Yosl Rakover Speaks to the Rav: How Zvi Kolitz' Novel Prefigures His Confrontation with J. B. Soloveitchik

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Introduction

This is a study of Zvi Kolitz' philosophical views, particularly his engagement with the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, as a method with which to understand his short story, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God* (1946), his fictionalized account of a ḥasidic Jew's last words during the Warsaw Uprising. In his brief biographical portrait of Kolitz, Paul Badde suggests a causal link between Kolitz' exposure in his youth to the writings of Kierkegaard—in Yiddish, no less—and his short story.[2] While Kolitz was undoubtedly influenced by Kierkegaard, this paper will argue that it is his commitment to halakhah, or Jewish law, as articulated in the thought of Joseph Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man* (1944) but which is only fully developed in *Confrontation,*[3] Kolitz' philosophical engagement with Soloveitchik's thought, which better accounts for Yosl's struggle.

In particular, Soloveitchik's distinction between *homo religiosus* and halakhic man will help us understand the significance of the narrator's ḥasidic background and the change in his description of his relationship with God. As well, the metaphysical tension of the book, to use Leon Wieseltier's formulation, will be explained through Soloveitchik's bipartite

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1 This article is based on a paper I presented at the philosophy conference of the Athens Institute for Education and Research in Athens, Greece. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Eli Rubin for his insights on t*z*imt*z*um. I also want to thank my nephew, Rabbi Uziel Milevsky, for turning my attention to Zvi Kolitz' *Confrontation*.

2 Paul Badde, "Zvi Kolitz," in *Yosl Rakover Talks to God with Afterwards by Emmanuel Levinas and Leon Wieseltier*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (Vintage Books, 1999), 37.

3 Zvi Kolitz, *Confrontation: The Existential Thought of Rabbi K.B. Soloveitchik* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1993).

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conception of the concept of *tzimtzum*, which is in turn based on its treatment in the thought of Shneur Zalman of Liadi. And while I will argue that the conceptual similarity between *Confrontation* and *Yosl Rakover Talks to God* is indicative of Soloveitchik's influence on Kolitz' thought, it should also be noted that Kolitz himself shows an interest in *tzimtzum*, a key concept in Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man*, and in the book of *Yetzirah*, five years before the publication of his *Confrontation*.[4]

Thus, in contrast to Emmanuel Levinas' ethical treatment of this short story and against the view of Wieseltier for whom the metaphysical tension in the text remains unresolved, I will argue that Yosl's religious devotion is better understood though Soloveitchik's theoretical-normative lens,[5] and that the tension is resolved through Yosl's practice of the halakhah. The argument that I am making here, in other words, is maximally, that Kolitz' short story was influenced by Soloveitchik's thought, or minimally, that the themes in *Yosl Rakover Talks to God* prefigure Kolitz' engagement with Soloveitchik's writings later in his life.

Introducing Yosl Rakover

The short story, which we now know to be fictionalized, begins by identifying Yosl, who is both the main character and the narrator of the text, as a follower of the rabbi of Gur, a ḥasidic sect.[6] Despite losing two of his children in the months leading up to the uprising against the Nazis, Yosl is filled with faith. Indeed, he is told in a dream that his children are in God's hands,[7] although it remains unclear if this offers him any comfort. Reflecting on his life, he believes it to have been lived honorably, which he explains to mean that he was devoted to the commandments and that his only request from God was to serve Him with all his heart, soul, and strength.[8] This is where Yosl expresses his wish to address God directly.

Together with providing the tragic details that led to his being alone in an abandoned house, including the loss of his wife and children and

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4 In a letter he writes to my grandmother (his sister) in 1988, Zvi Kolitz specifically mentions *tzimtzum* and encourages her to read *Sefer Yetzirah*. The view that Kolitz' own thought is reflected in his short story can be further buttressed by the fact that he uses some themes from his own life in his book. Yosl's father's name is David, much like Zvi Kolitz' own David Nachman, of blessed memory, and the narrator's own age as he prepares for his death, 43, is eerily reminiscent of his father's age at his death, 44.

5 Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 86.

6 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 3.

