CHAPTER ONE

THE OPENING OF HALAKHIC MAN:
A COVERT DIALOGUE WITH HOMO RELIGIOSUS

R. Soloveitchik often presents his ideas through “ideal” types, of which the best known are halakhic man and homo religiosus. These pure types are composites, incorporating features characterizing other ideal types (homo religiosus and cognitive man, man of fate and man of destiny, and others). Relationships between them are at times intricate and multidimensional. In this work, I analyze the figure of halakhic man as an ideal type while exploring its deconstruction into its elementary components or, more precisely, presenting it as a figure that is actually not amenable to such deconstruction. This analysis compels an in-depth discussion of homo religiosus vis-à-vis halakhic man, a task I undertake in the first chapters of this book. Chapter One focuses on the opening section of Halakhic Man, and examines a series of theses about the writing of this essay.

Halakhic Man: A Balanced Figure?

At the opening of the essay, R. Soloveitchik describes halakhic man as a figure representing a balance between homo religiosus and cognitive man. Halakhic man has features of homo religiosus—an inner rift, contradictions, and a yearning for transcendence—and of cognitive man—striving for clear, systematic, and precise knowledge of the laws of the universe. In the opening passage of Halakhic Man, he emerges as a dialectic type. Lawrence Kaplan argues that R. Soloveitchik’s writings in Hebrew describe harmonious and optimistic personalities, unlike his writings in English, which speak of pain and contradictions:

But in his [R. Soloveitchik’s] Hebrew writings, and particularly in his two long pieces, “Halakhic Man” and “From Thence You Shall Seek,” the model of the ideal homo religiosus is entirely different. In the actual life of this figure are elements of equilibrium, of stoic silence, of Aristotle’s golden mean, and of Maimonides’ personality. In his articles in Hebrew, the ideal homo religiosus succeeds, through a concerted thought-will-and-action
effort, in turning the religious experience of revelation into a source of creativity, individuality, and freedom, unlike its beginning as an experience of coercion, failure, self-sacrifice, retreat, and submission. In sum, he combines glory and majesty within the framework of the covenant. He thereby dismisses the contradictions between the rational religious experience and the religious experience of revelation. Harmony, rather than incongruities and contradictions, is the ultimate criterion, although this harmony indeed emerges from an entanglement of contradictions and incongruities. Moreover, attaining this harmony is indeed the main religious aim of the ideal man living within the covenant. Halakhah itself, both its study and its observance, gives man the means to attain this aim.1

Kaplan unequivocally postulates here that the contradictions within halakhic man are ultimately resolved. But the question is whether the balance that characterizes the life of halakhic man is a unification of existing opposites, or whether these opposites are altogether dismissed. Is it accurate to suggest, as Kaplan does, a parallel with a golden mean that draws away from extremes and offers a middle course? Incongruities, after all, do seem to persist within halakhic man. In this book, I offer another option: stoic serenity is what characterizes halakhic man, since the Stoics argue that the wise individual has feelings but ignores them, allowing them no impact on his actions and decisions.2 The same is true of halakhic man: he is aware of feelings and of aesthetics, but without letting them affect his halakhic cognition and consciousness.3

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3 Note my use of the following terms:

1. **Thought** (*Denken*) deals with cognition of an object involving no contradiction. According to Cohen, thought is what creates the objects of mathematical natural science.

2. **Cognition** or **knowledge** (*Erkenntnis*). This term relates to the perception of objects meeting the transcendental conditions of experience that, according to Kant, are space, time, categories, and analogies of experience.

3. **Consciousness** (*Bewusstsein*) is thought confronting itself and examining its products and achievements in light of qualitative concreteness. According to R. Soloveitchik, thought is a postulate of the system, whereas consciousness is a “critical category.” Consciousness emerges when thought begins to engage in judgments. See Das reine Denken, 53.

These concepts define both the cognition and the consciousness of halakhic man, as the following chapters will show. In his Hebrew writings, R. Soloveitchik often fails to distinguish between thought and consciousness, since the discussion on *homo religiosus* relied on criteria taken from the phenomenology of religion. Hence