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Naturalism and the Rav: A Reply to Yoram Hazony

Alex Sztuden

Biography: Alex Sztuden has taught philosophy at Fordham University and recently spoke on Rav Soloveitchik's thought at the Yeshiva University/Bar-Ilan University International Conference: "Reflections on the Thought and Scholarship of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik." He holds a J.D. from Columbia Law School and an M.A. in philosophy from Fordham University.

Abstract: In the April, 2012 issue of the journal *Commentary*, Yoram Hazony provided an interpretation of one of R. Soloveitchik's recently published manuscripts entitled "The Emergence of Ethical Man." Hazony argued that *Emergence* is "an entirely naturalistic" work that constitutes "The Rav's Bombshell." This essay proposes an alternative reading of *Emergence*, one that does justice to both the book's pronounced naturalistic strands as well as its non-naturalistic elements. This essay argues that Hazony's reading of *Emergence* is unwarranted and that R. Soloveitchik was not a thoroughgoing naturalist, either in his major works, or even in *The Emergence of Ethical Man*.

Naturalism and the Rav: A Reply to Yoram Hazony

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In the April, 2012 issue of *Commentary*, Yoram Hazony, founder of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, published an assessment of a posthumously published book by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik called *The Emergence of Ethical Man* (“*Emergence*”).¹ The book is part of The *Toras HoRav Series* and is based upon manuscripts of lectures that R. Soloveitchik delivered in the early 1950s. In his article, Hazony alleges that *Emergence* is an “entirely naturalistic” work, characterizes it as “The Rav’s Bombshell” and believes it represents R. Soloveitchik’s “posthumous revision of some of the orthodoxies of Orthodox Judaism.” Hazony’s article provoked an avalanche of letters to the editor, many of which were published, along with Hazony’s response, in the September, 2012 issue of *Commentary*.²

It is my contention that Hazony’s analysis of *Emergence*, however provocative, is deeply flawed. To be sure, *Emergence* is the most naturalistic of R. Soloveitchik’s works, but the naturalism is mitigated—explicitly and at some length—in ways that Hazony ignores. Apart from this critique of Hazony, I hope to shed light on aspects of *Emergence* that cannot be understood, and are in fact obscured, if the book is read solely through the prism of ‘naturalism.’ *Emergence* is surely one of R. Soloveitchik’s most fascinating works, but not for the reasons Hazony provides.

Hazony’s reading is meant to demonstrate how Rav Soloveitchik re-interpreted traditional concepts along naturalistic lines.

Throughout his essay, Hazony attempts to show how R. Soloveitchik re-interpreted traditional concepts like revelation, prophecy, miracles, immortality, and redemption, and proceeded to naturalize them. For Hazony, this move towards naturalism generally involves claims that: 1)

human beings are situated squarely within the natural, biological world of animals and plants and are continuous with that world—there is nothing supernatural, magical or “transcendent” about human beings as such; 2) nature’s laws are never violated; 3) human reason can, on its own, discover and ground the most important truths about how to live; 4) human beings can on their own realize those norms in this world, i.e., they can redeem this world and themselves; and 5) the focus of our attention should be on this world, not on some spiritual afterlife.³

Hazony’s reading of *Emergence*, meant to demonstrate how R. Soloveitchik re-interpreted traditional concepts along naturalistic lines, is at times insightful. Unfortunately, his attempted reduction of the range and depth of the ideas found in *Emergence* to the abstract philosophical category of ‘naturalism’ cannot be sustained when we look closely at the text itself.

Abraham and Moses

Consider the following ‘bombshell’ from the lyrical passages in *Emergence* describing the background to Abraham’s eventual encounter with God:

“In fact, Abraham discovers the ethos himself. As a free personality, he goes out to meet the moral law...he chances to find it within himself.”

