

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your interest in this paper. As you may already know, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), popularly known as “the Rav,” is a giant among modern halakhic authorities. He has had far-reaching influence in shaping Modern and Centrist Orthodox Judaism. He himself comes from illustrious roots: he received the mantle of his family’s Lithuanian rabbinic dynasty from his father, who also trained the young Soloveitchik in the Brisker method of Talmudic analysis, an approach created by his grandfather, Rabbi Chaim of Brisk. While studying Talmud intensively as a young adult, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik also pursued doctoral studies at the University of Berlin, graduating in 1931 with a dissertation on the philosophy of Hermann Cohen. His father brought the family dynasty to the United States in 1929 when he became head of Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary; he served in that position until 1941 when Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, his eldest son, succeeded him. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik’s authoritative halakhic decisions and his philosophical writings simultaneously embraced both the Judaism of old-world Europe and more modern cultural and intellectual traditions. Through his writing, teaching, and halakhic judgments, he solidified and lent greater legitimacy to modern approaches to Orthodox Judaism. For his broad and enduring influence, he came to be known as a founding father of Modern Orthodoxy.

Although I myself am not an Orthodox Jew, I have endeavored in this paper to engage with Rabbi Soloveitchik’s teachings on their own terms, and to take his writings seriously. No doubt his written works do not capture all of Rabbi Soloveitchik, the man; likewise, my analysis surely falls short of capturing his humanity. Still, as it is his written works that were used to support the OU’s 2017 position on women clergy, I believe they merit the examination I give them.

Because I have attempted to argue within Rabbi Soloveitchik’s cisheteronormative understandings of gender, this paper does not address the question of how different some of his positions would be if he had treated LGBTQ+ identities as valid. However, I believe that topic is worth exploring and I would want to read such a paper, especially if it were written by someone who can speak from experience as an LGBTQ+ Modern Orthodox Jew.

Please feel welcome to write to me with your comments.

With Care,
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Abstract:

In 2017, the OU affirmed that men and women have equal spiritual value, but rejected the possibility of women serving in synagogues as clergy, on the basis that women and men should occupy “distinct roles.” Its affirmation of spiritual gender equality relies upon Rabbi Soloveitchik’s *Family Redeemed*, but I argue that *Family Redeemed* implicitly rejects that affirmation, especially when read alongside *Halakhic Man*. I show that *Family Redeemed*’s characterization of masculine and feminine resembles *Halakhic Man*’s characterization of the man of God and species man, respectively. I argue that the “distinct roles” claim is used to devalue women’s public religious acts, while the claim about men’s and women’s equal spiritual value serves to justify that devaluing. Because *Family Redeemed* is unconvincing when it claims that men and women have equal spiritual value, the use of this text leaves the OU’s decision vulnerable to the criticism that it undervalues women.

Like the Beasts that Speak Not: Soloveitchik and the Disappearance of Women

In 2016, a select panel of seven rabbis presented the Orthodox Union with a statement explaining why, in their opinion, women are not to serve in clergy positions, although halakhah may permit them to hold positions in which they do similar work without the authority of ordination.¹ The OU released the “Responses of the Rabbinic Panel on Professional Roles of Women in the Synagogue” (hereafter “Responses”) on February 2, 2017,² along with a statement explaining its adoption of the “Responses” as its official policy.³ I will not engage directly with the halakhic reasoning of the panel’s rabbis—I salute them for lending legitimacy to recent developments in women’s authoritative roles, but I am not persuaded by some of their arguments, for reasons that people wiser than I have already expressed⁴—but I do take the influential power of the “Responses” as cause for examining one of the sources upon which the panel heavily relies. The “Responses” considers three primary factors in developing its ruling: legal sources, precedent, and relevant halakhic ethos.⁵ In examining relevant halakhic ethos, the panel assures the reader that its decision in no way suggests that women are spiritually inferior to

¹ Rabbi Daniel Feldman et al., “Responses of the Rabbinic Panel On Professional Roles of Women in the Synagogue,” Responses of the Rabbinic Panel, February 2, 2017, <https://www.ou.org/assets/Responses-of-Rabbinic-Panel.pdf>.

² Orthodox Union Staff, “On Women’s Professional Roles in the Synagogue,” OU.org, February 2, 2017, <https://www.ou.org/blog/womens-professional-roles-synagogue/>.

³ Orthodox Union, “OU Statement,” OU.org, February 2, 2017, <https://www.ou.org/assets/OU-Statement.pdf>.

⁴ I especially appreciate the careful reasoning in these works: Rabbi Michael J. Broyde and Rabbi Shlomo M. Brody, “Orthodox Women Rabbis? Tentative Thoughts That Distinguish between the Timely and the Timeless,” *Hakirah* 11 (Spring 2011), <http://hakirah.org/Vol%2011%20Broyde.pdf>; Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, “Women as Spiritual Leaders and Halakhic Decisors—a Position Paper,” *Ohr Torah Stone*, <https://ots.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WOMEN-AS-SPIRITUAL-LEADERS-AND-HALAKHIC-DECISORS.pdf>; and Rabbi Jeffrey S. Fox, “Rabbi Soloveitchik’s Position On Women as Shohatot and the Development of Customs of Abstention: Semikhah and Mesorah—a Response to the Ou Panel,” *Lehrhaus* (February 23, 2017), <https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/rabbi-soloveitchik%e2%80%99s-position-on-women-as-shohatot-and-the-development-of-customs-of-abstention-semikhah-and-mesorah%e2%80%94a-response-to-the-ou-panel/>; and Rabbi Jeffrey S. Fox, “Can Orthodox Women Receive Semikha?,” *Yeshivat Maharat*, https://3c9c5fef-8db2-4f96-9dfb-feffaf25670e.filesusr.com/ugd/452d96_786a6743a9494306ac960bf7688dc848.pdf

⁵ Feldman et. al., “Responses,” 1

men.⁶ I take this assurance to imply that according to the rabbinic panel, Orthodox Judaism affirms that women and men have equal spiritual value despite their different natures and roles, and if “Responses” suggested otherwise, they would want to reexamine it.

But the panel’s claim, that barring women from clergy positions does not imply their spiritual inferiority, depends heavily upon *Family Redeemed*,⁷ a collection of essays presenting the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on gender, marriage, and family relationships as they pertain to Torah and halakhah. Now, Soloveitchik is celebrated in Modern Orthodox Judaism as an advocate for Talmud study for women and girls, in a time when that position was unpopular to the point of being revolutionary; but his *conceptual* teachings about men and women were not so daring. In *Family Redeemed*, Soloveitchik makes two major claims about gender that the OU’s rabbinic panel uses to support its position. First, he asserts that **men and women have opposing sex-personalities**: men are active and creative, they initiate, and they are inclined toward transcendence; while women are passive and receptive, they follow others’ initiatives, and they are inclined to remain earthbound. Second, Soloveitchik affirms that **men and women have equal humanity, equal capacity for spiritual excellence, and equal value in the eyes of God and the halakhic tradition**. I will argue that the former claim, that men and women have these essential personality differences, is used by Soloveitchik to justify the halakhic devaluing of women’s public religious acts. As for the latter claim: it is certainly necessary for defending the halakhic tradition against secular critique, but how well does it withstand scrutiny? I will argue that it stands in contradiction to Soloveitchik’s own thought, as well as running counter to some major streams of thought in the halakhic tradition.

⁶ Feldman et. al., “Responses,” 10-12.

⁷ Feldman et. al., “Responses,” 10-12 footnotes 26, 29, 30, and 34.

In Part I, I set the stage to examine these two claims as they appear in *Family Redeemed* by first looking at one of Soloveitchik’s most celebrated written works, *Halakhic Man*. After presenting its main ideas, I find in it this crucial claim: **spiritual excellence requires transformation of the self from mere species man into a man of God.**⁸ I then return to *Family Redeemed* to look at Soloveitchik’s understanding of man and woman, masculine and feminine. By comparing *Halakhic Man*’s discussion of species man and the man of God to language in *Family Redeemed*, I show that the masculine according to *Family Redeemed* is remarkably similar to *Halakhic Man*’s man of God, while the feminine according to *Family Redeemed* is remarkably similar to *Halakhic Man*’s species man. But Soloveitchik says species man is vastly spiritually inferior to the man of God. From these striking resonances, I argue that these three claims cannot all be true at the same time: either we have to give up *Halakhic Man*’s claim that it is worse to be like mere species man than like a man of God, or *Family Redeemed*’s claim that men and women have opposing sex-personalities, or *Family Redeemed*’s other claim, that men and women are spiritually equal to each other. I will argue, though it deeply saddens me, that in Soloveitchik’s halakhic tradition, the most vulnerable claim is that men and women are spiritual equals.⁹

⁸ As Rabbi Reuven Ziegler beautifully puts it, “Part of redemption [in *Halakhic Man*] is transforming oneself from a passive object into an active subject.” Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2012), 205 fn. 9.

