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THE UNITY AND STRUCTURE OF RABBI JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK'S THOUGHT

A great thinker, especially one who expresses himself in complex and subtle language, always risks being misunderstood. This has been the fate of great philosophers of the past and it continues to be the case among contemporary thinkers as well.¹ The religious and philosophical thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is no exception to this rule. For the most part, the literature on the Rav's work tends, with some happy exceptions, either to mindless uncritical panegyric, or else to ill-informed and even hostile criticism. One of the criticisms that has gained considerable currency is that the Rav's thought lacks a single unifying center, that it is riddled with a mass of unresolved contradictions. I propose in this paper to show that there are, in fact, a clear and integrating central focus and a fully developed methodology which together serve to unify and structure the work of the Rav, despite the diversity of style and theme which is to be found in his published writings.

I.

Before pursuing our study it is important to call attention to certain hazards which confront students of the Rav's thought. First, it is essential to maintain a very sharp distinction between those works which were written by him and published with his authorization and all the rest of the published corpus, whether authorized, quasi-authorized, or not authorized at all. Much has appeared in Rav Soloveitchik's name which purports to be his work, but is in fact only someone else's summary or paraphrase of what they believe him to have said. The very best example of a work prepared for publication by another hand is *Al ha-Teshuvah*, a collection of the Rav's oral

discourses which were first given in Yiddish and subsequently rendered into Hebrew by Pinchas Peli. The text rings true and it is as reliable a representation of his thought as one might hope for from someone other than himself. There are, however, a number of far less reliable works which represent themselves as essays by the Rav but have been done by other people. In most cases these have been published without any proper authorization, and in some cases even against the explicit opposition of the Rav and his family. In some instances they are of poor quality and are far from meeting the standards of style, content, and ideas that are characteristic of the Rav's own work. Unhappily, far too many people presume to speak and to write in his name. However well-intended, they do a great disservice to him and to the community of students and scholars who look to him as a teacher of Judaism of unparalleled scope and depth in our generation.

Anyone who seeks to achieve a reliable understanding and appreciation of the Rav's thought should confine himself to those studies which he himself wrote and whose publication he approved.² It should always be remembered that he writes with painstaking care and that every word and phrase is carefully chosen. Language and thought are inseparably connected in his work, and one must not rely on someone else's paraphrases or summaries even when they are well done. The Rav's style of meticulously careful writing is rooted in a long tradition. The most striking post-talmudic example is Maimonides who tells us in his Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed* that every single word of his book has been carefully and deliberately chosen and that the organization of the entire work is consciously planned at every point. A more recent model is Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik, the Rav's grandfather.³ As the disciple of these paradigmatic figures, the Rav devoted infinite care to his writing. It is clear that no work published under his name should be taken as a reliable source for his teachings unless it actually came from his pen and was submitted for publication with his approval. Even in cases where the actual words may be his own, as recorded on tape or even in a privately held manuscript, a work is not to be taken as authoritative unless it was published with his explicit approval. He alone is the judge of what is in a form that he considers final and ready for publication. To ignore this *caveat* is to risk drawing unfounded conclusions about the Rav's thought based on formulations that he considered not fully finished.

A second danger which confronts the student of Rav Soloveitchik's thought springs out of a certain type of interpretive literature. There are writers who claim to know the Rav's unexpressed inner thoughts, his unspoken aims and purposes, his con-

scious and unconscious motivations, and who offer accounts of his thought based on this supposed secret knowledge. There is in this style of interpretation a level of presumptuousness which is not only tasteless, but also profoundly and inexcusably misleading. Once such conjectures about private motives are expressed, they tend to assume a life of their own and to become the basis for conclusions about the meaning and import of the Rav's work. It can be demonstrated, and I shall do so later on, that these conclusions are unfounded, that they are not sustained by the texts themselves, and that they derive from the mistaken supposition of the authors that they know the inner and unexpressed dimensions of the Rav's personality and therefore understand in a uniquely accurate way what the Rav "really" was saying.⁴ Such claims should always be treated with extreme skepticism and should never be allowed to become the basis for deciding anything at all about the Rav's teachings. Even when practiced by the most skilled and sophisticated professionals, psychohistory is a dubious and ill-founded discipline. It should have no standing as a tool for penetrating into the thought of Rav Soloveitchik. His written and spoken word are all we have. As is the case with all thinkers, even reliable memory of the spoken word will dim as time passes, and it is the written word upon which we must rely. The Rav's writings need to be studied with the care and thought that they deserve, and no psychologizing can ever be a satisfactory or responsible substitute for such study.

