



## Journal of Religion & Culture

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*Halakhah, Habitus, and Embodied Theology in Judaism*

Shonkoff, Sam Berrin.

Journal of Religion and Culture, vol. 23 (2012). 15-37p.

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The *Journal of Religion and Culture* is a peer-reviewed journal published by the graduate students of the Department of Religion at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.

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# We Shall Do and We Shall Understand: *Halakhah, Habitus, and Embodied Theology in Judaism*

Sam Berrin Shonkoff

## INTRODUCTION

Does theology play a major role in Judaism? Is it an important value in the Jewish religion to believe in God? If so, then who or what is this God? There has been widespread disagreement amongst Jewish scholars and practitioners alike with regard to these questions. Many claim that theology is not at all an essential ingredient in Judaism.<sup>1</sup> While the Bible undeniably contains abundant discourse about God, one struggles to make coherent sense out of all the contradictory statements and images.<sup>2</sup> The same can be said for Talmud and Midrash; as one contemporary scholar writes, “Of all the presences in rabbinic literature, God’s is surely the hardest to pin down. A ubiquitous figure, He defies easy categorization or simple definition” (Stern 1992, 151). The history of medieval and modern Jewish thought has been no less saturated with conflicting, dramatically disparate perspectives on the Divine. One could hardly expect all Jews to embrace a common credo. Even if faith in the reality of God were a crucial component of Jewish religiosity, the content of what one ought to believe would remain nonetheless vague.

This obscurity of the Divine has been a leitmotif in Jewish theology and has perpetuated tensions and ambiguities therein. While Maimonides (1135-1204) did enumerate Judaism’s thirteen articles of faith, and this list even penetrated Jewish liturgy,<sup>3</sup> it has constantly been contested and never attained normative status.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this tension between theological speculation and radical incomprehension was even present within Maimonides’ own writings:

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1. For example, see Ford 2005; and Jacobs and Umansky 2007.

2. Spinoza was one of the earliest biblical critics to draw attention to the fact that Scripture is fraught with internal contradictions, and this finding has proven to be an indispensable tool for modern biblical criticism, see Spinoza 2007, 97-129.

3. Maimonides’ thirteen articles of faith are summarized in the medieval liturgical hymns *Ani Maamin* (“I believe”) and *Yigdal* (“Exalted”), which are recited daily in many Jewish communities. According to the *Shulkhan Arukh* (arguably the most authoritative and comprehensive summary of halakhah), the famous sixteenth-century kabbalist, Isaac Luria, removed *Yigdal* from his prayerbook. Perhaps more significant for our discussion, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik expressed disapproval of the fact that *Yigdal* suggests a divide between faith and practice in Jewish theology, see Ziegler 2007, 27-28.

4. For a famous rejection of its normative status in Jewish tradition, see Mendelssohn 1983, 100-101.

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On the one hand, Maimonides ruled that the knowledge of God is the first among the 613 commandments...On the other hand, he maintained the doctrine of negative attributes, which denies all possibility of knowing God. On the one hand, Maimonides designated the knowledge of the Creator as the guiding criteria for man, as his ultimate end. On the other hand, Maimonides held the view that knowledge of God is not in the realm of human cognition (Soloveitchik 1983, 11).

Thus, even Maimonides, perhaps the most prominent theologian in the history of Jewish thought, did not ultimately provide a succinct theology for Jews to collectively profess.

Furthermore, it is unclear whether Jewish law actually *commands* faith in God. The notion that Judaism does not require specific beliefs was widely emphasized in modern Western Europe, where Jews sought emancipation in Christian states. Moses Mendelssohn, the dominant philosopher of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), famously claimed,

Among all the prescriptions and ordinances of the Mosaic Law, there is not a single one which says: *You shall believe or not believe*. They all say: *You shall do or not do*. Faith is not commanded...Hence ancient Judaism has no symbolic books, *no articles of faith*. No one has to swear to symbols or subscribe, by oath, to certain articles of faith. Indeed, we have no conception at all of what are called *religious oaths*; and according to the spirit of true Judaism, we must hold them to be inadmissible (Mendelssohn 1983, 100).

Although Mendelssohn's emphasis on Judaism's lack of dogma reflects aspects of his own political agenda, his claims are nonetheless significant; while they are certainly debatable, they are rooted in Jewish canonical sources, and they have significantly influenced modern Jewish thought through the present day.<sup>5</sup> It is sufficient to say that the theological dimension of Judaism has been, and continues to be, an open question.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Gershom Scholem and Ismar Schorsch have documented ways in which *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the nineteenth century academic movement that emerged in the wake of the *Haskalah*, promoted an approach to Jewish studies that stripped Judaism of all dogmas and so-called irrational features, see Schorsch 1994, 182, 195, 267, 283; and Scholem 1997, 51-71. Cass Fisher claims that such mitigations of the role of theology in Judaism—particularly in rabbinic literature—have outlasted their political utility and appear in the works of later Jewish scholars such as Solomon Schechter, Max Kadushin, Ephraim Urbach, and David Stern, see Fisher 2010, 203-204. Fisher maintains that rabbinic theology is more earnest (i.e. not merely “homiletical”) than many modern scholars care to admit.

6. One cannot deny, however, that significant voices in Jewish tradition have indeed affirmed that faith in God is an essential element of Jewish religiosity. In his *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 1:1, Maimonides claims, “The foundation of foundations and the pillar of all sciences is to know that there is a prime being...and this knowledge is a positive commandment” (Soloveitchik 1983, 11; Cf. Maimonides 1993). Heschel points out, “According to Maimonides, [Yehudah] Halevi, Nahmanides and others, the first words of the Decalogue contain the command to believe in the existence of God” (Heschel 1983, 335 n. 41). My paper does not seek to ignore these voices but rather to acknowledge that there are also other conflicting voices in Jewish tradition that challenge the indispensability of faith in God and downplay theological discourse.

In an age that so commonly conceives of religion in terms of the Durkheimian dichotomy of beliefs and rites, the very identity of a Jewish *religion* seems to hang on this problem of Jewish theology. Moreover, Durkheim suggests that shared beliefs constitute an essential element for the continuity and unity of a religious people,

Religious beliefs proper are always held by a defined collectivity that professes them and practises the rites that go with them. These beliefs are not only embraced by all the members of this collectivity as individuals, they belong to the group and unite it. The individuals who make up this group feel bound to one another by their common beliefs (Durkheim 2001, 42).<sup>7</sup>

Of course, long-term communal continuity, despite grave obstacles such as persecution and geographical dispersion, has been one of the defining characteristics of the Jewish people. Is it possible that Jews have done all this without shared religious beliefs, in the absence of a clear theology? Alternatively, is it possible that our working definition of theology is too narrow? Perhaps we must critically re-examine the borders of theology.<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, I propose that Jewish theology has been so elusive—particularly in the modern era—not because it is absent, but precisely because it defies the salient categories of modern conceptions of theology. Judaism does, indeed, have a strong theological dimension, but it remains concealed as long as one’s definition of theology is constrained within the horizons of *logos* (word, reason, speech). Recent scholarship on paradigms of embodiment and the body as a site of subjectivity have contributed immensely to the field of religious studies, but they have not yet sufficiently expanded our definition of theology and, thus, the notion of Jewish theology remains obscure.

