

A Jewish Response to the Numinous: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Critiques of Rudolf Otto

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Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was not only one of Judaism's great teachers of Talmud and Halakhah in the last century, but also one of its greatest philosophers. His philosophical writings draw freely not just from Jewish thinkers, but from non-Jewish philosophers as well. Some who exerted great influence on his thought are Aristotle, Hegel, Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Bergson, to name a few. One non-Jewish writer that the Rav, as he is respectfully and affectionately called, makes extensive use of is Rudolf Otto, the twentieth-century Protestant theologian whose book *The Idea of the Holy*, which originally appeared in 1923,¹ popularized the idea of the "numinous," or non-rational, element of religious life.

Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* is a book that no serious theologian can ignore, and this work introduced several key words to our theological

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¹ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958). All subsequent quotations refer to this edition of the work.

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lexicon. First is the idea of the “numinous,” which is the element of holiness that does not relate to ethical goodness.² If the numinous is *not* the ethical or moral aspect of holiness, then what is it? Here Otto defends the experiential nature of God and holiness as one of “self-attestation” (130), meaning the experience gives validity to itself.³

Otto admits—or asserts—that the numinous “is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, it cannot be strictly defined” (7). Nonetheless, he highlights different elements of the numinous, one of grandeur and one of smallness; the former he calls “createdness,” the latter “creaturehood” (more on this later). These states of createdness and creaturehood loosely correspond, respectively, to the *mysterium tremendum* and the *fascinans*. These terms are further dissected: *mysterium* refers to the idea that God is “wholly other”; *tremendum* can be even further subdivided into the elements: awefulness, overpoweringness (majesty), and energy (or urgency); these three subcategories (awefulness, overpoweringness, and energy), subsumed under *tremendum*, are for Otto all categories that are frightful and daemonic. Hence, most of Otto’s vocabulary speaks of religious frightfulness. It is only the category of *fascinans*, or fascination despite the terror, that is inviting and attractive.

Rabbi Soloveitchik clearly internalized much of Otto’s vocabulary and messaging, freely using terms like “numinous” and “*mysterium tremendum*” throughout his writings. In many cases, the Rav was favorably disposed towards Otto. For example, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes, “The numinous character is very characteristic of our religious consciousness” (*Worship of the Heart*, 71); again, “The numinous element is important because it lends greatness to the religious experience; it deepens the human awareness of the existential and metaphysical antinomies that his nature involves and

² Here Otto is clearly rejecting Kant’s theory of holiness (or more precisely the “holy will”), explained in *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, as what is perfectly moral. See further my *A Theology of Holiness: Historical, Exegetical, and Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2018), pp. 205-208.

³ Roger Scruton similarly wrote about the “self-verifying character” (*The Soul of the World*, p. 11). Scruton, however, is trying to use religious experience as a proof for God’s existence (an argument I followed in “The Validity of Religious Experience in a Post-Kantian World,” *Strauss, Spinoza & Sinai: Orthodox Judaism and Modern Questions of Faith* [New York: Kodesh Press, 2022], 75-96). Otto, however, does not use “self-attestation” as evidence for God’s existence. Rather, Otto argues that if someone has not had such experiences, then his book will provide little meaning to the reader.

brings his historical destiny into a sharp focus. It brings the most profound of human experiences, the religious feeling, to full life and fruition” (*Worship of the Heart*, 74).⁴

Yet despite the Rav’s overall positive disposition towards Otto, it is not difficult to detect certain places where Rabbi Soloveitchik contests some of Otto’s assertions. There are several points of divergence that I would like to highlight:

1. According to Otto, the religious experience is not necessarily something the individual should pursue. Rather, it comes upon the individual passively. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, it is the essence of the religious person to pursue such experiences.
2. According to Otto, the religious experience does not demand anything from the individual. For the Rav, the numinous religious experience must be translated into a cognitive intellectual endeavor, an ethical pursuit, and results in a closeness with the Divine. These three components—intellectual transformation, ethical imperative, and intimacy with God—are mostly absent from Otto’s writing, but for the Rav are (or should be) the result of the numinous experience.
 - a. The numinous should be transformed into an *intellectual* pursuit, even if it cannot be fully resolved on an intellectual level.
 - b. The numinous always translates into an *ethical* imperative on behalf of the person who has had a religious experience.
 - c. The numinous is an opportunity for *spiritual* intimacy.
3. Otto writes of “fear” but in general does not distinguish between dread and awe. Rabbi Soloveitchik specifically describes the difference between these two. The Rav explains that dread is useful in small doses but damaging if it is the majority of one’s religious constitution. Awe, however, is a more positive manifestation and can serve as the cornerstone of one’s religious experience and worldview.

⁴ The Jewish biblical scholar Nahum Sarna also internalized Otto’s message: “The encounter with the Holy universally inspires fascination; inevitably and characteristically it also arouses feelings of awe, even terror... Fear of death is a frequent reaction. The unique, transcendent, supernal holiness of the Divine Presence is felt to be beyond human endurance” (*The JPS Commentary: Exodus* [New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991], p. 115, at Ex. 20:15-16).

I. Is the Religious Experience Something Passive or Should It Be Pursued?

Otto makes no mention of how or why such numinous feelings might encroach on the individual. Indeed, this lacuna cannot be overlooked. Rather, the numinous feeling comes upon the individual unprompted and leaves just as mysteriously. Its appearance and departure are not Otto's concern; Otto is rather concerned with the presence and experience of the numinous, for whatever duration it should affect the individual. Otto writes:

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its "profane," non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures (12-13).