Another danger to be avoided is posed by interpreters who do not understand the Rav's language correctly and draw unfounded conclusions based on mistranslations of his terminology. An instructive example is to be found in the article by Singer and Sokol to which reference was made above (note 4). They address the admittedly important question of the place and function of Western philosophy in the Rav's thought. They conclude that the Rav "uses Western thought to serve his own (Jewish) theological purposes." By itself this is certainly a conclusion which is possible and which may be defensible. They go on, however, to accuse the Rav of deliberately dressing up his Jewish thinking in Western philosophical garb as a way of winning adherents to his position. It is important to see exactly how they express themselves. "Soloveitchik latches on to neo-Kantianism as a way of adding to the prestige of talmudism; he dresses up talmudism in neo-Kantian garb so as to make it more appealing to a modern, secularized audience. . . . he uses neo-Kantian philosophy *as a mere packaging device*." The authors then add with a triumphant note what they take to be the incontrovertible proof of their claim. They assure us that, "Soloveitchik himself underscores this point when he states (in a footnote in 'Halakhic Man' that has

been ignored in all discussions of his work) that he is drawing upon neo-Kantian thought so as to make talmudism more ‘palatable’ to the reader. Exactly!”⁵

The entire charge rests on a misreading and mistranslation. In the text to which the authors refer, Rav Soloveitchik tells us that he has made use of the example of philosophical idealism from Kant to Hermann Cohen and his disciples, “*kedei le-sabber et ha-ozen beniddon ish ha-halakhah, she-ein hakhmei ha-dat regilim bo.*”⁶ The phrase, *le-sabber et ha-ozen*, certainly does not mean “to make more palatable.” There is nothing sinister in the phrase, nor does it refer to some hidden propagandistic agenda. It is a standard expression which means “to make intelligible” or “to make more readily understandable.” The Rav is simply saying that the concept of “halakhic man” is totally unfamiliar to people schooled exclusively in the standard literature of Western religious thought. Consequently, in order to make that concept intelligible to readers of that type, he has expressed aspects of the typology in the more familiar language of philosophical idealism. He is not engaged in some kind of vulgar packaging in order to market his ideas successfully. He is certainly not concerned to make his views more “palatable” to properly enlightened Westerners. He is just doing what any good teacher or writer does, namely, making a body of unfamiliar concepts intelligible to his audience by comparing them to that with which he presumes his audience is already acquainted.⁷ It should be clear that the works of interpretation need to be read with the greatest care and with appropriate caution. Even seemingly scholarly interpreters can mislead their readers, especially when they are determined to make the Rav fit into their own preconceived mold.

II.

One of the recurrent lines of criticism in some of the secondary literature is that the Rav’s thought is beset by internal contradictions and conflicting purposes, that it lacks systematic unity and coherence. Here again we can find an excellent paradigm of such criticism in the article by Singer and Sokol. They assert that, “a reading of Soloveitchik’s *oeuvre* makes it clear that his theological concerns . . . are characterized by tensions, polarities, and outright contradictions.”⁸ They quote a passage from “The Lonely Man of Faith” and assure us that “the Soloveitchik of the main body of ‘Halakhic Man’ would find this statement totally alien, while the Soloveitchik of the introduction to the essay would fully endorse it.”⁹ A superficial reading of the Rav’s works might readily lend support to this picture

of a figure who is torn between opposed worlds that he cannot bring together, especially if it starts out from an erroneous set of preconceptions. These critics, like some others, see in Rav Soloveitchik a thinker who lives simultaneously in totally inconsistent and contradictory intellectual and spiritual worlds. He is, according to this view, the scion of and superb spokesman for something that they call Litvak-mitnagged talmudism which is described conventionally as coldly unfeeling in its pure intellectualism and without a shred of religious emotion or passion. At the same time he is also portrayed as an existentialist religious spirit (perhaps hasidic or quasi-hasidic), one who has the deepest religious feelings and for whom the life of the intellect alone does not answer true religious concerns. Since it is assumed that these two are intrinsically and mutually contradictory positions, it then follows, in the view of these writers, that brokenness, disunity, and systematic incoherence characterize the Rav's thought.