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7. It is interesting to note that Durkheim himself was Jewish, and his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were rabbis. Deborah Dash Moore argues that Durkheim’s perspective on religion in *The Elementary Forms* reflects his identity and experience as a French Jew. Although Durkheim clearly distinguishes between beliefs and rites, Moore notes that his emphasis on the centrality of rites may relate to his Jewish intellectual heritage. “In Jewish tradition, belief is always less important than action. Even during the Middle Ages when Jewish philosophy flourished and with it a concern for dogma arose, correct action superceded the importance of proper belief; indeed, the former nourished the latter; Durkheim argues that especially for a believer, ‘the real function of religion is not to make us think . . . but rather, it is to make us act’” (Moore 1986, 295). While Durkheim’s emphasis on the centrality of rites in religion may reflect his Jewishness, my paper suggests that he does not go far enough, if he does indeed have Judaism in mind (which is certainly debatable). The rites-beliefs dualism itself fails to appreciate a crucial principle of *halakhah*, namely that theology, which is generally constrained within the category of “beliefs”, may actually be embodied in “rites.”

8. The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who associated faith not with dogmas but with the courage to embrace ultimate concerns and thereby articulated a subversive and expansive definition of faith, wrote, “That which is based on an ultimate concern is not exposed to destruction by preliminary concerns and the lack of their fulfillment. The most astonishing proof of this assertion is the history of the Jews. They are, in the history of mankind, the document of the ultimate and unconditional character of faith” (Tillich 1965, 119). In what follows, I will not adopt Tillich’s definition of faith, but I will similarly expand the conventional definition in a way that elucidates the element of faith in Jewish religiosity.

Jewish theology is not based on words or concepts as much as on actions and matters of spatiality. In contradistinction to the Durkheimian beliefs-rites dualism, I contend that *halakhah* (literally “the way”)—the corpus of normative Jewish practice—is the foundation of Jewish theology.<sup>9</sup>

According to Midrash, the Israelite declaration at Mount Sinai, *Naaseh v'nishma*, “We shall do and we shall hear,” teaches that commitment to *halakhah* precedes understanding.<sup>10</sup> I propose that this is not only a statement about religious devotion but also about Jewish theology: one encounters and articulates God primarily through *maaseh*, embodied action.

We cannot fairly discuss *halakhah* without reference to a particular theoretical framework,<sup>11</sup> so I will focus on that of Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the preeminent intellectual of twentieth-century Modern Orthodoxy.<sup>12</sup> Soloveitchik envisages “halakhic man” as one who devotes himself fully to the application of Jewish law, without unnecessary “subjectivist,” mystical, or theoretical elements. Soloveitchik implores Jews to embody theology rather than ruminate on it. He also claims that *halakhah* is the ultimate “objectification” of deeply subjective and preconceptual religious stirrings.

I will explore Soloveitchik’s conception of *halakhah* in relation to Bourdieu’s conception of *habitus*—generally defined as systems of durable, transposable, and largely unconscious dispositions that individuals exhibit in communal contexts and that reflect the objective conditions in which those individuals exist (Bourdieu 2010, 77). Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* has significantly influenced the field of

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9. It is crucial to note that one cannot justifiably identify *halakhah* as the foundation of Jewish theology for all modern denominations, such as Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism. Such “liberal” movements have historically questioned and challenged the authoritative, obligatory nature of *halakhah* and have thereby affirmed the presence of other foundational theological principles in Judaism. Without any intention to undermine liberal denominations, this paper regards those relatively recent religious movements as theologically anomalous in the broader span of the history of Judaism, that is, “rabbinic Judaism” that has incorporated talmudic discourse into its religious sphere. The role that *halakhah* continues to play in liberal Jewish theologies is a worthwhile, yet separate study from this one.

10. *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's* commentary on Exodus 24:7 begins with the question of why the Israelites promise to *act upon* commandments before they promise to *hear* what the commandments are — would it not make more sense for them to reverse the order of promises and say *Nishma v'naaseh*, “We shall hear and we shall do”? The Midrash concludes that, in the realm of the divine commandments (*mitzvot*), understanding only arises by means of action see TB S 88a; and Heschel 1983, 281-282.

11. Even for those various sects and thinkers who more or less follow the same *halakhic* system of Rabbinic Judaism, conceptions of the meaning, purpose, and impact of those practices nonetheless vary significantly. For example, compare the disparate philosophies of Jewish practice among Hillel and Shammai, Maimonides and Isaac Luria, Nachman of Bratslav and the Gaon of Vilna. While this paper will include some of my own general comments and observations about *halakhah*, one must recognize that the psychological and theological textures of *halakhah* metamorphose under different human gazes.

12. For a good introduction to Soloveitchik’s thought, see Singer and Sokol 1982, 227-272. For an analysis of Soloveitchik’s concept of *halakhah*, particularly in his early works, see Schwartz 2007.

religious studies,<sup>13</sup> but it has not yet been adequately applied to the study of normative Jewish practice. Correlations between *halakhah* and *habitus* shed a great deal of light on Jewish law as embodied theology. Both *habitus* and *halakhah* presuppose that (1) concrete movements and actions of practice manifest communal beliefs, values, and principles; (2) practice has a quality of ineffability; and (3) in order to understand a practice, one must first and foremost analyze its objective structures, as opposed to its subjective underpinnings. After a critical examination of Bourdieu's conception of *habitus* and an exploration of commonalities between *habitus* and *halakhah*, this paper will then consider some fundamental differences between them, which largely relate to the genesis, cultivation and psychology of embodied practice. These differences will also serve to highlight distinctive theological dimensions of *halakhah*.

