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## СОДЕРЖАНИЕ

<b>И. Дворкин</b> ( <i>Еврейский университет в Иерусалиме</i> ) ВМЕСТО ПРЕДИСЛОВИЯ . . . . .	5
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### ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

<b>У. Гершович</b> ( <i>Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет</i> ) НЮАНСЫ ЭЗОТЕРИЧЕСКОГО ПИСЬМА МАЙМОНИДА В СВЕТЕ ПЕДАГОГИКИ АЛЬ-ФАРАБИ . . . . .	7
<b>R. E. Allinson</b> ( <i>Soka University of America; The Hebrew University of Jerusalem</i> ) NACHMAN KROCHMAL AND THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN . . . . .	19
<b>D. J. Cohen</b> ( <i>University of Chicago; The Hebrew University of Jerusalem</i> ) BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE: JEWISH DIALECTICS IN SOLOVEITCHIK'S WRITINGS AND DIALECTIC THEOLOGY . . . . .	34
<b>Т. А. Акиндинова</b> ( <i>Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет</i> ) ЭСТЕТИКА ГЕРМАНА КОГЕНА В КОНТЕКСТЕ ЕВРОПЕЙСКОЙ ЭСТЕТИЧЕСКОЙ МЫСЛИ XX ВЕКА . . . . .	50
<b>I. Dvorkin</b> ( <i>The Hebrew University of Jerusalem</i> ) A MATHEMATICAL ROAD TO LITURGY. RELIGION AND MATHEMATICS IN FRANZ ROSENZWEIG'S PHILOSOPHY . . . . .	70
<b>J. M. Delgadillo</b> ( <i>Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla, México</i> ) MAY JARHETH DWELL IN THE TENTS OF SHEM: TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL READING OF TALMUD BASED ON LEVINAS' THOUGHT . . . . .	81
<b>J. R. Cooney</b> ( <i>University of Leicester; University of St Andrews, Durham University</i> ) SCHOLEM'S MESSIANISM IN THE UTOPIANISM OF SCRIPTURE . . . . .	100

### ЭССЕ

<b>J. R. Russell</b> ( <i>Harvard University; The Hebrew University of Jerusalem</i> ) THE BIBLE AND REVOLUTION: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON EXODUS, PSALM 37, ESTHER, AND PHILO . . . . .	109
<b>И. И. Евлампиев</b> ( <i>Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет</i> ) О ВОЗМОЖНОМ ВЛИЯНИИ ЕВРЕЙСКИХ РЕЛИГИОЗНЫХ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЙ НА ФИЛОСОФИЮ АНРИ БЕРГСОНА . . . . .	135
<b>A. A. Sinitsyn</b> ( <i>Saint Petersburg State University; The Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities</i> ); <b>V. A. Egorov</b> ( <i>The Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities</i> ) MIKHAIL KALIK — ARTIST AND THINKER ( <i>IN MEMORIAM</i> ) . . . . .	146

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**BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE:  
JEWISH DIALECTICS IN SOLOVEITCHIK'S WRITINGS  
AND DIALECTIC THEOLOGY**

*Abstract:* This paper examines the relations between the prominent thinkers of the Dialectic Theology movement from the 1920's, namely Emil Brunner and Karl Barth and their influence on Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik. This paper proposes a reading of Soloveitchik's writings in light of the Dialectic Theology movement and seeks to draw a philosophical distinction between the use of dialectics in Judaism, characterizing it as Dialectic Ethics, and the Christian-Protestant use of dialectics, namely, dialectic theology. The aim of this paper is first, to point to the shared philosophical and theological concepts both Christian and Jewish thinkers are using. And second, to reach an insight about the boundaries between the two traditions, to what degree could Judaism use the full scope of Dialectic Theology? Through examining the language and core ideas employed by the Dialectic Theology movement, this paper discusses the limits and boundaries between Jewish and Christian philosophical and theological concepts. The phenomenality of Jewish philosophy can be best understood when examining it through the lenses of one who like Soloveitchik is well versed in both philosophy and rabbinic teachings. This paper seeks to explore the possibility of a unique Jewish philosophical system through the notion of dialectics.

*Keywords:* (Rav) Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Dialectic Theology, Neo-orthodoxy, Jewish Philosophy, Dialectic Ethics, Majesty and Humility, Dialectics, Reconciliation, German-Jewish thought, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

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**МЕЖДУ САКРАЛЬНЫМ И ПРОФАНЫМ:  
ЕВРЕЙСКАЯ ДИАЛЕКТИКА В СОЧИНЕНИЯХ  
СОЛОВЕЙЧИКА И ДИАЛЕКТИЧЕСКАЯ ТЕОЛОГИЯ**

*Резюме:* В данной статье рассматриваются отношения между видными представителями движения диалектической теологии 1920-х годов, а именно Эмилем Бруннером и Карлом Бартом и их влиянием на рава Йосефа Дова-Бера Соловейчика. В статье предлагается прочитать сочинения Соловейчика в свете

движения диалектической теологии и попытаться провести философское различие между использованием диалектики в иудаизме, характеризующим ее как диалектическую этику и христианско-протестантским использованием диалектики, а именно диалектической теологией. Цель этой статьи — во-первых, указать на общие философские и богословские концепции, которые используют как христианские, так и еврейские мыслители, и, во-вторых, понять суть границ между двумя традициями, и задаться вопросом, в какой степени иудаизм может использовать весь спектр диалектической теологии. Изучая язык и основные идеи диалектической теологии, автор статьи обсуждает пределы и границы между еврейскими и христианскими философскими и теологическими концепциями. Специфику еврейской философии лучше всего можно понять, если рассматривать ее через призму взглядов определенного мыслителя, который подобно раву Соловейчику хорошо разбирается как в философии, так и в раввинских учениях. Посредством диалектики автор статьи попытается исследовать возможность уникальной еврейской философской системы.