Otto does not directly speak to the issue of whether the individual should pursue the religious experience or not; the implication from this passage is that the religious experience comes upon the individual who is in a passive state. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, however, the religious experience is something to be pursued. In fact, the underlying structure of *And from There You Shall Seek* assumes that the individual has an unrelenting desire to draw close to God. The quest and search for God is something that Rabbi Soloveitchik both assumes and encourages.⁵

⁵ Carl G. Jung also notes that for Otto, the individual is primarily passive:

In speaking of religion, I must make clear from the start what I mean by that term. Religion, as the Latin word denotes, is a careful and scrupulous observation of what Rudolf Otto aptly termed the "numinosum," that is, the dynamic existence of effect, not caused by an arbitrary act of will. On the contrary, it seizes and controls the human subject, which is always rather its victim than its creator. The numinosum is an involuntary condition of

Sidestepping the medieval question of whether or not commitment to God is one of “knowledge” or “belief,” Rabbi Soloveitchik introduces a third element—that of *bakkashah*, searching for God. Rabbi Soloveitchik quotes the verse, “And from there you shall seek [*u-vikkashtem mi-sham*] the Lord your God, and you will find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 4:29).

Based on this verse, he writes, “There is a separate commandment ‘*u-bikkashtem mi-sham*,’ to search for God, to quest, yearn and crave for Him, to continue searching until one finds Him.... In my opinion, the Torah, in recommending to us the search for God, was concerned with total religious experience, with religious reason, or I may say, religious sensibility or sensory experience” (*Family Redeemed*, 179-180).⁶

Here it must be mentioned that Rabbi Soloveitchik does not quote Otto by name or cite his specific language. However, the question of whether the individual should actively seek the religious experience, or

the subject, whatever its cause may be (*Psychology and Religion* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966], p. 4).

Hence Jung’s observation seems to be consistent with that of Rabbi Soloveitchik that in general the individual is acted upon, rather than the actor.

Jung goes on to say, however, that certain rituals can inspire—or are at least designed to inspire—a feeling of the numinous: “A great many ritualistic performances are carried out for the sole purpose of producing at will the effect of the numinosum by certain devices of a magical nature, such as invocation, incantation, sacrifice, meditation and other yoga practices, self-inflicted tortures of various descriptions and so forth” (*ibid.*, pp. 4-5).

Mutatis mutandis, we can explore the relationship between the numinous and Jewish religious performance, namely—halakhah. For Jung, ritual is often designed to inspire a numinous experience; once someone has had an initial numinous experience, rituals are developed and implemented to arouse similar experiences. In other words, in the initial moment, the ritual precedes a numinous experience. However, for the Rav, rituals (specifically prayer and *talmud Torah*) are responses to the numinous in order to restore the individual from a less heightened or panicked state. See “The Ethical-Kerygmatic-Halakhic Response” discussed later.

⁶ Rabbi Bezalel Naor, in personal correspondence, directed me to a statement of Rabbi Isaac ben Joseph Corbeil, in his *Sefer Mitzvot Katan (Mitzvah 11)*, which utilizes the phrase *u-vikkashtem mi-sham* to derive the principle that at least some prayer is biblical in nature. Maimonides, however, derives the biblical imperative of prayer from Exodus 23:25 and Deuteronomy 13:5; see *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, Positive Commandment 5* and Nahmanides’ gloss.

To the best of my knowledge, Rabbi Soloveitchik does not make specific reference to this statement of the *Semak*, though it would be hard to imagine it did not exert influence on his comment here.

whether it only falls upon him passively, is a fundamental distinction between the two. For Otto, the numinous is something that comes upon the individual passively rather than something that needs to be pursued, while for Rabbi Soloveitchik, the religious experience is bound up in the idea of *bakkashah*—the active, conscious, and unrelenting quest for God. While the Rav does not deny that a religious experience may come upon the individual without prompting, he argues that by definition the religious person will pursue God.⁷

II. Does the Religious Experience Impose Demands on the Individual?

A. The Cognitive-Intellectual Response

While Otto himself was a highly learned individual, drawing not only from biblical sources, but also from Martin Luther, Goethe, Immanuel Kant, William James, and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, to name a few, there is no implication that the numinous needs to be translated into an intellectual pursuit of understanding what the individual has experienced. Rather for Otto, the numinous exists on a different plane than the intellect and therefore imposes no such demand. Similarly, an intellectual experience will not rise to the level of a numinous one.

