INTRODUCTION

The philosophical originality of Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik is widely held to consist primarily in his harmonization of traditional Lithuanian Talmudism with German philosophical idealism. Soloveitchik is heralded for his unusual mastery of these two very different disciplines, particularly for his erudition in culling so richly from them both in formulating his own "modern" Orthodox Jewish philosophy. Personally as well, Soloveitchik is admired as the embodiment of this grand intellectual synthesis, as a kind of model of the "mithnagged-philosophe." 

It is in the first and most celebrated of Soloveitchik's works, the 1944 monograph Ish Ha-halukha (Halakhic Man), more than in any of his other writings, that the composite and synthesizing nature of his religious thinking is most manifest. This work is largely predicated upon the harmonization of the Lithuanian Rabbinic tradition—or the religion of the mithnagdim—with elements of German philosophical idealism. In Halakhic Man, Soloveitchik constructs an ideal religious typology, in a distinctly neo-Kantian epistemological framework, in order to portray his own mithnagdic progenitors, such as Rabbis Hayyim of Brisk, Hayyim of Volozhin and the Gaon Elijah b. Solomon of Vilna.

For this reason, Eugene Borowitz, in an early, landmark essay on the philosophy of Rabbi Soloveitchik, famously characterized Halakhic Man as "a mithnagged phenomenology of awesome proportions." Borowitz' perception of the halakhic personality portrayed in Halakhic Man, as not only entirely consistent with mithnagdic religion, but its finest, ideal representation has never been challenged by scholars of Soloveitchik's thought. On the contrary, it was been widely cited and endorsed.

This essay will contend that Soloveitchik's ideal halakhic personality has nothing at all in common with the earlier mithnagdic philosophy of man. Quite the contrary, the almost heroic optimism and
unabashed this-worldliness which characterize Halakhic Man are, in many ways, entirely antithetical to the ascetic and pessimistic spirit of "Mithnagdic Man" which emerges from the writings of Soloveitchik's Lithuanian Rabbinic ancestors.

THE WORLDLINESS OF HALAKHIC MAN

Ish Ha-halakha is Soloveitchik's elaborate portrait of the halakhically observant Jew which emerges from a critical synthesis of the best qualities of two human prototypes: "cognitive man" and "homo religiosus." On the one hand there is the intellectual, scientific man who, in his quest to master the universe cognitively, orders his existence on the basis of reason and the empirical knowledge resulting from his autonomous investigation of the world. This is "cognitive man." In bold contrast to cognitive man stands the religious, metaphysical personality who is possessed by a desire to fathom the mystery behind the natural universe. In his search for the transcendant spirit which animates the world, he is unsatisfied with beholding this life bound by space and time and seeks mystically to transcend the limits of the created, corporeal universe. This is "homo religiosus." Homo religiosus is a dualistic and ascetic mystic who is pained by the fissure which exists between body and soul, matter and spirit, and God and creation.

Emerging from the fusion of the best qualities of these two paradigms is Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man. Although his temper always remains closer to that of cognitive man, the halakhic personality manages to synthesise his admirable worldliness, rationalism and intellectual rigor with the lofty spiritual aspirations of homo religiosus. He does this by means of the rigorous application of Jewish law to the realities of the created universe. Since the halakha includes regulations corresponding to every facet of mundane existence, its study and observance serve the innate needs of both cognitive man and homo religiosus. For, in the study and practice of the Divine Law, Halakhic Man is able to attain the goals of homo religiosus without forsaking the world, or needing to transcend it.

Halakhic Man is, in David Hartman's words, Soloveitchik's religious hero whose personality is marked by bold independence, courage, creativity, and originality. Armed with his unique set of ethics and values, which are rooted in a scientific, a priori, ideal system for ordering reality—which is how Soloveitchik characterizes the halakhic system—he confronts the world in an autonomous, healthy and confident spirit. Like cognitive man, or the natural scientist, Halakhic Man is primarily concerned with confronting and mastering the olam ha-zeh—this world bound by time and space. And like cognitive man,
he approaches the world in a rigorous and systematic manner. As Soloveitchik puts it:

When halakhic man approaches reality he comes with his Torah, given to him at 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. His approach begins with an ideal creation, and concludes with a real one.5

Halakhic man does not enter a strange, alien mysterious world, but a world with which he is already familiar through the a priori which he carries within his consciousness.6 He enters into the real world via the ideal creation which in the end will be actualized—in whole or in part—in concrete reality.6

In his interpretation and application of sacred legislation to mundane existence—that is, in the study and performance of the laws and rituals of the halakhic system—Halakhic Man orders his world in a unique fashion, infusing it with holiness and sanctity. It is precisely in this way that he is able to attain the spiritual goals of homo religiosus, without having to abdicate the freedom of cognitive man, or transcend the created universe:

Homo religiosus ascends to God; God however descends to halakhic man... He (Halakhic Man) brings down the divine presence into a sanctuary... [and] (brings) holiness into the world situated within the realms of concrete reality.9

In Halakhic Man, Soloveitchik focuses primarily on the contrast between the halakhic personality and homo religiosus, rather than cognitive man. And his major complaint against homo religiosus is his abandonment of the world for the sake of spiritual ascent:

The ethical and religious ideal of homo religiosus is the extrication of his existence from the bonds of this world, from the iron chains of empirical reality, its laws and judgments, and its elevation up to the level of being of a higher man, in a world that is wholly good and wholly eternal.10

Halakhic Man, on the other hand, insists on realizing his spiritual aspirations precisely within the categories of this life and the corporeal world. He rejects the dualism which denigrates the material world in order to elevate the spirit, and he realizes his religious aspirations fully within the categories of the here and now:

Halakhic man's approach to the reality is, at the outset, devoid of any element of transcendence...
Halakhic man explores every nook and cranny of physical-biological existence. There is no real phenomenon to which halakhic man does not possess a fixed relationship from the outset and a clear, definitive, a priori orientation. Halakhic man does not long for a transcendent world, for superior levels of a “supernal” pristine existence. It is here, in this world, that halakhic man acquires eternal life.

The contrast between the dualism and otherworldliness of homo religiosus and the this-worldly orientation of halakhic man is a central theme of Ish Ha-halakha. Soloveitchik’s repeated insistence that the ideal halakhic personality attains all of his aspirations by applying religious categories to mundane reality forms the very foundation of his religious anthropology. The distinctive feature of halakhic man is in fact his worldliness, his sanctification of earthly existence:

Homo religiosus who thirsts for the living God demolishes the bounds of this-worldliness, transforms himself into pure spirit, breaks through all barriers and ascends on high. For him the approach to God consists in a leap from the empirical and concrete into the transcendent and the mysterious. Not so for Halakhic man! When his soul yearns for God, he immerses himself in reality.