### I. BOURDIEU'S CONCEPTION OF *HABITUS*

Let us examine Bourdieu's understanding of *habitus* with respect to the three characteristics enumerated above. First, he maintains that the tangible structures and corporeal movements that comprise the *habitus* express and propagate a community's ethical, sociopolitical, and aesthetic norms. Indeed, Bourdieu locates psychological phenomena and predilections in the "socially informed body,"

With its tastes and distastes, its compulsions and repulsions, with, in a word, all its *senses*, that is to say, not only the traditional five senses—which never escape the structuring action of social determinisms—but also the sense of necessity and the sense of duty, the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of balance and the sense of beauty, common sense and the sense of the sacred, tactical sense and the sense of responsibility, business sense and the sense of propriety, the sense of humour and the sense of absurdity, moral sense and the sense of practicality, and so on (Bourdieu, 124).

Bourdieu seeks to radically expand our sense of the body's cultural and psychological significance. He dissolves the mind-body dualism, and asserts that one's physical self contains even the most seemingly non-physical aspects of one's being. Furthermore, he deconstructs the subject-object duality through the unifying principle of practice. He claims that "the mental structures which construct the world of objects are constructed in the practice of a world of objects constructed according to the same structures. The mind born of the world of objects does not rise as a subjectivity confronting an objectivity" (91). One's whole world is seamlessly connected to her own consciousness, sense of self, life, and body. According to Bourdieu, from the moment we are born until the day we die, we move through our environments and constantly internalize

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13. For example, Thomas J. Csordas' effectively applies a "paradigm of embodiment" to the study of religious practices, see Csordas 2001; and Csordas 1990.



information about the way things are, and “the ‘book’ from which the children learn their vision of the world is read with the body, in and through the movements and displacements which make the space within which they are enacted as much as they are made by it” (90). The transmission of culture and the development of self occur through embodied practice. Bourdieu regards the “body as memory” (94).

Moreover, he maintains that such complex emotional, psychological, and ethical facets of one’s character are present in the most subtle, simple movements. This is, in part, what makes the transposition of *habitus* so thorough and profound. He says,

The values given body [is] *made* body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as “stand up straight” or “don’t hold your knife in your left hand” (94).

Concrete commandments that appear to be arbitrary or insignificant prove to instill deeply rooted and far-reaching values in a person’s being. It makes no difference whether or not the teacher or pupil is aware of their respective roles or techniques. Indeed, it is precisely the inscrutability of this worldview-transmission that makes it so powerful and penetrating. Bourdieu continues,

The whole trick of pedagogic reason lies precisely in the way it extorts the essential while seeming to demand the insignificant: in obtaining the respect for form and forms of respect which constitute the most visible and at the same time the best-hidden (because most “natural”) manifestation of submission to the established order... (94-95).

Thus, the *habitus*—that infinitely diversified “matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions” (83) — is born through concrete movements and actions, postures and gestures, “a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and (how could it be otherwise?) a certain subjective experience” (87).

A second characteristic of *habitus* is its quality of ineffability. We have already seen how it is transposed along pathways of embodiment that are subtle and largely unconscious. Bourdieu draws attention to the fact that this guarantees a lack of conceptual comprehension. This “pure practice without theory” (Durkheim 1956, 101) remains firmly enmeshed in the somatic fibers of human life, “without attaining the level of discourse” (87). Thus, an individual is unable to adequately articulate the subjective, abstract underpinnings of her embodied *habitus*.

The principles embodied [*sic*] in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body (94).

Thus, one cannot even be fully aware of the superficialities of her own *habitus*.

The explanation agents may provide of their own practice, thanks to a quasi theoretical reflection on their practice, conceals, even from their own eyes, the true nature of their practical mastery, i.e. that it is *learned ignorance* (*docta ignorantia*), a mode of practical knowledge not comprising knowledge of its own principles (19).

*Habitus* is, by definition, so all-encompassing and self-saturating that one cannot expect to notice all the particularities that comprise it. *Habitus*, to a large degree, remains perpetually unfathomable to the individual who embodies it. Like “the work of art [it] always contains something *ineffable*...something which communicates, so to speak, from body to body, i.e. on the hither side of words or concepts, and which pleases (or displeases) without concepts”(2). Just as the artist cannot possibly explain the totality of her own painting, an individual cannot possibly explain the totality of her own *habitus*.

This is also true for the outside observer, and as a social scientist, this is crucial for Bourdieu’s work. The anthropologist who strives to understand another community’s way of life is bound to produce an incomplete account, at best. One must appreciate, “the distance between learned reconstruction of the native world and the native experience of that world, an experience which finds expression only in the silences, ellipses, and lacunae of the language of familiarity”(18). The subtle intricacies of human interaction, and all the principles, values, and tastes that underlie such verbal and nonverbal social dynamics, are ultimately impossible to summarize. An abyss lies between a *habitus, per se*, and one’s description or explanation of that *habitus*. Even if a researcher (or casual people-watcher, for that matter) were to produce a fairly accurate, systematic description of a community’s practice, it would nonetheless resemble, “a ‘mechanical’ model which would at best be to the man of honour’s regulated improvisation what an etiquette handbook is to the art of living or a harmony treatise to musical composition”(11). One cannot comprehend a *habitus* without personally embodying it within the context of the community, and even then, as we have seen, an exhaustive understanding is still beyond human grasp or at least incommunicable.

In part, this ineffability is a result of the fact that *habitus* is not a fixed, static system.<sup>14</sup> It is not rooted in unchanging rules or laws. It involves improvisation and strategy – not necessarily unconsciously, but nonetheless spontaneous. Bourdieu insists that in order to maximally understand a *habitus*, one must appreciate the fact that “it unfolds in time” with its “rhythm, its orientation, its irreversibility” (Bourdieu 2010, 9; Cf. 72-73). This dynamic quality makes the *habitus* difficult to put into words and also

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15. In this respect, *habitus* clearly differs significantly from *halakhah*. I discuss this contrast, among others, in part III of this paper.



accounts for the fact that there will always be seemingly unexplainable diversity within a single community.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, one who wishes to actually gain insight into a culture's general *Weltanschauung* and way of life has no choice but to begin with examinations of specific, concrete events as they occur in time. In other words, one must shift her focus from the *opus operatum* to the *modus operandi* (72).

This methodological concern relates to a third salient characteristic of *habitus*: in order to gain understanding of a practice, one must first and foremost analyze its objective structures. The primacy that Bourdieu's proposed methodology attributes to observations of concrete, spatiotemporal events is one of the defining features of his anthropology, which differentiates his approach from those of materialists, functionalists, and structuralists.

In order to escape the *realism of the structure*, which hypostatizes systems of objective relations by converting them into totalities already constituted outside of individual history and group history, it is necessary to pass from the *opus operatum* to the *modus operandi*, from statistical regularity or algebraic structure to the principle of the production of this observed order, and to construct the theory of practice, or, more precisely, the theory of the mode of generation of practices (72).