Hazony thinks this startling passage is naturalistic through and through, for human beings are here portrayed as freely discovering the moral law within them.⁴ But Hazony doesn’t mention, or seem to be aware, that R. Soloveitchik here is describing only one side of a dialectic—that between the *natural* religious consciousness and the *revelational* consciousness, a distinction he elaborates upon in his major work *And From There You Shall Seek*. Having depicted Abraham as the

model of the free and natural religious consciousness, R. Soloveitchik switches tracks, and contrasts him with Moses:

“While the father of the nation voluntarily undertakes a historical mission...the redeemer [Moses] is forced by apocalyptic command into a historical situation. He did not discover God...The apocalyptic revelation surprised him and took him prisoner. He encountered apocalyptic necessity.” (182).

Hazoni ignores this starkly non-naturalist passage, which R. Soloveitchik deliberately places in dialectical balance with the Abraham passage.⁵

Abraham, Prophecy and Relationship to God

Even within the Abraham narrative itself, Hazoni ignores important phrases. For instance, Hazoni cites R. Soloveitchik: “As a natural being, man is arrested within concreteness, and, as such, can never reach a transcendent God...Man discovers God within finitude.”⁶ Yet that is not the whole passage, which also includes these words: “In order to meet man (i.e., revelation) God descends from transcendental infinity into concrete finitude and confines Himself...”⁷ What happened to those words in Hazoni’s rendition? Hazoni places ellipses in their stead, thereby effacing the word ‘revelation’ and the decidedly non-naturalist theme of God’s descent to man.

To say the least, this alters the meaning of the passage.⁸ In other words, Abraham both discovers the moral law *and* subsequently God reveals Himself to Abraham (i.e., prophecy), but Hazoni collapses this dual movement. Hazoni does mention God’s entreaty to Abraham to go forth from his land, but he proceeds to discuss only one aspect of this entreaty, namely, that God wants Abraham to uproot himself from the corrupt society around him. From Hazoni’s depiction, one cannot know that God entreats Abraham to go into the desert because:

“God does not share His beloved person with society...The human being acting under divine orders is portrayed as a forsaken person whose only friend is God...”

and

“God Himself appears here under two aspects: as master and owner of the entire being...to whose absolute will and authority man must surrender;⁹ and as friend, comrade and confederate who wanders with His chosen person. God takes His friend along...The motif of the Song of Songs prevails throughout the narrative...” (152).

Abraham and God here enter into a relationship of mutual love and friendship. It is hard to see how all this fits comfortably into the naturalist theme.¹⁰

God’s Will and the Moral Law

Moreover, in Hazoni’s rendition, there is a subtle but significant shift that occurs when Hazoni translates R. Soloveitchik’s statement that Abraham encounters a unique being, a God who commands Abraham. Hazoni writes that yes, truth is not simply subjective, here Abraham is encountering an objective reality, so moral autonomy does not mean that you can make anything up:

The moral law that Abraham discovers on his own must conform to an objective truth. No, he discovers something real that is both “from beyond and within his own personality.” But R. Soloveitchik stresses: “God came to man after the latter had sought and found him. Only then did he contact Abraham.”

Knowledge gained through prophetic insight is thus presented here as something that man “seeks and finds” even before God’s role in this process becomes evident. This makes biblical prophecy sound very much akin to the natural human effort to attain knowledge: That effort, too, is a search that ends with some kind of confirmation from beyond.¹¹

But R. Soloveitchik *didn’t* write that Abraham encountered “something real” “which is akin to the natural human effort to attain knowledge,” and “which ends with some kind of confirmation

from beyond.” R. Soloveitchik wrote that Abraham encountered *God*, and Hazony shifts the profoundly personal, experiential nature of this encounter to an encounter with an objective reality, the way a scientist might receive confirmation of his hypothesis from an objective reality from “beyond.”