7 Ibid., 6.

8 Ibid., 9.

the eleven other fighters alongside whom he was fighting, and describing his attacks on the Nazis, Yosl admits that his relationship with God has changed: while he used to be in God's debt, God is now also in his debt.[9]

Explaining the circumstances, Yosl asserts that God has hidden his face and left human beings to their own devices. As a result, the greatest tragedies "weigh little."[10] Once Yosl disassociates the Nazis' murderous campaign against his people from any possible sin that the Jews may have committed—its magnitude would make attributing it to sin a desecration of God's name—he expresses his acceptance of it as fact and vows not to save himself.[11] Instead, he tells us that he will stay and pour "dozens" of bottles of gasoline on the Nazis.[12] The anticipation of this act brings Yosl a great deal of joy and helps him understand the passage in the Talmud that God's vengeance is holy.[13]

Just before addressing himself to God, Yosl states that he is proud to be a Jew and that he challenges his enemies to have conducted themselves any better had they been in the same circumstances.[14] Despite the absence of any applicable Mosaic law, he declares his ongoing commitment to the Torah; and, in contrast to his earlier petition, he asks that God exercise vengeance on those who sat by as the atrocities were perpetrated on the Jews, since those who committed those acts would reap the fruit of their deeds. After sharing this confession, Yosl admits that he will hide this testimony in one of the gasoline bottles he used on his enemies, using a method not unlike the one used by the literary association, the *Oyneg Shabes* group. Anyone who finds this letter, he notes, will learn about the feelings of a Jew "abandoned by God."[15] Despite these words, Yosl's final mood, as he recites *Sh'ma Yisrael* (Hear, O Israel) and prepares to "commend his soul" to God,[16] is one of resilience and pride.

Kolitz' *Confrontation*

What follows is an overview of Kolitz' book, a sustained engagement with the thought of Joseph Soloveitchik, with an emphasis on his work in *Ha-*

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 10.
11 Ibid., 11.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 17.
15 Ibid., 13.
16 Ibid., 25.

lakhic Man. Beginning with his frustration on the reluctance of Soloveitchik's students to build upon his thought, Kolitz sets out to discuss the "ontological implications"' of Soloveitchik's existential philosophy, which for Kolitz includes a response to "inner anguish" and an antidote to what he calls "pagan liberalism."[17] In chapter one, Kolitz uses a distinction of Matthew Arnold to put the "existential uneasiness" of Hebraism against the detached, logical outlook of Hellenism, but also against those existential thinkers who see religion as a "tranquilizer."[18] In the same chapter, Kolitz introduces the halakhic man, who is distinguished from *homo religiosus*. As this is a foundational concept, I expand this discussion to include Soloveitchik's own statement on this issue: Soloveitchik puts the contrast between halakhic man and *homo religiosus* in the following way:

> Instead of yearning to rise from below to above, from earth to heaven, from the images and shadows of reality to the plentitude of a lofty existence, to a pure ontic overflow (like the aspirations of the Platonists to the ideas, or the neoplatonists to higher worlds that emanate from the absolutely unknowable and transcendent One), the Halakhah occupies itself with the lower realms. 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."[19]

Another distinction is that *homo religiosus* demarcates the various areas in his life. He would, for example, distinguish between driving a bargain in the market and his religious devotion, to use Soloveitchik's own example earlier,[20] but not halakhic man, for whom every facet of life is included in his halakhic worldview. Kolitz then shows how *tzimtzum*, or the mystical concept that God limits Himself, is key to halakhic man's existence. This too is a core concept in Soloveitchik's thought and I briefly expand upon it here. In his conception of *tzimtzum*, Soloveitchik follows S.Z. of Liadi, the *Ba'al Ha-Tanya*. In this variation of *tzimtzum*, it is a bipartite concept: In concealment itself, the world is protected, for it cannot exist in

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17 Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 127.

18 Ibid., 1.

19 Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 44–45. That is not to say that halakhic man is not mystical: "And yet, on the other hand, halakhic man is not a secular, cognitive type, unconcerned with transcendence and totally under the sway of temporal life" (Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 40).