*Ключевые слова:* рав Йосеф Дов-Бер Соловейчик, диалектическая теология, нео-ортодоксия, еврейская философия, диалектическая этика, величие и смирение, диалектика, примирение, немецко-еврейская мысль, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The founding of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*<sup>1</sup> stimulated various Jewish responses to the contemporary philosophical thought of the time. Jews were forced to think and reevaluate their tradition in view of their newly gained and constantly shifting social status. Philosophical thought external to the Jewish tradition asserted many things that Jews could now respond to philosophically. These responses vary from one another in the way they are obliged by tradition and philosophical capacity. For example, some responses discussed the role of Jewish revelation or the status of Halacha, the Jewish law, in the face of modernity and social integration or as direct responses to certain continental thinkers such as Kant and Hegel<sup>2</sup>. Other responses worked from within the tradition and aimed to resolve historical and Jewish textual issues<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The science of Judaism.

<sup>2</sup> Greenberg 2011: 19–24.

<sup>3</sup> A good source for understanding the scope of Jewish responses could be seen in examining one of the major Jewish academic journals of the 19–20th century Germany “*Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*” which was first published in Dresden (1851) by Zecharias Frankel, a Talmudic philologist and a reformed Rabi, its last issue was in Berlin in 1939. It mediated between two central movements in the German-Jewish world, the reform movement, represented by Abraham Geiger and the neo-orthodoxy of Samson Raphael Hirsch. This journal published many articles that all relate to Jewish studies, that is Jews thinking and writing about issues that concern Jewish life, history, society, philosophy and theology from a broad range of religious observance and intellectual interest, prominent figures in the study of Judaism such as Martin Buber and Alexander I. Altmann publish there. The main theme is that Jews finally thought and wrote about themselves.

One interesting example of a response to western philosophy is Joseph B. Soloveitchik. His writings are a mixture of philosophy and Jewish thought, and presents an interesting case in which western philosophy is integrated into Judaism in a way that it might be difficult to disentangle the two, which is often not the case with earlier Jewish responses<sup>4</sup>. Greenberg categorizes Soloveitchik as working from within the Jewish tradition and fully bound to Halacha and Jewish traditional thought, on the one hand, as well as a philosophical dialectic thinker, on the other. His writings influenced the contemporary discourse in modern Jewish theology and religious ethics, especially within modern Jewish neo-orthodoxy of the twentieth century<sup>5</sup>. His dialectic methodology highlights crucial issues in the relations of philosophy and theology. And yet, a closer reading of some of his writings reveals an interesting relation and resemblance to key notions in Protestant theology. This is true especially in regard to the dialectic theology of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, which is the topic of this paper.

The primacy of dialectics in the dialectic theology movement and the resemblance to certain aspects in Soloveitchik's thought raises some questions regarding the role and place of dialectics in Judaism and the boundaries between philosophy and Judaism, especially for someone who works explicitly from within the Jewish tradition.

This paper presents a close reading of some of Soloveitchik's writings with special attention to similar themes in Barth and Brunner<sup>6</sup>. It focuses on the different stages of Soloveitchik's dialectical thought in an attempt to understand what is Jewish in the use of dialectics, why does Soloveitchik use dialectics, and what are the limits of this method for Soloveitchik and perhaps for Jewish studies, as well. I reach the conclusion that Soloveitchik uses dialectics

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<sup>4</sup> Earlier responses often referred explicitly to a philosophical issue that has implications on Judaism (but it is not always the case for example Nahum Krochmal discusses Jewish dialectics might be a possible response to Hegel, but it is not explicit. However, it is clear he discusses philosophy) in those cases it is clear to distinguish between the *Jewish* premises of such a thinker and his *philosophical* premises. In Soloveitchik's case it is not always clear what is "Jewish" in his writings and what is philosophy. This raises questions as to the role of philosophical inquires in Soloveitchik's writings, especially if we are to accept his categorization as working from within the tradition, is philosophy and Jewish thought interchangeable? What are the relations between philosophy and (Jewish) theology? I cannot claim to answer those questions in this paper, but I attempt to set some of the boundaries for such a discussion. See also: Shatz 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Greenberg 2011: 482–484.