⁹ Rabbi David Shatz argues that Soloveitchik himself would not have identified with Halakhic Man, suggesting that perhaps it is my first claim that should be abandoned: “All that said, we cannot help but accentuate the ostensible inconsistency between the theses of *Halakhic Man* and *The Halakhic Mind* on the one hand and R. Soloveitchik’s career on the other. He apparently saw religious value in doing phenomenology (studying religious consciousness). Thus the outlook of halakhic man is not that of R. Soloveitchik himself. (This calls to mind a by-now popular quip that a halakhic man would never have written the essay Halakhic Man.) On the contrary, R. Soloveitchik describes the mindset of halakhic man, but does not fully identify with it. For polemical reasons—to silence liberal approaches—he aims to capture “the image of his father” (to cite the rabbinic phrase he invokes in the opening epigraph about the biblical Joseph), but he does not identify with the portrait. His failure to argue for the religious value of scientific study need not reflect his own posture at the time he wrote the essay. R. Soloveitchik is describing a way of life that was not his own.” “Science and Religious Consciousness in the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik” in Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes, *David Shatz: Torah, Philosophy, and*

In Part II, I address four objections to my argument: to be a woman is not a moral choice in the way that it is a moral choice to be a mere species man; Soloveitchik explicitly celebrated biblical heroines; femininity and masculinity are types, not descriptions of actual people; and Soloveitchik's promotion of women's Talmud study proves his esteem for women.

In Part III, I argue that in Soloveitchik's thought, *Halakhic Man's* man of God is specifically male—that according to *Family Redeemed*, a woman of God would not be allowed to exist—meaning *Family Redeemed* cannot be taken seriously when it affirms the equal value of men and women. Perhaps this absence of the category “woman of God” in Soloveitchik's conceptual map of the world would have been challenged by Orthodox communities that today embrace women's public religious service. It is my hope that as highly engaged and educated Orthodox Jewish women step into more public roles, thus enriching the religious lives of their communities, their service will make an impression upon the ways that brilliant and influential thinkers like Soloveitchik use halakhic concepts to represent the world to themselves.

I. The Three Claims

1. *Halakhic Man's* Claim: Spiritual excellence requires becoming an active subject

Halakhic Man defends Judaism and Jewishness to a Christianity-centric thought tradition by presenting Jewish life as the glorious work of internalizing divine concepts and ideals and using them to impose order on a disorder-prone world. Part I of *Halakhic Man* introduces two characters that serve as foils of sorts for halakhic man: cognitive man resembles the ideal scientist of the Enlightenment; and *homo religiosus* resembles the Christian world's picture of a generic person of faith. Both cognitive man and *homo religiosus* exhibit something praiseworthy

Culture (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 142. Although I suspect he is correct regarding Soloveitchik's complicated personal commitments, Soloveitchik's own response to the problem I am posing is not as relevant to my inquiry as the response of a Modern Orthodox Jewish rabbi today who is trying to be faithful to the halakhic tradition as he believes Soloveitchik conveyed it to him.

about human potential: cognitive man uses his powers of observation and reason to penetrate the mysteries of reality; and *homo religiosus* receives all of creation as something wondrously incomprehensible that feeds his yearning for the Creator.¹⁰ But neither one fully realizes man's inherent potential. Only halakhic man can do that, by harmonizing the best impulses of both cognitive man and *homo religiosus* to create a magnificent new being,¹¹ one who consults the realm of the divine to learn how to redeem the world and himself—and then proceeds to do so.

Soloveitchik's halakhic man appears to be his ideal Jew, one whose thoughts and actions amount to partnership with God. He explains that “[h]alakhic man orients himself to reality through *a priori* images of the world which he bears in the deep recesses of his personality,”¹² and which he compares to what he sees around him. The source of halakhic man's norms is, of course, Torah:

When halakhic man approaches reality, he comes with his Torah, given to him from Sinai, in hand. He orients himself to the world by means of fixed statutes and firm principles. An entire corpus of precepts and laws guides him along the path leading to existence. Halakhic man, well furnished with rules, judgments, and fundamental principles, draws near the world with an *a priori* relation.¹³

Halakhic man would delight to live in the ideal realm of Torah law, but because the world does not reflect divine ideals, his dearest wish is to “subject reality to the yoke of the Halakhah.”¹⁴ His task is “the task of creation. He must...repair the defects in the cosmos, and replenish the ‘privation’ in being. Man, the creature, is commanded to become a partner with the Creator in the renewal of the cosmos....”¹⁵ God imposed order upon the cosmos in the beginning, but chaos never ceases to strain against its bindings: “[T]he forces of relative nothingness ... wish to burst

¹⁰ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 3-16. I quote from the 1983 English translation, but this book first appeared in Hebrew in 1944.

¹¹ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 4.

¹² Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 17.

¹³ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 19.

¹⁴ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 23-29.

¹⁵ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 105.

forth out of the chains of obedience that the Almighty imposed upon them and seek to plunge the earth back into chaos and the void. It is only the law that holds them back and bars the path before them.”¹⁶ The image of law as a retaining wall, holding off the threat of an avalanche of meaninglessness, is developed further:

The Deep wishes to cast off the yoke of the law...to pass beyond the boundary...and limit that the Creator set up and carved out and inundate the world and the fullness thereof. However, at the rebuke of the Almighty, it flees in retreat. ... The sight of a tempestuous sea, of whirling, raging waves that beat upon the shore there to break, symbolizes to the Judaic consciousness the struggle of the chaos and void with creation, the quarrel of the deep with the principles of order and the battle of confusion with the law.¹⁷

The law that God enacts, and halakhic man upholds, is no mere normative map of the world: it is the source of life itself, the divine barrier protecting order and meaning from the looming ocean of chaos and nothingness.

Because God’s original ordering of the world was incomplete, and because evil threatens, there is work for halakhic man to do. He must transform himself—he must repent and create himself anew¹⁸—and he must transform the world, establishing justice in his community for the sake of the disempowered (the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the oppressed). Soloveitchik poetically summarizes this aspect of halakhic man’s task:

The actualization of the ideals of justice and righteousness is the pillar of fire which halakhic man follows, when he, as a rabbi and teacher in Israel, serves his community. More, through the implementation of the principles of righteousness, man fulfills the task of creation imposed upon him: the perfection of the world under the dominion of Halakhah and the renewal of the face of creation.¹⁹

Halakhic man is to approach his community and himself as he approaches the natural world, with Torah-based norms in mind, a reflexive tendency to categorize whatever he encounters, and an eagerness to restore whatever strays from the divine norms he espouses. In this way, halakhic man combines cognitive man’s habit of observing and analyzing worldly reality with *homo*

¹⁶ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 103.

¹⁷ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 103.

¹⁸ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 110-117.

¹⁹ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 91.

religiosus's yearning for something eternal, prior to worldly reality; and he transforms himself from a passive creature into an active agent, choosing to partner with God to perfect creation.

Although neither cognitive man nor *homo religiosus* can match the majesty of halakhic man, both of them are greater realizations of human potential than mere species man, whom Soloveitchik introduces in his discussion of prophecy in Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the final two sections of the book, Soloveitchik compares species man, a merely biological life, to the man of God, whose creative activity distinguishes his life.²⁰ Species man is unindividuated, but the man of God is a *somebody* who leaves his unique mark on the world. (It is not made explicit how halakhic man compares to the man of God, but Soloveitchik's use of Maimonides here suggests that the man of God is akin to Maimonides's prophet,²¹ in that to be a man of God would be halakhic man's crowning achievement, the highest level of spiritual development available to him.) Whether a man ever develops past species-hood to become a man of God is a moral choice that rests entirely in his own hands:

This ontological privilege [to act and create], which is the peculiar possession of the man who has a particular existence of his own, a privilege that distinguishes him from all other creatures and endows him with individual immortality, is dependent upon man himself. The choice is his. He may, like the individual of all the other species, exist in the realm of the images and shadows, or he may exist as an individual who is not a part of the universal and who proves worthy of a fixed, established existence in the world of the 'forms' and 'intellects separate from matter'.... Species man or man of God, this is the alternative which the Almighty placed before man. If he proves worthy, then he becomes a man of God in all the splendor of his individual existence that cleaves to absolute infinity and the glorious 'divine overflow.' If he proves unworthy, then he ends up as one more random example of the biological species, a turbid and blurred image of universal existence.²²

²⁰ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 125.

²¹ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 124-128.

²² Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 125-26. Soloveitchik later reinforces his point that to be species man or to be a man of God is a moral choice that rests entirely in the hands of each individual when he writes on p. 128, "Man is obliged to broaden the scope and strengthen the intensity of the individual providence that watches over him. Everything is dependent on him; it is all in his hands. When a person creates himself, ceases to be a mere species man, and becomes a man of God, then he has fulfilled that commandment which is implicit in the principle of providence."