20 Ibid., 92.

the face of God's full glory.[21] At the same time, God's disclosure is what sustains existence.[22] It is within the context of the latter form of *tzimtzum* that human creation, meaning the implementation of halakhic practice, plays a role. As Soloveitchik notes:

> Creation means the realization of the ideal of holiness. The nothingness and naught, the privation and the void are rooted in the realm of the profane; the harmonious existence, the perfected being are grounded in the realm of the holy. If a man wishes to attain the rank of holiness, he must become a creator of worlds…creation is the lowering of the transcendence into the midst of our turbid, coarse, material world; and this lowering can take place only through the implementation of the ideal Halakhah in the core of reality (the realization of the halakhah = contraction = holiness = creation).[23]

And as Kolitz correctly notes, the halakhah itself, and halakhic man who practices it, mimics the contraction of transcendence:

> The halakhah, from the perspective of the process of contraction, also uses the method of quantification: it quantifies quality and religious subjectivity in the form of concrete, objective phenomena that are standardized and measurable.[24]

The idea, in other words, is that by practicing the law, transcendence is lowered into the world and, by so doing, man becomes a creator and brings perfection into the realm of holiness. More to the point, as Kolitz explains, *tzimtzum* directly connects existence to one's halakhic obligations:

> Thus, halakhic man, to the Rav, "resembles somewhat the mathematician who masters infinity only for the sake of creating finitude." What follows is that halakhic man's relationship to existence is not only ontological but normative in nature.[25]

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21 *Tanya*, ch. 21. See also Christoph Schulte, *Zimzum: God and the Origin of the World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023), 202.

22 Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 151–152, fn. 61.

23 Ibid., 108–109.

24 Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 20.

25 Ibid., 28. It is significant to note that this variation of the concept is not to be identified with the *tzimtzum* of *Kabbalah*: "Here (in the halakhah), the concept of *tzimtzum* does not pertain to the secrets of creation and the chariot but rather to law and judgment" (Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 49). That is not to say that Soloveitchik's conception is any simpler to understand. The idea is that "God, qua He who fills all worlds and He who encompasses all worlds, sustains the world; qua *Deus Abscunditus,* the most hidden One, He who is above and beyond the mysterious, God nullifies the world and returns it to chaos and the void. The

In chapter two, Kolitz discusses the confrontation with which halakhic man is faced, a tension that he identifies as identical to the one between Adam the first and Adam the second—that is, the seemingly contradictory descriptions of Adam in the first two chapters of the Bible—in Soloveitchik's *Lonely Man of Faith*. The former type, for Soloveitchik, is interested in "the possibility in reproducing the dynamics of the cosmos by employing quantified-mathematized media which man evolves through postulation and creative thinking,"[26] while the latter is the "natural instinctual man."[27] That is to say, it is a conflict between halakhic man's physical and metaphysical needs. In chapter three, Kolitz writes about the tension that confronts halakhic man, particularly that between the demands of halakhah and the various circumstances of life. As Kolitz puts it, the life of halakhic man is not easy to define:

> But if the complete faith experience does not lend itself to an easy "translatability," to any fixation, its opposite, namely, the immediacy-experience of the natural work community, is clearly identifiable. And it is probably in this area that existentialism has established itself as the most persuasive observer of the human scene… All existential philosophers, from Kierkegaard to the Rav, not only show the same aversion for [sic] mediocrity, but point in the same direction of its flagrantly manifested symptoms."[28]

In the fourth chapter, Kolitz touches on sin, which Soloveitchik sees as both indispensable but also intolerable—the former because it enables the experience of recoiling from it and the latter because it is a sickness. Ultimately, says Kolitz, halakhic man knows nothing about the conflict with the evil urge, but does experience "dark spells."[29] It is God who is the refuge of halakhic man during these moments, although this is not a *unio mystica* of the kabbalists. Part of the process of repentance, which is both ethical and aesthetic, as people are naturally repulsed by ugliness, is to respond to God by withdrawing. For Kolitz, this lesson, which is informed by *tzimtzum*, is desperately needed by those who are obsessed with the "social image,"[30] a comment that seems eerily relevant in our age. In

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absolute contradiction between existence and naught are the two faces that reveal themselves, as determined by the relationship between God and His creatures" (Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 51).

26 Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Random House, 1992), 13.

27 Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 41.