While there is a tendency in the social sciences to apply *a priori* notions about meaning, signification, psychological motivations, etc. to the observation of cultural practices, Bourdieu insists that researchers must abandon their own preconceived notions and simply try to *observe* behavior (with an awareness that even such observations will inevitably result in limited understandings). In other words, Bourdieu seeks to reverse the structural-functionalist order of operations: one can ascertain the subjective underpinnings and effects (*opus operatum*) of various practices prior to phenomenological examinations of the practices themselves as they unfold in time (*modus operandi*).

Bourdieu wishes to mitigate our faith in theory and reduce our need for comprehensive explanations. In this vein, he criticizes,

The intellectualist tendency inherent in the objectivist approach to practices. This academicism of the social "art" of living which, having extracted from the *opus operatum* the supposed principles of its production, sets them up as norms explicitly governing practices (with phrases like "good form requires...", "custom demands...", etc.) takes

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16. For instance, Bourdieu acknowledges that it is virtually impossible to discern a general set of principles that govern all marriages within a certain community—there will always be occurrences that appear to contradict common conduct, but that may very well make sense in a fluid, temporal and inscrutable scheme. "Marriages which are identical as regards genealogy alone may thus have different, even opposite, meanings and functions, depending on the strategies in which they are involved. These can only be grasped by means of a reconstruction of the entire system of relationships between the two associated groups and of the state of these relationships *at a given point in time*" (Bourdieu 2010, 48).

away understanding of the logic of practice in the very movement in which it tries to offer it (19).

One should not try to identify frameworks or systems of meaning for the *habitus* before seriously examining the individual actions that comprise the *habitus*. If one prematurely ruminates on the sources, rationales, and impacts of practices, then she will fail to understand the practices themselves—and, ironically, she will also fail to understand those subjective backdrops in question. In fact, Bourdieu asserts that such excessive theorizing will actually cause the inquirer to overlook some of the most concrete aspects of practice. He explains, “when the anthropologist treats native kinship terminology as a closed, coherent system of purely logical relationships...he prohibits himself from apprehending the different practical functions of the kinship terms and relations which he unwittingly brackets” (37).

These three elements of Bourdieu’s conception of *habitus* – embodied actions express and transmit complex constellations of sociopolitical, ethical, and aesthetic values—shed new light on *halakhah* and enable us to gain fresh perspectives on the theological dimensions of Jewish religiosity.

## II. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN *HABITUS* AND *HALAKHAH*

While Bourdieu maintains that the embodied actions of the *habitus* express and propagate vast arrays of that community’s social, ethical, and aesthetic values, Soloveitchik similarly suggests that halakhic action is the objectification of human subjectivity.<sup>16</sup> The following passage is lengthy, but nowhere else does Soloveitchik more vividly articulate the flow of content from inner subjectivity to religious normativity.

To illustrate, we may analyze the triad in the God-man relation: first, the subjective, private finitude-infinity tension; second, the objective normative outlook; and third, the full concrete realization in external and psychophysical acts. A subjective God-man relation implies various contradictory states. These are wrath and love, remoteness and immanence, repulsion and fascination (on the part of divinity), tremor and serenity, depression and rapture, flight and return (on the part of man), etc. This subjective attitude in man is in turn reflected either in the form of logico-cognitive judgments or in ethico-religious norms, e.g., God exists; He is omniscient; He is omnipresent; He is omnipotent; He is merciful; He is vengeful; He is the Creator, etc. You shall love God; you shall fear Him; you shall worship Him; you shall love your fellowman, etc. These judgments and norms lying in the immediate proximity of the psychophysical threshold tend to externalize themselves. They find their concrete expression in articles of faith, in prayers, in physical acts of worship, and in other practices and observances, all of which lie in the external world. Ostensibly, religion, though flowing in the deepest subliminal

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17. For an intriguing examination of the relationship between human subjectivity and religious normativity in Soloveitchik’s thought, see Cohen 2008, 175-185.

ego-strata, is in eternal quest for spatialization and corporeal manifestation (Soloveitchik 1986, 68-69).

Thus, there is a natural and continuous current that runs from the most amorphous and chaotic recesses of human subjectivity to the most solid and objectified forms of ethico-religious life. This is how religious rituals are born.<sup>17</sup>

For Soloveitchik, *halakhah* is the most complete crystallization of those subjective depths known to humankind. He says, that “objectification reaches its highest expression in the Halakhah” (1986, 85; Cf. 99). Every seemingly minute detail of every commandment moves the observant Jew to engage in actions that embody the turbulent animations of her heart and soul.

The fundamental tendency of the Halakhah is to translate the qualitative features of religious subjectivity – the content of religious man’s consciousness, which surges and swells like the waves of the sea, then pounds against the shore of reality, there to shatter and break – into firm and well-established quantities “like nails well fastened” (Eccles. 12:11) that no storm can uproot from their place (Soloveitchik 1983, 57).

Even Jewish practices that pertain to apparently mundane issues such as hand washing, not wearing a garment made of wool and linen (Deut. 22:11) – “the red cow, the heifer whose neck is to be broken, leprosy, and similar issues” (Soloveitchik 1983, 39) – have their roots in various spiritual, emotional and psychological depths.<sup>18</sup> Thus, like Bourdieu, Soloveitchik mitigates the boundary between subjective and objective. What appears to be extremely objective behavior actually springs from subjectivity; what appears to be subjective, fleeting emotions becomes solidified in objective, concrete commandments. “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” (1986, 65). While the typical *homo religiosus*<sup>19</sup> “prefers the spirit to the body, the soul to its mortal frame, as the main actor in the religious drama,” halakhic man does not recognize such a duality and prefers the whole, psychosomatic individual (1983, 94). For Soloveitchik, the concrete practices of *halakhah* embody all the elements of the human being.

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18. It is crucial to note, however, that Soloveitchik actively discourages his readers from applying this philosophy of ritual to the creation of new rituals, see Soloveitchik 1986, 89.

19. Jonah Steinberg writes, “Explicit, verbal ideology is far from being the only vehicle of meaning in religious culture. Messages concerning the relative position and worth of human beings in the religious context may be encoded in, among other vectors, patterns of physical dispositions and relations” (Steinberg 1997, 26).

20. This is a term that Soloveitchik uses throughout *Halakhic Man* to refer to what he considers to be the typical, non-halakhic religious individual. Such a *homo religiosus* is drawn to the ineffable unknown and is saturated with inner contradictions and antinomies, as portrayed by modern theologians such as Soren Kierkegaard, Rudolph Otto and Karl Barth, see Soloveitchik 1983, 3-5; 139, n. 4.