Following this passage, Soloveitchik quotes from III:17-18 of the *Guide*, concluding with the implication that his species man, like Maimonides's "ignorant and disobedient," is "like the beasts that speak not" of Ps. 49:13 and 49:21.²³ In other words, mere species man, through his poor life choices and resulting spiritual unworthiness, does nothing to individuate himself, nothing to register his name in the eternal registry that might have granted him a sort of immortality. He lives a forgettable life, dies, and vanishes from the record—as he deserves.

2. *Family Redeemed's* Two Claims: Men and women have opposing natures; but they have equal spiritual value

This collection of essays was made available in 2000, seven years after Soloveitchik's death, thanks to the work of Rabbi Reuven Ziegler and his editing team, under the direction of Rabbi David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky. As the editors' introduction explains, the essays I will look at were first presented to the public in the form of lectures, delivered by Soloveitchik between 1959 and 1971.²⁴ In these works, he mines Torah and halakhah to uncover divine norms regarding gender roles. In the passages I examine, Soloveitchik observes that halakhah divides

²³ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 126

²⁴ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed*, ed. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2000), ix-x. I examine "Marriage," "Torah and Shekhinah," "Adam and Eve," and "Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed." According to the preface, "Marriage" was from an undated essay, but Soloveitchik gave a lecture on this subject in 1959. "Torah and Shekhinah" was presented as a lecture in March 1968, on the first anniversary of the death of his wife. "Adam and Eve" was presented as a lecture at Stern in December 1971, although the section on Adam's and Eve's respective sins comes from another (undated) manuscript. And "Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed" comes from three undated manuscripts. On 10 December 2020, in response to my email query, Professor Shatz graciously informed me that after *Family Redeemed* was published in English, Rabbi Ziegler discovered that "Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed," like "Torah and Shekhinah," was also delivered as a lecture in 1968, on the occasion of Soloveitchik's wife's first *yahrzeit*, but "Parenthood" was given in Boston while "Torah and Shekhinah" was given in New York. (Professor Shatz points out that Soloveitchik could have delivered the same lecture in both cities, but he chose to write two different lectures instead.) The dating information for "Parenthood" appears in the Hebrew version of *Family Redeemed*, which was published after the English version. From this information, I think it safe to conclude that Soloveitchik was aware of what he had written in *Halakhic Man* when he was discussing the nature of male and female in these lectures; that is, he must have chosen the descriptive terms he used to oppose species man and the man of God well before he applied those same terms to oppose masculine and feminine.

people into the categories of male and female and assigns certain religious tasks and privileges to men that are not given to women. Soloveitchik tries to make sense of that asymmetrical division via essentializing ideas about the ways in which the woman's personality differs from the man's, while still insisting that men and women are equally valuable in the eyes of God and halakhah.

In "Marriage," Soloveitchik writes,

in the eyes of the Halakhah man and woman enjoy an equal status and have the same worth as far as their *humanitas* is concerned. Both were created in the image of God, both joined the covenantal community at Sinai, both are committed to our metahistorical destiny, both crave and search for God, and with both He engages in a dialogue. ... Man and woman are both worthy of communing with God, the highest form of human perfection and self-fulfillment. However, the Halakhah has discriminated between axiological equality pertaining to their Divine essence and metaphysical²⁵ uniformity at the level of the existential personal experience. Man and woman are different personae, endowed with singular qualities and assigned distinct missions in life.²⁶

In this passage we find both the claim that men and women hold equal value in the eyes of God and the claim that they have different natures and thus are differently obligated by halakhah.

Similarly, in "Marriage," Soloveitchik describes the traditional gender-based division of labor as a balanced one: "The husband, according to the law, is the provider, and the wife is the housekeeper. The husband must support and sustain the wife and she in turn is supposed to run the house. Each one fulfills an assigned task, and they need each other."²⁷ But this portrayal of husband and wife as equal in standing is challenged by other portrayals that not only distinguish men and women but characterize masculinity as superior.

In "Adam and Eve," we read, "The two sex-personalities sin differently."²⁸ The male, like Adam, is guilty of seeking to "legislate an ethical code of his own, to unravel the cosmic

²⁵ On my reading, the word "metaphysical" does not serve Soloveitchik's meaning. It appears to me that he is talking about uniformity at the level of material reality rather than in the sense of intangible reality that other philosophers use "metaphysical" to signify.

²⁶ Soloveitchik, "Marriage," in *Family Redeemed*, 71-72.

²⁷ Soloveitchik, "Marriage," in *Family Redeemed*, 53. Although he does not specify which "law" he is referring to here, it may be a reference to Mishnah Ketubot 5:5, which lists a wife's household obligations.

²⁸ Soloveitchik, "Adam and Eve," in *Family Redeemed*, 22.

mystery and thus usurp the omnipotence of God and become himself a creator.”²⁹ To thwart him, God cursed man to struggle with nature: “Man will not be able to master nature the way he was destined in the original plan of creation. The returns on his investment in terms of toil and anguish will not be adequate with the effort. His drive for power, coupled with creativity and production, will not be fully realized.”³⁰ Nature will forever frustrate man’s efforts, and in this way God keeps man from achieving the power he wants. The woman-personality’s sin, like Eve’s, is not an over-ambitious grab for power like Adam’s, but rather a hedonistic lust for sensory pleasure. “She was the passive personality, the receptive mind, the indulging type. She wanted to redeem herself from her sacrificial destiny, from selfless involvement in motherhood.... She wanted to take everything from nature without giving anything in return.”³¹ Soloveitchik contrasts her interest in the world with the male interest in the infinite: “She exchanges her yearning for the vast and infinite, for a nature-encompassed and restricted life. ... The woman yields to the dictates of nature and surrenders her dreams and vision of the infinite in order to be a natural mother.”³² It is the duty and the fate of the woman to become a mother and live a life of self-sacrifice, but while women willingly abandon the infinite, they never stop desiring earthly enjoyments. To their frustration, God assigns them a subservient role to the very husband and children they wanted to be free to love and enjoy. “[T]he woman fails in her attempt to enjoy life; she is never successful at a hedonic aesthetic level. She wants to unite in marriage with the man she loves and establish a home, raise a family and enjoy her children, [but] she finds herself in bondage to her companion and children.”³³ Women want to indulge in the delights family life appears to promise, but they find instead that family life means serving their

²⁹ Soloveitchik, “Adam and Eve,” in *Family Redeemed*, 22-23.

³⁰ Soloveitchik, “Adam and Eve,” in *Family Redeemed*, 25.

³¹ Soloveitchik, “Adam and Eve,” in *Family Redeemed*, 23.

³² Soloveitchik, “Adam and Eve,” in *Family Redeemed*, 25-26.

³³ Soloveitchik, “Adam and Eve,” in *Family Redeemed*, 24.

husband and children. The essay claims that the man's sin is no better or worse than the woman's, but it must be noted that the man's sin stems from his noble desire to become a creator in God's image; while the woman's sin stems from her desire to passively receive and enjoy without actively contributing to society through her own work. The man needs to temper his ambition, but his failing is not commensurate to that of the woman, who barely differentiates herself from other animals.

In "Torah and Shekhinah," we find a defense of Jewish law for obligating fathers and not mothers to teach their sons Torah. Soloveitchik asserts that fatherly love presents no barrier to educating sons, but motherly love presents a conflict of interest. He writes,

the love of father consists in helping the child to free himself from paternal authority, in moving away from him, while mother's love expresses itself in steady intensification of her emotional attachment, in surging toward her child. The Halakhah entrusted education to the father – and what is the educational gesture if not an act of granting independence to the young person...? The father was charged with this task because it fits into the framework of paternal concern. The mother was relieved of the educational duties since she instinctively resents her child's adulthood and the independence that education is supposed to promote and foster.³⁴

Soloveitchik characterizes this gender-based halakhic disparity as arising logically from the emotionally overbearing nature of the mother, compared to the more restrained and practical parenting style of the father. To be blunt, he holds that mothers are justifiably shut out from the passing of Torah onto their children because they are emotionally immature: they are so absorbed by their own fondness for their children (as *dependents*) that they cannot support the child's natural transition to adulthood, as fathers can. Only the more emotionally mature father can be trusted to properly educate his sons without resenting their progress toward independence. Therefore Judaism wisely creates separate roles for men and women, and the responsibility of passing the halakhah from generation to generation is entrusted to fathers. This position of Soloveitchik's is certainly consistent with his claim that the halakhic status of women is justified

³⁴ Soloveitchik, "Torah and Shekhinah," in *Family Redeemed*, 165.

by essential gender differences, but it puts mothers in a morally impossible position: while a father is given a doubly strong reason to help his child grow toward independence (it being both better for the child developmentally and halakhically required of him as the child's father), a mother is in a moral dilemma. Either she is emotionally immature, as mothers naturally are, and thus she does not deserve the responsibility of seeing to her child's religious education; or, if she somehow manages to rise above her natural inclination to resent her child's progress toward adulthood, then she is guilty of not conforming to her assigned gender role. If this position of Soloveitchik's is consistent with the claim that women have spiritual value equal to men, it is difficult to see how.