28 Ibid., 50.

29 Ibid., 82.

30 Ibid., 100.

chapters five and six, Kolitz elaborates on "sin-sickness," which for Soloveitchik is a metaphysical corruption with which human beings mourn their own souls. For Kolitz, the anxiety from which modern society suffers is an expression of an "ontological need," which if not properly directed leads human beings "galloping along the nihilistic road to a vacuous nowhere."[31] But all of this can be healed, says Kolitz, with an awareness of God's presence:

> The vast and vital use which the Rav makes of the paradigmatic notion of Kabbalistic *tzimtzum* clearly points towards such an experience. Shekhina, literally translated, actually means "presence" as it is written, "They shall make Me a sanctuary and I shall be present [*veshakhanti*] in their midst."[32]

In contrast to this state, Kolitz finds a cultural ignorance in his day which comes from failing to look outside of one's self and desperately needs correction. In the final chapter, titled "Kant Would Not Have Understood My Grandfather," Kolitz polemicizes against the Christian view in the context of C.S. Lewis' comments on Psalm 119. Lewis struggled to understand how the law can be desired more than gold, per verse ten. I add that this confusion is presumably shaped by Paul's emphasis on being free from the law in Romans 7:6 and elsewhere. Be that as it may, for Soloveitchik, these words are perfectly understandable given his halakhic man's aims to "finitize the infinite."[33] As we return to Kolitz' short story, it should be noted that Yosl's most poignant words about his love for the Torah come from the same Psalm.

Yosl's Identity

The suggestion that Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man* may have influenced *Yosl Rakover Talks to God* or that the latter prefigures Kolitz' engagement with Soloveitchik never gets off the ground if the distinction between the *homo religiosus* and halakhic man, which forms the basis of Soloveitchik's book, cannot be detected in this short story. By reference to Kolitz' definition of the *homo religiosus*, however, we discover one of these categories in Yosl's autobiographical exordium. Kolitz writes that, when Soloveitchik discusses *homo religiosus* in the context of Judaism, the latter refers to

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31 Ibid., 135.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.,157.

ḥasidic Jews, although not all of them: only those that practice "easy mysticism" are maligned by Soloveitchik.[34] It is those Jews, unlike the halakhic men, whose goal is to transcend the world rather than to be concerned with it.[35] In this context, the narrator's identification of himself is significant. Yosl is a Gur ḥasid, which tells the reader that he belongs to a sect which put great emphasis on talmudic study.[36] But even this more refined form of *ḥasidut* is not sufficient for Kolitz, as we will see from the change in his perspective. With respect to understanding the purpose of one's life, Yosl initially writes the following, in reference to a young child who had died in his presence:

> Why he was born, if he had to die so soon and why he had to die now—and this in just five years. And even if he doesn't know why, he knows that knowing why or not knowing why is utterly irrelevant and unimportant in the light of the revelation of God's majesty in that better world where he is now—perhaps in the arms of his murdered parents, to whom he has found a way back.[37]

For Yosl, the life of the devout follower is made insignificant in the light of the afterlife. And there is no value in understanding God's actions. Halakhic man, however, would never speak this way. Soloveitchik is clear that the purpose of life is directly related to the practice of God's law. Indeed, as Kolitz notes about Soloveitchik, the world was created by the Divine Will so that there is a "continuous unfolding of His Will in and by His obedient creatures."[38]

Subsequently, however, Yosl seems to lose that sense of simplicity. When he directly addresses God, and at which point his changed relationship with God comes into focus, Yosl is not afraid to ask about the limits of God's "patience."[39] More to the point, Yosl shows the limits of his own patience even in light of that better world, by asking God to "stop crowning" His greatness by veiling His face "from the scourging of the wretched."[40] Further, Yosl's zeal in attacking his enemy can be seen as the

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34 Ibid., 10–11.

35 Ibid., 74.

36 See Yitzḥak Meir Alter, *Ḥiddushei Ha-Rim Al Ha-Torah, Mo'adim Ve-Liqutim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rim Levin, 1985), 16, 104.

37 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 16.

38 Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 84.

39 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 19.

40 Ibid., 21.

actions of halakhic man. Yosl's description of the bottles as "more precious than wine to a drinker,"[41] echoes the description of the beloved's affection for her lover in the Song of Songs, understood by Rashi to refer to the Torah. Further, lacking any "expectations of miracles,"[42] Yosl instead plans to empty two of the last three bottles of gasoline on his enemies, thus taking on halakhic man's zeal for the fulfillment of his practical duties without any expectation.