Halakhic man is consequently a monist who rejects both the body/soul and world/creator dualism which are so axiomatic to homo religiosus, as well as the attendant asceticism which results from that dualism:

Halakhic man is firmly embedded in this world and does not suffer from the pangs of the dualism of the spiritual and the corporeal, of the soul which ascends on high and the body which descends below. Unlike the Christian saints whose lives consisted of a long series of battles with the dazzling allure of life, with carnal, this-worldly pleasures, the great Jewish scholars knew nothing about man’s conflict with the evil urge. The church fathers devoted themselves to religious life in a state of compulsion and duress, the Jewish sages in a state of joy and freedom.

Perhaps the most strikingly original formulation of Soloveitchik’s monistic position in the entire work is his revisionist interpretation of the medieval cosmogonic myth, known as zimzum—or divine contraction. Explicitly rejecting the cosmogonic connotation of zimzum in Lurianic kabbalah, as the withdrawal of God into Himself in order to allow “room” for a created, physical universe which is meant to exist apart from Him, Soloveitchik, consistent with the long-abandoned Rabbinic use of the term, understands zimzum as a metaphor for the contraction and infusion of the divine into the temporal and spatial confines of this world, through the conduit of God’s revealed legis-
lation. *Zimzum* is, "the contraction of the infinite into the finite, the transcendant within the concrete, the supernal within the empirical, and the divine within the realm of reality" which occurs, not prior to the genesis of the cosmos but rather at the moment that God legislated His will to Israel at Sinai.

This startling reinterpretation of the notion of *zimzum*, rather than resulting in a perceived abyss which separates God from His creation and leading to the dualistic asceticism which characterized the Lurianic system, serves instead to connect God intimately with this world via the categories of halakha and to obviate the need for the transcendant, world-denying religious behaviour of *homo religiousus*. As Soloveitchik optimistically declares: "The ideal of halakhic man is the redemption of the world not via a higher world but via the world itself."

As a consequence of his harmonization of world and spirit, and the integration of his religious cravings with mundane existence, halakhic man treasures this life and, again unlike *homo religiousus*, does not perceive any spiritual liberation in death.

Many religions view the phenomenon of death as a positive spectacle, inasmuch as it highlights and sensitizes the religious consciousness and sensibility... halakha is devoid of any positive orientation to death and burial; on the contrary, it views these phenomena from a negative perspective.

Because his expression of spirituality is so concrete and so intimately connected with the a priori categories of time and space, halakhic man can find his final religious fulfilment without having first to enter the world to come. For in the halakhic man's consciousness,

Temporal life becomes transformed into eternal life; it becomes sanctified and elevated with eternal holiness. such that

Death and holiness constitute two contradictory verses.

Soloveitchik emphatically rejects all transcendent, life-denying religious expressions mainly for their escapism, and for their pious evasion of the social and ethical responsibilities of the practical, earthly life. And, as Soloveitchik exuberantly declares, this is precisely what the halakha does achieve:

If you desire an exoteric, democratic religiosity, get thee unto the empirical, earthly life, the life of the body with all its two hundred forty eight organs and three hundred sixty five sinews. Do not turn your attention to an exalted, spiritual life rooted in abstract worlds.
From the perspective of halakha, it is not the spirit that is charged with carrying out the religious process but the physical-biological individual, the conative individual who is led astray by the prompting of his yetzer and attracted to bodily pleasures.21

Although this optimistic portrait of the halakhic man as a spiritually healthy, autonomous, monistic, this-worldly religious hero is tempered by the more pessimistic, existentialist portrait of the brooding religious Jew in some of Soloveitchik's later English works—most notably, in The Lonely Man of Faith22—it remains an enduring feature of his thought. In fact, in his very important 1978 monograph, U-vikashtem Mi-sham, Soloveitchik contrasted at great length the transcendent, world-denying homo religiosus with the healthy halakhic personality in even bolder terms and greater detail. Here it becomes clear that his rejection of the transcendentalism and romantic other-worldliness of the mystic is, for Soloveitchik, of the essence of halakhic Judaism, which distinguishes it not only from Christianity, but also from dualistic manifestations of mystical spirituality in Judaism, such as medieval hasidism and ascetic kabbalism. It is the Jewish mystics' separation of all sublime religious experiences from this-worldly time and space which most offends Soloveitchik's halakhic sensibilities. As in Ish Ha-halakha, Soloveitchik affirms, in U-vikashtem Mi-sham, that the major objective of the halakha is the incorporation of the divine into the mundane. Halakhic study and observance provide the categories which enable man to endow all of the dimensions of the material world with holiness. Once again here, Soloveitchik strongly criticizes the ascetic dualism of the mystics who believe that there is an unbreachable chasm separating God from the world and matter from spirit:

On the contrary, Judaism teaches that there is a continuum from the sensual to the Absolute, from the finite to the Infinite. Infinity hovers over our world, finally mingling with it to create a homogenous reality. When we speak of the 'unfathomable,' this signifies only the limitations of human perception, and not any absolute metaphysical transcendence from material reality. Judaism strictly and finally decrees that there is no terrible abyss separating our finite, limited world from the absolute and painless world that is purely good. Judaism has bridged this concrete world with the higher world.23

From a halakhic orientation, even the most sublime mystical experience—devekuth—and the ultimate collective religious aspiration—messianism—are meant to be rooted in, and emanate from, the mundane experiences of the material life:
Even Derekh, which is also, in essence, an eschatological vision connected with prophecies concerning the end of days, can only begin to be realized within this fragmented and imperfect world, and within the tangible life of the flawed and lonely man. Judaism always recognized the continuity of temporal existence with eternal existence, of a struggling world with a redeemed world, of a tainted world with a world which is all pure and good.24

It is precisely on account of this monistic insistence on connecting God with the world that Soloveitchik is especially critical of mysticism's opposite tendency. As already noted in connection with Soloveitchik's critique of Christian monasticism, this otherworldly dualism of the mystics leads inevitably to a misguided asceticism, and finally to a dangerous and ethically irresponsible retreat from the very purpose of man's creation:

As a consequence of their denial of any ontic significance to the creation, (the mystics) recommended that it is the path of mortification, or via purgativa, which leads one to unio mystica. The individual must empty himself of the content of his life... in order to abandon himself in the (Divine) One. Judaism, with the halakha at its head, declares: 'This is not the correct path'... man does not cling to God through denying the validity of his very existence, but rather, quite the contrary, by the affirmation of his essential existence. The authentic, rich and complex personality attains closeness to God only when he maintains an autonomous, original and colourful existence, a life marked by a sense of purpose, energy, and freedom... only then does he begin to lead a Godly existence.25

The ideal of a healthy, unitive and this-worldly spiritual life is not the only casualty of the dualistic, world-denying faith of the mystics. Their insistence on abandoning the world in order to serve God also undermines man's important ethical and social obligations which are so fundamental to Judaism. Soloveitchik accuses the mystics of "not comprehending the ethical dimension of religion" and of being indifferent to those social and communal issues which are so central to halakha26

In describing the general features of Soloveitchik's spirituality, his son-in-law and most distinguished student, Aaron Lichtenstein, accurately concluded that his understanding of Judaism is essentially,27

... positive, dynamic and comprehensive. His approach emphasizes the integration of all parts of living into a unified religious framework. It knows no dualism and recognizes no dichotomy between the religious and the secular. Halakha, therefore, sees man attaining the Kingdom of heaven on earth—not by transforming the finite into the infinite, but by introducing the infinite into the finite.
Or, as David Hartman put it most recently:

*Halakhic Man*, although admitting belief in immortality and messianism, nevertheless locates the passion of halakhic man in a profoundly this-world attitude.\(^8\)

Halakhic Man is, then, a pristine practitioner of what William James has famously termed the "religion of healthy-mindedness," and an exemplar of the "united self." His spiritual expression is monistic, integrative, and comfortable with the world. His soul is at peace with his body, and his world is at one with its Creator. He knows no wrenching religious alienation, and no deep inner existential sickness.