For Rabbi Soloveitchik, however, intellectual activity can most certainly rise to the level of the numinous. In “Catharsis,” he writes, “Next to the religious experience, knowledge is perhaps the most vibrant and resonant personal experience. It sweeps the whole of the personality, sometimes like a gentle wave infusing the knower with a sense of tranquility and serenity; at other times like a mighty onrushing tide, arousing

⁷ The means of pursuing God will vary greatly. For kabbalists and chasidim, it might be through study of mystical texts. For others it might be through music, singing, prayer, introspection, meditation, experiencing nature, or a myriad other ways. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, from the intellectual Litvak tradition, these religious experiences come through the learning of analytical Jewish texts like Talmud, its commentaries, and the legal codes. Indeed, Rabbi Soloveitchik, while his writing exudes an undeniable intoxication and fixation on God, is also skeptical of the subjective nature of religious experience and repeatedly argues that the objectivity of studying Talmud and legal texts grounds the individual, imbues the experience with rigor, and prevents flights of unscrupulous and contradictory speculation. For the Rav’s definition and limitations of “religious experience,” a good starting point is *And from There You Shall Seek*, 41-55. The salient point, for current purposes, however, is that the religious experience is something to be pursued.

the soul to its depth and raising it to a pitch of ecstasy” (“Catharsis,” *Confrontation and Other Essays*, 57). It is impossible to miss that Rabbi Soloveitchik adopts Otto’s verbiage and imagery of the religious experience. While for Otto, such experience is devoid of cognitive content, this passage demonstrates that, for the Rav, the intellectual (or, intellecto-religious) experience correlates to Otto’s numinous experience.⁸

Similarly, for Rabbi Soloveitchik, the numinous experience triggers an intellectual response, even though he admits such a response to be futile: “Man is restless because he has not yet resolved the *mysterium magnum* of the cosmic drama” (“Majesty and Humility,” 28). Similarly, “Modern metaphysicians... sought to develop a unique metaphysical method which would vouchsafe them a glimpse into the ontological *mysterium magnum*” (*The Halakhic Mind*, 29). The numinous begs to be explained, analyzed, and quantified in precise scientific terminology, i.e., into intellectual and digestible terms. Yet precisely because the numinous experience transcends the cognitive element, it eludes intellectual explanation.⁹

⁸ In *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Soloveitchik creates a dialectic—or conceptual contrast—between *homo religiosus* and cognitive man. *Homo religiosus* is far more concerned with the mystical experience and is an individual who lacks conceptual rigor, while cognitive man is a mathematician or scientist, concerned with what is measurable, testable, and empirically knowable. This dichotomy finds resolution in the model of the “halakhic man,” who is simultaneously oriented towards Heaven but connects to God in large part through the exacting method of Halakhah, Jewish law, which is just as rigorous as any mathematical or scientific system, and through which he finds an outlet of his own creativity (for the Rav, Halakhah is an endless spring of understanding and creativity). Of *homo religiosus*, one of the rejected archetypes, he writes, “*homo religiosus* is intrigued by the mystery of existence—the *mysterium tremendum*—and wants to emphasize that mystery. He gazes at that which is obscure without the intent of explaining it and inquires into that which is concealed without the intent of receiving the reward of clear understanding” (*Halakhic Man*, 7). While *homo religiosus* shares certain traits with halakhic man, such as God-intoxication and a fascination with existence, the ideal of halakhic man is ultimately typified and manifested not in the mystery of the universe, but in the exoteric—not esoteric—realm of Judaism. In *Halakhic Man*, the *mysterium tremendum* is closely correlated to *homo religiosus*, but the ideal for Rabbi Soloveitchik is not *homo religiosus* but halakhic man. Based on the above, the halakhic man would never be satisfied with perceiving the world “without the intent of explaining it.”

⁹ James Joyce, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, deals with the human response to different types of aesthetic experiences. This paper is not claiming that religion can be reduced to aesthetics (nor to ethics), but it is true that religion has both aesthetic and ethical components (the relationship of which is only mentioned tangentially).

B. The Ethical-Kerygmatic-Halakhic Response

For Otto, holiness is comprised of two components: the ethical and the numinous. While his sustained argument is that the numinous element precedes the ethical, he remains ambivalent about what weight—if any—should be allotted to the ethical component of the holy.

In one place, he writes, “if the ethical element was present at all, at any rate it was not original and never constituted the whole meaning of the word” (5). Similarly, he writes of “a power which, if not opposed to the moral world order, yet intersects it in such a way that the one might be taken for the warp and the other for the woof” (153). In these sources, he implies that the numinous and ethical components of the religious experience are not necessarily interconnected.

However, he also writes, “The venerable religion of Moses marks the beginning of a process with ever increasing momentum, by which the numinous is throughout rationalized and moralized, i.e., charged with ethical import, until it becomes the ‘holy’ in the fullest sense of the word” (75).

The religious experience is (at least partially) aesthetic, and to that extent, Joyce’s quotation is worth quoting, because he deals with the sense of movement as opposed to stillness in response to a profound experience: “The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I used the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing.”

The value of aesthetic—or, *mutatis mutandis*, religious—experience for Joyce can be judged by the natural human response. Vulgar arts, for Joyce, inspire movement, either towards the object in lust or away from the object in revulsion. Proper arts, for Joyce, are arresting and inspire a response of being “static.” A similar sense of awe is described by Keats in his comment “Silent, upon a peak in Darien.” There are biblical echoes of this sentiment as well: “The Lord is in His holy Temple, let all the earth be silent before him” (Habakkuk 2:20).

One can of course question Joyce’s distinction. When observing a beautiful painting or landscape, one is often drawn closer. The first time I saw Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, I found myself inching closer to the painting until I was against the guard-rope. Similarly, I remember being in Sausalito, California, whose coastline offers stunning views of San Francisco. Once again, I found myself approaching the skyline until I was pressed against the protective glass fence. It would be hard to describe these aesthetic experiences as vulgar or improper, yet they were kinetic rather than arresting. Therefore, it appears that there may be more than one valid response to such aesthetic experiences. In some cases, these experiences inspire movement and undulation; in other cases a cessation of activity and air of quietude and motionlessness.