At the same time, Kolitz himself is a product of Slabodka. Writing on the history of Lithuanian Jewry, Kolitz recognizes the significance of the Mussar movement to that town.[43] But Soloveitchik is explicitly opposed to that approach. To his mind, the Mussar movement is not helpful:

> It was the practice of Kovno and Slabodka to spend the twilight hour when Sabbath was drawing to a close in an atmosphere suffused with sadness and grief, an atmosphere in which man loses his spiritual shield, his sense of power, confidence and strength and becomes utterly sensitive and responsive, and there engages in a monologue about death, the nihility of this world, its emptiness and ugliness. The halakhic men of Brisk and Volozhin sensed that this whole mood posed a profound contradiction to the halakhah and would undermine its very foundations…one must not waste time on spiritual self-appraisal, on probing introspections, and on the picking away at the "sense" of sin.[44]

Yosl's words, however, seem to be the "monologue about death" decried by Soloveitchik. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that Kolitz redeems the Slabodka view. Evidence for this claim comes from Yosl's hypothesis that, for God, it is no longer "a question of sin and punishment," meaning that the horrors he has witnessed are to be decoupled from sin, based on Yosl's earlier conclusion that for Jews to accept the Holocaust as commensurate with their sins would be blasphemous.[45] Such a stance represents a detachment from a focus on sin, and thus seems to address Soloveitchik's criticism. Moreover, Soloveitchik's difficulty with Mussar is that the anxiety is not rooted in halakhah and will only cause despair.[46]

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41 Ibid., 13.

42 Ibid., 10.

43 Kolitz, "The Physical and Metaphysical Dimensions of the Extermination of the Jews in Lithuania," 198, in *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR*, 1941–1945, eds., Lucjan Dobroszycki, Jeffrey S. Gurock (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 198.

44 Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 74–75.

45 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 10.

46 Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 75.

Yosl's anxiety, however, only strengthens his adherence to the Torah. Seen in this way, Yosl's transformation of his anguish into a commitment to Torah amounts to a restoration of Mussar. And it should be added that Soloveitchik approved of Mussar in modified form.[47]

Yosl's Mode of Thought

As we have seen, halakhic man is defined not only in his commitment to the fulfillment of the law but in his method of seeing the world. More than simply using categories of halakhah, halakhic man, in Kolitz' account of the concept, uses the methodology of studying Torah in his observation of the world. In Soloveitchik's words, the goal for halakhic men is "living" the Torah, meaning, shaping one's suppositions and personality towards "theoretical analysis" and "means of repair." Referring specifically to Psalm 119, Kolitz cites the following passage:

> "We do not have here a directive that imposes upon man obligations against which he rebels, but delightful commandments which his soul passionately desires… when halakhic man comes to the real word, he has already created his ideal, a priori image, which shines with the radiance of the norm."[48]

If Yosl becomes such a person, it should be detectable in his mode of thought. And, indeed, a close reading of one of the points in Yosl's soliloquy demonstrates that his thinking is talmudic precisely in this sense. The point in question is the support he brings for his plea that God should punish those who have passively watched the horrors of the Holocaust. Yosl states that the Torah instructs its followers to punish thieves more harshly than robbers, for the former demonstrate shame in their activity by stealing in secret, whereas the latter do so openly. Since the thief accords more honor to human beings than to God, inasmuch as he or she hides their actions from others, but not from God, who is aware of these crimes in any case—unlike the robber whose act is known to both—the penalty is more severe.[49] In this way, Yosl's argument is molded by the Torah. His plea to God, then, is mediated by the categories of halakhah, much like the thinking of the halakhic man.

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47 The later movement, under R. Nathan Zvi Finkel in the Yeshivah of Knesset Israel and under R. Yeruchem Levovitz in the Mir yeshivah, meets Soloveitchik's approval since it "assumed an entirely different form and approached the world perspective of the great halakhic men" (Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 76).

48 Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 159.

49 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 22.