<sup>6</sup> Although the dialectical theology is presented in many writings of the scholars of this movement, in this paper I chose to focus mostly on Barth's "Church Dogmatics" (Barth 1936–1988) and Brunner's "The divine imperative" and "Dogmatics" (Brunner 1947; 1979). I will not present Soloveitchik's intellectual development and the changes in the use of dialectics throughout his writings. It is beyond the scope of this paper because this topic calls for a separate discussion. This paper focuses on the possible implications and limits of using dialectics on Judaism.

primarily in the ethical context, as it aims to describe matters that are part of human-religious experience, but his thought has a theological dimension that does not involve dialectics, as it does not discuss human experiences. That is to say that for Soloveitchik, humans cannot partake in things that are beyond the mode of dialectical tension. Furthermore, though a more detailed analysis is required in order to provide a more thorough account of Soloveitchik's particular mode of dialectics, it is enough to determine the main difference between him and the dialectic theology movement. That is, while the latter sought to resolve the conflict of faith in modernity with the third stage of dialectics, reconciliation, Judaism, according to Soloveitchik, cannot do this. Dialectics, according to Soloveitchik, are limited to the first two stages and reconciliation is an ontological impossibility in Judaism. Judaism uses dialectics primarily to describe the mode of human existence and his conflicted nature, without the final stage. There is no reconciliation according to Judaism. Thus, we could draw a distinction between dialectic theology and Soloveitchik's use of dialectics — dialectic ethics.

## 2. DIALECTIC THEOLOGY: GOALS AND DEFINITIONS

The dialectic theology movement of the 1920's, led by Brunner and Barth, protested against the view that Christianity is identified as part of the ethical and social domain. The movement identified a tension between faith and modernity and saw the believing man as living in a dialectic relation to the world because of his faith. The movement described the dialectic relation in ethical, theological and social-phenomenological terms. Scholars of this movement vary in the ways they describe the dialectic tension but in general, they all sought to defend faith from the forces of modernity. To achieve this, it is crucial for them to place faith outside of society. They did so by creating a dichotomy between faith, as a private domain, and the liberal public culture<sup>7</sup>.

The outline of dialectic theology regarding creation in both Barth and in Brunner describes the natural man as concerned mostly with aesthetics and knowledge<sup>8</sup>. This man stands in contrast to his creation in God's image, and receiving responsibility, and then attaining dignity<sup>9</sup>. He is redeemed only

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<sup>7</sup> Robinson 1968: 9–25.

<sup>8</sup> The differences between Barth and Brunner, which are relevant to this paper, are illustrated below.

<sup>9</sup> This paper focuses on the doctrine of creation because it sets the grounds for a discussion about human nature, its dialectical-conflicted nature. However, it is possible to discuss other aspects of human life in relation to dialectic theology in Soloveitchik's work (such as relations of Halakhah and ethics). This is true especially with regard to Brunner, who emphasized work and duty as the peak of Christian ethics. I argue that, in Soloveitchik's case, Halakhah is mainly an ethical category, which poses an answer to the conflicted man, not to resolve it, but rather to assist in living through it. For Brunner there are also major

through creating a covenantal community, which has faith. Faith, in turn, is received through the transforming force of revelation in which man acknowledges his created-in-God's-image status. God's image is responsible for social order, and thus the covenant's people stand in a dialectical relation with the natural people. Redemption is the final stage of this dialectical move that is enabled through one's acknowledgment of his divine image and thus being able to create a true covenantal community. Thus, the dialectical tension between faith and modernity is resolved. As illustrated below, Soloveitchik shares many views with this movement, but does not enable the final stage of the dialectical mode of existence, reconciliation.

Brunner focuses his thought on showing how revelation is greater than any personal experience of the *homo religiosus*. He presents the natural man as one who, while seeking meaning in the despair of an unredeemed existence<sup>10</sup>, changes his perspective into accepting revelation where only God grants order and meaning to the world. Barth, on the other hand, framed his thought in opposition to the forces of society. He presents the gap between God and man as so great that only revelation can provide religious knowledge. For him, the natural man is in need of a redemptive act of faith based on humility and submission<sup>11</sup>.

Brunner's social philosophy describes a social world setting where man must live in a dialectical relation to the world by attaining dignity (i. e. by living, creating and ruling the world) and religious humility, which balances one's existence<sup>12</sup>. The basic mode of existence of an individual is loneliness. In order to go beyond loneliness, and being able to express their inner state, one must be married. Through marriage as a social and religious act the individual constitutes a relation to the world, which is reconciliation with a covenantal society.

Barth discusses one's commitment to the covenantal community as means to attaining revelation and holds similar views to Brunner's on marriage and loneliness. Barth rejects Brunner's view on society. He argues that the distance between God and man is so great that only revelation and the way of faith can help individuals escape from their despair and vanity. The artic-

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theological implications (Brunner 1947: 191, 320–329. There he discusses the relation to God and its implications on Christian humanism, individuality and relation with others).

<sup>10</sup> This view was common in the religious-existential thought of the time.

<sup>11</sup> Robinson 1968: 14–25. I found that other scholars could have influenced Soloveitchik. Reinhold Niebuhr sought to change the secular-liberal society, and make it acknowledge humility and revelation due to humanity's limits. Given his prominence in US's religiosity and advocacy for the dialectic theology movement, it is possible that he had some influence on Soloveitchik. Barth drew the distinction between majestic man and the covenantal from Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Barth 1936–1988: 194–195). Soloveitchik's doctoral dissertation's topic was Hermann Cohen work, and he was familiar with the works of Cohen's student, Barth and at times cites him.