Hazony’s subtle shift in terminology is noteworthy, for the problem is analogous to what the scholar Jon Levenson has pointed out in his review of Hazony’s book on the philosophy of the Bible. As Levenson writes:

The point is this: the focus of Hazony's History, and of most of the Hebrew Bible, is not on "discover[ing] the true and the good in accordance with man's natural abilities," as he thinks. The focus, rather, is (to invert and adapt Kass' words) on what happened, not on what always or naturally happens. It lies on the world-transforming acts of the unique and unparalleled God in covenant with the unique and unparalleled people he has formed for himself. And it is within that covenantal framework of love, service, and obedience that the laws propounded in the name of Moses find their rationale....

[A]ccording to the biblical narrative, the norms of the Torah are embedded within the covenant, and observing them is an act of covenantal service, of loyalty to the Lord alone in an ongoing relationship to which he is not dispensable. Break them loose from that relationship and they mean something very different from what the Hebrew Bible intends. In other words, whatever value these norms may have as expressions of abstract reasoning, in the Hebrew Bible they are cast as *commandments*—vital elements in the intensely personal relationship of the one who commands and those who are commanded.¹²

Levinson points out that the Bible’s laws mean something very different when removed from their status as God’s commandments. For Hazony, saying that “God commands x” is

shorthand for saying that “x is true.” The *commanded* nature of the law in which God serves as author and which helps to establish a relationship between God and His people is rendered superfluous in Hazony’s re-description.

Hazony shifts the profoundly personal, experiential nature of the encounter to an encounter with an objective reality

Similarly, here in *Emergence* it is not simply ‘reality’ that makes the moral laws true. It is God and His commands that make them true. As presented in *Emergence*, reason alone is insufficient to ground the moral law. It is true that reason can discover the moral law, but the source of the laws’ validity is also to be located in God’s will.¹³ In both his readings of the Bible and of *Emergence*, Hazony seeks to minimize the role of the *commanded* nature of the laws and to “break them loose” from the critical role they play in “an intensely personal relationship of the one who commands and those who are commanded.”¹⁴

Immortality

To buttress his naturalistic interpretation of *Emergence*, Hazony cites passages from R. Soloveitchik that seem to indicate a radical departure from Orthodoxy with respect to the doctrine of immortality. R. Soloveitchik writes:

[The] concept of immortality as coined by Judaism is the continuation of a historical existence throughout the ages. It differs from transcendental immortality insofar as the deceased person does not lead an isolated, separate existence in a transcendental world. The identity [of the individual] persists on a level of concrete reality disguised as a people....Metaphysical immortality is based upon historical immortality. Whoever does not identify himself with the historical ego and remains at the natural level cannot attain immortality.

Thus according to Hazony:

One does not overcome the natural limit of man's biological mortality by some supernatural means. It is rather by merging one's own consciousness with that of a historical existence or ego, which is to say, a people.

If the biblical concept of man offers immortality only through the merger of one's living consciousness with the unending life of one's people, what kind of salvation or redemption can man hope for? Clearly, the Bible does not offer the individual salvation through the redemption of his soul in a transcendental world. What, then?¹⁵

As others have pointed out,¹⁶ Hazony omits the word "first" when citing R. Soloveitchik's claim that "The concept of immortality" is a natural-historical-communal one, implying that there are no other concepts. But surely R. Soloveitchik also believed that there is a *second* concept of immortality, namely, personal immortality, which is clear both from his use of the word 'first'—which implies a second—and from the language that follows, where R. Soloveitchik explicitly states that personal immortality "is based" on natural-historical-communal immortality. Hazony never explicitly claims that R. Soloveitchik denies personal immortality as a biblical concept, but his inexcusable omission of the word "first", along with much of the rest of what he writes, implies it. Nevertheless, Hazony is correct that in *Emergence* R. Soloveitchik wishes to emphasize and highlight the natural-historical-communal meaning of immortality.