Regardless of exactly how Otto weighed the ethical and numinous elements, one thing is clear: he never states that the numinous experience *obligates* the individual in ethical behavior.

By contrast, Rabbi Soloveitchik repeatedly contrasts the “numinous” with the “kerygmatic”—which is a fancy word that relates to a message, especially a concrete, ethical message. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, the religious experience should not merely be a passive experience that comes upon the person, but leaves the individual frightened or fascinated, yet ethically unaffected. Rather the numinous must be translated into the “kerygmatic,” or the ethical, actional realm. Rabbi Soloveitchik argues that the key to translate the “numinous” into the “kerygmatic” is prayer: “In prayer, man tries to break through the unknown to the kerygmatic and to attain contact with the Creator, to convert tenseness into intimacy, strangeness into acquaintance. Judaism wants him to take courage and address himself to God, and by boldly approaching Him—the Infallible and Unknowable—to lift the veil and dreadful mystery of the numen. When this takes place, man finds the unknown to be an old friend; in the numen he discovers the intimately Unknown, radiating warmth and love. Through prayer, man accomplishes the impossible: the transformation of the numinous into the kerygmatic, of fear into love and of absence into presence” (*Worship of the Heart*, 80).¹⁰

The numinous can be transmuted, digested, or in modern parlance—processed—into the kerygmatic. For Otto, the feeling of the numinous is largely passive: it comes unprompted, departs just as mysteriously, and demands nothing of the individual who has had a numinous experience. For Otto, the numinous might have some overlap with the ethical, but such shared traits are not intrinsic to the numinous, which is decidedly not something ethical: “When once it has been grasped that *qadosh* or *sanc-tus* is not originally a *moral* category at all, the most obvious rendering of

¹⁰ Rabbi Shalom Carmy quotes the verse, “Enter into the rock and hide there in the dust for fear of the Lord and for the glory of His majesty” (Isa. 2:10). From this, Rabbi Carmy concludes, “I believe the imperative form here is not accidental: the speaker is the prophet; he is saying that the proper response in the face of the *mysterium tremendum* is humility” (“‘Yet My Soul Drew Back’: Fear of God as Experience and Commandment in an Age of Anxiety” in Marc Stern, ed., *Yirat Shamayim: The Awe, Reverence and Fear of God* [Ktav, 2006], p. 293). Rabbi Carmy, like his “revered teacher” Rabbi Soloveitchik, is speaking of an ethical or actional response to the *mysterium*. However, from the writings—and unlike Rabbi Carmy I was never privileged to learn with the Rav face to face—it appears to me that the Rav emphasized that the proper response is prayer. Obviously, there may be no contradiction here at all, since proper prayer presupposes several things, including humility.

the word is 'transcendent' ('supramundane,' *überweltlich*). The one-sided character of this rendering to which we had to take exception has been supplemented by the more detailed exposition of the numinous and its implications. But its most essential defect remains to be noted: 'transcendent' is a purely ontological attribute and not an attribute of *value*..." (52).

Otto quotes four characters from the Hebrew Bible to substantiate his position: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Isaiah. Abraham declares that he is but "dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27), which Otto explains as, "There you have a self-confessed 'feeling of dependence,' which is yet at the same time far more than, and something other than, *merely* a feeling of dependence. Desiring to give it a name of its own, I propose to call it 'creature-consciousness' or creature-feeling. It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (9-10). Otto famously contrasts this sentiment with the idea of "createdness." Otto writes, "In the one case [=createdness] you have the creature as the work of the divine creative act; in the other [=creaturehood], impotence and general nothingness as against overpowering might, dust and ashes as against 'majesty'" (21). For Otto, then, Abraham in this moment becomes the paradigm for the sense of creaturehood, the one who embodies the sense of lowliness of existence.

Otto also quotes Jacob's declaration, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" (Gen. 28:17). In interpreting this passage, Otto writes, "This verse is very instructive for the psychology of religion.... The first sentence gives plainly the mental impression itself in all its immediacy, before reflection has permeated it, and before the meaning-content of the feeling itself has become clear or explicit. It connotes solely the *primal numinous awe*, which has been undoubtedly sufficient in many cases to mark out 'holy' or 'sacred' places.... [Concerning the second half of the verse:] the statement [is] simply the pure expression of the emotion of 'eeriness' or 'uncanniness' itself, when just on the point of detaching and disengaging from itself a first vaguely intimated idea of a numinous something, an entity from beyond the borders of 'natural' experience" (126-127).

Another source is Moses' encounter at the burning bush, "And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon it" (Exod. 3:6). Otto describes this as "the genuinely numinous narrative of the theophany in the burning bush" (75). Rabbi Soloveitchik also makes the same point. In referencing the burning bush, he writes, "Fire has both a numinous aspect, symbolizing destructiveness and remoteness of divinity that inspires grisly horror and shuddering, and a kinetic aspect, implying the activity and impetus of divinity" (*The Emergence of Ethical Man*, 50).

