching the world from the a priori perspective of halakhah, framing this persona on the level and legitimacy of more universal ideal norms, rather it also informs “those who have not penetrated into the essence of Halakhah and have failed to understand the halakhic personality”²⁴ allowing them to comprehend the rationale behind such a world view. However, while the internal logic of this philosophy is sound and useful, if one disagrees with the fundamental assumption that the Torah is God’s gift to humanity and thus Halakhah is our guide to life, then Soloveitchik’s philosophy is moot, as he provides no argumentation to convince us otherwise (for, as was already stated, this was not his purpose).

I fall into this final category. Although *Halakhic Man* was interesting to read, nothing was going to convert my personality to that of the halakhic persona; I simply disagree with Soloveitchik’s premise that halakhah is the foundation of Jewish existence. Oppositely, at the present, I absolutely agree with Kaplan that Judaism is, primarily, a civilization. Unfortunately, due to our limited reading of Kaplan, I do not feel as if I can present as coherent a summary of his philosophy as I have for Soloveitchik. As such, I will explore Kaplan primarily in relation to Soloveitchik.

The single most profound difference between Soloveitchik and Kaplan is their epistemological origin. For Soloveitchik, this is God through the Torah. For Kaplan, this must begin with humanity and the mitigation of theology. For example, Kaplan explains, “Instead of resorting to belief in miracles, theophanies, and external authority as the sanction for its

²³ Ibid., 137.

²⁴ Ibid.

teachings, religion will, henceforth, resort to the study of the needs of human nature which have found their satisfaction in the complex beliefs, practices and emotions that center about the idea of God.”²⁵ This may be primarily due to Kaplan’s identity as a naturalist, for, as Borowitz suggests, “As a consequence, naturalistic religious thinking focuses on people and their welfare rather than on God and God’s purposes. Modernity involves a radical shift from theocentrism to anthropocentrism and Kaplan often employs the term ‘humanism’ in this people-focused but not God-denying sense.”²⁶ Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, this reduces the importance and emphasis on religion in general by elevating other aspects to equal importance. In discussing Judaism’s survival and approaching his characteristic of the otherness or the essential existence of Judaism itself, Kaplan writes, “Judaism as otherness is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization.”²⁷ Kaplan widens his scope of Jewish existence beyond any other thinker we have studied and certainly that of Soloveitchik, whose view is even narrower than that of religion, just that of Halakhah (though he might claim that this covers all aspects of existence).

This holistic view which encompasses the full complexity of Jewish existence is what I find most essential to Kaplan’s philosophy. However, he takes it one step further, which creates a similarity between him and Soloveitchik. In the same way that Soloveitchik views Torah and Halakhah as the end point, Kaplan views Judaism’s existence as a civilization as the end point. The purpose of a *civilization* (as an abstract term), according to Kaplan, may be that the history,

²⁵Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*, Enlarged Edition (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, Inc., 1957), 399.

²⁶Borowitz, 100.

²⁷Kaplan, 178.

literature, etc. (see previous paragraph) of the people “stand[s] between man and external nature, and ... serves as a bulwark against the hostility of forces that would otherwise destroy him.”²⁸

Nevertheless, Kaplan continues to emphasize that, “as a civilization [the actuality of the abstract term], Judaism possesses the prerogative of being justly an end in itself.”²⁹

As a result, Kaplan suggests,

“By placing Judaism within the category of civilizations we shall know how to fit it into the framework of the modern social order. That classification should help us identify, in the complex thing called Judaism, all of the elements and characteristics which go to make up its substance, and which can be properly appraised in terms of present-day values and desiderata, because they can be studied as the reactions of human nature to social environment. Judaism is but one of a number of unique national civilizations guiding humanity toward its spiritual destiny. It has functioned as a civilization throughout its career, and it is only in that capacity that it can function in the future.”³⁰

He further explains, “We may call this approach the intuitional approach, in contrast with the traditional approach of Neo-Orthodoxy and the rational approach of Reformist Judaism.”³¹ This leads to the most unique attribute of Kaplan’s philosophy, which is inconceivable to that of Soloveitchik, the notion, acceptance and necessity for, what Kaplan terms, “the functional method of interpretation” and “reconstruction.” According to Kaplan, since Judaism is a civilization, it has always adapted and changed to fit the reality of the present day, but, in recent times, the approaches of the current forms of Judaism have inhibited such creativity and reconstruction. Kaplan delineates “for a Jew who approaches Judaism as a civilization, the test for any form of adjustment will not be whether it conforms to the accepted teachings of

²⁸ Kaplan, 179.

²⁹ Ibid., 181.

³⁰ Ibid., 180.

³¹ Ibid., 182.

Revelation (as per Soloveitchik for instance), nor whether it is consistent with the universal aims of mankind. His criterion will be: does that adjustment proceed from the essential nature of Judaism? Will it lead to the enrichment of the content of Judaism? Is it inherently interesting?”³² In other words, one asks, is this aspect of Judaism useful to me today. If not we either try to adapt, reconstruct, it or, in some cases, even remove it completely.

Kaplan’s approach to Judaism, of all those that we have studied, is, to me, the most healthy, comprehensive and appropriate to the modern world in which we live and even, perhaps, to the post-modern world into which we are moving. However, in the complete opposite way that I was able to appreciate essentially all of Soloveitchik’s work despite disagreeing fundamentally, I struggled immensely with numerous aspects of Kaplan’s philosophy, despite agreeing fundamentally with his premise. For example, another similarity between the two is an emphasis on halakhah. For, although Kaplan does not recognize the divinity of Jewish laws, their function as “mores, laws, and folkways” make them equally important aspects of Judaism as a civilization. I do not approach the tradition with even this rigidity, and Kaplan’s inclusion of such “halakhah” distances me from his philosophy. Nevertheless, the fundamental structure which Kaplan sets up to evaluate and perceive Judaism as a civilization fits within my personal, current, philosophy in the same way that Soloveitchik’s depiction of the halakhic persona does not fit into my personality.

³² Kaplan, 184.

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