<sup>12</sup> Soloveitchik might call this 'self defeat' a term he often uses in regard to the inability of man to achieve full victory, and hence reconciliation. The only possible resolution available to man is to acknowledge his limits and contract his ambitions.

ulation of many of these ideas influenced Soloveitchik's dialectical thought. The intention here is to present some of Barth's and Brunner's ideas as developed by Soloveitchik in the latter's "The Lonely Man of Faith", in an attempt to understand Soloveitchik's use of dialectics and its implications for Judaism.

### 3. SOLOVEITCHIK AS A DIALECTIC THEOLOGIAN?

In "The Lonely Man of Faith" Soloveitchik analyses the first two chapters of Genesis to empathize the conflicted nature of humanity. He aims in part to describe human-religious experience in modernity. He identifies two human types: the first Adam, the "majestic man", who employs his creative faculties in order to master his environment, and the second Adam, the "covenantal man", who surrenders himself in submission to his lord. Soloveitchik describes how the man of faith integrates both forces. In the first chapter of Genesis, the first Adam is created together with Eve and they are given the mandate to subdue nature, and transform the world into a domain for their power and sovereignty. The first Adam is a majestic man who approaches the world and relationships, even with the divine, in functional and pragmatic terms. The first Adam, created in the image of God, fulfills this seemingly "secular" mandate by conquering the universe and employing knowledge, technology, and cultural institutions. The human community described in Genesis I is utilitarian, where man and woman join together, like the male and female of other animals, to further the telos of their species<sup>13</sup>.

In the second chapter of Genesis, the second Adam represents the lonely man of faith, bringing a redemptive interpretation to the meaning of existence. The second Adam does not subdue the garden, but rather tills it and preserves it. This type of human being is introduced by the words, "It is not good for man to be alone", and through his sacrifice he gains companionship and relief of his existential loneliness — this covenantal community requires the participation of the Divine<sup>14</sup>.

While Soloveitchik draws much of his conceptions from Jewish sources, the dialectic theology scholars, concerned with faith in the face of modernity, inspired his framework of thought. It seems that Soloveitchik's basic view that God alone, through one's relation to him, grants meaning to a confused world<sup>15</sup>, and the different creative capabilities of humanity<sup>16</sup>, comes from Brunner, and the tension between modern society and the covenantal community to Barth:

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<sup>13</sup> Soloveitchik 1992: 12–20.

<sup>14</sup> Soloveitchik 1992: 21–24.

<sup>15</sup> The same idea is expressed in Brunner's "The Divine Imperative" (Brunner 1947: 486–488).

<sup>16</sup> The idea of human creativity is similarly expressed in Brunner's "Dogmatics" Vol. 3 (1979: 56–57).

...community of interests, forged by the indomitable desire for success and triumph and ... the “I” and the “thou” who collaborate in order to further their interests. A newcomer, upon joining the community, ceases to be the anonymous “he” and turns into a knowable, communicative “thou”. The second is a community of commitments born in distress and defeat and comprises three participants: “I, thou, and He”, the He in whom all being is rooted and in whom everything finds its rehabilitation and, consequently, redemption<sup>17</sup>.

Above Soloveitchik describes the advantage of the community of faith, who, unlike the first Adam, receive order and meaning through their relation to God. Brunner presents a similar view: through a relation to God one is granted with order and meaning. The opposite is no more than an interested relationship with God, and using one’s God given abilities to his own ends hoping to achieve autonomy of reason without god:

But it is the creator who has given us reason...it is not the absolute, but the relation with the absolute...man has been created by God in a way that he is never complete in himself, he is only complete through his relation to God... when man refuses to respond through faith, the relative self-end and autonomy of the reason... man desires to be as God<sup>18</sup>.

Barth, in section § 41 of “Church Dogmatics”<sup>19</sup>, presents a detailed analysis of the two accounts of the creation of man in Genesis I–II<sup>20</sup>. Barth’s analysis discusses the differences between two Adams in a way that resembles Soloveitchik’s. However, Barth takes the discussion to possible implications on man’s relation to God, while focusing on the different names of God mentioned in the biblical source in each account. Brunner has the complementary discussion regarding the different creative forces man has<sup>21</sup>.

Soloveitchik appears to draw from Barth the general outline of a dual account of human creation, and from Brunner the implications for human existence and typology. This analysis is oriented towards an understanding of the nature of humanity. The main difference is the creation of man out of the dust versus creating man in God’s image. Soloveitchik and Barth both note the distinction between the triumphed and majestic man and the covenantal man<sup>22</sup>. Although early rabbinic sources are aware of the two accounts of creation, the focus in the Talmud is mostly on the relation between man and women and not the im-

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<sup>17</sup> Soloveitchik 1992: 43.

<sup>18</sup> Brunner 1947: 486.

<sup>19</sup> Barth 1936–1988: § 41 *creation and covenant*, 233–239.

<sup>20</sup> A more detailed analysis regarding the two creations of man from Barth, Brunner and Soloveitchik is due, but it is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>21</sup> Brunner 1979: 30, 56–57. In this paper I quote several passages from these sources, but the creative force of humanity as deriving from God and its implications is a main theme in “*The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*”.