Soloveitchik's own general characterization of Judaism as a healthy, worldly and optimistic religion best summarizes his understanding of the essence of Jewish spirituality:

Halakhic Judaism is therefore permeated with a total optimism; its essential fragrance is derived from the fullness and richness of worldly existence, and it is totally dedicated to life with all the warmth of its soul . . . (Judaism) hungers and thirsts for the material life in all of its glorious beauty.\(^9\)

**IS HALAKHIC MAN A MITHNAGGED?**

What is most problematic about Soloveitchik's very bold and optimistic understanding of Judaism and this ideal portray of halakhic man's *weltanschauung*, is that he ascribes all of these characteristics not to the theoretical adherents of an abstract and pure form of halakhic Judaism, but specifically attributes them to his own forebears, the Rabbis of the Lithuanian Jewish tradition, or the mithnagdim, beginning with R. Elijah b. Solomon, the famed Gaon of Vilna. Repeatedly throughout his optimistic depiction of the healthy soul of the halakhic man, he refers anecdotally to the lives of the earlier sages of mithnagdic Judaism in order to illustrate or substantiate this image. Legends and tales from the lives of Gaon of Vilna, R. Hayyim of Volozhin and, of course, R. Hayyim of Brisk, many from the Soloveitchik family's repository of oral history, pepper the work in order to lend precedent and authority to his highly original construct of the halakhic personality.\(^9\)

It is largely for this reason that the notion that *Halakhic Man* is a faithful depiction of the spirituality of the mithnagdim, cited at the beginning of this essay, has become almost casually accepted by Soloveitchik's students and readers. But when one turns to examine the actual doctrinal writings of the mithnagdim—the theological and eth-
ical works of the Gaon of Vilna and his disciples—an almost diametrically opposite type of spirituality appears. The image of man which emerges from the sources of classical mithnagdic Judaism is, as we shall presently see, both strictly dualistic and starkly pessimistic.\textsuperscript{31}

Before demonstrating how radically different halakhic man is from mithnagdic man, we ought first to concede the one not insignificant, central religious value which they share; namely, the attachment of supreme sanctity to the act of Torah study and the glorification of the Rabbinic scholar. There is no doubt, insofar as Soloveitchik's enthusiasm for halakhic man is related to his learning per se, that he is faithfully following in the tradition of Lithuanian mithnagdic Judaism in which there was no more valued act than study and no more revered man than the \textit{talmid hakham}, or Rabbinic scholar. Insofar as \textit{Halakhic Man} can be classified as a panegyric to the scholar for his erudition and his devotion to the act of study, it is certainly an archetypical manifesto of mithnagdic spirituality, fully within the tradition of classic mithnagdic tributes to \textit{Talmud Torah}, such as Abraham b. Solomon of Vilna's \textit{Ma'aloth Ha-torah}, Phinehas of Polotsk's \textit{Kether Torah} and Hayyim of Volozhin's classic, intellectualistic refutation of hasidic spirituality, \textit{Nefesh Ha-hayyim}.\textsuperscript{32}

All of these mithnagdic classics reflect an extravagant adoration of the religious importance of Torah study and the unrivalled distinction of its practitioners. But the power of \textit{Talmud Torah} is itself, in classic mithnagdic thinking, a transcendant one. \textit{Talmud Torah} is praised not so much from the subjective perspective of the autonomous, creative stature of the individual Jew who engages in it, but on account of the Torah's own exalted place in the highest cosmic realms, and the inherent powers which the Torah itself consequently possesses. The obsessive focus of the earlier mithnagdim upon the study of Torah \textit{lishmah}, or for its own sake, as the highest religious priority did not center upon the majestic or heroic personality of the student, but on the essential metaphysical qualities of the texts and the theurgic consequences automatically resulting from the very act of their study.\textsuperscript{33} Soloveitchik, on the other hand, is consumed by his existential interest in glorifying the student.

More importantly, \textit{Halakhic Man} is far more than a tribute to scholarship. It is rather a total spiritual portrait of the ideal halakhic personality. And while his primary and most admirable trait is his learning, \textit{Halakhic Man}'s grandiose conception of the halakha as an ideal \textit{a priori} system—in fact as an axiomatic basis by which to order all of existence—results in a far more complex and comprehensive characterisation of the soul of its students and faithful practitioners. And the spirit of that portrait is, as we have seen, optimistic, healthy-minded, monistic and this-worldly. Halakhic Man's greatness lies not
only in his intellectual boldness and the cognitive autonomy which he exercises. His distinction reaches beyond his intellect to the essence of his spirit. And it is Soloveitchik’s grand spiritual characterization of Halakhic Man which stands in striking contrast to the image of man and his relationship with the created world found in the earlier mithnagdic literature. For “Mithnagdic Man” is, very much unlike Halakhic Man, starkly pessimistic, strictly dualistic, harshly ascetic and quite literally obsessed with death.

THE OTHERWORLDLINESS OF MITHNAGDIC MAN

In the course of rejecting religious transcendentalism and substantiating his sense that the true halakhic man is at one with the world and sees it as a satisfactory stage for his most significant spiritual achievements, Soloveitchik invokes a legend about the father of mithnagdism, the Gaon of Vilna’s deathbed affirmation of his life for this world. For the Gaon, according to Soloveitchik, it is only in this world that man has the sacred opportunity to enact God’s will as reflected in the halakha.

That the Gaon, like all mortals, feared death, and that he, like all religious Jews, cherished the mitzvoth, is rather obvious and unremarkable. What was however truly remarkable about the way in which the Gaon led his life was his legendary asceticism, and his strict, consistent and clearly dualistic rejection of the pleasures of earthly life.

Although best known by the scholarly honorific, Gaon, or genius, he also enjoyed another less intellectual appellation—Hasid, or saint. He was called a Hasid largely by virtue of his asceticism, and his famed practice of that classical form of Ḥasidut, or saintliness—namely, perishut—self-denial and studied, deliberate abstention from physical indulgences and this-worldly interests or pleasures.

This rabbi who, legend has it, denied himself the elementary physical pleasure even of sleep and who studied Torah all of his days and nights in a darkened, windowless study, hermetically sealed from the outside world, with his feet immersed in ice water, expected no less from his students and disciples. Thus he reminded his children that, “all of the material of this world is vanity and all of its pleasures are worthless.” And he insisted that they rigorously deny themselves all forms of material or physical gratification.