Significantly, for our purposes, Soloveitchik identifies *halakhah's* subjective undercurrents with God. In most statements he makes about the origins of *halakhah*, Soloveitchik seems to blur the boundary between human subjectivity and divine creativity, but he nonetheless holds that *halakhah* comes from the Divine. For instance, he writes, "The Halakhah, which *was given to us from Sinai*, is the objectification of religion in clear and determinate forms, in precise and authoritative laws, and in definite principles. It *translates subjectivity into objectivity*, the amorphous flow of religious experience into a fixed pattern of lawfulness" (1983, 59). In this passage, Soloveitchik affirms both that the Jewish people passively received the *halakhah* at the Mount Sinai revelation, and that *halakhah* springs from subjectivity. He seems to imply that there is divinity in the deepest levels of human consciousness. Thus, "halakhic man does not experience any consciousness of compulsion accompanying the norm [halakhah]. Rather, it seems to him as though he discovered the norm in his innermost self, as though it was not just a commandment that had been imposed upon him, but an existential law of his very being" (1983, 65). One who observes halakhic normativity experiences, "a blending of the obligation with self-consciousness, a merging of the norm with the individual, and a union of an outside command with the inner will and conscience of man" (65).

For Soloveitchik, this theological dimension of *halakhah* is not confined to the genetic origins of *halakhah*.<sup>20</sup> He also asserts that one actually encounters God through halakhic action, and, for Soloveitchik, this radical attribution of divinity to such embodied, earthly activity differentiates Jewish theology from that of most other religions.

When [halakhic man's] soul yearns for God, he immerses himself in reality, plunges, with his entire being, into the very midst of concrete existence, and petitions God to descend upon the mountain and to dwell within our reality, with all its laws and principles. *Homo religiosus* ascends to God; God, however, descends to halakhic man. The latter desires not to transform finitude into infinity but rather infinity into finitude (1986, 45).<sup>21</sup>

Soloveitchik considers this notion that God is present in the objective structures of *halakhah* to be one of the most indispensable religious principles.<sup>22</sup> He rejects the notion

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21. In fact, Soloveitchik does not consider the theological origins of *halakhah* to be the most important theological dimension of *halakhah*. "The truth of the matter is that the genetic background of a certain method does not in the least affect its cogency and validity" (Soloveitchik 1986, 87).

22. On the same page, Soloveitchik writes, "When halakhic man pines for God, he does not venture to rise up to Him but rather strives to bring down His divine presence into the midst of our concrete world" (Soloveitchik 1986, 45).

23. Soloveitchik asserts that "religious subjectivism" – which he associates with "liberal religion," including liberal denominations of Judaism – not only proves to be ineffective for the cultivation of holiness and the facilitation of human-divine encounters but also proves to be sociopolitically deleterious

that one can encounter the Divine in fleeting fantasies and feelings. “Any encounter with God, if it is to redeem man, must be crystallized and objectified in a normative ethico-moral message” (Soloveitchik 2006, 59). Although from an outside perspective the halakhic Jew may not appear to commonly invoke God while engaged in seemingly mundane normative acts, Soloveitchik insists that Jewish practice cultivates unspoken intimacy between God and human beings. Halakhic man, “communicates with his Creator, not beyond the bounds of finitude, not in a holy, transcendent realm enwrapped in mystery, but rather in the very midst of the world and the fullness thereof” (Soloveitchik 1983, 37). “The Halakhah, the Judaism that is faithful to itself...brings the Divine Presence into the midst of empirical reality” (1983, 94-95). One both catalyzes and experiences this contraction (*tzimtzum*)<sup>23</sup> of God into spatiotemporal reality through embodied action. “Transcendence becomes embodied in man’s deeds, deeds that are shaped by the lawful physical order of which man is a part”(45-46). Thus, the way to gain insight into the nature of the Divine is not through cerebral speculations, but through grounded rituals. “Judaism does not direct its glance upward but downward” (92). One may not commonly hear the traditional Jew theologize, but an awareness of God (or at least the thirst for such an awareness) nonetheless forms the core of her practice. Thus, Soloveitchik agrees with Bourdieu that a plethora of subjective content can be nonverbally fixed within embodied practice—content that is undetectable to outside observers and often even to the actors themselves.

It follows from his preference for embodied ritual over cerebral speculation that Soloveitchik is often critical of discourse about God. In a sense, he is an anti-theology theologian, and he regards *halakhah* as the ideal religious system to direct adherents to the Divine without plaguing them with misleading reflections on mysterious matters. He claims that “the Halakhah does not concern itself with metaphysical mysteries. Nor does it inquire into that which is too remote for it regarding the creation of the universe” (1983, 49). Understandably, Soloveitchik generally opposes Kabbalah. “The mystics discern in our Torah divine mysteries, esoteric teachings, the secrets of creation, and the *Merkabah* [the chariot of Ezekiel’s prophecy]; the halakhic sages discern in it basic *halakhot*, practical principles, laws, directives, and statutes” (100). Since “God, whom no thought can grasp” (45-46), is beyond understanding, it is more appropriate and illuminating for the spiritual seeker to pore over nonverbal rituals than verbose

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inasmuch as it leads to esotericism, elitism, and disinterest in ethical matters. While this paper focuses more on Soloveitchik’s theological reasons for renouncing religious subjectivism, his sociopolitical reasons are no less significant in his own work, see Soloveitchik 1983, 42-43, 57-59; 1986, 78-81.

24. Soloveitchik rejects the kabbalistic notion of *tzimtzum* that holds that God’s presence withdraws, or “contracts” in order to create empty space wherein the world can exist. Soloveitchik argues, rather, that the real *tzimtzum* is the miraculous contraction of the infinite Divine presence into the finitude of earthly life, and that the *halakhah* facilitates this divine contraction, see Soloveitchik 1983, 48-51.



theologies; “therefore, when a person knows and grasps with his intellect...the law as set forth in the Mishnah, Gemara, or Codes, he thereby comprehends, grasps, and encompasses with his intellect the will and wisdom of the Holy One, blessed be He, whom no thought can grasp, etc.”(Schneur Zalman of Liada, *Likkutei Amarim* I:5; Soloveitchik 1983, 26).

The Babylonian Talmud presents a famous discussion about whether study (*talmud*) or action (*maaseh*) is more important (TB K 40b). In essence, this is about the relationship between thought and practice in the realm of religion. The final resolution reads, “Great is study, for study leads to action.” This harmonizing solution stresses the importance of theology, but only inasmuch as it leads to concrete ritual observance. Moreover, it teaches that theology is embedded—or embodied, as it were—in religious action. While Bourdieu holds that communal values and principles are embodied in the *habitus*, Soloveitchik holds that theological values and principles are embodied in the *halakhah*.<sup>24</sup>

As Bourdieu asserts that *habitus* has qualities of ineffability; Soloveitchik asserts the same about *halakhah*. First, *halakhah* is ineffable with regard to its origins. While Soloveitchik posits that religious norms spring from subjective depths,<sup>25</sup> he maintains that those depths are ultimately beyond intellectual understanding.<sup>26</sup> One who mindfully observes the commandments may gain insight into underlying subjective layers, but there will always be more, increasingly elusive layers deeper down in the genetic history.