The passage quoted at the beginning of this section promised that all the undesirable aspects of women's halakhic status have no bearing whatsoever on their spiritual value in God's eyes. This passage is cited at the beginning of "Responses," in order to establish that the "halakhic ethos of gender roles" is one of "equal value of men and women as individuals and as *ovdei Hashem*, [despite] role differentiation."³⁵ But in light of what we have already seen Soloveitchik state about the personality of women—the baser and more hedonistic ways in which they sin, their lack of natural inclination to be active creators, and their relative emotional immaturity when it comes to educating their children—it is reasonable to ask whether the claim that they have equal value still carries the promised meaning. The next section's comparison of *Family Redeemed* to *Halakhic Man* questions whether the claim can be made at all.

3. Resonances between *Family Redeemed* and *Halakhic Man*

In "Marriage," Soloveitchik draws from Jewish mysticism to place the abstract concepts of masculinity and femininity in opposition to each other:

³⁵ Feldman et. al., "Responses," 10, fn. 26.

The ideas of *Shekhinah* and *Deus Absconditus*, the “Hidden God,” reflect the dual character of Being as feminine and masculine. However, Jewish mysticism ... interpreted the dual ontic motif in abstract philosophical categories [rather than through mythic narrative]. The principles of creativity and receptivity, acting and being acted upon, energizing and absorbing, aggressiveness and toleration, initiating and completing, of limitless emanation of a transcendent being and measured reflection by the cosmos, are portrayed by the dual motif of masculinity and femininity within our religious experience. The whole cosmology of Jewish mysticism revolves around polarity in Being. Femininity, *Shekhinah*, has been imprisoned within the orderly yet restricted universe, while masculinity, *Yesod*, is transcendent, above and beyond concrete reality.³⁶

If “Responses” is right to cite *Family Redeemed* to support its claim that men are not spiritually superior to women despite their unequal roles, then we could expect Soloveitchik’s opposition of masculinity and femininity here to celebrate them both as different from each other, but equally valuable. But when he describes the masculine personality, Soloveitchik speaks of an active, powerful subject: “creativity,” “acting,” “energizing,” “aggressiveness,” “initiating,” “of limitless emanation,” “transcendent,” “above and beyond,” etc. To describe the feminine essence, he speaks of a passive object—“receptivity,” “being acted upon,” “absorbing,” “toleration,” “reflection,” and “imprisoned within the...restricted universe.” For Soloveitchik, the masculine essence is creative agency and movement, while the feminine essence is quiet submission. Masculinity involves independent purpose; femininity involves receiving and reflecting the purposeful acts of others. If these are the wellsprings of what makes men men and what makes women women, it already stretches the imagination to suppose that Soloveitchik sees these two sex-personalities as being of equal spiritual value.

But it requires an even more elastic imagination to hold onto the claim of equal spiritual value for men and women when we compare the above passage to the final two chapters of *Halakhic Man* discussed earlier, in which Soloveitchik contrasts a man of God to species man.

The difference between [species man] and a man of God is that the former is characterized by passivity, the latter by activity and creation. The man who belongs solely to the realm of the universal is passive to an extreme—he creates nothing. The man who has a particular existence of his own is not merely a passive, receptive creature but acts and creates. Action and creation are the true distinguishing marks of authentic existence. ...

³⁶Soloveitchik, “Marriage,” in *Family Redeemed*, 69.

[Species man]...has never done anything that could serve to legitimate his existence as an individual. His soul, his spirit, his entire being, all are grounded in the realm of the universal. ... He has no stature of his own, no original, individual, personal profile. He has never created anything, never brought into being anything new, never accomplished anything. He is receptive, passive, a spiritual parasite. He is wholly under the influence of other people and their views. ... He lives unnoticed and dies unmourned. He bequeaths nothing to future generations, but dies without leaving a trace of his having lived. ...

But [the man of God] is no longer a prisoner of time but is his own master. He exists not by virtue of the species, but solely on account of his own individual worth. His life is replete with creation and renewal, cognition and profound understanding. ... He is not passive but active. His personality is not characterized by receptivity but by spontaneity. He does not simply abandon himself to the rule of the species but blazes his own individual trail. Moreover, he, as an individual, influences the many. ... He is dynamic, not static, does not remain at rest but moves forward in an ever-ascending climb.³⁷

Masculinity, like the man of God, is active, creative, influential, and energetic. Both tend to transcend the universe's boundaries and move toward the infinite. Femininity, like species man, is receptive, passive, influenced and acted upon by others, and static. Neither femininity nor species man can escape the creatureliness that keeps it bound within the restrictions of time and space, so it cannot transcend this world to approach the infinite.³⁸ Soloveitchik does not explicitly scorn the feminine as he does species man, but once the commonality between the two is established through the qualities noted above, one cannot help wondering: is it possible for the spiritual excellence of the man of God and the spiritual worthlessness of species man to imply *nothing* about the relative spiritual value of men and women? Since he describes the man of God in the same way he describes the masculine, and species man in the same way he describes the feminine, how can he coherently say that a man of God is spiritually so much better than species man, but men and women have equal spiritual value?

II. Objections

I turn now to dealing with four possible objections to this apparent incompatibility. First, women are not like species man because they do not choose their sex-personality in the way that

³⁷ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 125-128.

³⁸ See the Appendix for a more complete visualization of these two pairs of overlapping concepts.

species man chooses never to become a man of God. Second, Soloveitchik's celebration of biblical heroines appears to prove that womanly greatness is indeed celebrated equally to masculine greatness. Third, masculinity and femininity are to be seen as abstract concepts, not descriptions of actual people. And fourth, whatever he may have believed Torah says about femininity, he could not really have thought less of women because he put his reputation on the line to ensure that they could have access to Talmud study from a young age.

1. Femininity is not a moral choice

The double standard between Soloveitchik's scorn for species man and his apparent neutrality toward the feminine could be explained by recalling that women do not choose their femininity. In *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik said that whether one lives life as a spiritually excellent man of God or a spiritually parasitic species man is a *moral choice* that rests solely in the hands of each individual human, but he presumably believes that no one chooses their gender. One could say that species man did something to deserve our scorn, but a woman should feel no shame for her femininity because she cannot help being a woman. But while this solution might explain why we do not blame women for their femininity, it does not give womanhood a spiritual status equal to manhood. Instead, it grants the troubling premise that to be a woman is to be something lesser—not a sin, but still a pity. On this view, femininity is excusable in women, but masculinity remains universally preferred, which is not what we would expect to find from one who holds that the sex-personalities of men and women are of equal spiritual value.

2. Biblical heroines are valued for their redemptive acts and leadership in crisis

Soloveitchik's concept of women and femininity is complicated by his praise of particular biblical heroines in "Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed." He says that after Eve tarnished the role of mother by mothering her children in only the biological sense, without any

commitment or leadership, Sarah redeemed motherhood by “rising from a receptive to an active role,” committing with intention to what biology had assigned to her, and becoming a leader.³⁹ He also notes with approval that Sarah, Rebecca, Miriam, and Deborah took on their respective leadership roles “heroically” in moments of crisis, when the men around them had been led astray despite their “great intellectual prowess.”⁴⁰ He generalizes from there to say that “the greatness of the man expresses itself in everyday action, when situations lend themselves to logical analysis and discursive thinking,” but the woman’s leadership style becomes valuable only “at the hour of crisis,” when what is needed is not a man’s detailed analysis but a woman’s “instantaneous action that flows from the very depths of a sensitive personality.”⁴¹ I take him to mean that because it is a man’s nature to analyze situations at a detailed level, male leadership is appropriate for times of stability; but because it is a woman’s nature to take the entire situation in at once and act as if by feel, women have taken crucial leadership-like actions in emergencies, when there was no time to reason through all the relevant considerations.⁴²

Thus, Soloveitchik says, “the woman is a crisis personality.” Normally “the man makes up his mind and the Biblical woman follows him,” hiding herself from the public eye. In times of upheaval, she appears and “takes command,” but “the instant she completes her task,” she swiftly “draws down the curtain of anonymity and disappears.”⁴³

This picture of women as suited to crisis leadership is quite different from the picture of women we saw in “Marriage.” There, the feminine essence is one of reactivity and receptivity

³⁹ Soloveitchik, “Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed,” in *Family Redeemed*, 109.

⁴⁰ Soloveitchik, “Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed,” in *Family Redeemed*, 115-119.

⁴¹ Soloveitchik, “Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed,” in *Family Redeemed*, 116-17.

⁴² What goes unstated here is that no male authority invited them to take control; they seized it of their own initiative and according to their own judgment. Rather than call women crisis leaders, Soloveitchik might have said that women don’t lead until everyone is so desperate that if one confident in her judgment seizes the helm, no one stops her. In other words, perhaps the significance of the crisis is not that it awakens her abilities but that it quiets the objections of others.