The Gaon’s asceticism derived in part from his very strong dualistic conviction that man is an inherently and hopelessly divided creation; that the body and soul of man are irreconcilable adversaries. His neglect of his own body was therefore considered the necessary condition for the elevation of his soul.
This dualistic asceticism of the Gaon, which literally posits the body as the mortal enemy of the human soul, is the logical existential outcome of his essential understanding of the nature of the cosmos—a perception rooted in a literal understanding of the aforementioned Lurianic cosmogonic myth of *zimzum*, whereby God separated His spiritual essence from the material universe in order to render the act of creation "physically" possible. There is thus a primordial divide, an abyss, between the realms of matter and spirit. That divide exists not only cosmically, but also within the microcosm which is man. All of this stood, of course, in very sharp, diametrical contrast to the emerging hasidic movement's monistic materialism.

The Gaon's asceticism was then the practical consequence of his thoroughly dualistic view of body and spirit, which in turn was predicated upon his cosmological dualism. The rigidly ascetic discipline and suppression of bodily appetites which the Gaon both practiced and preached, was no more than a temporary holding measure for man while he endured the trials of *olam hazeh* existence. The ultimate felicity of the soul is however only possible subsequent to its final departure from the physical world, and its liberation from the human body. In other words, only physical death provides the soul with the opportunity for spiritual perfection. The Gaon insisted that man's confrontation with the sacred is impossible in the context of this-worldly existence and must wait until after death and his entry into the *olam haba*. He makes this clear in a number of pronouncements, especially those explicitly regarding death:

This world is but a corridor before the world-to-come; one must prepare himself in the corridor in order to enter the reception room. But the evildoers focus (all of their attention) all of their days on the corridor.46

For the evil instinct beguiles man into believing that this world exists for the sake of ultimate repentance which reaches right up to the divine throne of glory. The (*yetzer ha-ra*, or evil instinct) thus advises man that all of the elements of this world are (potentially) heavenly, holy matters.46

For the Gaon, no spiritual ecstasy is conceivable in this world. And the final attainment of divine knowledge can only occur subsequent to man's passing away into the future life. One's death is therefore a matter worthy of constant meditation: "Man should always contemplate the day of his death and have his own termination before his eyes at all times."46

The Gaon strongly condemned those who attributed any type of sanctity, realized or even potential, to earthly existence. The final attainment of divine knowledge only occurs subsequent to man's pass-
ing away into the future life. In this spirit, the GRA re-interpreted the Biblical Job's initial "cursing of his day" and his apparent preference for death over a life of intolerable affliction. Commenting on Job's protest that those who would naturally prefer death are compelled instead to endure an unbearable life, the GRA shifts the focus away from the text's original anti-theodicy, and suggests that man's quest for death is due to the after-life's increased spiritual capacities:

The essential pleasure of the future-life is the constantly and endlessly increasing knowledge of God and of the depths of His Torah. At every moment we add to our cognizance of Him, and there is a parallel increment in the soul's thirst to cling to Him. This quest for God swells and expands at every moment. This is what the Sages have referred to as the 'feast of the Leviathan'—'Leviathan' signifying dvekuth... This intense knowledge (of God) is impossible while still in the confines of the lowly body and its corrupt matter... This then is the sense of this verse—'those who rejoice with gladness,' i.e. they will rejoice when they fulfil unto me the gladness, which is death... It says that they will rejoice from the moment of death on... Thus it says that they will celebrate upon finding their grave...41

In a remarkable exegesis of the opening verse of the book of Deuteronomy, which introduces Moses' final admonition to Israel before crossing the Jordan River to enter the promised land, the GRA—once again using water (or geshem) as a symbol of material pursuits—suggests that the "River" represents the life of this world. Moses is portrayed as advising the Israelites regarding the type of human behavior which will assure their crossing the Jordan, or this life, in order safely to enter the promised land of the future life. Once again, asceticism and a heightened awareness of, and preparedness for, physical death are strongly prescribed:

"These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel on the desert east of the Jordan (ever ha-Yarden), the Arava, opposite Suph..."

This world (olam haxeh) is called the Jordan; the words "ever ha-Yarden" indicate that man is a mere transient sojourner in this life. Now, just as below, the Jordan borders the land of Israel below, so too, in the heavens, one cannot arrive in paradise before passing through the River Dinur. Only then is the soul raised as a sacrifice.

So that "ever ha-Yarden" is a general statement, followed by specific teachings. "On the desert" instructs that it is the correct thing for man to ignore all of the passions of this world such as food, and he should render himself as a desert, only to study Torah... "Opposite Suph" teaches that man should always contemplate the day of his death and have his termination (soph) before his eyes at all times.42
Perhaps the most remarkable manifestation of the Gaon's pessimism regarding the life of this material world is to be found in his unusual understanding of the consequence of Adam's primordial sin, which resulted in human mortality. Far from seeing the advent of physical death as a catastrophe, as is so common in the Jewish exegetical tradition, the GRA suggests that man is better off as a mortal being than he would be had he continued, after the sin, to enjoy eternal life:

It was decreed upon man for his own welfare that he should not live eternally, for there is nothing better for man than the decomposition of his physical matter; thus the Sages have instructed: “God's comment (upon having created man that all was) ‘Very good’—this refers to death.”

All of the Gaon's most noted disciples followed him in both his cosmological as well as anthropological dualism. Two themes, consistent with this prevalent Rabbinic perception of the spiritually limiting nature of physical human existence since the sin of Adam, continuously recur in the later writings of the disciples of the GRA: 1) That man cannot achieve his ultimate religious perfection (i.e., knowledge of God) until after his departure from the material world; 2) that it is important that he be acutely aware of this limitation and thus focus constantly on his mortality and, specifically, that he consciously anticipate and intensely contemplate the day of his own death.

Consistent with this morbid and dualistic religious anthropology, the mithnagdim were possessed by a fear of the dangerous seductions of the evil instinct. The need to suppress the yeser ha-ra is a central theme of all mithnagdic literature. In many mithnagdic writings, the evil impulse of man is personified, or identified specifically with the hasidic movement and its religious innovations.

Whereas Soloveitchik insists that “the great Jewish scholars knew nothing about man's conflict with the evil urge,” the earlier mithnagdim often spoke of little else. The Gaon of Vilna, in his commentary to the Book of Esther, viewed the entire Purim story as an allegory for the “battle with the evil instinct” which “plagues man all of the days of his existence on earth.” This obsession with man's struggle against the evil urge permeates the mithnagdic manual, Kether Torah, by the Gaon's student, Phinehas b. Judah Maggid of Polotsk. Modeled after Baha Ibn Pakuda's Duties of the Heart (Hovoth ha-Levavoth), Kether Torah is structured as a series of elaborate refutations of the “evil instinct” which seeks to cause man to stray from the normative path of halakhic Judaism. Various aspects of hasidic spirituality, as well as the trends of modernization of Jewish life beginning to appear at the
time in Eastern Europe, are depicted by Phinehas as the stirrings of the yezer hara, which must be vigilantly repressed.