Finally, Otto makes frequent use of the prophet Isaiah, who declares, "I am a man of unclean lips and dwell among a people of unclean lips." According to Otto, this is what Isaiah says "when the numinous reality encounters" him as a present fact of consciousness. Otto writes, "... this self-deprecating feeling-response is marked by an immediate, almost instinctive, spontaneity. It is not based on deliberation, nor does it follow any rule, but breaks, as it were, palpitant from the soul—like a direct reflex movement at the stimulation of the numinous. It does not spring from the consciousness of some committed transgression, but rather is an immediate datum given with the feeling of the numen: it proceeds to 'disvalue' together with the self the tribe to which the person belongs, and indeed, together with that, all existence in general. Now it is today pretty generally agreed that, all this being the case, these outbursts of feeling are not simply, and probably at first not at all, *moral* depreciations, but belong to a quite special category of valuation and appraisal. The feeling is beyond question not that of transgression of the moral law, however evident it may be that such a transgression, where it has occurred, will involve it as a consequence: it is the feeling of absolute 'profaneness'" (50-51). And in a jarring continuation, Otto concludes, "Mere awe, mere need of shelter from the *tremendum*, has here been elevated to the feeling that man in his 'profaneness' is not *worthy* to stand in the presence of the holy one, and that his own entire personal unworthiness might defile even holiness itself. This is obviously the case in the vision of the call of Isaiah..." (54; see however 62-63).

In these four cases—Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Isaiah—the biblical speaker expresses feelings of unworthiness in relation to God. Yet for Rabbi Soloveitchik, the numinous aspect is not the totality of the religious experience: "We witness similar intermittent numinous experiences in the *Akedah* (the binding of Isaac), in Jacob's dream, in the tragic controversy between Joseph and his brothers, among other episodes. *Yet the numinous is always translated into the kerygmatic...*" (*Worship of the Heart*, 81, emphasis added).

Otto does not see the need—or perhaps even the possibility—of identifying any ethical import in these narratives. Yet it is almost impossible to read the episodes highlighted by Otto without an ethical—or kerygmatic—implication. Abraham's declaration that he is "dust and ashes" precedes his intercession on behalf of the Sodomites, which is an ethical quest. Moses' turning to hide, and Isaiah's feeling of unworthiness, are in many ways parallel (and the relationship between Exodus 3-4 and Isaiah 6 begs exploration); both are part of prophetic "call narratives" preceding an imposition to comply with a Divine mission. In the case of Moses, he was tasked with standing up to Pharaoh, leading the Jews out of Egypt,

receiving the Torah, and guiding the Jews through the desert to Israel. The prophet Isaiah was charged with rebuking the political leadership and the masses to conform with God's ethical messages. Otto's omission of these crucial details amounts to a misinterpretation of the story.

Otto is famous for defining the encounter with God in terms of both creaturehood and createdness. As noted above, creaturehood is the feeling of smallness before God and createdness is the sense of grandeur for being created in the image of God. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, we can add the following categories as well: commandedness, creativity, and caringness.¹¹ Commandedness is a major theme in *Family Redeemed* and *The Emergence of Ethical Man*. For present purposes, commandedness represents man's existence as an ethical being. It seems to me that without the idea of commandedness, man—when experiencing the numinous—has no outlet and is incapable of processing that overpowering experience. Without a tangible way to express the experience, the numinous will remain lodged in the individual's psyche until the feeling passes.

The actional component of the commandments allows the numinous to find tangible expression. Man knows what is required of him, since he possesses the tangible guidance of the codes; how can he be afraid? How can he be seized with demonic dread when he has the Halakhah, an expression of Divine will, instructing him exactly what this selfsame overpowering Being demands? While the Rav does not state it explicitly, one may surmise that the resolution is precisely this: the ability to fulfill the Divine will, through the medium of ethics and Halakhah, relieves the dread imposed by the numinous experience, precisely because God both instills the numinous experience and instructs man in proper ethical, halakhic behavior. The latter is the remedy for the former, since they have the same Source.

C. The Intimate Response

Rabbi Soloveitchik links the ethical response to the feeling of closeness and intimacy between man and God. Yet, the aspect of intimacy with the Divine is a topic that is palpably absent from Otto's schematization.

¹¹ "Commandedness" ties into the current section of the ethical response to the numinous. "Creativity" will not be discussed in the present work, but we cannot discuss commandedness without mentioning, at least in passing, Rabbi Soloveitchik's liberating position that Halakhah is not something constricting but rather something liberating that propagates endless human creativity. "Caringness" will be discussed in the next section, "The Intimate Response."

Rabbi Soloveitchik is not content to accept Otto's interpretation. We have already seen that Otto viewed Abraham's declaration of being "dust and ashes" as a manifestation of the numinous, while for the Rav it is a prolegomenon to an ethical component. It is true that ethics does not have to be linked with tender emotions; indeed, for someone like Kant, ethical decision-making should be devoid of emotional content.¹² Yet Rabbi Soloveitchik believed that just as the numinous could be transmuted to the ethical, it should also evolve into affection. In describing Abraham's dialogue with God, he writes, "Strangeness and marvel intermingle with familiarity and friendship" (*Worship of the Heart*, 81).

Rabbi Soloveitchik makes a similar point elsewhere. Commenting on the origin of the name *Yisrael* (Israel), given to Jacob after the encounter with the mysterious figure of Genesis 33, he writes, "*Yisrael* denotes the triumph of man over the numinous moment in his relationship with God, his victory over the antithetic phase in his communion with his Creator.... There is closeness, intimacy and comradeship. God rules as a comrade-king. Man does not retreat before him" (*The Emergence of Ethical Man*, 200; see also 129-130). For Otto, the opposite of *tremendum* is *fascinans*, while for the Rav, the opposite of *tremendum* is friendship and intimacy.

