In every one of his major philosophical works as well as several of his public lectures and popular essays, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik refers heavily to modern science as he develops his various analyses of religious life and experience. Generally speaking, R. Soloveitchik's references to science reflect a complicated dialectical mix: favor balanced with criticism, enthusiasm tempered by recognition of cognitive limits and moral or spiritual shortcomings. Yet notwithstanding the regularity with which this dialectic appears, a reader who closely examines R. Soloveitchik's oeuvre with an eye toward defining the exact place of science in religious consciousness cannot help being struck by sharp distinctions among the works.

Indeed, I hope to show that R. Soloveitchik's thought concerning the role of science in religious life evolved over a twenty-year period. That
period begins with the publication of *Ish ha-Halakhah* in 1944, includes the completion of *The Halakhic Mind* in that same year and the writing of an early draft of “*U-Bikkashtem mi-Sham*” in the late 1940s, and concludes with the appearance of “Confrontation” and *The Lonely Man of Faith* in the mid 1960s. I refer here to an analytical evolution—that is, an evolution in the ideas that are articulated and presented—but, as I will explain at the end of the essay, not necessarily a “biographical” evolution in R. Soloveitchik’s thinking.

R. Soloveitchik vigorously and firmly rejects any attempt to completely translate faith commitment into cultural categories.\(^2\) Nonetheless, he did not embrace the view of thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and Yeshayahu Leibowitz that cultural categories are altogether irrelevant to religious commitment. Rather, R. Soloveitchik is rooted at least partly in the tradition of medieval rationalism, which made the pursuit of general wisdom, in particular science and metaphysics, part and parcel of such commitment. As we explore R. Soloveitchik’s writings on science, we will indeed see him laboring to appropriate this medieval tradition—but only in a manner that matches his own principles and objectives. That struggle often brings forth surprising uses of medieval rationalism.

1. *The Study of Science in Halakhic Man*

Our topic bears upon a larger question, namely whether R. Soloveitchik was an adherent of the ideology known as “*Torah u-Madda,*” which asserts that Torah should be combined with general wisdom.\(^3\) From one point of view, it is difficult to grasp the question. R. Soloveitchik’s life was an open book. Surely it is not credible that a person would pursue a doctorate in philosophy (in radical departure from family precedent), cultivate for decades an impressive sophistication in Western culture, allocate time and energy

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\(^2\) See especially “Lonely Man of Faith,” 55–57; also “*U-Bikkashtem mi-Sham,*” passim.

\(^3\) Typically, advocates of Torah u-Madda assign religious value to the study of madda. An adherent of Torah u-Madda, however, might acknowledge multiple sources of value and assign non-religious value to study of general wisdom. In this approach, the crucial obligation of the religious person is not to shun the secular but rather not to blur boundaries, that is, to understand what is religious and what is not. Leibowitz can I think be read this way. Mainstream Torah u-Madda, however, assigns religious worth to madda, and by asking how science functions in halakhic life I am asking what religious value it has, if any, in a certain form of religious life.