⁴³ “Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed,” in *Family Redeemed*, 116-119.

and never one of leader-like initiative, not even informed by the increased sensitivity attributed to women here. In “Marriage,” women’s lack of initiative was part of their essential nature: it is the essence of femininity to be passive and not active, receptive and not creative, etc. But here it is implied that these women *could* take command, but they refrain until absolutely necessary, out of a pious commitment to letting men be in control, along with a humble awareness that men are more naturally inclined to detailed analysis.

What precisely does Soloveitchik value about these biblical heroines? It seems to be a combination of two things: first, it is the courage and wisdom they showed when they heroically took command; and second, it is the way they rejected the authority that their wisdom and courage earned them, donating it all to men in their lives. So in light of the definitions of masculinity and femininity we saw in “Marriage,” is Soloveitchik praising these heroines for their feminine traits, proving that he does indeed value women’s spiritual potential? Or is he praising them for masculine traits that were lying dormant within them?

It seems to me that what he admires most about these women is not their “feminine” passivity and receptivity, but rather their ability to take heroic action, a quality that he would call masculine, despite their pious commitment to *performing* femininity when no crisis looms. This explains why he writes with such approval that Sarah rose “from a receptive to an active role,” while portraying it as fitting, albeit sad, when she “draws down the curtain of anonymity” and Abraham thereafter receives most of the credit for her work. For the same reason, Soloveitchik admires the other biblical heroines for saving their people when men could not, but he also expects that they would not accept the resulting public acclaim nor use it to insert themselves into the male authority structure they helped to restabilize. If *Family Redeemed* is as representative of the halakhic ethos as “Responses” suggests, these findings seriously challenge

the claim that the halakhic ethos sees women and men as equal in spiritual value despite their natural differences. Instead, it looks like men are valued for traits that qualify them to hold religious authority, while women, who may also harbor those same traits, are discouraged from publicizing their own fitness to lead. Displaying feminine qualities is not applauded in these women so much as it is *expected*; it is their masculine qualities that are celebrated, but in order to not challenge the authority structure, those qualities are to be expressed only in limited ways.

3. Masculinity and femininity are abstract concepts; real people are mixtures of both

In “Torah and Shekhinah,” while discussing why halakhah assigns to fathers and not to mothers the obligation to educate their children, Soloveitchik writes, “I want you to understand: the Baraita does not speak of father and mother, but of types—father types and mother types. The real father may have certain characteristics which belong to the mother-type, and the mother may act like a father.”⁴⁴ In this passage he appears to be acknowledging a larger point, that not all men fit the picture of masculinity he finds in Jewish mysticism, nor do all women fit its picture of femininity. But while he may indeed have *agreed* with that statement, I am not sure he would have *approved*, for two reasons.

First, we saw in *Halakhic Man* that “halakhic man orients himself to reality through a priori images of the world which he bears in the deep recesses of his personality,”⁴⁵ and “[his] ideal is to subject reality to the yoke of the Halakhah”⁴⁶ wherever he can. If masculinity and femininity are two of halakhic man’s norms, as they seem to be from the way Soloveitchik speaks of them, then for halakhic man, the proper response to masculine women or feminine men is not to appreciate that each person expresses their own unique mixture of these opposing

⁴⁴ Soloveitchik, “Torah and Shekhinah,” in *Family Redeemed*, 161.

⁴⁵ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 17.

⁴⁶ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 29.

abstract concepts, but rather to reinforce the existing gender norm that has been assigned to them and, if possible, to encourage them to conform.

Second, when Soloveitchik presents this point in “Torah and Shekhinah,” he does not follow it through to its logical conclusion. I argued earlier that this passage speaks of mothers’ relative emotional immaturity in order to justify that fathers and not mothers are responsible for the religious education of their children. But if Soloveitchik really believed that the halakhah wanted to obligate whichever parent was more emotionally mature, then he would have had to call for the parent whose love is more fatherly to take on this obligation, regardless of that parent’s gender. Instead, he proceeds to speak about fathers and mothers as though they do not diverge from the sex-personalities he describes. After quoting another baraita that assigns to fathers the responsibility for educating their sons, he recapitulates his earlier justification:

Again, the law is rooted in the fundamental incongruity of the two concerns, paternal and maternal. Of course, both relationships are genuine, deep-seated and intimate. Yet the teleology or purpose guiding father in his efforts to help his child is not identical with that which is stimulating mother. Neither are the images of the child which father and mother behold the same....father and mother move in two opposite directions.⁴⁷

If Soloveitchik’s sex-personalities were meant to describe archetypes and not actual people, why use them to explain why these obligations apply to actual people, and not merely to the abstract archetypes? Once again the most likely answer appears to be that he saw the abstract concepts of masculinity and femininity as ideals that men and women ought to emulate consciously, if they could not emulate them naturally. (If true, this answer would help to explain why he approved of the biblical heroines who were not naturally feminine, but acted the part most of the time.) A woman who loves her son in a fatherly way should still step aside and let her husband see to the boy’s education, because that is what femininity demands, and femininity is the ideal that has

⁴⁷ Soloveitchik, “Torah and Shekhinah,” in *Family Redeemed*, 162.

been assigned to her. In *Family Redeemed*, masculinity and femininity are not just descriptive concepts; they are normative.

4. Soloveitchik proved he valued women by fighting for their Talmud education

Throughout his adult life, Soloveitchik used the influential power of his stature to help open opportunities for girls and women to learn Talmud. In 1937 he and his wife Dr. Tonya Soloveitchik founded the Maimonides School in Brookline, MA, the first Jewish school to teach Talmud to girls as well as boys in every grade.⁴⁸ In a 1953 letter, in response to a query from Rabbi Leonard Rosenfeld (then the director of the Education Committee of Hebrew Institute of Long Island), Soloveitchik reiterated that girls and boys should have coeducational Talmud education in grade school.⁴⁹ And in 1977, when Stern College for Women inaugurated its program of intensive Talmud study, he agreed to give the opening lecture, risking his own reputation to support the initiative.⁵⁰ One cannot understate the power of his influence to legitimize this revolution in access to intensive Talmud study for Orthodox girls and women. But why did he work so intently for this cause? Was it indeed because he saw women as of equal value to men, or was there another reason?

⁴⁸ Seth Farber, *An American Orthodox Dreamer: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Boston's Maimonides School* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2004), 8.

⁴⁹ Seth Farber (as Rabbi Shaul Farber), "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Coeducational Jewish Education," *Conversations*, no. 7 (Spring 2010): 103-12, <https://www.jewishideas.org/node/2535/pdf>. The exchange of letters between Soloveitchik and Rosenfeld shows that Soloveitchik originally refused to answer Rosenfeld's query until Rosenfeld explicitly stated that he would be bound by Soloveitchik's answer, whatever it was. Only after Rosenfeld clarified that he had already agreed to be so bound did Soloveitchik offer his answer. Soloveitchik wrote, "...it would be a very regrettable oversight on our part if we were to arrange separate Hebrew courses for girls. Not only is the teaching of Torah she-be-al peh to girls permissible but it is nowadays an absolute imperative. This policy of discrimination between the sexes as to subject matter and method of instruction which is still advocated by certain groups within our Orthodox community has contributed greatly to the deterioration and downfall of traditional Judaism. Boys and girls alike should be introduced to the inner halls of Torah she-be-al peh. I hope to prepare in the near future a halakhic brief on the same problem which will exhaust the various aspects of the same. In the meantime I heartily endorse a uniform program for the entire student body."

⁵⁰ Rabbi Saul Berman, "Forty Years Later: The Rav's Opening Shiur at the Stern College for Women Beit Midrash," *Lehrhaus* (October 9, 2017), <https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/forty-years-later-the-rav%E2%80%99s-opening-shiur-at-the-stern-college-for-women-beit-midrash/>.

Sincere, well-informed people have been disagreeing about his reasons for a long time, perhaps in part because he never gave a definitive written halakhic justification for his position.⁵¹ The two most common views are, first, that he believed teaching Talmud to girls and women was a regrettable but necessary measure to save them from the unfortunately secular society in which they are raised these days; and second, that for girls and women to study Talmud is as good a thing for them as it is for boys and men. The first view points to a minimalist, instrumentalizing approach: Judaism needs girls to grow into pious Jewish women to ensure that the next generation will be raised in good Jewish homes; so while girls and women would not ideally study Talmud, in this situation they may study just what is absolutely necessary to enable them to reject secular temptations. The second points to a maximalist, non-instrumentalizing approach: Talmud study is good for Jewish girls and women as it is for boys and men, so even if Jewish children today grew up without the influence of secular society, it would be good for all of them to study Talmud. Soloveitchik seems to have expressed both views at different points.