<sup>22</sup> Barth 1936–1988: § 41 *creation and covenant*, 237.

plications for human nature<sup>23</sup>. This speaks to the relation between Soloveitchik and Barth on this matter. While rabbinic sources discuss the implications of the two accounts of creation on the relations between man and woman, Soloveitchik, like Barth, understands these accounts to say something about human nature and how man acts in the world. According to them, these accounts discuss two conflicted forces that man must deal with and the role faith and acknowledging God plays in it. These issues will be further elaborated below.

The notion of “God’s image” (*Imago dei* in Brunner)<sup>24</sup> has a significant meaning in the dialectic theology movement and in Soloveitchik’s work, which has a similar implication of “God’s image”:

... to be “man”, to be himself...to discover his identity which is bound up with his humanity... “For thou made him a little lower than angels and has crowned him with glory and honor”<sup>25</sup>. Man is an honorable being<sup>26</sup>.

That is, the self-acceptation of man’s creative abilities derives from God, who enables one to attain dignity.

And as Brunner notes:

The free self, capable of self-determination, belongs to the original constitution of man as created by God...God wills my freedom...because he wills to glorify Himself...and give Himself to His creatures...man has only limited freedom because he is responsible, but he has freedom only so can he be responsible. Thus...man’s nature... “made in the image of God”...<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Soloveitchik and Brunner have a similar view of dignity derived from the image of God:

The capability of man to know is one aspect of... “being made in the image of God” which constitutes the nature of man... gives him the consciousness of possessing particular dignity and special destiny. For this reason alone science could be in the service of God... “replenish the earth and subdue it”... God gave this permission... man’s responsibility... He gave the capacity to make use of it<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Tractate Berachot, 61 a, and tractate ketubot 8 a.

<sup>24</sup> Although Brunner uses Latin for “image of God” *Imago dei*, implying certain notions of Christian theology, he discusses the different uses of the biblical terms and the implications to each account of creation, namely “tzelem elohim” (אלהים צלם) and “demut” (דמות).

<sup>25</sup> In my opinion, this translation of the psalmist verse fails to show the significance of man’s limitation in comparison to God. The Hebrew verse shows better resemblance to Brunner’s view.

‘תעטררהו והדר וכבוד מאלהים מעט ותחסרהו’ (Psalms 8, 6), man is limited and a little lower than God, this language is very apparent in Brunner.

<sup>26</sup> Soloveitchik 1992: 14.

<sup>27</sup> Brunner 1979: 56–57.

<sup>28</sup> Brunner 1979: 30.

Soloveitchik's view of God's image implies man's creative force, which is a manifestation of God, as well as the mandate to use knowledge. The same notions appear in Brunner's work as illustrated above<sup>29</sup>. According to Soloveitchik and Brunner, the man created in God's image has the creative power derived directly from God, which the right use of it grants dignity:

Only the man who... discovers therapeutic techniques and saves lives is blessed with dignity... Adam the first is trying to carry out the mandate entrusted to him by his Maker who, at dawn of the sixth mysterious day of creation, addressed Himself to man and summoned him to "fill the earth and subdue it"... Thus, in sum, we have obtained the following triple equation: humanity = dignity = responsibility = majesty<sup>30</sup>.

While the notion of dignity and its implications on human nature come from Brunner, the tension between the salvation of the majestic man, and the helplessness of the natural man, comes from Barth<sup>31</sup>. According to Soloveitchik, the natural community is founded on individual's helplessness; this is similar to Brunner's notion, in which individuals need to live in a community in order to succeed. Brunner uses Robinson Crusoe as a negative example for life, arguing that humanity must live in a community of faith, alongside non-believers, to form ethical and true social values:

... the relation between the individual and the community is not a philosophical, but a theological problem... "individual" and the "community" — appear to be... two kinds of sin... in the Christian faith, the individual is so defined that he cannot be imagined apart from the community, and the community that it cannot be imagined without the individual... I do not mean the... reflection that Robinson Crusoe... is an abstraction which would not occur in real life... what I do mean is this: that the individual as such [i. e. Robinson Crusoe] does not and cannot exist at all... the very conception of the individual implies and includes that of the community<sup>32</sup>.

A similar notion of the wholeness of the individual appears in Soloveitchik's work. While Brunner goes further to imply that the notion of the individual includes the community, Soloveitchik's individual is completed in his own terms and his full fulfillment is in the community:

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<sup>29</sup> Brunner 1979: 30, 56–57.

<sup>30</sup> Soloveitchik 1992: 17–20.

<sup>31</sup> Barth 1936–1988: § 60 *The Pride and Fall of Man*, 376, 465–467. There, Barth discusses the balance needed between personal humility and the ability to achieve salvation. Essentially, one must be aware of himself (as God is), and respect that — only then he would be worthy of salvation. In other words, a conflicted aspect of existence is in God as well as in man. The helpless natural man is majestic because he lives according to the Lutheran decree to be in need for salvation, thus maintaining the natural order in which humanity needs God to be saved. Brunner and Soloveitchik both need a community to succeed (or in Protestant terms, to achieve salvation).

<sup>32</sup> Brunner 1947: 294–295.