Yosl's Self-Contraction

As Kolitz demonstrates, the concept of *tzimtzum* is central to Soloveitchik's view. If Yosl Rakover takes on the status of a halakhic man, we would expect the concept to feature in his monologue. But while the word does not appear, it can be argued that his description of God can be seen as a cognate of the concept. In particular, Yosl's statement that God has hidden His face to allow evil to flourish is an expression of God's self-contraction as a way of preserving the world. That is to say, following the first component of *tzimtzum* in Soloveitchik's treatment of the concept, the concealment of God's presence is what allows Yosl's world to continue. I will note here that Kolitz' description is to be distinguished from the Talmudic discussion of *hester panim*, or the hiding of God's face during the exile, which is typically discussed in the context of theodicy.[50] It is also treated as a form of punishment rather than an act of protection in which God actively grants evil permission to flourish.[51] At the same time, the second component of *tzimtzum,* that is, the part that relates to God's presence in the world, can also be seen in Yosl's words, specifically in the disclosure awaited by the narrator. Soloveitchik describes the yearnings of halakhic man in the following terms:

> His soul, too, thirsts for the living God and these streams of yearning surge and flow to the sea of transcendence to "God who conceals himself in His dazzling hiddenness [the first line of a kabbalistic *piyut* recited at the conclusion of the third Sabbath meal]."[52]

In light of this desire, halakhic man does not want to escape this world. For him, the task is:

> To bring down the Divine Presence to the lower world, to this vale of tears. The mystery of *tzimtzum* should not precipitate metaphysical anguish but rather anguish and joy. Man resides together with his creator in this world, and it is only through cultivating that togetherness in the here and now that man can acquire a share in the world to come.[53]

While Yosl acknowledges that he will shortly join the next world,[54] what he awaits will occur in this world. Yosl's final words express his

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50 B. *Ḥagigah* 5b.
51 J. *Sanhedrin* 10:2.
52 Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 40.
53 Ibid., 52. See also ibid., 53.
54 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 23.

longing for the time when God will reveal himself and his voice will shake the foundations of the earth.[55] Further, Yosl's subsequent words are an emulation of God's *tzimtzum*, which for Kolitz is an example for humans to replicate. In what is seen as a form of *imitatio Dei* in his reading of Soloveitchik,[56] Kolitz states that "triumph should turn into defeat."[57] This type of defeat can also be detected in Yosl's words:

> I die at peace, but not pacified, conquered and beaten, but not enslaved.[58]

Thus, Yosl exhibits not only the two components of Soloveitchik's *tzimtzum* but also the practical bearing that it has upon halakhic man's life.

Introducing Levinas

In Emmanuel Levinas' treatment of our short story, Yosl's suffering is inextricably linked with God's absence. And since "a personal, unique God does not reveal himself," the text is an expression of "humanism in all its integral austerity, bound to a demanding love."[59]

As a result of his circumstances, Yosl is called upon to work towards justice even though it will not reconcile the problem. This will be an individual struggle, which will require swimming against the unjust current, an act that will itself create suffering.[60] Crucially, for Levinas, it is the integrity of the law, rather than the fulfillment of the law, that assures the protagonist that God is still with him:

> It is precisely the word itself, not incarnate, that assures us of the living God among us. Belief in a God Who does not manifest Himself by any terrestrial authority can only be grounded in internal evidence and the value of an education…Which is what gives rise to

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55 Ibid., 25.

56 Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 14.

57 Ibid., 97. Indeed, in nature itself we see a normative framework: Halakhic man learns this obligation from the world itself, says Soloveitchik: "But what is the tale of the heavens, if not the proclamation of the norm? What is the recitation of the firmament if not the declaration of the commandment?" Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 64.

58 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 23.

59 "*Aimer la Torah plus que Dieu*" ("Loving the Torah More than God"), in *Dificile Liberte: essays sur la judaisme* (Paris: Albin Michel 1963). The English translation appears in Zvi Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God,* translated by Carol Brown Janeway from the edition established by Paul Badde, afterwords by Emmanuel Lévinas and Leon Wieseltier (NY: Pantheon Books, 1999), 87.