On Soloveitchik's work at the Maimonides School, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin writes that he

often intoned the verse "And the Lord created the human being in His image...male and female..." when he insisted that young women be exposed to Torah She'ba'alpeh in the exact same manner and methodology as are the young men, and this verse was the proof-text behind the equal-gender Talmud curriculum in the Brookline Maimonides Yeshiva High School which he and his Rabbanit Tonya pioneered and led.⁵²

The sentiment is a charming expression of the second view, but this verse is an odd choice of proof text from one who also asserts that halakhah rightly applies differently to men than to

⁵¹ "As Seth Farber, who has chronicled Soloveitchik's involvement in Maimonides School, concludes, 'Rabbi Soloveitchik left no written testimony that would explain the ideology behind these decisions [regarding women's education], nor did he speak publicly about these matters' (Farber, *An American Orthodox Dreamer*, 75). What is more, Soloveitchik's theological works defends a counterview that emphasizes essential gender differences and sharply distinguishes between the role of men and women in Jewish education." Ari Ackerman, "Soloveitchik, Rabbi Joseph Dov" in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 27 February 2009, *Jewish Women's Archive* <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/soloveitchik-rabbi-joseph-dov>.

⁵² Riskin, 8. <https://ots.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WOMEN-AS-SPIRITUAL-LEADERS-AND-HALAKHIC-DECISORS.pdf>

women because men and women have always sinned differently, because mothers and fathers naturally love their children in different ways, and because the abstract concepts of masculine and feminine are fundamentally opposite each other. If the creation of male and female in God's image establishes that girls and women should learn Talmud in exactly the same way that boys and men do, despite centuries of halakhic decisors upholding the opposite view, why would it not also challenge all the other ways in which halakhah treats women differently from men? Soloveitchik may simply have held inconsistent views on this issue; but he was such a careful thinker that it would be reasonable to ask whether he had another justification in mind.

His 1953 letter to Rosenfeld speaks of his intention to write a definitive halakhic brief justifying Talmud study for girls and women, but if he wrote it, it was never published.⁵³

However, testimony as to his reasoning comes from his student Rabbi M. Mozeson, who recalls a conversation he once had with Soloveitchik on this topic:

Even if teaching women the Oral Torah was once forbidden, today, when [women] are on par with men both in the academic world and in matters of determining policy, and *when women won't agree to follow the strictures of the Torah if they don't understand these matters themselves*, by learning the sources in the Gemara and the Pentateuch, *we must permit them to study the Oral Torah...* [Soloveitchik] explained that complex problems arise in our technical world and if our daughters don't study the fundamentals of the Torah, from the Pentateuch and the Gemara, including the commentaries of the Rishonim, our genuine Judaism may, God forbid, cease to exist. It's now time for "women to come and hear", and then, we'll witness the realization of the end of the verse in parashat Vayakhel: "and they will observe to do all of the words of this Torah"⁵⁴

⁵³ Rabbi Shaul Farber, 6-7, <https://www.jewishideas.org/node/2535/pdf>.

⁵⁴ Rav Dr. Amit Kula, "Women as Poskot Halacha," *Beit Hillel* (Summer 2015): 9-10, <https://eng.beithillel.org.il/docs/beit-hillel-pub-english-5.pdf>, emphasis mine. Kula cites "Rabbi M. Mozeson of Passaic, NJ, Chinuch Habanot, *Hadarom* (journal), pp. 66-67 (Elul 5758), pp. 65-66." *Hadarom* is a Hebrew journal published by the Rabbinical Council of America, the rabbinic wing of the Orthodox Union. Contrast the tenor of this passage with a statement from Soloveitchik's son-in-law Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "Women, Talmud Study, and Avodat Hashem," *Lehrhaus* (October 30, 2017), <https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/women-talmud-study-and-avodat-hashem/>. Although they share some ideas about why Talmud study for women is needed now when it was not needed before, and what positive effect it will have on the women who engage in it, Soloveitchik's greatest emphasis (as recorded by Mozeson) seems to be the need to preserve "genuine Judaism" against the threat of women who are today both more powerful and less docile than women of generations ago, whereas Lichtenstein's greatest emphasis is on the benefits of serious Talmud study for the spiritual development of the women themselves. (Some of that difference may be due to the difference in context: Lichtenstein was speaking at the opening dedication of a girls' yeshiva high school, while the setting of the conversation between Soloveitchik and R. Mozeson is not given.) Lichtenstein also cites the Bais Yaakov movement as another positive step toward the religious education of girls, despite criticism that it was not traditional enough. It appears to me that Soloveitchik's

If this account is an accurate representation of Soloveitchik's views,⁵⁵ then he called for women's Talmud study as a concession to unfortunate circumstances:⁵⁶ now that women can pursue secular education and hold higher-status positions in the world, they are no longer so willing to follow the instruction of their religious authorities without first looking into the matter themselves. The concern is that they might leave Orthodox Judaism in frustration unless they are allowed to learn Talmud and thereby come to see the wisdom of the halakhot. Because good

efforts to make Talmud study available to girls and women amounts to a continuation of the pioneering and halakhically controversial work of Sarah Schenirer to bring formal Jewish education to girls from a young age; but if Soloveitchik ever spoke publicly of the positive changes to Orthodox Judaism that Schenirer's work effected, I have not found a record of it.

⁵⁵ The implications of this account appear to be widely accepted among many Modern Orthodox scholars, but disputed by some. Efraim Vaynman records conflicting views: "The reason why R. Soloveitchik condoned women's Talmud study is a matter of dispute. Walter Wurtzberger, in his article, 'Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post-Modern Orthodoxy,' *Tradition* 29:1 (1994), p. 17-18, relates the version more popularly known, that R. Soloveitchik 'was convinced that under contemporary conditions, it was necessary to confront the challenge of modernity, and therefore Jewish women must be provided with the intellectual resources needed to appreciate the meaning of halakhic Judaism.' R. Soloveitchik's own grandson, R. Mayer Twersky, maintains that his grandfather's opinion was that only optional study of Torah sh'Bal Peh was forbidden by Talmudic injunction. Accordingly, since he, like the Chafetz Chaim before him, maintained that in modern times women must be taught more halacha, it was permitted to teach these sections of Torah sh'Bal Peh in a school setting. R. Twersky stresses that the difference between what the Chafetz Chaim advocated and what his grandfather sanctioned is just a matter of magnitude but not a fundamental disagreement of the underlying argument. See his article, 'A Glimpse of the Rav: Talmud Torah for Women and the Mehitsa Controversy,' *Women and the Study of Torah*, ed. Joel Wolowelsky, *Ktav* (2001), p. 49-54. [Seth] Farber, ["Dreamer"], p. 83, brings both opinions and sides with Wurtzberger. See also Moshe A. Mozeson, 'Chinukh Banot (Im Horaot R. Soloveitchik),' *Hadarom* 66-67 (1993), p. 63-66. In this light it is interesting to note a letter by Jeffery R. Woolf, quoted in *Women, Jewish Law, and Modernity*, p. 143 n. 146. According to Woolf, R. Soloveitchik "explicitly provided for co-education in grades K-12, thus ensuring equal education for all enrolled in the school. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that until the time of his illness and subsequent retirement, he never veered from the position that such an arrangement was legitimate and halakhically justified, *ab initio*, and not a begrudged ex-post-facto concession. ... (I am going out of my way to emphasize this point, as there is significant amount of conscious 'historical revisionism' in the Orthodox community which seeks to portray Rav Soloveitchik's position in a different light.)" Efraim Vaynman, "Rethinking the Shidduch Crisis II," *Torah Musings*, July 16, 2014, endnote 30 <https://www.torahmusings.com/2014/07/rethinking-shidduch-crisis-ii/>.

⁵⁶ The work of Sarah Schenirer has been characterized similarly, perhaps because that is the most effective way to render it acceptable to a halakhically conservative audience. However, the idea that Schenirer herself saw her work as an unfortunate emergency concession is not supported by current scholarship. In Naomi Seidman's definitive account, we learn that Schenirer was more of a revolutionary than she has been portrayed as being: "...there is little evidence that she longed to turn back the clock to the times when girls could get all the religious education they needed within their own homes, or that she ever regretted the revolution she accomplished." Naomi Seidman, *Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov Movement: A Revolution in the Name of Tradition* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019), 198. See also Leslie Ginsparg Klein, "Sarah Schenirer and Innovative Change: The Myths and Facts," *Lehrhaus* (August 14, 2017), <https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/sarah-schenirer-and-innovative-change-the-myths-and-facts/>.

Orthodox Jewish women are needed to bear and rear the next generation, if they make a credible threat to abandon the religion, religious authorities must save Judaism, even by non-traditional or extra-halakhic methods. But this framing of the matter suggests that offering Talmud study to women is done for the sake of the future of the religion, and not *also* for the sake of the women themselves: if not for the fact that women will be involved in the creation of the next generation of Jews, there might be no reason to make this change. It also gives no credit to (nor even acknowledges) all the Orthodox Jewish women who pressed for this change out of a fervent desire to learn and teach Talmud, nor does it credit their active efforts to persuade others in the community to support them. Instead, it presents the qualified male interpreters of halakhah as the sole powers steering the religion through the challenges of modernity—where one of those challenges is the behavior of Jewish women themselves. Perhaps this account is not an accurate reflection of Soloveitchik’s views, but it does not support the claim that he saw women as spiritually equal in value to men, because it does not show equal concern for their spiritual development beyond the minimum required for them to not destroy the religion.