Miracles

Consider also R. Soloveitchik's bold interpretation of miracles. According to R. Soloveitchik, miracles involve no violations or suspensions of natural laws. Rather, the miraculous event represents the merger of nature and ethics, of bending nature to realize ethical purposes. In refusing to see miracles as violations of natural laws, R. Soloveitchik is following in the footsteps of Maimonides. And what does this merger of

nature and ethics entail? As R. Soloveitchik points out, this bending of nature to God's ethical will implies that God does, at times, *interfere* with history. In other words, R. Soloveitchik's treatment of miracles includes the doctrine of divine intervention (170-171), albeit working within natural and historical processes, and also includes the corollary guarantee that the promises contained in the covenant will eventually be realized (171). There is no possibility of 'radical tragedy.'¹⁷ Maybe this is naturalism, but it is an extraordinary form of naturalism, one that includes divine intervention in history and divine guarantees regarding the fulfillment of an ancient covenant. Further, it is through the agency of Moses that God proceeds to initiate the process of liberation from Egypt. As R. Soloveitchik continues: "God endows him with supernatural power to perform certain miraculous deeds. Moses here attains a new stature."¹⁸ (183). In R. Soloveitchik's understanding of how God acts in history through natural processes, there is hardly any bombshell.

But surely R. Soloveitchik also believed that there is a second concept of immortality, namely, personal immortality

It is important to recognize that these doctrines of divine intervention and divine guarantees are not stand-alone ideas, but are rather woven into the entirety of R. Soloveitchik's narrative on redemption and the unity of nature and ethics, and that these doctrines do not fit into any recognizable version of naturalism.

Redemption

Is redemption "entirely naturalistic" as presented in *Emergence*? Only if one ignores this: "God acts here in the role of co-participant in the historical destiny of His confederates and is duty-bound to bring the covenant to full realization. There is no other alternative. The promise must come true regardless of the willingness of the chosen clan." (183) Or this: "That is why Moses' prophetic

career [as redeemer] began with an apocalyptic experience. For had providence waited for Moses, the shepherd would never have found God." (187).¹⁹ This passage is the culmination of R. Soloveitchik's argument that during the dark days of the "interim period," the period in which nature and ethical-historical purposes are split, human beings would not have been able to overcome this division on their own. God therefore, *must have* initiated the process of redemption, which is why He seizes Moses.²⁰

The Unity of Nature and Ethics

Hazony focuses much of his argument on R. Soloveitchik's naturalistic account of how human beings move from mere biological beings to ethical beings:

Soloveitchik's man is entirely "of this world," a part of nature. True, man comes into conflict with the order of nature through his capacity to distinguish between right and wrong and his yearning for God. But Soloveitchik argues that the possession of such qualities does not require a departure from the order of nature....²¹

The account in *Emergence of man-as-animal*²² and of the conflict between nature and ethics, and of their eventual unity, constitutes one of R. Soloveitchik's most interesting and original contributions to Jewish thought. But Hazony's depiction ignores some crucial points and

R. Soloveitchik's account of the unity of nature and ethics is that it arises from the unity of nature and ethics in the divine consciousness.

collapses key distinctions. R. Soloveitchik depicts a three-stage process with respect to the relationship between nature and ethics. At first, both are unified (the pre-lapsarian stage). In this initial stage, R. Soloveitchik provides a narrative of how natural being becomes ethical being. But, as Daniel Rynhold has pointed out, it is God's command that initiates the process of self-

transcendence,²⁴ and Hazony ignores this non-naturalist claim.