Life is, for Phinehas, an endless series of struggles with the evil inclination which tirelessly seeks to seduce man into sinfulness. The study of Torah and the performance of its statutes are the most effective antidotes to man's base impulses, while in this material world. But these are again seen as no more than temporary holding measures to allow man to withstand the onslaught of this-worldly evil, rather than a route to any genuine spiritual attainment. Only his departure from the world fully and finally liberates man's soul from the endless torments of his bodily impulses.

Given this dualistic, otherworldly understanding of the nature and destiny of man, it comes as little surprise that Phinehas devoted considerable attention to the role of death as man's final religious good. In fact, Kether Torah concludes with a remarkable poem; a lengthy ode to death which reflects an extreme posture of "contemptus mundi," which Soloveitchik so strenuously rejects. Whereas Soloveitchik insists that "Judaism has a negative attitude toward death," and that "Halakha is devoid of any positive orientation to death and burial," Phinehas is positively exuberant about the spiritually liberating and morally purifying role played by death.47

The same despair that man might even attain holiness in this life, and the insistence that the most effective preparation for spiritual greatness is his contemplation of his own morality is an important theme in the mystical writings of the Gaon's most noted kabbalistic disciple, Menahem Mendel of Shklov. Consider, for example, the very opening paragraphs of his commentary to the Idrah Zuta:

The point is that the day of his death is the very purpose and fulfillment of man's existence, and this fact represents the highest, unique level of human understanding . . . For upon dying, man instantly attains more knowledge than he cumulatively could ever achieve all of the days of his life. In other words, at that moment, man has wisdom that is simply impossible to acquire so long as he remains in olam hasheh, as it is written, 'for no man can see me and live.' But, as the Sages have said, at the moment of death he can see, and that day of death is equal to all the days of his life. This is the true meaning (of the verse) that 'the day of death is more precious than the day of man's birth.'48

The pessimistic view of this-worldly existence and the obsession with death as the exclusive path to spiritual felicity endured in later generations of mithnagdic thought, particularly among the descendants of the Gaon of Vilna and their disciples. The notion that it is death, not life, which is man's final good is, for example, a leitmotif
of the writings of the Gaon’s grandnephew, the anti-hasidic polemicist, Meir b. Elijah of Vilna.49

Meir’s view of human nature is both pessimistic and starkly dualistic, and he is virtually obsessed with the battle which the higher spiritual forces within man must wage constantly against the evil instinct which animates his innermost physical desires. This “great war” between the conflicting instincts of man is a central theme, especially of the ethical will, Nakhala’th Avoth.50 This work also contains an extensive critique of the materialism which Meir sensed to be rampant among the Jews of his time. Meir was a rigid ascetic who repeatedly warned against the material seductions of this life. Since, in his view, the physical desires and material aspirations of man are his greatest moral adversary, Meir believed in the spiritually therapeutic nature of physical suffering (yisurim) and the essential nobility of a life of poverty and deprivation (aniyuth).51 In that spirit, he continuously reminded his children of the ephemeral nature of this life, the ultimate insignificance of all its physical gratifications and the utter folly of amassing wealth or accumulating material possessions.52 In terms remarkably reminiscent of the panegyric to death by Phinehas b. Judah Maggid of Polotsk, Meir continually reminds his readers of the final fruitlessness of materialistic pursuits in this life:

Son of man! Open your eyes from your blindness, and realize that all of the possessions of this world are nothing but vanity and the pursuits of the perplexed. For why should you so greedily desire to accumulate silver and gold, and to build spacious houses, when you are headed inevitably to the grave, in the netherworld. Then you will have nothing in your hand, and you will leave the results of all of your efforts to others. Why should you be so bothered about a world which is not really yours, for you will, quick as the blink of an eye, go on to another world, and all that you toiled for in this world will be as nothing, and it will turn out that you have so exerted yourself in vain.53

Like his mithnagdic predecessors then, Meir was convinced that true human fulfilment can only occur subsequent to man’s passing from this life:

Even if a man were to live from the very genesis of creation until its very end, and to attain all of the gratifications and precious objects of this world, none of it is as valuable as a single moment in the world to come.54

The very purpose and spiritual end of man’s entire life is arriving at death free from sin. Death frees man’s soul from its torments and allows him to complete his religious destiny.55 The regular contem-
planation on the part of man of the inevitable day of his death is therefore the most effective form of ethical training.56

In very sharp contrast to Halakhic Man, “Mithnagdic man” is then thoroughly dualistic and pessimistic; and his spirituality is radically transcendental, not at all this-worldly. Ultimately for him, due to his naturally divided state, man has no choice but to await death in order to achieve salvation.

In fact, in a fundamental sense, the very essence of authentic, mithnagdism was, I believe, the rejection of the this-worldly orientation of hasidism, and the strenuous re-affirmation of the dualism of the earlier Lurianic tradition, rooted in a literal understanding of the cosmogonic myth of zimzum. Mithnagdism, insofar as it was a reaction to hasidism’s monistic worldliness and religious optimism, constituted a deliberate retreat from the attempt to impose spiritual categories upon this world. Where hasidism insisted that God can be known in time and space, that the mystical experience can be attained through the spiritualization of the here and now, and that divine worship can be performed through the sanctification of the material universe, mithnagdism responded by insisting on the unbreachable, primordial abyss which separates the created universe from the Creator, by emphatically denying the world any holiness or possibility of sanctification and thereby deferring all ultimate spiritual felicity to the life of the world to come.

Soloveitchik, on the other hand, insists that the entire purpose of the law, as studied and observed by the Halakhic personality, is the sanctification of the created, physical universe—the olam ha-zeh—by means of the application of the a priori categories of the halakha to mundane existence.

U-VIKASHTEM MI-SHAM

The notion that the central goal of Jewish spirituality is the wedding of God with this world, achieved through the halakha’s objectification and concretization of spirit, is, as mentioned above, a central focus of Soloveitchik’s later essay, U-vikashtem Mi-sham. It is here that Soloveitchik’s passionate affirmation of the sanctity of this life and his conviction that Judaism ascribes ultimate religious significance to time and space, find their fullest expression. This essay, arguably the most important in Soloveitchik’s oeuvre, provides a richly textured and highly optimistic portrait of halakhic Judaism’s sanctification of the temporal and spatial categories of mundane existence.

Once again, Soloveitchik is primarily concerned, in U-vikashtem Mi-sham, with refuting the dualism of the neo-platonic tradition and
the ascetic religious manifestations resulting from it. As in *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik contrasts Judaism's monistic affirmation of the material life with the world-denying spirituality of medieval Christianity:

> Whereas Socratic/Platonic metaphysics, which so strongly influenced Christianity, established its opinion that the spirit ascends on high to the degree that the body descends below... Judaism proclaimed that man merits eternal life when he transforms his temporal, meaningless animal existence into the sanctified life of the Godly man. Whereas the former spoke of the eternity of the universal soul, the latter spoke of the eternity of the individual and the resurrection of the dead: It is the body, in all of its glory, which is destined to rise from the grave.