My primary purpose in this study is to establish and explicate the fact that, contrary to these assertions, an overarching unity of doctrine, methodology, and structure inform the Rav's thought. A sound understanding of the Rav's works will reveal in them an underlying and widely encompassing thematic and systematic unity. We must not rest with superficial first impressions. Let us begin by considering a number of general points. First, it is true that the Rav's works are written in different styles, but this is by itself hardly an indication of internal lack of unity and coherence. The style which is appropriate for *hiddushei Torah*, written in a classical mode, is hardly appropriate for a philosophical or theological essay. What is appropriate when writing systematic philosophy is not the style in which one makes a personal religious statement. From the fact that the Rav writes in different styles (although always in a way that is unmistakably his own) we can draw no conclusions about the unity or lack of unity in his thought.

Second, we need to keep in mind that not only the style but also the content of any work is determined by its particular purposes. A single thinker may very well write about different aspects of a given topic and do so from diverse perspectives and in diverse frameworks. Tone and content will reflect these variegated aims and objectives. The traditional teaching that the one divine Torah has seventy faces¹⁰ is not just a rhetorical flourish. It expresses the conviction that the Torah is infinitely deep and varied, that it transcends the capacity of any person, no matter how gifted, to contain it all within a single structure. A student of the Torah can only present its teaching from particular aspects and perspectives, exhibiting and explicating some of its facets, never all of them. This is what great figures of the past

have always done, and it is characteristic of the work of Rav Soloveitchik in our own time. We know of *tannaim* and *amoraim* who were great masters of both halakhah and aggadah. Maimonides wrote his *Mishneh Torah* in a manner quite different from his *Guide of the Perplexed*, and these both differ from his style in some of his epistles or in his responsa. The style and focus of the *Shulhan Arukh ha-Rav* of Rabbi Shneur Zalman is strikingly different from his *Tanya*. In these and similar cases there may be those who will argue that we have deep internal conflicts and contradictions, but there is little evidence to support the claim.¹¹ In the case of Rav Soloveitchik, differences of style, theme, or orientation in his various works do not by themselves support the claim that his work is internally contradictory and is lacking in any systematic unity. The great talmudist, the master of halakhah, the deeply searching religious thinker, the incomparable preacher, the Jew of simple piety, are all one and they live together in a carefully nuanced and consciously forged systematic unity.

III.

The unifying principle in all of the Rav's work is his frequently stated conviction that the only legitimate source of Jewish doctrine is the Halakhah. As he has often expressed it, "The halakhah is the objectification and crystallization of all true Jewish doctrine." In his various studies, the controlling force and focus is the Halakhah. Religious and philosophical accounts of Jewish spirituality are sound and meaningful in his view only to the extent that they derive from the Halakhah. The deepest religious emotion, the subtlest theological understanding, can only be Jewishly authentic to the extent that they arise from reflection on matters of Halakhah, and are integrated into its disciplined intellectual structure. I propose to focus on a single case which can teach us how this general rule of method is carried out in practice in the Rav's work. The case I have in mind is the Rav's treatment of the problem of evil, the fact that there is human suffering for which we can find no reason and for which we can produce no religiously satisfactory explanation. This is a classic philosophical-theological problem, one which has preoccupied religious thinkers from the Prophets down to the present. I choose this example because of its intrinsic interest and because it illuminates so well the way in which halakhic norms generate theological principles. This case is particularly useful as a paradigm since the Rav's treatment of it is frequently cited, but not always very deeply understood.