To the thinkers of the Age of Reason man posed no problem. He was for them an understandable, simple affair... They saw man in his glory but failed to see him in his tragic plight. They considered the individual ontologically perfect and existentially adequate. They admitted only that he was functionally handicapped even though he could, like Robinson Crusoe, surmount this difficulty, too. If the individual is ontologically complete, even perfect, then the experience of loneliness must be alien to him, since loneliness is nothing but the act of questioning one's own ontological legitimacy, worth and reasonableness<sup>33</sup>.

This similarity provides additional support for Brunner's social anthropology's influence on Soloveitchik's work<sup>34</sup>. If so, it appears that the dialectical theology movement, especially as put forward by Brunner and Barth, influenced much of Soloveitchik's views<sup>35</sup>. Barth and Soloveitchik's opening postulates are similar. Humanity without God lives in a constant struggle in a conflicted dialectical relation to the self and the world. Barth's solution is to place God outside one's ontological existence and find reconciliation in faith through marriage. Similarly, Brunner reconciles individuality and community with faith into marriage.

To Soloveitchik, Halachic actions do not resolve the dialectic nature of the religious experience. Moreover, he argues that even in a religious community one still cannot lose his dialectic consciousness<sup>36</sup>. Barth and Brunner take the dialectical nature of humanity to the next level, namely Christian theology<sup>37</sup>; Soloveitchik has his reservations for further uses of dialectics in Judaism. In Judaism dialectics do not ascend to the third stage, reconciliation. Soloveitchik employs dialectics when the topic is human experience and the ethical implications of it. When he discusses themes that relate directly to God, he uses connotations of harmony, contrary to dialectics<sup>38</sup>. This is because it goes beyond

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<sup>33</sup> Soloveitchik 1992: 30–31.

<sup>34</sup> This social anthropology is contrary to the modern concept of Brunner's time, that the individual can meet his own needs.

<sup>35</sup> There are more passages that require a more thorough comparison with Soloveitchik's writings and Protestant theology. This paper presents some examples of the key terms of dialectic theology. However, for Soloveitchik the comparison ends at the description of human nature, and is meant to show that the use of dialectics is primarily for emphasizing the human condition and mode of existence in the world.

<sup>36</sup> Soloveitchik 1992: 56.

<sup>37</sup> Brunner understands that this human feature implies the Christian doctrine of the First Sin. This derives from one's overlooking his responsibility in acknowledging his human limits on the one hand, and his freedom on the other. Brunner seems to place the capability of sin with the first Adam, the natural man, while the second Adam acknowledges his limited God-given freedom (Brunner 1979: 91–93).

<sup>38</sup> By "harmonized" I mean that, while dialectic issues are described in a conflicted manner, here there is no other option. There is an ultimate ability to describe reality in unified terms. This is often the case when Soloveitchik discusses topics that relate to God, such as prayer.

the roiling ontological existence of humanity. Hence Soloveitchik's distinction between Halacha, which is meant to assist man to deal with his conflicted-dialectic nature, and divine related topics which are not discussed in dialectic terms<sup>39</sup>.

#### 4. RECONCILIATION AND THE LIMITATIONS OF *JEWISH* DIALECTICS

As seen above, Jewish dialectics are limited to human experience; however, its uses, role, and limits in Judaism have not been clearly articulated. Turning to Soloveitchik's "Majesty and Humility"<sup>40</sup> sheds some light on this matter. On the limitation of dialectics Soloveitchik notes:

Judaic dialectic, unlike the Hegelian, is irreconcilable and hence interminable. Judaism accepted a dialectic move, consisting only of thesis and antithesis. The third Hegelian stage, that of reconciliation, is missing. The conflict is final, almost absolute. Only God knows how to reconcile; we do not. Complete reconciliation is an eschatological vision. To Hegel, man and his history were just abstract ideas; in the world of abstractions synthesis is conceivable. To Judaism, man has always been and still is a living reality, or may I say, a tragic living reality. In the world of realities, the harmony of opposites is an impossibility<sup>41</sup>.

While Soloveitchik accepts dialectics when they describe human religious experience, he argues that there is no third stage to Jewish dialectics. Here he strongly differs from the scholars of the dialectic theology movement, who go beyond human experience and ethical implications towards theological assertions. Man, according to Soloveitchik, is bound to his limitations, and cannot reconcile his conflicted nature to find true harmony, which Soloveitchik employs to divine issues. Reconciliation is not applicable to Judaism:

Man, confused, kneels in prayer, petitioning God, who has burdened him with this dialectic, to guide him and to enlighten him. The Halacha is concerned with this dilemma and tries to help man in such critical moments. The Halacha, of course, did not discover the synthesis, since the latter does not exist. It did, however, find a way to enable man to respond to both calls<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> I do not use the term 'theology' because that could take different meanings in Soloveitchik's writings. However, it is often the case, but not always, that when Soloveitchik discusses a topic that relates to God or man's relation to God, such as prayer or his Halachic response to suffering, the dialectic tension disappears. Note that the dialectic tension does not however resolve itself, but is simply not there. I would not present an example of such an analysis because it is not the topic of this paper, a more detailed typology of Soloveitchik's dialectics is required for this. This paper seeks to draw the limits of Jewish dialectics, not to describe its full scope.