A more flattering picture of Soloveitchik emerges from Rabbi Saul Berman’s recollection of Soloveitchik’s inaugural lecture at Stern in 1977. (Berman oversaw Stern’s creation of its intensive Talmud study program for women.) He writes that Soloveitchik closed his lecture by saying, “It’s important that not only boys should be acquainted, but girls, as well. I’ll support you as far as education is concerned. If you have problems come to me, I’ll fight your battles. I wish you success, *brakhah ve-hatzlahah*. I hope that next year you’ll know a lot, lot more.” And before he left, he said to Berman, “Tell them that if their fathers or brothers say to them, ‘what

are you doing learning gemara, *bist duch nor a maidel* (you're just a girl)?!'—tell them not to answer them. They should refer the fathers and brothers to me. I will answer for them.”⁵⁷

His offer is remarkably supportive, but it again fails to explain *why* Soloveitchik thought it was so important for girls and women to study Talmud. It seems to me that he was simply acknowledging the fact that if these women had sought to answer their critics directly, they would never have been taken seriously. If he wanted things to be otherwise—if his hope was that these women might lean upon his authority for now, but one day, with decades of education and experience, they would stand upon their own authority, as educated and experienced men do—that hope is not contained in his words.

His advising them not to speak for themselves might remind us of the description, in “Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed,” of the biblical heroine who “draws down the curtain of anonymity and disappears,” and of *Halakhic Man*’s likening of species man to the one who is “like the beasts that speak not.” Whereas boys and men learn Talmud both for their own spiritual development and with the hope that they may eventually use their knowledge to teach their children, make halakhic decisions, and generally be like a man of God who “influences the many,” Soloveitchik (if he was being consistent) seems to have called for women to learn Talmud so that they would feel spiritually satisfied enough to remain pious, despite their exposure to secular studies.⁵⁸ Because they have been assigned the feminine role, even if they

⁵⁷ Berman, <https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/forty-years-later-the-rav%E2%80%99s-opening-shiur-at-the-stern-college-for-women-beit-midrash/> But Berman’s characterization of Soloveitchik as an uncomplicated advocate for women may have been influenced by his own more liberal views. See his arguments for positions that Soloveitchik would likely have disagreed with in Saul J. Berman, “The Status of Women in Halakhic Judaism,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1973): 5-28, <https://traditiononline.org/the-status-of-women-in-halakhic-judaism/>.

⁵⁸ This approach would be consistent with a famous 1911 statement by the Chofetz Chaim that appears in his *Likkutei Halakhot*, *Sotah* 20b: “It seems that all of this [prohibition against women learning Torah] applies only to times past when all daughters lived in their fathers’ home and tradition was very strong, assuring that children would pursue their parents’ path, as it says, ‘Ask your father and he shall tell you.’ On that basis we could claim that a daughter needn’t learn Torah but merely rely on proper parental guidance. But today, in our iniquity, as

engage in intensive Talmud study, they are not to use their own knowledge to guide their community as the man of God would. Instead of becoming the publicly influential Jew that Soloveitchik terms a man of God, their assigned gender role calls upon them to act the part of species man, to “live unnoticed” by deliberately making themselves disappear.

We saw earlier that Soloveitchik planned to publish his halakhic reasoning for offering Talmud study to girls and women, but that such a brief has not appeared. Perhaps that decision was intentional: he may have believed that to publicize his reasoning would be counterproductive, given what he meant to achieve with his initiative compared to what Talmud study meant to the women who were doing it. If Soloveitchik approved of women studying Talmud to prevent them from abandoning Orthodoxy, but women studying Talmud imagined that through their study they might someday be recognized as halakhic authorities⁵⁹ (a development that Soloveitchik never called for and presumably did not support),⁶⁰ then Soloveitchik’s unpublished justification for women’s Talmud study could have appealed to the patronizing goal of *nachat ruach l’nashim*, or women’s spiritual satisfaction. The usage of this phrase in rabbinic discussions indicates that it is sometimes permissible for a woman to perform

parental tradition has been seriously weakened and women, moreover, regularly study secular subjects, it is certainly a great mitzvah to teach them *Chumash*, Prophets and Writings, and rabbinic ethics, such as *Pirkei Avot*, *Menorat HaMaor*, and the like, so as to validate our sacred belief; otherwise they may stray totally from God’s path and transgress the basic tenets of religion, God forbid.” Feldman et. al., “Responses,” 5. The authors quote the Chofetz Chaim in order to describe Soloveitchik’s work as an “expansion of this endorsement.” That “Responses” describes Soloveitchik’s actions as “compelled primarily by extra-legal considerations” is consistent with the picture of him as one who did not believe women should study Talmud except in an emergency situation, when so many of them might otherwise disaffiliate from Orthodox Judaism that the future of the religion would be in question—at which point they should study enough Talmud to secure their continued participation in the community.

⁵⁹ Even if women are not eligible for ordination, they may be eligible to serve as halakhic decisors. Riskin writes, “we are advocating heter hora’ah for women, the right for women with proper learning and piety to provide halakhic direction, but not necessarily semikhah, which might be mistaken to mean their ability to preside over a Synagogue similar to their male counterparts, and therefore to wrongly encourage them to lead in Public Prayer and Public Torah reading as baalot tefillah and baalot kriyah.” Riskin, 8, <https://ots.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WOMEN-AS-SPIRITUAL-LEADERS-AND-HALAKHIC-DECISORS.pdf>

⁶⁰ See Rabbi Aryeh A. Frimer, “The View of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l On the Ordination of Women,” *Text and Texture* (blog), June 26, 2010, <http://text.rcarabbis.org/the-view-of-rav-joseph-b-soloveitchik-zt%E2%80%9Dl-on-the-ordination-of-women-by-aryeh-a-frimer/>.

a religious action as though it were commanded of her, even though it is not, for the sake of the spiritual satisfaction it brings her. But as Rabbanit Devorah Zlochower points out in a case she examines, a woman who was so permitted could only have achieved that satisfaction by believing something *untrue* about the religious meaning her action carried.⁶¹ Did Soloveitchik withhold his halakhic brief on women's Talmud study in order to allow women studying Talmud to believe something untrue, but dear to their hearts, about the religious status their learning might bring them in their community? Of course we cannot know, but if he believed the efficacy of his initiative depended upon their untrue beliefs, he might have thought he had good reason not to publicize it. Women's Talmud study would lose its power to revitalize Judaism if the women studying Talmud learned of this reasoning and felt heartbroken. To have their hearts broken by such a revered figure might have made them even more susceptible to the temptation to abandon Orthodoxy for the secular world. Soloveitchik would certainly have been intellectually sensitive enough to anticipate this possibility. It could explain why today we do not have his halakhic brief, and why he relied primarily on his stature in the community to move his agenda forward.

⁶¹ "This notion of *nahat ruah li'nashim*, allowing women's ritual participation when it is not required is used by later authorities to allow women to recite the accompanying blessings to mitzvot from which women are exempted and thereby endow those acts with full religious significance. Thus, numerous medieval commentators ruled that women may, for example, sit in the *sukka* and recite the blessings without concern that the *berakha* which states that God commanded us to dwell in the *sukka* is a *brakha li'vatala*, a blessing recited in vain. The notion of *nahat ruah li'nashim* has been a powerful means of creating greater ritual roles for women, however, it is not an unadulterated good. It is, first of all, an act of benevolent paternalism. It is benevolent in that it gives women something good, the opportunity to do mitzvot, and paternalistic because it is men granting and circumscribing these possibilities. *Nahat ruah li'nashim* is unsatisfactory for it is contingent on the good will and power of men and it covers up systemic inequities. But the *gemara* does not end here with a *semikha* born of a desire to give women a role where none is mandated. In order to resolve the problem of *avoda bi'kodshim*, performing labor with a sacrificial animal, the *gemara* suggests that the women of *Abba Elazar's* story were actually not performing *semikha*. More insidiously, it seems clear that the women were not aware that their "*semikha*" was not a legitimate *semikha* for how else could they experience *nahat ruah* if they were aware that their actions were religiously meaningless!" Rabbanit Devorah Zlochower, "An Opened Book: Talmud Study by Women in the 21st Century," in *Why Study Talmud in the Twenty-First Century? The Relevance of the Ancient Jewish Texts to Our World*, ed. Paul Socken (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 71-72.

Because sources disagree on why Soloveitchik supported Talmud study for girls and women, there has been a great deal of surmising in this section. In the end, I come back to this point: if Soloveitchik really meant what he said about the genders having equal spiritual value and potential, some of the ramifications of that belief appear to have gone unexamined in his system of thought, especially in relation to his other beliefs about the different sex-personalities explaining the halakhic status of women. It is also possible that he did not sincerely believe his claim; or that he *would have* been inclined to believe it, but not seeing it reflected in the halakhic ethos gave him pause. I believe he called for Talmud learning for girls and women in hopes that it would both inform them of their obligations and help them develop their piety and sense of Jewish identity, but that he was not aiming to prepare women to serve in roles that carry publicly-recognized authority over their communities,⁶² as that would have been inconsistent with the gender norms he espoused.