Christian Rutishauser also identifies that the *mysterium tremendum* is something to be processed or translated first into ethical behavior and then into something more intimate: "He [Rabbi Soloveitchik] highlights the three steps in objectification through which religious objectivities come into being, and he makes them concrete by means of religious experience and the relationship between God and the human being: (1) The extremely subjective experience of God in the *tremendum et fascinans* is the core. (2) A stronger objectification of this manifests itself in theoretical judgments and norms, such as the knowledge of God's existence and of God's imperatives. (3) The concretion of the external relationship with God through prayer, theological thought, religious acts, and so forth, finally crystallizes the religious even more" (*The Human Condition and the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, 37).

In summary, for Otto, the numinous experience does not transform the individual. For the Rav, the numinous experience creates intellectual

¹² Contrast this with Sartre's short story "The Wall" ("Le Mur") (1939), where the protagonist, Pablo Ibbieta, believes he is providing false information to deceive the enemy, yet the information turns out to be inadvertently correct, thus leading to the untimely demise of his ally. From a purely deontological perspective, Ibbieta did nothing wrong, despite the unfortunate outcome. One of Sartre's points is to argue that ethical actions and emotional responses are more intertwined than we might imagine.

curiosity, imposes ethical (halakhic) obligations, and should be used as a springboard to achieve divine closeness.

III. The Difference Between Dread and Awe

Otto appears to merge the ideas of “awe” and “dread”: “The awe or ‘dread’ *may* indeed be so overwhelmingly great that it seems to penetrate to the very marrow, making the man’s hair bristle and his limbs quake. But it may also steal upon him almost unobserved as the gentlest of agitations, a mere fleeting shadow passing across his mood. It has therefore nothing to do with intensity, and no natural fear passes over into it merely by being intensified. I may be beyond all measure afraid and terrified without there being even a trace of the feeling of uncanniness in my emotion” (16).

I cannot prove it, since Otto does make mention of the positive side of this numinous experience, but it appears to me that the book is dominated not by the equiponderant balance of the *tremendum* with the *fascinans*—the fearful and uplifting experiences. Rather the book—read as a literary whole—is in my mind far more concerned with the *tremendum*, the feeling of daemonic dread, frightfulness, and uncanniness. Even in his chapter on the *fascinans*, the supposedly *positive* aspect of the numinous, Otto cannot help but close on a negative note, referring to “the uncanny, the fearful, the dauntingly ‘other’ and incomprehensible, that which arouses in us *stupor*” (40).

It appears to me that for this reason, Rabbi Soloveitchik criticized Otto for over-emphasizing the aspect of fear in religion: “For Rudolf Otto... this experience of the fear of God is the greatest element of religion. Fear, for him, is the fear of being overwhelmed by the *mysterium tremendum*. It is a primordial religious experience that precedes and should not be identified with fear as an axiological performance, fear as an ontic experience, fear as fear of God’s sublimity (*yirat ha-romemut*). It is the experience of a man who meets something uncanny, something differing totally from him in kind, something from the beyond. He feels that his existence is menaced, defeated, by his meeting this something. This experience of the fear of God is totally separate from the experience of the love of God, which is an experience of ontic unity with God” (*Maimonides Between Philosophy and Halakhab: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Lectures on the Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. Lawrence Kaplan, 223-224).¹³

¹³ Similarly, in *And From There You Shall Seek*, Chapter 6.B (pp. 49-50), Rabbi Soloveitchik lays out his theory of the Attribute of Justice (Hebrew: *Middat Ha-Din*). He writes, “God, who reveals Himself out of His utter separation as a

Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746), in his *Mesillat Yesharim* (*The Path of the Just*), distinguishes between *yirat ha-onesh*, “fear of punishment,” and *yirat ha-romemut*, which refers to fear of God’s exaltedness (ch. 24). While “fear of punishment” can lead to an observance from negative emotion, *yirat ha-romemut* implies something positive: “This type of fear is not so easy to attain, for it will arise only out of knowledge and thought, [namely] by contemplating God’s exaltedness, blessed be He, and the lowliness of man. All these things are outgrowths of the intellect which understands and attains insight.” Luzzatto’s fear of God’s exaltedness shares one quality with Otto, namely a linguistic similarity in *pehituto shel ha-adam*, the “smallness of man” (cf. Maimonides’s uses of *beriyah ketannah*, “small creature,” in *Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:2), compared with Otto’s “creaturehood” or lowliness of man. Maimonides and Luzzatto make it clear, however, that this fear or appreciation of God can only come through enquiry and contemplation; for Otto the numinous is a spontaneous emotion. The fear that emerges from contemplation is at a higher level.¹⁴

Furthermore, Rabbi Soloveitchik drives a wedge between “fear” and “awe”: “Fear is a powerful, vital response, dark and obscure, of bodily and psychic shock caused by an outside threat. It is an instinctual, emotional driving force that bursts forth at times of danger out of the mad desire to exist and assumes unrestricted dominion over man in times of crisis. Clear thinking has no part in it. . . . Religiosity that remains too long in the realm of this terrible fear does not achieve its goal. It deteriorates into magic. The Torah commanded us to be in awe of God [rather than

mysterium tremendum, an awesome mystery, walks terrifyingly with the despicable ‘small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge’ (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 2:2). This tiny creature flees out of utter despair.”