We delve persistently into the enigmatic, subjective mists. Yet, however far the regressive movement continues, we are never quite able to fathom subjectivity. What we call subjectivity is only a surface reproduction which still needs exploration. An infinite regression takes place along the stationary track left behind the objectifying “logos.” The destination is always at an infinite distance (Soloveitchik 1986, 73).

In short, there will always be unfathomable aspects of *halakhah*'s origins. Perhaps this is where human subjectivity and God begin to converge for Soloveitchik. “It is therefore impossible to discover final causation in the spiritual realm. Any subjective stage to

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25. It is significant for our purposes that the *Shulkhan Arukh*, which is the most authoritative, comprehensive summary of *halakhah*, was composed by Joseph Karo, a sixteenth century kabbalist from Tsfat. While the *Shulkhan Arukh* is not explicitly or outwardly a theological work, Karo was a key player in one of the most intensely and graphically theological movements in Jewish history. Therefore, one may regard the *Shulkhan Arukh* as a deeply theological work in the form of a concretely halakhic guide.

26. As noted above, Soloveitchik associates those subjective depths with divine creativity.

27. It is important to note that while Bourdieu does recognize the mysteriousness of the origins of specific practices in the *habitus*, he does not necessarily conclude that they are beyond human comprehension. For Bourdieu, retroactive analyses of the *modus operandi* can in fact reveal the *opus operatum*. This is not the case for Soloveitchik's understanding of *halakhah* though, as we shall now see.



which we may point with satisfaction can never be considered ultimate. We may always proceed further and discover yet a deeper stratum of subjectivity" (Soloveitchik 1986, 73). This mysteriousness of the source of *halakhah* is, for Soloveitchik, inextricably connected to the infinite mysteriousness of God.

Second, *halakhah* is ineffable with regard to its meaning and signification. The notion that the reasons for the commandments (*taamei hamitzvot*) are beyond understanding has a long history in Jewish tradition. In the fifth century, Midrash Tanhumah featured a commentary on Jewish menstrual laws which claimed that "only words of Torah," as opposed to literally harmful substances, separate husband and wife during menstruation (Midrash Tanhumah, Ki Tisa 2:2; Cf. Steinberg 1997, 15). This midrash implies that the menstrual laws themselves are incomprehensible and one should not try to discern the *taamei hamitzvot*. Approximately six centuries later, Maimonides designated *chukim* (statutes) as those God-given laws whose cause "is hidden from us either because of the incapacity of our intellects or the deficiency of our knowledge" (Maimonides, *Guide*, III:26, 507). In 1783, Mendelssohn connected religious doctrines with *knowing* (because they are eternal truths, accessible to the human intellect) and religious commandments with *believing* (because they are revealed, or historical truths, to be accepted on faith) (Mendelssohn, 101-102). In other words, Mendelssohn maintained that *halakhah* (more than theological discourse) transcends the limits of rational thought.

Soloveitchik upholds and underscores this tradition of not-knowing in the realm of halakhic meaning.

Indeed, many halakhic authorities have even sanctioned, after the fact, a mechanical performance of a commandment, one lacking in intention...And even according to those authorities who declare that commandments do require intention, the Halakhah does not require of us any mystical, esoteric intentions directed toward a *mundus absconditus*, a hidden world, but only the clear, plain thought to fulfill via this particular act such and such a commandment. Heaps upon heaps of mystical intentions and unifications have been piled up by the mystics to lead man's consciousness to hidden worlds; halakhic man knows nothing, however, about such mysteries (Soloveitchik 1983, 59-60).

Soloveitchik endorses a sort of unquestioning, stoic mindfulness during the fulfillment of commandments. While he encourages his readers to reflect on the divine and psychological origins of *halakhah*, Soloveitchik also insists that such speculation is inherently limited inasmuch as God and the deepest strata of subjectivity are ineffable and inasmuch as such theoretical reflection does not actually clarify the meaning of halakhic action in the present moment. "The enumeration of causes never exhausts the eidetic substance itself. It discloses the 'what has gone before' but never the 'is' of the subject matter" (Soloveitchik 1986, 98). This is consonant with Bourdieu's appreciation

of “the distance between learned reconstruction of the native world and the native experience of that world” (Bourdieu, 18). To analyze a phenomenon from afar is not the same as analyzing it up close.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Soloveitchik rejects Freudian and Jungian reductions of religion to psychological mechanisms of projection, sublimation, and transference. Interestingly, he does not reject those reductions on the basis of inaccuracy (although he very well may consider them inaccurate) but rather on account of their *causalistic fallacy*; “The differentiation between sign and symbol is of no help towards the understanding of the religious act. Whether we reduce the sign to a known, or a symbol to an unknown phenomenon is irrelevant. Both explain but do not describe” (Soloveitchik 1986, 132). In the spirit of Bourdieu, therefore, the most one can do to understand *halakhah* is to focus on its most objective, concrete dimensions. This frontal investigation will undoubtedly shed light on the origins and meaning of Jewish practice, but ultimately, there will always be qualities of ineffability.

This leads us to our third major correlation between *habitus* and *halakhah*: Bourdieu and Soloveitchik agree that one who wishes to understand a practice must first and foremost examine its objective structures. “The starting point in any analysis of subjectivity must be the objective order,” (1986, 74) Soloveitchik writes. One must investigate the *modus operandi* before one can accurately clarify the *opus operatum*. “It is impossible to gain any insight into the subjective stream unless we have previously acquired objective aspects” (74).<sup>28</sup> As noted above, Soloveitchik promotes a methodology of reconstruction by which one reconstructs the subjective undercurrents out of the objective elements of normativity.<sup>29</sup> While this cannot generate a causal explanation of religion, it is the necessary starting point (1986, 87-88). Like Bourdieu, Soloveitchik maintains that this method can unveil myriad principles, paradigms and values that underlie the embodied practice itself.

If the philosophy of religion asks for example, how the *homo religiosus* interprets the concepts of time, space, causality, substance, ego, etc., then it would have to look into the objective series and examine norms, beliefs, articles of faith, religious texts, etc. Out of this objectified material, the philosopher of religion may glean some hints regarding the structure of the most basic religious cognitive concepts. The objective act alone may serve as a point of departure for the philosopher desirous of interpreting the religious experience.