In the second stage, a rupture between ethics and nature is effected by man's sin. We are living in this stage, which R. Soloveitchik terms "the interim period"—that stage in history prior to the messianic era. During this interim period, the rupture between nature and ethical-historical purposes (that is, nature's indifference to ethical purposes) can be partially healed either: a) intermittently—during "miraculous" events, when nature and ethics align themselves; or b) "for the most part" in the character of the charismatic personality. But the full and complete re-unification of nature and ethics must await the third stage, the messianic era, when nature and ethical-historical purposes will be completely aligned. And the crucial point in R. Soloveitchik's account of the unity of nature and ethics—and the point which Hazony misses—is that this unity between the natural world and the ethical world, i.e., this teleological view of nature, arises from, and is dependent on, the unity of nature and ethics in the divine infinite consciousness. As R. Soloveitchik writes:

"Yet in the divine infinite consciousness, the cosmic law is at the same time a moral law and morality is natural...God reveals Himself through the cosmos in the natural law and through the ethical universe. The unity of God warrants the unity of both orders: the natural and the moral." (189-190).

That is why,

"Faith in the inevitable fulfillment of the covenant is unshakeable, a passionate, optimistic faith in the ultimate sensibility and meaningfulness of the historical process...in spite of the horrifying length and monotony of the antithetic interim, the synthesis must finally come true." (186)

So yes, on the one hand R. Soloveitchik is no doubt trying to show how ethics can arise as part of the natural world, as Hazony points out. But on the other hand, the possibility of their complete unity, of the overcoming of the rupture

and dualism between the natural and normative worlds, *is only intelligible* for R. Soloveitchik as a result of the more basic and primal unity of God, of the infinite consciousness in which there are no divisions.

R. Soloveitchik's faith that nature is slowly but surely moving towards ethical purposes, that the ancient covenant with the patriarchs will be realized, is grounded in his faith in the unity of God, where all dualisms are overcome. In other words, teleological 'naturalism' is unintelligible without the existence of a supernatural God who is guiding nature, however slowly, to its final reunification with ethics. This, at least, is R. Soloveitchik's doctrine as found in *Emergence* and it can hardly be described as "entirely naturalistic." More problematic, the misleading label of naturalism actually covers up R. Soloveitchik's three-stage account of the relationship between nature and ethics and the complete dependence of their unity on the supreme unity of a supernatural God.

Thus R. Soloveitchik's 'naturalism' as presented in *Emergence*, includes the following elements:

- 1) the dialectic between Abraham and Moses, or that between the natural and revelational religious consciousness;
- 2) the idea that man owes unqualified and absolute allegiance to the Sovereign;
- 3) the claim that a divine command is needed to initiate the movement from natural to moral being;
- 4) the claim that the moral law is made true, not simply by an objective reality, but by God's command.
- 5) the dual movement between Abraham and God. While Abraham discovers the moral law, God also descends to him and reveals himself (i.e. prophecy);
- 6) the claim that divine contraction is ultimately a mysterious act;
- 7) a depiction of a relationship of love and friendship between God and Abraham;

- 8) the doctrine of divine intervention and interference with the course of history, albeit working through natural processes;
- 9) divine guarantees regarding the fulfillment of the covenant;
- 10) the necessity for God to have initiated the process of redemption; and
- 11) the doctrine of the unity between nature and ethics, which flows from the ultimate unity of nature and ethics in the divine infinite consciousness.

Maybe there are ways of jerry-rigging the concept of naturalism to accommodate the elements above.²⁵ But a more accurate assessment of *Emergence* would see these elements as *non-natural properties that take place in, or are part of, the natural world*. None of this negates the naturalistic bent of *Emergence*, it only complicates it. I certainly do not mean to imply that Hazony is completely wrong in his *general* thrust that *Emergence* is an attempt to naturalize aspects of Judaism. But R. Soloveitchik, with his penchant for dialectic, is much too complicated and multi-faceted a thinker to be reduced to simplistic labels like "entirely naturalistic." Hazony's manner of selectively citing passages that support his thesis, but ignoring or suppressing those which constitute a departure from a "thoroughgoing naturalism" is particularly problematic when applied to R. Soloveitchik, who was *systematically* a dialectical thinker and often presented conflicting claims. Selective citations from his works distort his methodology and cover up the multi-faceted nature of this thought.