60 Ibid., 82.

> Yosl's remarks that are the culminating moment of the soliloquy and carry within them the echo of the Talmud in its entirety: "I love him. But I love his Torah more. Even if I were disappointed in him, I would still cherish his Torah."[61]

This is not, Levinas assures us, the *salto mortale* along the lines of Kierkegaard. It is rather "protection against the madness that comes from direct contact with the sacred without the mediating power of reason."[62] That is to say, this is not a suspension of the ethical,[63] but in fact a supplement of it.[64]

For Levinas, Yosl is not a knight of faith and is instead engaged in a "relation of minds mediated by instruction, the Torah."[65] But Levinas does not mean the practice of the law—his reference to the "internal evidence" which proves the Torah to be true, suggests that he means the Torah's moral integrity. For Soloveitchik, however, it is the practice of the commandments that distinguishes halakhic man from Kierkegaard's Abraham. This point emerges from a statement of Kolitz, in which he distinguishes Soloveitchik's view from Kierkegaard's:

> Kierkegaard regarded subjectivity as a condition for the religious experience. "Truth is subjectivity," he insisted. But there is no contradiction here. The Rav identifies objectivity with the revealed law, while to Kierkegaard subjectivity meant inwardness. The Rav would have no objection to this, for it is out of the objection to the a prioristic objectivity of the revealed law that the singular human personality emerges in all its splenderous subjectivity and uniqueness, as the Rav characterizes the halakhic man.[66]

Kolitz argues that subjectivity with respect to truth is experienced in the personal engagement with the law and the rejection of its universality.

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61 Ibid., 84.

62 Ibid., 84.

63 See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 52.

64 As we have noted, Kolitz himself sees a similarity to Kierkegaard in the thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik. Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 20–21. But Kolitz explicitly states that Soloveitchik goes further than Kierkegaard: "To the three degrees of development, as defined by Kierkegaard, namely, the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious, the Rav adds what to him seems to be the highest — the halakhic." Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 11.

65 Levinas, "Loving the Torah More than God," 84.

66 Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 100.

In contrast to this position, in Levinas' account, Yosl's religious experience is an objective religious one, since it is universal in nature. A close look at Yosl's statement about his love for Torah, where Levinas' article gets its name, however, indicates that it is the practice of the commandments that he loves:

> God commands religion but His Torah commands a way of life—and the more we die for this way of life the more immortal it is.[67]

In Yosl's death and the actions that precede it, he fulfills a commandment. And by dying for it, as Yosl acknowledges, the Torah becomes more immortal. Here again, what the reader witnesses is not a recognition of the Torah's moral foundation but quite literally of an act of faith.

Returning to Levinas' classification of this text as a form of humanism, it is surprising that he overlooks Yosl's explicit rejection of the humanists: When Yosl boasts about pouring gasoline over the heads of Nazis and admits that he was "convulsed with laughter," he scoffs at the "foolish humanists," that may "say what they will." "Revenge and the longing for retribution," he adds, have always fueled the resistance of the oppressed to the very last, and will always do so.[68] It is fair to suggest that Kolitz' hero resists such a definition.

What Wieseltier Gets Right, At Least Partially

Leon Wieseltier also challenges Levinas' reading of Yosl Rakover, which the former defines as religious existentialism, but he does so on the basis that a God that manifests Himself by not doing so is a contradiction in terms. For Wieseltier, Kolitz' short story is filled with metaphysical tension, since he believes in God and remains devoted to Him despite God's absconsion; but in Levinas' treatment, it is an ethical tension. This reading raises several difficulties for Wieseltier, one of which is that humanism requires no Torah—"Kant will do just fine," as Wieseltier writes.[69] But Wieseltier stops short of recognizing that the tension is resolved through the fulfillment of halakhah. Such a resolution can be found in Soloveitchik's thought, in particular when he responds to the mystics who posit that the tension between finitude and infinity results in chaos:

> Halakhic man, however, declares that "contraction" does not consist in God's concealing His face but rather in His revealing His glory. Man finds his existence to be full, rich, and holy even when standing

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67 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 18.

68 Ibid., 11.

69 Wieseltier, "A Privation of Providence," in *Yosl Rakover Talks to God,* with afterwords by Emmanuel Levinas and Leon Wieseltier, 97.