In particular does this hold true of the Jewish religion where the process of objectification culminates in the Halakhah. We do not know of any other religion where

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28. As Wittgenstein remarks, “If I’m supposed to describe how an object looks from far off, I don’t make the description more accurate by saying what can be noticed about the object on closer inspection” (2009, §171).

29. Soloveitchik writes, “There is no direct approach to pure religious subjectivity” (1986, 81); and “Subjectivity cannot be approached directly; it must first be objectified by the ‘logos’” (1986, 75).

30. For his most succinct summary of this method of reconstruction, see Soloveitchik 1986, 62.

## We Shall Do and We Shall Understand

the process of objectification has attained such completeness as it does in the Halakhah (1986, 99).

For Soloveitchik, *halakhah* is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. Normative actions that appear to be mundane or arbitrary are the objectifications of a vast and profound matrix of psychological, philosophical, spiritual, and ethical paradigms. The scholar who wishes to gain insight into these dimensions of Jewish thought must focus her study on *halakhah* itself.

The same goes for the religious practitioner. She who wishes to encounter God must begin her spiritual journey with the earthly, objectified stuff of halakhic observance. "The path to the Absolute leads through concrete reality" (1986, 45). Through personal engagement with "the gritty realia of practical Halakhah, with an endless stream of laws, an innumerable amount of halakhot" (Soloveitchik 1983, 85), one experiences unexpected realizations and discovers novel perspectives that pertain to all aspects of life and existence.

In passing onward from the Halakhah and other objective constructs to a limitless subjective flux, we might possibly penetrate the basic structure of our religious consciousness...Problems of freedom, causality, God-man relationship, creation, and nihility would be illuminated by halakhic principles. A new light could be shed on our apprehension of reality (Soloveitchik 1986, 101).

Soloveitchik suggests that the theological dimension of Jewish religiosity is embedded within Jewish practice, in ways that one could not begin to imagine without personal observance of the commandments. Hence, *naaseh v'nishma*, we shall do, and we shall understand.<sup>30</sup>

In summary, Bourdieu's conception of *habitus* harmonizes with Soloveitchik's conception of *halakhah* insofar as both theorists hold that (1) the embodied actions of practice manifest communal beliefs, values and principles, (2) practice has qualities of ineffability, and (3) in order to begin to understand a practice, one must investigate its objective structures. These three correlations between Bourdieu and Soloveitchik serve to highlight distinct theological elements in Jewish practice: theology is embodied in halakhic action; God is ineffable and therefore *halakhah* is ineffable; one gains insight into God through analyses of the objective structures of *halakhah*.

### III. CONFLICTS BETWEEN *HABITUS* AND *HALAKHAH*

There are also significant ways in which *habitus* and *halakhah* do not harmonize, and these discordances serve to further expose theological dimensions of Jewish

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31. In common parlance, "Don't knock it till you've tried it."

religiosity. The first major conflict between *halakhah* and *habitus* pertains to the genesis and cultivation of practice. Whereas *habitus* changes over time and thus involves improvisation and spontaneity, *halakhah* emphasizes tradition and fixity. A central pillar of Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is the fact that practice is continually shaped and reshaped in accordance with ever-changing objective conditions. *Habitus* is, by definition, malleable and adaptive. "As an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others" (Bourdieu 2010, 95). Bourdieu's assertion that *habitus* changes in relation to time and space is unequivocal. As a result of this adaptability, *habitus* always "makes sense."

The habitus is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less "sensible" and "reasonable." That part of practices which remains obscure in the eyes of their own producers is the aspect by which they are objectively adjusted to other practices and to the structures of which the principle of their production is itself a product (79).

*Habitus* is ultimately circumstantial and relativistic. Those who embody it are inevitably moved "to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway refused and to love the inevitable. The very conditions of production of the ethos [are] necessity made into a virtue" (77).

Since *habitus* always changes in relation to time and place, its enactors engage in spontaneous strategizing, regardless of whether or not they are aware it. New situations call for new worldviews and unprecedented lifestyles. Decorums change as circumstances change, "without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor" (72). *Habitus* is an improvisation, "without in any way being the product of obedience to rules" (72). In truth, for Bourdieu, there is no rule but rather *strategy*, and this necessarily alters the way one studies other cultures. "To substitute *strategy* for the *rule* is to reintroduce time, with its rhythm, its orientation, its irreversibility" (9). Bourdieu himself notes, "This takes us a long way from the objectivist model of the mechanical interlocking of preregulated actions that is commonly associated with the notion of ritual" (9).<sup>31</sup> Bourdieu insists that even seemingly fixed and rigid systems of rules are, essentially, strategies in response to particular environments in space-time.

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32. Bourdieu writes, "What is called the *sense of honour* is nothing other than the cultivated disposition, inscribed in the body schema and in the schemes of thought, which enables each agent to engender all the practices consistent with the logic of challenge and riposte, and only such practices, by means of countless inventions, which the stereotyped unfolding of a ritual would in no way demand" (Bourdieu 2010, 15).

This paradigm quite obviously conflicts with the traditional Jewish understanding of *halakhah*. *Halakhah*, for all intents and purposes, does *not* change, and its proponents take pride in its constancy and resistance to opportunism. One is obligated to adhere to Jewish commandments even when they conflict with one's environment.<sup>32</sup> This is the essence of the Hebrew concept of *masorah*, tradition—a foundational concept of Jewish practice.

Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua, etc. [Avot 1:1]. This is the motto of the Halakhah. The *masorah*, the process of transmission, symbolizes the Jewish people's outlook regarding the beautiful and resplendent phenomenon of time. The chain of tradition, begun millennia ago, will continue until the end of all time...The consciousness of halakhic man, that master of the received tradition, embraces the entire company of the sages of the *masorah*. He lives in their midst, discusses and argues questions of Halakhah with them, delves into and analyzes fundamental halakhic principles in their company. All of them merge into one time experience (Soloveitchik 1983, 120).

As Soloveitchik suggests in the first sentence of this passage, the foundation of *masorah* is the notion that the Jewish people first received the *halakhah* from God. *Masorah* imbues *halakhah* with divine gravity and ensures that it will change minimally throughout the generations.<sup>33</sup> The above passage also highlights the fact that the halakhic sense of time radically diverges from that of the *habitus*. Whereas time, in the sense of a distinct present moment, is a core element in the ever-changing, strategy-based *habitus*, halakhic time emphasizes timelessness over time, the eternal over the present. *Halakhah* overshadows temporality, and it is greater than any individual's present situation.<sup>34</sup> "The experience of halakhic man is not circumscribed by his own individual past but transcends this limited realm and enters the domain of eternity. The Jewish people's all-embracing collective consciousness of time...is an integral part of the 'I' awareness of halakhic man" (Soloveitchik 1983, 117).<sup>35</sup> The sense of time that makes *habitus* intelligible makes *halakhah* absurd, and vice versa.