In this essay he takes this characterization of the nature and function of halakha further than he did in *Halakhic Man*. Here we find much bolder and more precise affirmations about the worldliness of halakhic Judaism. Soloveitchik also provides specific illustrations of the spiritualizing effect of the halakhic approach upon mundane existence. Two such examples are particularly striking when viewed in contrast with classical mithnagdic attitudes: 1) Soloveitchik's perception of the religious significance of the satisfaction of man's bodily appetites; 2) Soloveitchik's view of the social and ethical role of halakha.

**THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF EATING**

One of important practical consequences of the halakha's role of unifying man with God in and through the material world is what Soloveitchik terms "the elevation of the body." By providing legal categories which govern man's satisfaction of his physical and sensual needs, halakha is, in fact, creating a sacred context for them. Soloveitchik affirms this in the boldest of terms:

> Indeed, Halakha is the law (Torah) of the body. And it is precisely here that one discovers its greatness; for it is through the sanctification of the body that halakha forges a unified psycho-somatic man who serves God with his spirit and his body equally, and elevates life to the heights of eternity.

Laws governing food, drink and sex do not serve primarily to limit and curb those physical requirements of the sensual man, but rather to lend sanctity to them. Far from taking a dismal or restrictive view of the indulgence of man's material appetites, the halakha sees in them the opportunity for great spiritual achievement:
The halakha instructs: Fortunate is the creature who confronts his creator on the pathways of this world, every time he swallows a little water or tastes bread. Fortunate is the man for whom the Lord becomes his God each time he makes use of his senses and derives pleasure from them.60

The earlier mithnagdim had a very different view of man's animal need for consumption. They saw absolutely no inherent spiritual value in the physical act of eating. At the very most, the mithnagdim accepted the medieval philosophical concession of utilitarian value to food and drink in maintaining the necessary physical strength in order to facilitate man's spiritual life. Thus did the Gaon of Vilna's student, Benjamin Rivlin, characterize his master's attitude to participation with others in a meal:

When someone invites his friend to join him for a meal, the latter should respond: 'feed your hearts,' that is to say 'intend in your meal only to have the energy to sustain your good instinct to engage in Torah study and the observance of the commandments.'61

Eating without this higher end in mind was of absolutely no value to the mithnagdim. In fact, the Gaon of Vilna viewed all acts of physical consumption as being inherently rather repulsive:

The things of this world, such as eating in which one takes food and turns it into feces and excrement, and the sexual act, are inherently loathsome. It is only what may result from them which might be for good; such as, if the sole purpose of one's eating is to be able to turn back to Torah study.62

The Gaon's student, R. Hayyim of Volozhin, seems to have shared this sensibility. In a highly dualistic perspective on food as serving only the needs of the body and not those of the soul, he laments:

The truth is that this whole business of eating—whereby man's very existence is dependant upon putting a material thing into his bowels—is a great disgrace to the dignity of a human being. Now surely his soul, the spiritual part of man, must scorn all of this with utter contempt.63

Soloveitchik's extensive proclamations regarding the spiritual significance of food and drink, far from echoing the teachings of his mithnagdic predecessors, call to mind the doctrines of the hasidic masters concerning the sacramental function of eating.64 While the hasidic teachings on the sanctity of human consumption are based upon their monistic re-interpretations of Lurianic cosmogonic mythology and Soloveitchik's statements are rooted in the conventions of halakha, their respective doctrines on the subject remain signifi-
cantly the same. For both, the satisfaction of the material appetites should be viewed as an opportunity for the sanctification of the created world, rather than a sinful indulgence. Soloveitchik's conclusion that, 

Eating, the animal function upon which man's life is dependant, is refined by halakha and transformed into a religious sacrament and a lofty ethical activity, is not, in the end, very different from the affirmation of his older hasidic contemporary, R. Arele Roth who, in a work devoted entirely to the subject of the sanctity of eating, proclaims:

God decreed that it is specifically through eating and drinking that the lofty soul of man becomes united with his coarse and oft-abused body.

Of course, the specific form which Soloveitchik's celebration of the limitless religious possibilities of this-worldly time and space possess when refracted through the categories of halakha is not at all comparable to hasidism's acosmic worship of God by transforming matter to spirit. Nonetheless, from a phenomenological perspective at least, the halakhic man—in his attitude to the spiritual potentialities of the present life and the physical indulgences of this world—far from being a paradigm of "mithnagdic spirituality of awesome proportions" is much closer to the Hasidic mystic than he is to the mithnagged who insists that genuine religious experience absolutely requires transcending the world.

SOCIAL AND ETHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

As already noted, Soloveitchik's insistence on the role of halakha in cultivating ethical sensibility underlies his critique of the mystical abandonment of this world by homo religiosus. Mystical dualism and asceticism ultimately result in a general posture of "contemptus mundi." This in turn leads to a pious isolationism from the affairs of society, and an indifference to the needs of others, which Soloveitchik strongly censures. For him, one of the most important effects of man's adherence to halakhic regulations is the cultivation of a highly developed social and ethical sensitivity.

Soloveitchik dramatizes the radical difference between the mystic's escape from his social and ethical responsibilities and the halakhic personality's seriousness about them, using the example of their respective understandings of the nature of the religious goal of devekuth. Whereas, for the mystic, devekuth is essentially a transcendant, other-
worldly clinging to the Divine, for the halakhic Jew devekuth retains a socio-ethical significance. For, according to the talmud, devekuth requires an attachment not merely to God, but to other mortals—specifically to the students and scholars of Torah. The halakha thus transformed an ostensibly transcendant mystical activity into a form of social action. Soloveitchik sees this as but one example of Judaism's general insistence that man's confrontation with the sacred is impossible when he isolates himself from society:

If a person separates himself from the community, he is unworthy to cling to God. One may not invoke the holy except in the context of a quorum of ten—as it is written, “And I (God) will become sanctified within the community of Israel.” Judaism grasped the importance and influence of the social surroundings. It is only through an exalted community that man can be raised to the greatest heights.64

This insistence on a heightened social consciousness and attachment to the community as the necessary conduit to holiness could hardly be more different than the earlier mithnagdim's notorious elitism and their insistence on separation from the untutored masses in order to attain an exalted intellectual and spiritual state. It was precisely this elitist indifference to the Jewish masses which provoked the harshest criticism of the Rabbis by the earliest hasidic theoreticians, most notably R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoe.65

The Gaon of Vilna's entire life is testimony to his deliberate separation from the larger society. Not until late in life, with his 1772 declaration of war on hasidism, did he involve himself in any communal matters. His refusal to accept a Rabbinical post, establish a yeshiva, or even lecture to all but a tiny circle of intimates, have all been viewed as paradigmatic of the scholarly elitism and effete isolationism of the mithnagdic Rabbis.