III. Conclusion: The Missing Woman of God

We have seen that *Halakhic Man* presents a clear spiritual hierarchy of the man of God over species man, and that *Family Redeemed* describes the opposing natures of masculine and feminine (and the corresponding ideals for men and women) in terms that clearly overlap with the descriptions of the man of God and species man. In a logical system that affirms both of these claims, it is not possible to also say that masculinity and femininity have equal value. But

⁶² In Rabbi Frimer's examination of Soloveitchik's view of women's ordination, he writes that Soloveitchik was not only opposed to the ordination of women, but to women holding any position of *serara*, coercive authority, over their community. He writes, "Rabbi Walfish asked [Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik] whether women could serve on shul boards. The Rav responded that he saw no reason why women could not serve as a shul board member. The latter appointment was not *serara* [discretionary power] over the community which [Maimonides] forbids for women, since the final decision was made by the board as a whole – and not by the individual members, which merely had input. The Rav did pasken, however, that women could not be shul presidents. The latter had certain prerogatives that constituted *serara*. The Rav also felt it unwise – though there was no [prohibition] – to have women serve as vice presidents. This is because such an appointment would imply that women could serve as presidents – which to his mind they could not. [This ruling is confirmed by R. Hershel Shachter who cites a similar ruling by Soloveitchik elsewhere.]" Frimer, "The View" <http://text.rcarabbis.org/the-view-of-rav-joseph-b-soloveitchik-zt%E2%80%9Dl-on-the-ordination-of-women-by-aryeh-a-frimer/>.

the spiritual superiority of the man of God to species man does not appear to receive meaningful challenge from elsewhere in Soloveitchik's halakhic tradition—indeed, to equate their value would be almost unimaginable. And while Soloveitchik's celebration of the crisis leadership of biblical heroines and his commitment to Talmud study for girls and women might seem to weaken his claim that the distinct natures of men and women require them to have separate, distinct roles in Jewish practice, ultimately these two objections only serve to modify his claim slightly. Biblical heroines are said to have exhibited praiseworthy but masculine qualities when circumstances required their leadership, but afterward, they are said to have removed themselves from the public eye—which is part of what makes them exemplary women. And even though Talmud study and the resulting halakhic knowledge and understanding was usually off-limits to women before Soloveitchik's time, he evidently did not want the change he helped institute to lead to women taking on what he considered masculine roles—roles that would give them more of a public presence in their Jewish communities or allow them to speak or act with authority.

But the third claim, that masculine and feminine have equal spiritual value, is one that Soloveitchik asserts in a few places, but implicitly challenges in others. One of the strongest challenges comes in his discussion of the natural differences between male and female sinful desires, in "Adam and Eve," which we are now prepared to look at a second time.

We saw before that Soloveitchik depicts men as wanting godhood of their own, while women are depicted as wanting only earthly pleasures. He says one is no worse than the other, but as I noted above, he also explains that Adam's sin stemmed from wanting to create, to legislate, and to have power over the universe. These desires, like his description of masculinity from "Marriage," echo the characteristics of the man of God in *Halakhic Man*: the man of God is

creative, influential, ever-ascending, and seeking to no longer be a prisoner of time. Although the sinful man wants to compete with God, he and the man of God want similar things.

But the sinful woman's desires have nothing to do with what the man of God wants; as we saw above, she is naturally passive, receptive, and more interested in earthly pleasures than transcendent things. While the man of God is the ultimate autonomous individual, Soloveitchik's universal woman accepts "bondage" to husband and children in order to satisfy her inescapable yearning for motherhood. Even when the demands of serving her family orient her away from her feminine inclinations, her interests remain in line with those of species man. Desiring not "the vast and infinite" but rather "a nature-encompassed and restricted life" of motherhood, she is essentially unable to rise above her earthly existence and transform herself into the state of spiritual excellence represented by the man of God.

When "Adam and Eve" shows us the sinful man, it shows us someone who, with religious education, could become a man of God; but when it shows us the sinful woman, it shows us someone whose spiritual potential is fatally stunted. As far as *Family Redeemed* goes, there is no woman of God. The closest thing we have to a woman of God is the biblical heroines discussed earlier, but they are barely allowed to exist as such. Their leadership is described in terms that have already been coded as masculine; and they are to fade into the background and disappear if the alternative is to compete with male authority. To be sure, Soloveitchik does not write about this state of affairs as though it were ideal—both he and the editors describe it as tragic⁶³—but acknowledging the tragedy of the situation does not support the claim that men and women have equal spiritual value. It may even do the opposite.

I conclude that when *Family Redeemed* claims that men and women are equal in spiritual value, those words do not have the meaning a reasonable person would have expected. I believe

⁶³ Soloveitchik, "Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed," in *Family Redeemed*, 119-20.

the seven rabbis who authored “Responses” were sincere when they affirmed the equal spiritual value of men and women, but using *Family Redeemed* to guide and defend their reasoning has resulted in policy that reproduces at the synagogue level the serious problems the text contains at the conceptual level.

As I see it, there is ample reason for halakhic interpreters in the Soloveitchikian tradition to treat “Woman of God” as a live halakhic category. Highly educated and engaged Orthodox Jewish women already draw upon the authority of their knowledge and devoutness to publicly serve and enrich their communities in ministering and judgment-making roles, despite the added frustrations they surely deal with as a result of their uneasy status in the thought-worlds of halakhic luminaries like Soloveitchik. As they take on more visible roles of public influence, it is my hope that their work will more deeply inform their communities’ understanding of what the Torah means when it “affirms the absolute equal value of men and women.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Feldman et. al., “Responses,” 10.

Appendix

This table shows that many of the words and concepts Soloveitchik uses to differentiate masculinity from femininity in *Family Redeemed* (p. 69) are the same ones he uses to differentiate the Man of God from Species Man in *Halakhic Man* (pp. 125-28). All the words and phrases in this table are direct quotes.

	Male (<i>Family Redeemed</i>)	Man of God (<i>Halakhic Man</i>)	Female (<i>Family Redeemed</i>)	Species Man (<i>Halakhic Man</i>)
Words Describing Creating/Receiving	Creativity; Limitless emanation	Creation; Life is replete with creation and renewal; Personality is not receptive but spontaneous	Receptivity	Creates nothing; Receptive; Never created anything,
Words Describing Activity/Passivity, Movement/Stillness, and Influence/Lack of Influence	Acting; Energizing; Initiating; Aggression	Activity; Active; Not passive but active; Influences the many; his own master; Whole existence rushes onward; Dynamic; Moves forward; Ever-ascending climb; Pines for God	Being acted upon; Absorbing; Measured reflection by the cosmos; Completing; Toleration	Passivity; Passive; Born and dies involuntarily; Wholly under the influence of other people and their views; Never accomplished anything; Lives unnoticed and dies unmourned; Passes through life like a fleeting cloud; Bequeaths nothing to future generations; Static; Remains at rest
Words Describing Location vis-à-vis the Universe (Going Beyond or Imprisoned Within)	Hidden (as Deus Absconditus); Transcendent; Above and beyond concrete reality	Cleaves to absolute infinity; No longer a prisoner of time; Destination is distant magical regions; Like an enchanted stream	Present on earth (as Shekhinah); Imprisoned within the restricted universe	Belongs solely to the realm of the universal; Random example of the biological species; Image of universal existence; Image of the universal; One more example of the species image; Soul/spirit/being all grounded in the realm of the universal

The previous page's table shows that Soloveitchik describes Species Man's opposition to the Man of God in the same way that he describes the feminine's opposition to the masculine. The table on this page shows Soloveitchik's love for the Man of God and contempt for Species Man, based on their opposing characteristics—but there is a great deal of overlap between those opposing characteristics and the opposing characteristics Soloveitchik uses to distinguish male from female. That overlap implies a love for the masculine and contempt for the feminine.

		Man of God <i>(Halakhic Man)</i>		Species Man <i>(Halakhic Man)</i>
Words Describing Self-Awareness		Cognition and profound understanding; Recognizes his destiny, his obligation, and his task in life; Understands his dualism and the choice he must make		Never sought to render an accounting of self or world; Never examined relationship to self/God/fellow man
Words Describing Individuality and Worth		Totally worthy; Splendor of individual existence; Authentic existence; Does not require assistance of others; Does not need the support of the species to legitimate his existence; Exists solely on account of his own individual worth; Lives for the sake of life; Merits the world to come; Does not simply abandon himself to the rule of the species but blazes his own individual trail		Never done anything that could serve to legitimate his existence as an individual; Spiritual parasite; Faceless mediocrity; No stature; No original, individual, personal profile; Dies empty-handed; Bereft of mitzvah performances; No sense of historical responsibility or ethical passion; Random example of biological species

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