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33. There are, of course, certain occasions when one is obligated to prioritize safety or ethical righteousness over the fulfillment of halakhic duties, e.g. in a life-or-death situation (*pikuach nefesh*). However, such exceptions are rare.

34. Another central concept in Jewish tradition, which further underscores the unconditional adherence to *halakhah*, regardless of circumstances, is *galut*, exile. Jewish law was born in the land of Israel, a specific environment with a specific set of objective conditions. The Talmud is essentially a guidebook to instruct Jewish people about how to continue to live according to *halakhah* while in *galut*. Thus, within the language of traditional Judaism, there is language to illustrate and accentuate the sense of uprootedness and "homelessness" that accompanies halakhic observance when it conflicts with one's environment.

35. This is Soloveitchik's understanding of halakhic time. For a very different perspective, see Heschel 2005.

36. See Soloveitchik 1983, 28; 1986, 67.



Thus, in contradistinction to Bourdieu's understanding of *habitus*, *halakhah* traditionally is *not* "sensible" or "reasonable" (Bourdieu 2010, 79). It is not necessarily harmonious with one's objective life conditions, for it does not change. *Halakhah* does not conform to reality; rather, one actively projects the fixed matrix of *halakhah* onto dynamic reality. "Halakhic man's ideal is to subject reality to the yoke of the Halakhah" (Soloveitchik 1983, 29).<sup>36</sup> It is only in this way, in the repeated applications of *halakhah* to reality in its fluttering flux, that the halakhic person can be called "spontaneous" and "improvisational." Indeed, Soloveitchik claims that "Halakhic man is a spontaneous, creative type" insofar as he "does battle for every jot and tittle of the Halakhah" (79). However, this is different from the spontaneity that Bourdieu discusses in relation to *habitus*, for the "strategy" of *halakhah* (if it could be called a strategy) does not actually change — *halakhah* remains the independent variable on the axes of practice and circumstances. Why would the halakhic human conform to such a system, even when it conflicts with her objective conditions? This question directs us again to the theological dimension of *halakhah*. Jewish tradition holds that *halakhah* comes from God and leads one to God — it is embodied theology.

The second major contrast between *habitus* and *halakhah* pertains to the psychology of practice. Whereas Bourdieu holds that *habitus* may operate at a completely unconscious level, Soloveitchik stresses that intentionality is a crucial element of halakhic life. Recall that Bourdieu characterizes "practical mastery" as "*learned ignorance (docta ignorantia)*, a mode of practical knowledge not comprising knowledge of its own principles" (Bourdieu 2010, 19). *Habitus* is largely second nature. One embodies it and is often not even aware of the intricate system of motions and manners that she practices and propagates.

Between apprenticeship through simple familiarization, in which the apprentice insensibly and unconsciously acquires the principles of the 'art' and the art of living — including those which are not known to the producer of the practices or works imitated, and, at the other extreme, explicit and express transmission by precept and prescription, every society provides for *structural exercises* tending to transmit this or that form of practical mastery (Bourdieu 2010, 88).

According to Bourdieu, sometimes we are aware of practices and intentionally teach them, and sometimes we are completely unconscious of our active participation in normative systems.

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37. Ultimately, however, Soloveitchik does not see *halakhah* as conflicting with the objective conditions of the world. "The teachings of the Torah do not oppose the laws of life and reality, for were they to clash with this world and were they to negate the value of concrete, physiological-biological existence, then they would contain not mercy, lovingkindness, and peace but vengeance and wrath" (Soloveitchik 1983, 34).



Soloveitchik, however, emphasizes the importance of intentionality and free will in the practice of *halakhah*. One ought to devote the same degree of attention to halakhic activity as a scientist devotes to nature. “He approaches the world of Halakhah with his mind and intellect, just as cognitive man approaches the natural realm” (1983, 79). After all, Jewish law is a complex and extensive system that does not always jive with its objective conditions, and one must be maximally attentive and knowledgeable in order to effectively follow God’s commandments. Moreover, Soloveitchik actually associates intentionality and free will with closeness to the Divine. “Complete freedom belongs only to the prophet, the man of God. The man who is a mere random example of the species, on the other hand, is wholly under the rule of the scientific lawfulness of existence” (135). It takes high degrees of self-empowerment and self-awareness to rise above the natural forces of pleasure and pain, desire and repulsion, gain and loss—the objective conditions which, according to Bourdieu, compel human beings to spontaneously alter their practices. For Soloveitchik, the unchanging *halakhah* challenges one to remain sufficiently attentive and aware in order to continually choose a holy way of life that binds one to the ineffable and elusive God. He asserts that “the complete freedom of the man of God is embodied in his perception of the norm as an existential law of his own individual and spiritually independent being” (1983, 135-136). *Halakhah*, in a way that is fundamentally different than *habitus*, makes demands on human beings. The traditional Jew must constantly, intentionally choose to follow Jewish law, regardless of circumstances.

The commonalities as well as the contrasts between Bourdieu’s conception of *habitus* and Soloveitchik’s conception of *halakhah* shed light on theological undercurrents in Jewish practice. Verbal discourse about God may play a role in Jewish tradition, but theology is not necessarily verbal. Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* reminds us that concrete, corporeal practices may manifest a great deal more than they seem to at first glance. This most certainly appears to be the case for *halakhah*. Embodied theology is at the core of Jewish religiosity. One of the profound implications of embodied theology is that theological concerns and yearnings may be discussed openly and honestly among coreligionists. If the foundation of a theology is firmly rooted in concrete practices, then one can freely philosophize, question, and doubt with regard to theological matters and nonetheless remain at home in the religious community.<sup>37</sup> Personal reflections about God are then like the shimmering reflections on the surface of an exceedingly deep sea. Alternatively, one may remain quiet and unknowing about the

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38. The contemporary scholar and Orthodox rabbi David Weiss Halivni promotes such a theological position. He argues that a differentiation between practice (*halakhah*) and intellectual reflection (*hashkafah*) ensures that Jews are able to think freely and nonetheless remain within the boundaries of religious normativity. See Halivni 1991,101-125.

Divine—one may be wary of God-talk like Soloveitchik—and nonetheless express profound theological secrets through choreographed rituals. The works of Bourdieu and others who explore paradigms of embodiment can help us to redraw the boundaries of theology and remind us to “listen” for intimations of the Divine below the neck, in lacunae of silence and in moments beyond words.

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