> before the infinite one; and the *deus absconditus* does not, heaven forbid, negate its value and reality. And let the halakhah itself be proof! *God commanded man, and the very command itself carries with it the endorsement of man's existence. If man, when confronted by God, would revert to nothingness and naught, then the command, which is the very foundation of the halakhah, would be incomprehensible.*[70]

I suggest that in Yosl's statement that he dies exactly as he had lived, and that God's efforts to make him lose his faith have been unsuccessful,[71] he implies that his commitment to God's law resolves this tension. In what resembles Soloveitchik's point about the proof from halakhah for the value and reality of human existence, Yosl's practice of the law seems to convince him that his death is not meaningless, that it is a continuation of his faithful life. Accordingly, Soloveitchik's influence on Kolitz provides a cogent explanation of Yosl's response to God's absence.

Confrontation as a Developed Yosl

That is not to say that Kolitz' view in *Confrontation* can be identified fully with Yosl Rakover's perspective. There are in fact a few differences that I will highlight. The first is that, unlike the narrator in Kolitz' novel, Kolitz is less self-assured in his *Confrontation*:

> I don't know what to fear, what not to fear; I am utterly confused and ignorant. Modern man is indeed a slave, because he is ignorant and fails to identify his own needs. (Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah)
>
> > In these last words we discern the deeper reason of the Rav's inner dichotomy: it is a despair at his self-insufficiency. The great man, in his humility, demands so much of himself that he is not satisfied with what he has already achieved."[72]

Along these lines, Kolitz speaks of the anxiety held by halakhic man: It is, according to Kolitz, a "misnomer" to say peace of mind. It is "either peace or mind, and one cannot have both."[73] In contrast to this view, Yosl seems satisfied with what he has accomplished: The narrator tells us that he dies "at peace, but not pacified… bitter but not disappointed.[74] Further, unlike *Confrontation*, it seems that Yosl has a less developed notion of sin. In *Confrontation*, his conception of sin is as follows:

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70 Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 70–71, *emphasis mine.*
71 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 24.
72 Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 123.
73 Ibid., 172.
74 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 23.

> Sin deprives man of his natural privileges and unique human attributes. He is subjected to a complete transformation as his original personality departs and another one replaces it. This is not a form of punishment, or a fine, and is not imposed in a spirit of anger or vindictiveness. It is a metaphysical corruption of the human personality, being lost and adrift in a vacuum; of spiritual bankruptcy; of frustration and failure."[75]

In *Yosl Rakover*, however, sin is understood as an act which offends God and results in punishment. Finally, unlike in *Yosl Rakover*, in *Confrontation* Kolitz objects to rationalism. This can be seen by comparing the two types of what Kolitz calls Amen-sayers, a term he uses in both texts. In Yosl's penultimate words, he proclaims that he is not a blind Amen-Sayer:

> I die at peace, but not pacified, conquered and beaten but not enslaved, a believer but not a supplicant, a lover of God but not his blind Amen-sayer.[76]

In his *Confrontation*, Kolitz also writes negatively about Amen-sayers but in a slightly different context.

> The Hebrews regarded common logic with suspicion, for it does not touch upon the ultimate issues in life. The treatment which Scripture accords to the logical friends of Job is typical: The Almighty does not concur with "logical" Amen-sayers.[77]

Reading Yosl's words alongside this passage of *Confrontation*, it seems that Kolitz eventually rejects a different type of Amen-sayer, specifically one whose approach is grounded in logic. With this term, Kolitz seemingly rejects rationalism, which we can identify with the definition of Hellenism with which he begins his book. Taken together, Kolitz is no longer in the first category, since he is not "blind," that is, he does not simply accept God's will. But he is not on the other end of the spectrum either, for he also rejects the rationalistic view of God.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in his description of God's absence and his ongoing commitment to the practice of Torah law, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God* corresponds to Soloveitchik's perspective in his *Halakhic Man* and thus seems

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75 Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 145.
76 Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 23.
77 Kolitz, *Confrontation*, 3.

to suggest, maximally, that Kolitz' short story was influenced by Soloveitchik's thought, or minimally, that the text prefigures his subsequent engagement with Soloveitchik. And although the impact of Kierkegaard could indeed be detected in Yosl's existential struggle, the theoretical-normative view of Soloveitchik better accounts for Yosl's adherence to the halakhah. Future research might look at Kolitz' other literary works in light of Soloveitchik's other writings. In particular, *The Deputy*, Kolitz' Broadway play that deals with the Vatican's response to the Holocaust may be studied in light of Soloveitchik's writings on Jewish-Christian dialogue. ☙