In this passage (the reader is urged to read, or re-read this section—and book—in full), the *mysterium tremendum* represents the overpowering fear of standing in the presence of the King of Kings: “In this situation, when man encounters the attribute of justice, a terrible fear overtakes him. He despairs and attempts to flee. He thinks, as did Adam, that *his existence depends on fleeing from the King of judgment, not running toward Him*” (49, emphasis added).

Rabbi Soloveitchik identifies the *mysterium tremendum* with *Middat Ha-Din*. Yet *Middat Ha-Din* is not the totality of the religious experience, and in Otto’s scheme there is no analogue to the *Middat Ha-Rahamim*.

¹⁴ There is also a fear that *precedes* knowledge: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10), but the rest of this verse ties it to practical behavior: “all who *practice it* have a good understanding.” Yet this preliminary fear cannot compete with that intellectually inspired reverence described by Maimonides and Luzzatto.

fear of God—AG]. Awe is born of the spirit that soars on high; its essence is an axiological position toward another, brought about by knowledge. Awe stems from assessment. Man assesses himself and ‘the Other.’ Out of this comparison and assessment he comes to feel awe, which begins with knowledge of inferiority and a sense of shame, and ends with spiritual recoil, whose essence is spiritual elevation” (*And From There You Shall Seek*, 66-67).

Obviously, there is an issue of translation, in Otto’s case from German, and in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s case from Hebrew, into English. Yet we can construct a polarity with negative emotions like terror and dread on one side, and positive emotions like reverence and awe on the other side—and both can be subsumed under the rubric of the general, superordinate, term “fear.” (The reader is invited to find a more neutral word if “fear” is too negative, such as respect, alertness or recognition, though all of these too are lacking.)

Otto consolidates the positive reverence and negative dread into one emotion, a point to which Rabbi Soloveitchik objects. Dread and terror are enervating, while awe and reverence are invigorating. Religion needs a certain amount of dread and terror, yet if those are the dominant religious emotions, the religion will lack intellectual rigor (it is well known that people act irrationally in high-stress situations) and will become emotionally unendurable as well. This is not the case with awe and reverence. A religion based on awe requires analysis as to the proper ways to express that awe. The former is crippling; the latter is ennobling.

For Rabbi Soloveitchik, we should not merely flee from God in fear (as represented by the *mysterium tremendum*), but rather it should be a process of fleeing from God and leaping toward Him. He quotes from Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol: “If You seek my sins, I will run away from You toward You, and I will hide from Your anger in Your shade” (*And From There You Shall Seek*, 53). At first glance, this language appears paradoxical and might not fit into the framework of medieval rationalism. It does, however, represent the religious idea of darting hither and yon, being repelled by the *tremendum* and then drawn back in by the *fascinans*, very similar to the idea of *ratzo va-shov*, “running [away] and returning,” first coined in Ezekiel 1:14, but which the mystics used to represent the undulating condition of religious life.

Yet we can state even further. It is possible that for the Rav, the ideal relationship with God is neither Otto’s *mysterium tremendum* or the mystics’ *ratzo va-shov*, but something even more intimate: “Experiencing the infinite goodness of God as beautiful means to encounter Him, not as a mystery, defying all rules of orderliness, eluding the grasp of the necessary and lawful and harmonious. He is no longer the strange, alien, numinous God

who makes the worshipper shudder, wonder-struck in the presence-absence of the unknown and mysterious. On the contrary, *caritas Dei* inspires, ennobles, and befriends man. God is known to and intimate with him. There is no attempt to flee Him, since the experience is not numinous; it is not 'wholly other,' to use Otto's characterization of the numinous" (*Worship of the Heart*, 67). Here again, Rabbi Soloveitchik does not characterize the ideal religious experience as the numinous; and furthermore, he does not prefer Otto's self-created alternative, the *fascinans*. Rather, the Rav favors the idea of *caritas Dei* and the idea of God as a friend.

Relatedly, Otto's phrasing around his personal encounter with God requires analysis, and here it must be remembered that Otto was a devout Protestant. Otto writes, "For the abyss between creature and Creator, 'profanum' and 'sanctum,' sin and holiness, is not diminished but increased by that deeper knowledge that comes from the Gospel of Christ; and as a result of the emotion spontaneously stirred in the recognition of it, that in which 'the holy' stands self-revealed is taken here, as in other cases, both as the refuge from, and the means by which to approach, Holiness" (171).

In this short passage, Otto appears to do an about-face. He writes that the sense of God increases—rather than dispels—the feeling of lowliness. This is reminiscent of Maimonides' position, "When he [continues] to reflect on these same matters, he will immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited, wisdom before He who is of perfect knowledge" (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2). Although Maimonides situates this passage at the beginning of the *Mishneh Torah*, he then writes, "Based on these concepts, I will explain important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the world to provide a foothold for a person of understanding to [develop] love for God" (*ibid.*).¹⁵

Here Maimonides translates the feeling of lowliness into a desire for intellectual comprehension: "I will explain important principles...." This is remarkably reminiscent of the Rav's thesis that the numinous must be translated into the kerygmatic, and that the ideal halakhic man is someone who seeks greater understanding. Yet for Otto, his perception of God is not ennobling or kerygmatic; it does not mandate intellectual expenditure. Rather, the perception of God *increases* the abyss between creature and Creator. Here we should note that Otto does not reject the ethical value of religion, but rather the ethical and numinous operate on different axes. The numinous is "a power which, if not opposed to the moral world order, yet intersects it in such a way that the one might be taken for the warp

¹⁵ I have seen it speculated how the tenor of the *Mishneh Torah* would have changed had Maimonides opened with chapter two, but that requires its own analysis.

and the other for the woolf” (153). There is nothing, dare I say, redeeming in Otto’s description of the religious experience.