<sup>40</sup> Soloveitchik 1978: 25–37.

<sup>41</sup> Soloveitchik 1978: 25.

<sup>42</sup> Soloveitchik 1978: 26.

The ability to reconcile is beyond Halacha, the ethical commands man is obliged by God to perform. While man must deal with the day-to-day dilemmas through and with Halacha, the experience cannot go beyond the conflicted dialectic mode embedded in existence. Halacha poses a solution to immediate problems, and while it might be of a divine origin, it is for humanity<sup>43</sup>. To be able to achieve full victory, and implicitly the ability to reconcile is to become like God, because reconciliation, as victory, means to partake in creation:

Underlying the ethic of victory is the mystical doctrine that creation is incomplete. God purposely left one aspect of creation unfinished in order to involve man in a creative gesture and to give him the opportunity to become both co-creator and king. The individual who is not engaged in the creative gesture can never be king; only a creator may lay claim to kingship and sovereignty. The creative gesture aims at the control and domination of a hostile environment. Under victory we understand, not only the subjection of nature to the needs of man, but also the establishment of a true and just society, and an equitable economic order<sup>44</sup>.

From the outline of the limitations of Halacha and the meaning of reconciliation, Soloveitchik turns to a description of what it means to be truly bound to Halacha, and why one is not able to reconcile. To Soloveitchik, reconciliation is the ultimate victory. The need for victory frustrates humanity because man will never achieve true victory due to his finite nature. The notion of *tzimtzum*, the doctrine of God's contraction has a significant meaning in Soloveitchik's dialectics because it establishes the foundations of *Imitatio dei*, which is a crucial concept to understanding the limits of Jewish dialectics. Man's ultimate goal is to acknowledge his defeat, and seek to imitate God's contraction in bringing the finite world into existence by practicing self-defeat:

Let me ask the following question: Is this Lurianic doctrine of *tzimtzum* just a Kabbalistic mystery, without any moral relevance for us; or is it the very foundation of our morality? If God withdrew, and creation is a result of His withdrawal, then, guided by the principle of *Imitatio Dei*, we are called upon to do the same. Jewish ethics, then, requires man, in certain situations, to withdraw. Man must not always be victor. From time to time triumph should turn into defeat. Man, in Judaism, was created for both victory and for defeat — he is both king and saint. He must know how to fight for victory and also how to suffer defeat. Modern man is frustrated and perplexed because he cannot take defeat. He is simply incapable of retreating humbly. Modern man boasts quite often that he has never lost a war. He forgets that defeat is built into

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<sup>43</sup> In this sense, it is possible to understand the Midrash about the Oven of Akhnai, and Rabbi Eliezer's response: "it (the Torah) is not in the sky" in another way: Halacha, as a God given construct is for man and situated in the human day-to-day dealings in the world. It cannot go beyond the human world, because if it were it would no longer be Halacha.

<sup>44</sup> Soloveitchik 1978: 34.

the very structure of victory, that there is, in fact, no total victory; man is finite, so is his victory. Whatever is finite is imperfect; so is man's triumph<sup>45</sup>.

The notion of *tzimzum* calls for self-defeat; it forces humanity to acknowledge its limitations. It is the guiding principle of *Imitatio dei* that prevents Judaism from ascending to the third stage of dialectics. Reconciliation is beyond impossibility, it is immoral, and as such it would miss the point of Halacha. As seen above, Soloveitchik's understanding of Halacha is as follows: it is a tool that assists man in his day-to-day conflicts and crises in the world, as such it is the foundations of Jewish ethics, because it is part of the ontological existence. If one goes beyond his conflicted-human nature, he attempts to go beyond his ontological existence and hence loses the need in Halacha, and hence, revealed morality.

In the final footnote of 'Majesty and Humility,' Soloveitchik mentions that Abraham found victory in defeat — his son Isaac was returned to him, and Moses did not, despite the fact that he followed the same formula of obedience to God and self-defeat<sup>46</sup>. Soloveitchik concludes that God's ways are not intelligible to men. Yet, if the goal of self-defeat is *Imitatio dei*, we can understand at least one thing: one aspect of God that man should, or rather must, follow is self-defeat as deriving from *tzimzum*. That is to say, there are ways of God that are intelligible to humanity. Abraham's victory is not a reward for his good will or obedience to God because God needed Isaac. Nor did God, for reasons which will remain unintelligible to humanity, need Moses to enter the Promised Land<sup>47</sup>.

Soloveitchik's mentioning of Moses sheds light on another notion — dignity, or *Kavod* (דבוק), which is related to yet another aspect of reconciliation, or being like God. Moses asks of God "Now show me your glory" and God responds to him "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live"<sup>48</sup>. Moses requests to see God's dignity and is refused, because this aspect is not accessible to humanity, the penalty for such an act is death. However, if we understand Soloveitchik correctly, "death" is not merely a penalty inflicted by God, it is a change in one's ontological status. Following Soloveitchik, I argue that if Moses was able to reconcile he would become like God. One finds dignity not only in acknowledging his abilities and using them in the world, but also

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<sup>45</sup> Soloveitchik 1978: 35–36.