This same studied separation from the wider society was a trait emulated by many of the Gaon's descendants and disciples. To take but one example, his grandnephew, Meir b. Elijah, reflected a startling animosity toward the community, and wrote with great pride of his “successes” in avoiding any involvement in its affairs. Meir boasted frequently of the fact that he always avoided joining in any social or communal events, and advised his children to follow his example. Even his attendance at a family wedding was viewed by him as a necessary evil to which he simply had no choice but occasionally to succumb. He spoke passionately of the great dangers even of going out for a stroll in the streets, especially those of the “big city,” Vilna.

... the man whom God blesses with the possibility of staving closed up and sequestered, completely alone in a private room where he
can study Torah and serve God—such a person does not require any struggle or machinations (with the evil instinct). . . But any person who must carry upon his shoulders the burden of earning his living, and who must therefore be surrounded by women—especially a person who must go out into the marketplace and public streets and big cities—such a man requires great zeal and strength . . .

Meir repeatedly advised his children to follow his example and to avoid attending public events to the degree possible:

- Always try to avoid attending any public religious celebrations, most especially wedding receptions, unless it is for a very pressing reason. For the hazard of these events is great indeed . . .

- Meir's idealization of the sequestered life of total separation from society, and his romantic view of the isolated individual locked in his private room, almost uncannily recalls the legendary, monastic way of life of his grand uncle, the Gaon of Vilna. Their studied avoidance of contact with the masses of Jewish society have been viewed as emblematic of mithnagdism.

CONCLUSION

There is a rigorous, ongoing debate among scholars regarding the “modernity” of Soloveitchik's thought. While the extent or importance of his schooling in modern philosophy have never been the subject of any controversy, some have argued that his application of that modern learning is more apologetic than substantive, and that “Soloveitchik uses Western thought to serve his conservative Jewish theological purposes.” In this view, modern thought has not had any meaningful impact on his understanding of Judaism, but is merely used by him as “a packaging device,” in order to present “old Jewish wine in new Westernized bottles.”

Soloveitchik's hitherto unnoticed, but radical, departure from the mithnagdic view of man serves, I believe, as compelling evidence of his authentic theological originality and modernity. In rejecting completely the mithnagdim's adherence to Lurianic kabbalah's dualistic asceticism, and their sense of pessimism regarding the potentialities of man within the confines of this fragmented and alienated world, Soloveitchik has developed a highly original and uniquely optimistic alternative to hasidic spirituality.

In his early work on religious epistemology, The Halakhic Mind, Soloveitchik had explicitly rejected the medieval Jewish philosophical interpretation of the divine law as transcendent and utilitarian. The role of the Halakha, he insisted, should not be relativized, but rather
must stand as an autonomous system, as the objectification of the Jewish spirit. In *Halakhic Man*, as we now have seen, he explicitly parted with medieval kabbalistic dualism and asceticism. Soloveitchik has thus clearly broken from the two major schools of medieval Jewish thought—rationalist philosophy and kabbalah.

While claiming that his critique of earlier Jewish spirituality was inspired by the examples of his mithnagdic ancestors, it seems clear that the real source of inspiration for his boldly original and optimistic religious anthropology lies in his unique synthesis of German idealism with the pragmatism of Rabbinic legalism. Soloveitchik's original understanding of the nature and spiritual significance of halakhic study and observance is anything but conservative or apologetic. It is a brave new departure in the interpretation of the sources of Rabbinic Judaism, rich with potential. For Soloveitchik's ideal halakhic man represents an unprecedented, truly "modern" Rabbinic Jew emerging out of a unique blending of the empiricism of halakha with the idealism of neo-Kantian epistemology.

That Soloveitchik's students and readers have not noticed the degree to which he has in fact departed from earlier mithnagdic religious anthropology illustrates the need for a far more integrative approach to the study of modern Jewish thought. The importance of integrating the critical analysis of the writings of modern Jewish thinkers with classical and medieval Rabbinic scholarship is especially pronounced in the study of contemporary "transitional" Rabbinic figures, such as Soloveitchik. For what has been most lacking in the scholarship on Soloveitchik, and similarly composite Jewish thinkers, is not so much an adequate reading of their works per se, but rather an appreciation of the earlier theological and spiritual context out of which their ideas were forged.

YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH, NEW YORK CITY

ENDNOTES

1. For an interesting, if somewhat rambling and impressionistic, essay on Soloveitchik's struggle with the tensions resulting from his "transition" from the town of Brisk (the home of the Soloveitchik Rabbinic dynasty's critico-conceptual approach to Talmudic study) to Berlin, see Hillel Goldberg, *Between Berlin and Slobodka* (New York, 1989), chapter 5.

2. All references to *Ish ha-Halakha* in this essay are to the fine English translation by Lawrence Kaplan, entitled *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia, 1983). This work, a passionate tribute to the spiritual eminence of the Jew who devotes his entire life to the study of the Torah and the performance of its
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legal statutes, has received more attention than any of Soloveitchik's other writings. A large number of essays and articles about *Halakhic Man* have emerged, particularly since the appearance of the English version. Among the most important are: Elliot Dorff, “Halakhic Man: A Review Essay,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1986), pp. 91–98. (Dorff offers a critique of Soloveitchik, largely from the perspective of a Conservative philosophy of halakha) and David Hartman, “The Halakhic Hero: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik’s Halakhic Man,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1989), pp. 249–273. (Hartman provides an important and cogent response to some of Dorff’s most tenacious criticisms.)


3. See Eugene B. Borowitz, “The Typological Theology of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,” *Judaism*, vol. 15, No. 2 (1966), pp. 203–210. Several years later, while modifying his early perception of Soloveitchik’s anthropology in light of the very different spirit which emerged in the then-recently published essay, “Lonely Man of Faith,” Borowitz did not retreat so much as an inch from his depiction of *Halakhic Man* as a model of mithnagdic religion: “Indeed,” Borowitz wrote, “the essay Ish Ha’halakha may be read as an anti-hasidic tract which seeks to show, by a phenomenology of mithnagdic intellectuality, that legalistic rationality contains all the spiritual and emotional powers of Hasidism, but manages to correct its subjective excesses.” See Eugene Borowitz, “A Theology of Modern Orthodoxy: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik” in *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York, 1983), p. 297.

4. Even Lawrence Kaplan, the most perceptive and prolific scholar of Soloveitchik’s thought, in his “Translator’s Preface” to the English edition of *Halakhic Man*, cites Borowitz’s characterization of the work, as a “mithnagged phenomenology of awesome proportions” as “perhaps the best description of *Halakhic Man*.” I should add, at this point, that it was a question which Professor Kaplan posed to me during a discussion of my research on early mithnagdism, regarding the obvious discrepancies between Soloveitchik’s religious anthropology and that of his Lithuanian predecessors, which prompted the writing of this essay. See also, Prof. Aviezer Ravitsky’s important study of the respective Maimonidean and neo-Kantian roots of Soloveitchik’s epistemology, which accepts as axiomatic the fact that Soloveitchik’s philosophy of halakha was an accurate reflection of “the erudite world of his forebears.” [Aviezer Ravitsky, “Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik on Human Knowledge: Between Maimonides and neo-Kantian Philosophy,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1986), pp. 157–188.