His essay, "*Kol Dodi Dofek*," opens with the statement that suffering is one of the most obscure and enigmatic phenomena that Judaism has struggled to understand from the earliest days.¹² The Rav rejects out of hand a number of proposed solutions to the problem of human suffering which he takes to be fundamentally in error. Prominent among these is the effort to explain away all instances of suffering by treating the very phenomenon as somehow illusory. This is the way in which some philosophers have chosen to resolve the problem. Deny the reality of suffering and the problem has been dissolved. This is a solution which the Rav considers to be so contrary to actual human experience that no one can seriously affirm it. "Evil is a fact which cannot be denied. There is evil; there is suffering, there are hellish agonies in the world. . . . One cannot overcome the reality of monstrous evil through philosophic speculation."¹³ He argues furthermore that there is no philosophic solution to the problem of evil. Here he is responding to the long history of philosophic treatments of the subject, not one of which is finally convincing. However, he goes further and takes it to be a fundamental Jewish teaching that philosophical solutions to the problem of evil are in principle not possible. Man's view of the world is only partial. We do not grasp historical or metaphysical reality from the all-encompassing perspective of God, but only from our varying finite and limited perspectives. What may be intelligible just from the divine perspective can never be fully known by any human being, and it follows that a true philosophical answer to the riddle of why the righteous suffer can never be available even to the wisest of men. The tradition teaches us that Moses himself could not arrive at a satisfactory human answer to this agonizing question.

Rav Soloveitchik argues that according to Jewish teaching the proper question to ask is not why is there suffering in the world, but rather what is the appropriate response to the experience of suffering, an experience which no person escapes. He formulates his answer by setting forth two modes of response which he calls *goral* and *yi'ud*, which deal with that experience either as fate to be endured or as a call to destiny to be realized. The *goral* response is simply to endure the suffering and to try vainly to deal with it by way of illusory philosophical or theological solutions. The *yi'ud* response is a call to man to deal with his experience actively and creatively. In this mode one does not deny or minimize the fact of the suffering, but one asks what can I do to transform it into something positive and meaningful. Man should not be a passive object, a plaything of the various forces and events that affect him. Man is rather called upon to "transform fate into destiny, passive existence into active and effective living."¹⁴ The Jew must approach his suffering with a

halakhic question, namely, what must the sufferer do to live affirmatively and creatively with his suffering.

The most fundamental question is, what obligation does suffering impose on man. Judaism was particularly concerned with this question and set it at the center of its universe of thought. The Halakhah is concerned with this question as it is with other [more familiar] halakhic questions that focus on the forbidden and the permitted, obligation and absence of obligation. We do not reflect on the mysterious ways of God, but rather on the way in which man should go when he confronts suffering. We do not ask about the cause of the evil or about its ultimate purpose, but only how we can rectify and elevate it. How shall a man behave in a time of trouble? What shall man do so as not to be destroyed by his suffering?¹⁵

Rav Soloveitchik replies to these questions with what he specifically labels a halakhic answer. The Halakhah requires man to make use of suffering creatively, not just to submit to it passively and hopelessly. It requires us to use the experience of suffering to elevate ourselves, to refine ourselves, to increase our sensitivity, in short, to make ourselves better human beings than we were before.

The great model which exemplifies this response to suffering is Job. The Rav points out the crucial difference between Job before his suffering and after, a point that has gone largely unnoticed. Before his suffering Job is ego-centered. He prays only for himself and his children. When he becomes the victim of great catastrophe, he can make no sense of it. He only continues to affirm his own righteousness and to demand a coherent explanation of his suffering. All of his philosophizing leads him nowhere, until he finally shifts from the attitude of *goral* to that of *yi'ud*. He stops justifying himself and demanding explanations, but instead uses his suffering to elevate himself to a higher plane. It is only at this point that things turn in a new direction. As the biblical text notes at the end of the long Job episode, God rebuked Job's friends for their attempts to give a theological explanation of Job's suffering. He says to Eliphaz, "I am incensed at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about Me as did My servant Job." They are instructed to offer up sacrifices so that Job might pray for them. The biblical text then notes, "The Lord restored Job's fortunes when he prayed on behalf of his friends." Here we have the transformed Job who prays for his friends with the same concern and the same fervor that he had previously extended only to his own children. The critical point is that Job's suffering becomes meaningful only when it serves to make him a more sensitive, less self-centered person than he was before. The pain he endured was real. His attempts to account for it philosophically were futile. The only positive outcome of his experience is that he learned to use his suffering affirmatively and creatively

to transform his character and to make himself a more virtuous human being. His human concerns now extended beyond the narrow circle of his family to encompass other human beings in need of his compassionate help. This is the model which the Rav proposes should guide us whenever we confront our own pain.