<sup>46</sup> Soloveitchik 1978: 37, note 21.

<sup>47</sup> The ethical way to live according to Soloveitchik's formula is self-defeat and Halachic obedience. In this example, Moses did exactly what God required from him, but, unlike Abraham, he was not rewarded. To Soloveitchik, the goal of Judaism is not victory; it is the ethical-obedience and submission to God's will. The only way one can fulfill the *Imitatio dei* ideal is by retreating. Self-defeat is what God teaches man through his own contraction.

<sup>48</sup> Exodus 33:18–20. The Hebrew text uses the term *Kavod* אֵת נֹא הָרֵאֵינִי, which Soloveitchik refers to when articulating the notion of dignity in his 'The Lonely Man of Faith.

in knowing one's limits and practicing self-defeat. According to the principle of *Imitatio dei*, Moses can follow only what is known and accessible to him. Therefore, if Moses had seen God's dignity<sup>49</sup>, according to *Imitatio dei* and the aforementioned primacy of human dignity, Moses would die as *man* because he no longer has *his* dignity, but God's<sup>50</sup>. Hence, man must retain his own form of dignity, along with the recognition in his limitations and self-defeat, as the foundation of Jewish religious experience<sup>51</sup>.

## 5. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

So what is Jewish about dialectics and what is the dialectical nature of Judaism? As long as we deal with the first two stages, thesis and antithesis, dialectics describe the religious experience of humanity in the face of modernity, and the role of Halacha. But, when we reach the final third stage, there is nothing Jewish in the full scale of a dialectic move — the third stage is beyond mere hubris to attempt achieving, it is simply impossible. Moreover, to reconcile is to become like God, but this aspect is just not accessible to humanity, and hence it is beyond humanity.

If Soloveitchik does not accept the final stage of dialectics, why does he use the first two stages presented in comparison to Barth and Brunner? I argue that the first two stages, which describe the condition of humanity, provide an understanding for the role of Halacha. The final reconciliatory stage simply goes against the logic and system of Halacha. It misses the point of Judaism, the eternally conflicted human existential nature and the asymptotic ideal concept of *Imitatio dei*. Reconciliation is problematic from a phenomenological and behavioral perspective because while one falsely attempts to reconcile, he presumably ceases to act as a human, but like God. This requires a different objective of acting in the world as well as acquiring knowledge. Moreover, for Soloveitchik, the third stage is not possible from an ontological perspective. The analysis of Moses' encounter with God and asking to know God's

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<sup>49</sup> By "seeing" I mean understanding and acknowledging this form of dignity. Because as seen above, attaining dignity is through acknowledging and acting in accordance to the origins of this form of living. Understanding and acting according to God's dignity might have the transforming force according to Soloveitchik if we accept this interpretation to the dangers of victory and reconciliation.

<sup>50</sup> This is because man's dignity is based on the accessible to humanity aspect in the doctrine of *tzimtzum*, which calls for self-defeat.

<sup>51</sup> This argument illustrates another gap between the Protestant theologians and Soloveitchik. If according to Soloveitchik, reconciliation is to become like God, then in his view, it might imply the Christian doctrine of incarnation. That is to say, the ability to reconcile is not possible in Judaism because Judaism is part of the ontological existence and manifested through Halacha. In order to reconcile, one must go beyond the boundaries of ontology, which is impossible in Judaism. This is where Soloveitchik and the dialectic theologians separate, in transgressing between man and God.

dignity, in Soloveitchik-ian terms, demonstrates that reconciliation is not accessible to humanity, who cannot achieve final victory. Self-defeat is not only a moral act, or merely obeying God, but also a metaphysical realization that humanity cannot go beyond it. As such, reconciliation is an ontological impossibility.

However, understanding the limitation of dialectics in Judaism enables us to draw a distinction between two types of dialectics. The scholars of the dialectical theology movement are able to use dialectics to its full scale, with particular applications to Christian theology, which reconciles human experience in the world. Soloveitchik, on the other hand, accepts dialectics as long as they describe the human religious *experience*. This leads him to the understanding of the role of dialectics in Halacha and ethics. I argue that there is a difference between “dialectic theology”, which includes the final stage of dialectics, as in Brunner and Barth, and “dialectical ethics”, as what Soloveitchik finds dialectical in Judaism.

After examining the general aspects of Jewish dialectics in Soloveitchik’s thought, there is still place to conduct further research oriented to perform a typology of Soloveitchik’s thought according to the role which dialectics assumes<sup>52</sup>. In addition, the role of dialectics can illustrate the tangent points between Christianity and Judaism, as well as the unique essence of each tradition. Such an understanding can open new paths towards a better relation between philosophy and Jewish theology. More research is needed to achieve a better understanding of the full scope of dialectics in Judaism, its role in Halacha, and its relation to ethics. For by discussing the possible parameters of their engagement, both are honed and reified if only partially and the vibrancy of Jewish studies can be well affirmed as a partner alongside other lenses into and out of dialectics.

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<sup>52</sup> Such a typology should organize Soloveitchik’s dialectics towards an understanding of what goes under the term “dialectic” in his thought and what or why he uses a more harmonized language in other cases.

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