7. It is clear that, in referring to halakhic knowledge as "a priori," Soloveitchik cannot be using the term in a fully Kantian sense, since the entire system is ultimately a heteronomous one, founded upon God's revelation of the Torah. Nonetheless, it is equally clear that this heteronomous revelation of the Divine can only become realized by means of man's autonomous development of halakhic reasoning as well as in normative halakhic behavior. Moreover, the categories of halakha, as developed in this human process, then constitute halakhic man's active a priori principles of consciousness. This ideal juridical creation, although referred to by Soloveitchik as an a priori system, remains ultimately rooted in a Divine revelation.


16. *Halakhic Man*, p. 48. Soloveitchik's original definition of zimzum as the contraction of the Infinite into the finite is further elaborated in *Halakhic Man*, p. 108. Prof. Lawrence Kaplan argues, in a forthcoming paper, that there is in Soloveitchik's understanding of the nature of zimzum, a two-fold divine contraction: i.e., first, the contraction of the divine will and essence into the categories of halakha, followed by the contraction of halakhic categories into the material world as a result of their application and observance.


18. *Halakhic Man*, p. 31. On Soloveitchik’s view that death has nothing but a negative significance, see *Halakhic Man*, part 1, chapter 7. Soloveitchik elaborates upon halakhic Judaism's denial of any religious significance whatsoever to death in his later (1978) Hebrew essay "u-Vikashtem mi-Sham," *Ish ha-Halakhah—Golah ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem, 1979). See, for example, p. 223: (Judaism) despises death and condemns any life which is allowed by man to whither and dissipate without his having taken full advantage of its potentialities. It is not for naught that the halakha distanced the dead from holiness and from the Temple, and elevated the commandment to save human life.
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19. Halakhic Man, p. 35.
20. Halakhic Man, p. 36.
21. Halakhic Man, p. 44.

A notable exception to these apologetic affirmations of the unity of Soloveitchik’s thinking is Lawrence Kaplan’s creative suggestion that Soloveitchik’s philosophical mood depends largely upon the intended audience of his various writings. That, in turn, can be discerned from the language of his essays. His Hebrew writings, most notably Ish Ha-halakha and U-Vikashtem Mi-sham, addressed to a presumably learned, but theologically conservative and timid, Orthodox audience, emphasizes the autonomy, optimism, boldness and worldliness of halakhic Judaism. The English essays, on the other hand, are addressed to a more modern and worldly readership and therefore emphasize such corrective themes as the need for alienation, retreat and humility in the service of God. See, Lawrence Kaplan, “Models of the Ideal Religious Man in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s Thought,” Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought (Hebrew), Vol. 4, No. 3 (1985), pp. 327-339. Cf. the discussion by Hillel Goldberg, op. cit., pp. 101-106.

25. U-vikashtem Mi-sham, p. 190.
26. U-vikashtem Mi-sham, p. 192. See the discussion of the ethical component of the halakhic consciousness below.


29. U-vikashtem Mi-sham, p. 223.

30. The following are among the more significant references to the spiritual lives of Soloveitchik’s mithnagdic predecessors in Halakhic Man: P. 36: Regarding the custom of the Gaon of Vilna, and Soloveitchik’s own ancestors to avoid visiting graves in order to deny death any religious significance. P. 52: On R. Hayyim Brisker’s theory of the purpose of creation. P. 71: Anecdotal material regarding R. Hayyim’s manner of coping with the fear of death. P. 75: Regarding R. Hayyim’s rejection of the ascetic approach of the Mussar movement. P. 82: Citations from Hayyim of Volozhin’s classical work, Nefesh ha-Hayyim to support Soloveitchik’s thesis regarding the great spiritual potentialities of man in this life.

31. The subsequent discussion of mithnagdic anthropology in this paper is limited to the Gaon of Vilna and his small circle of disciples and direct
descendants. There were, to be sure, other personalities and trends in later mithnagdic Judaism—characters such as Soloveitchik's maternal grandfather, Elijah of Pruzhin—whose study might yield a very different religious prototype. A detailed study of later strands of mithnagdic religious thought remains a desiratum which lies well beyond the scope of the present paper.

32. See the book-length study of the role of "Talmud Torah" in the religious philosophy of R. Hayyim of Volozhin by Norman Lamm, Torah Lishmah—Torah For Torah's Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries (New York, 1989).


35. Such legends regarding the GRA's ascetic piety abound. See, for a treasure of such hagiographic material, Joshua Heschel Levine, Aliyoth Eliyahu. See, also, the reverent account by B. Landau, Ha-Gaon he-Hasid Mi-Vilna, (Jerusalem, 1978) chapters 4 & 12. A very important primary source regarding the GRA's asceticism is Israel of Shklov's introduction to Peeth ha-Shulhan (Jerusalem, 1965), esp. p. 5b.

36. See Iggereth ha-GRA, p. 6.

37. The extent to which the GRA's lifestyle was in harmony with this radical anthropological dualism is testified to by his own son, Abraham b. Elijah, in his Se'arath Eliyahu (Vilna, 1877), p. 6a.: "Who can properly express his wonderful ethical traits, how like a heavenly angel he nullified his saintly body, lest his corporeality (geshem) obstruct his (spiritual) path."

38. Megillath Esther im Perush ha-GRA al Derekh ha-peshat ve-al Derekh ha-sod (Warsaw, 1897), chapter 1, verse 5.

39. Ibid., chapter 1, verse 6.

40. Sefer Adereth Eliyahu al ha-Torah (Warsaw, 1887), (Deuteronomy), 1:1 (P. 320).

41. Devar Eliyahu al Sefer Iyov (Warsaw, 1840), chapter 3, verses 21-22.

42. Sefer Adereth Eliyahu al ha-Torah (Deuteronomy), 1:1 (P. 320).

43. Adereth Eliyahu al ha-Torah (Genesis), chapter 3, verse 21. The idea that God's statement that if man eats of the tree he will die should be understood not as a threat but as a promise recurs throughout the mithnagdic literature. Two generations later, for example, the GRA's grand-nephew, Meir ben Eliyahu, writes: "That which God told Adam, 'that on the day you eat from it you shall surely die,' was not said to him as a curse—quite the contrary, it was said for his own good. Namely, that having eaten of the tree you will only be able to arrive at your final perfection via death. Similarly, the warning that if man eat of the tree of life he would live forever was intended for his own good. For if man were to live eternally in this physical world he could never achieve his purpose in the future life. What possible pleasure could he have in living in this corrupt, vain and ephemeral world? 'The destiny of every animal is to be slaughtered'... and that is true of all creatures in the world—their destiny is to die. It is through the death of man that he is firmly established and rises to his final purpose and origin." Meir b. Elijah, Derekh Avoth, 1:12 (P. 10a).