The question which arises at this point is whether a response in accordance with the Jobian model has anything to do with the Halakhah. Despite the invocation of the Halakhah, it would appear that we have here a brilliant and moving proposal for dealing with suffering, but we do not see initially its relevance to or dependence on the Halakhah. However, further study will show that what we have here is one of the most clear and explicit cases in which important religious doctrine emerges from a proper understanding of the Halakhah. The Rav bases his views on his understanding of the Mishnah which teaches, "Man is obligated to bless God for the evil which befalls him, just as he is obligated to bless God for the good that befalls him."¹⁶ The point of this halakhic prescription requires explication.

We need first to understand what the significance of *berakhah* is. For this purpose we must grasp a principle which is deeply rooted in the Rav's halakhic analysis. In the act of doing a mitzvah there are, according to him, two elements. The first is the *pe'ulat ha-mitzvah*, that is the purely technical performance of the act which is required. I am obligated to put on *tefillin* each week day, and there are many rules with respect to the correct way to perform this action. The *tefillin* themselves must be constructed in a particular way, otherwise the performance is invalid. They must be put on in the way that is prescribed by law, and at a time which is prescribed by law. This and much more is included in *pe'ulat ha-mitzvah*, the technical performance of the set of actions required by the Halakhah. To perform these actions properly is a necessary condition for the fulfillment of the *mitzvah*. I do not fulfill the halakhic obligation unless I have done these actions in the prescribed way. Exalted thoughts, even the highest level of theological speculation, are no substitute for performing the required action. However, doing the act correctly is only part of what is involved in fulfilling a divine commandment. It is a necessary condition, and it may even be counted as formally satisfactory, but it is not the totality of a proper halakhic performance.

The other element in halakhic action is what the Rav calls *kiyyum ha-mitzvah*, the appropriate internal effects of the prescribed action. The action achieves its total import as the fulfillment of a divine commandment only when it generates the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, state of mind, and inner commitment which are appropri-

ate to it. For example, the rites of *avelut* for close relatives are prescribed in careful detail, but one can hardly consider them to be true mourning if they are only an external performance without any inner feeling. It is obvious that the *kiyyum ha-mitzvah* is only achieved when there is a deep sense of loss, pain, grief, all those attitudes which one expects to accompany mourning for a loved one. Moreover, for the *kiyyum* to be complete the mourner must ask himself what this experience teaches him, what it demands of him with regard to his own life. This point is made very clearly by Maimonides in his *Code*. He sets forth at considerable length the detailed rules for the technical performance of the obligation of mourning. Every aspect of the precise ways in which the *pe'ulat ha-mitzvah* is to be done is explicated carefully. At the very end of his discussion he introduces us to what is required for *kiyyum ha'mitzvah*, the inner state without which one cannot be said to have truly mourned the dead. Excessive mourning is forbidden since it suggests an unwillingness on the part of the bereaved to accept the divine judgment and to recognize that death is an inescapable aspect of the order of the world in which we live. Excessive mourning is, in a sense, a denial of God, and might be construed as nullifying the effectiveness of the technical performance of the mitzvah. On the other hand, "Whoever fails to mourn in the way which our sages commanded is cruel and unfeeling." True mourning, i.e., the *kiyyum ha-mitzvah*, says the Rambam, is expressed not only in the performance of the external rites, not only in the sorrow which is experienced, but in addition the mourner should see his loss as a challenge to his own life. "He should be overcome by fear and anxiety, which should, in turn, lead him to examine carefully his own deeds, and this should be followed by *teshuvah*, repentance."¹⁷ It is fairly easy in the case of such halakhic obligations as mourning or rejoicing to see that the technical performance is incomplete if it does not generate an inner state of mind. It is less obvious in the case of many other *mitzvot* that there is anything more required than the pure technical performance. There may well be some commandments which we fulfill completely and satisfactorily just by doing the prescribed action in the prescribed manner. What the Rav has taught us in his explication of the Halakhah is that this is the exceptional, rather than the normal standard for the true fulfillment of a *mitzvah*.

Let us turn now to the rule of the Mishnah which requires us to bless God for the evil which befalls us as well as for the good. The rules for the technical performance of this obligation are clear enough. We are commanded to recite prescribed liturgical formulas on specified occasions of joy or sorrow. This, however, is incomplete unless it is accompanied or followed by the *kiyyum ha-mitzvah*, a

