CHAPTER NINE

HALAKHIC MAN’S PERSONALITY STRUCTURE

R. Soloveitchik offers many descriptions affording readers an opportunity to become acquainted with the personality of the Brisk halakhic man. The cognitive-conscious description and the creative moment of halakhic man do not exhaust all the dimensions of his personality. R. Soloveitchik is interested in the psychological structure of this ideal figure, even though it is not essential for an understanding of the epistemology of halakhic cognition. He knows that in order to etch this pure type indelibly in the consciousness of his readers he must deal with the character and the behavior of halakhic man.

R. Soloveitchik discusses in greater depth the personality of halakhic man in the later sections of Part One of the essay (xi–xv). In this chapter, I address first his sporadic allusions in the earlier sections of the work, and then discuss various aspects from later sections.

Without Wavering

R. Soloveitchik expects his readers to explore the personality features deriving from halakhic man’s unique epistemic structure. The result is both impressive and thought provoking: halakhic man is a restrained figure, exerting absolute self-control, indifferent to elementary human feelings, and driven by predefined and unwavering rules. Halakhic man is absolutely controlled by ideal halakhic thought. Just as reason is the only element that determines autonomous duty in Kant’s ethics, and just as the law is the basis for the transcendental, ethical, and autonomous analysis in Cohen’s philosophy,¹ so does halakhic-ideal and scientific cognition determine autonomous duty. Halakhic man assumes the yoke of Halakhah from a position of absolute freedom, because it is the creation of his autonomous reason.²

² Again, the reference is not to actual Halakhah. In halakhic man’s milieu, no one
According to both Kant and Cohen, feelings are irrelevant to pure will and, in fact, may even divert will from its rationality. Nor is halakhic man driven by feelings. Since the figure of halakhic man fits the characteristics of cognitive man, it is marked by “his objectivity, his psychic equilibrium, and an almost eerie indifference” (66). He is the total antithesis of *homo religiosus*, whose essential characteristic is inner contradiction and an existential, conscious split, and whose mystical-experiential ethos derives from his dialectic personality. By contrast, indifference and obliviousness to realms essential to *homo religiosus* characterize halakhic man. R. Soloveitchik ascribes the abysmal gap between these two types to the characterization of halakhic man through freedom and of *homo religiosus* through necessity. Section x of *Halakhic Man* opens with the following declaration: “This fundamental opposition between the ontological outlooks of *homo religiosus* and halakhic man is reflected in the very being of these two personalities: it pervades their entire characters” (66). Although the emotional, moral, and aesthetic experience is not alien to halakhic man, it has absolutely no influence on his cognition or on the moral and personal characteristics derived from it. Experience is an expression of humanity, or involves emotional implications of halakhic-ideal cognition: halakhic man experiences the annihilation entailed by death, for instance, because his cognition does not extend to supernal or non-concrete realms. In sum: cognition dictates experience.

The necessary conclusion is that the dialectic described at the opening of *Halakhic Man* is present, if at all, only at the early stages of halakhic man’s development. Already at the opening of the essay, R. Soloveitchik states that once the scholar becomes a halakhic man, he reaches “a rank of perfection, which for sheer brilliance and beauty is unequaled by any level attained by the simple, whole personality who has never been tried doubts that the source of Halakhah is revelation. Halakhic man also dogmatically accepts that revelation is heteronomous, but the structure of his cognition is entirely autonomous. In his cognition, halakhic objects are constituted in a clear process of objectification, the same process that creates scientific objects in Cohen’s thought. Halakhic law, therefore, is not imposed on him, as noted on ch. 8, but accepted as naturally as scientific law is. Any attempt to view the term Halakhah as a practical endeavor, then, at least in Part One of Halakhic Man, is not only mistaken but also precludes a coherent understanding of R. Soloveitchik’s outlook.

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3 See, at length, *Halakhic Man*, 66–68. Shaul Stampfer notes that “*hithasdut* [excessive piousness]—in the sense of an ostentatious concern with the religious experience—was resisted in the Volozhin yeshiva by both the leadership and the student body.” See Shaul Stampfer, *The Lithuanian Yeshiva* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1995), 98.