The next sentence, however, is much closer to something that Rabbi Soloveitchik himself might write, “as a result of the emotion spontaneously stirred in the recognition of it, that in which ‘the holy’ stands self-revealed is taken here, as in other cases, both as the refuge from, and the means by which to approach, Holiness.” This passage is remarkably reminiscent of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol’s statement, quoted earlier: “If You seek my sins, I will run away from You toward You, and I will hide from Your anger in Your shade.”

Conclusion

Perhaps Rabbi Soloveitchik’s greatest sustained criticism of Otto is in a footnote at the end of *The Halakhic Mind*. Yet before quoting the footnote in full, there is a vocabulary problem that must be noted. In *Halakhic Man*, “*homo religiosus*” is a character who shares an appreciation of God on some level but has yet to achieve the dialectical idea of the “halakhic man.” The *homo religiosus* is lacking, relative to the “halakhic man.” However, in *The Halakhic Mind*, Rabbi Soloveitchik uses the same phrase—“*homo religiosus*”—to represent his ideal:¹⁶

Otto, although ingenious in his analysis of the numinous character of the religious experience, does not do it full justice in stating that the *mysterium tremendum* which confronts the *homo religiosus* exhausts itself in arousing a feeling of awe and dread. On the contrary, the religious *numen* does not only stimulate the *homo religiosus* to an emotional state or awe, but also arouses in him a passion for cognition of the incomprehensible. He is both fascinated and repelled—fascinated by the *mysterium magnum*; repelled by the *mysterium tremendum*. Moses sees the burning bush. On the one hand, confronted by the *mysterium tremendum*, he hides his face in fear of looking upon God; but, on the other hand, he says, “I will turn aside now and I will see this great sight as to why the bush is not consumed.” The *homo religiosus* senses the insolubility of the mystery but nonetheless yields to an irresistible temptation to solve it.

The religious act *is* ambivalent and fraught with paradox. Isolating the numinous component from the complex of the religious act

¹⁶ In *The Halakhic Mind*, the Rav defines *homo religiosus* as “the believer in revealed religion” (78) but again holds it up as an ideal, in “contrast with the philosopher.”

and construing it as its basis, Otto inevitably must regard any metaphysical¹⁷ urge as alien to the *homo religiosus*. He sees the basic religious experience not as an all-enveloping act, but as an act directed exclusively upon the absolute transcendence and otherness of God. It is self-evident that, if the religious experience be reduced to a non-rational and ineffable aspect, cognitive components are precluded, for the transcendental is incomprehensible (*The Halakic Mind*, pp. 119-120, note 61).

This passage weaves together many of the criticisms that have been noted above: the desire to comprehend mysteries rather than to leave them at face value, the positive component (*mysterium magnum* or *mysterium fascinans*) as a value above and beyond the negative *mysterium tremendum*, and the importance of the “metaphysical” (corresponding to the ethical or *kerygmatic*) not being overshadowed by the numinous.

Rudolf Otto's contribution to the landscape of theology was likely greater than we realize. Pushing against the stifling dryness of medieval scholasticism and Kant's attempt to reduce “holiness” to a mere ethical category, Otto recognized that there is something irreducible about religion—and that irreducible element is what gives it vibrancy. Core religious beliefs and practices are primary religious categories that cannot be deflected into purely intellectual, ethical, or utilitarian considerations. To properly treat this point, Otto created a complex system of neologisms to give full and proper voice to these religious experiences.

There is no question that Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik freely drew on the language and framework of Rudolf Otto. Words like “numinous” and “*mysterium tremendum*” had an undeniable role in shaping the Rav's thinking. He is known to have stressed the importance of *The Idea of the Holy*, and his students and students' students continue to tout its undeniable and valuable influence.

Yet this does not mean that the Rav accepted every point without scrutiny. This analysis gives us a little insight into the role that non-Jewish philosophy plays in Jewish thought. There is no doubt that many great Jewish thinkers have drunk deeply from the waters of non-Jewish philosophers. To the extent that those ideas were compatible, or enhanced Jewish thought, they were accepted and incorporated. To the extent that they were incompatible with traditional Jewish messages, they were modified, refined, or outright rejected.

¹⁷ Here it seems that by “metaphysical,” he might include both the “ethical” and the “cognitive.”

Rabbi Soloveitchik was his own fearless and honest thinker, with his own considerations, so it should not be surprising that he did not superficially accept Otto's formulations in full. Without diminishing Otto's overall importance, we can conclude by highlighting some key differences: The religious experience is something to be actively pursued; the numinous spurs a response—most importantly an ethical response; daemonic fear does not account for lofty emotions like *yirat ha-romemut*; and most importantly there is space for familiarity and intimacy with God. ❧