Naturalism and *The Lonely Man of Faith*

In his *Jerusalem Letters*, a revised version of his original article,²⁶ Hazony spreads the naturalism canopy not only over *Emergence*, but over the rest of R. Soloveitchik's writings as well:

Moreover, so far as I have been able to tell, nothing in R. Soloveitchik's published works in any way contradicts the naturalism of *Emergence of Ethical Man*. These issues are

deftly sidestepped, as in *Lonely Man of Faith*. But the naturalist standpoint of *The Emergence of Ethical Man* is never contradicted.²⁷

It is ironic that Hazony singles out *The Lonely Man of Faith*²⁸ as in no way contradicting naturalism. This is profoundly mistaken, for in the latter part of *The Lonely Man of Faith* what we encounter is actually a sustained attack on the project of (completely) naturalizing Judaism.

As is well-known to readers of R. Soloveitchik's works, in *The Lonely Man of Faith* R. Soloveitchik contrasts two different personality types—Adam I and Adam II. Adam I is a conqueror, triumphant, optimistic, a builder and creator, full of dignity and majesty. Adam II is humble, subservient to the will of God, longing for genuine connections with others in relationships of love, and lonely. As R. Soloveitchik's narrative progresses, he writes that the particular historical loneliness experienced by Adam II arises from modern Adam I's *complete* appropriation of the language and categories of Adam II, into the language and categories of Adam I. In other words, in the modern, secular age, Adam I has penetrated into the inner sanctums of organized religion. He has recognized the need for the concepts of Adam II and has therefore taken them over by translating them completely into his own terms.

The essence of prayer for Adam II cannot be naturalized, unless naturalism includes total devotion and submission to the will of God

For instance, consider prayer. Adam I also prays, for he recognizes in prayer its majestic and uplifting nature. Nevertheless, he has missed the essence of prayer, which only Adam II retains. The essence of prayer for Adam II is that one is standing before God, that there is an encounter and a submission before God and his infinite will. Adam I has appropriated prayer, but he has *naturalized* it completely, re-imagining prayer in naturalistic and humanistic terms. But the essence

of prayer for Adam II cannot be naturalized, unless by naturalism one includes total devotion and submission to the will of God. As R. Soloveitchik writes:

Prayer, for instance, might appeal to majestic man as the most uplifting, integrating and purifying act, arousing the finest and noblest emotions, yet these characteristics...are of marginal interest to Adam II, who experiences prayer as the awesome confrontation of God and man...and at the same time being aware that he fully belongs to God and that God demands complete surrender and self-sacrifice. (95)

How is this passage consistent with an “entirely naturalistic” understanding of Judaism? As R. Soloveitchik writes: “The act of faith is unique and cannot be fully translated into cultural categories.” (96). For R. Soloveitchik:

[T]he magnitude of the commitment is beyond the comprehension of the *logos* and the *ethos*. The act of faith is aboriginal, exploding with elemental force as an all-consuming and all-pervading passional experience...The commitment of the man of faith is...immediately accepted before the mind is given a chance to investigate the reasonableness of this unqualified commitment...The man of faith has to give in to an “absurd” commitment. The man of faith is “insanely” committed to and “madly” in love with God.” (94-95)²⁹

How can these passages be read in a naturalistic light?³⁰ This passage stands in obvious tension with a naturalism in which the ‘moral law is discovered within’, an echo of Kant, whom R. Soloveitchik in *The Lonely Man of Faith* classifies as an example of how Adam I appropriates the language of Adam II (92).³¹ *The source of the ultimate commitments of Adam II is simply not consistent with philosophical naturalism.*

Hazony links his reading of R. Soloveitchik with the larger project of naturalizing Judaism, starting with the Bible. Hazony writes that the Bible is full of accounts of what people philosophize about, of topics that are of universal human concern:

The things that we *do* find in Hebrew Scripture, by contrast, are in many respects similar to materials that are found in the books of philosophers and historians—whose subject matter is presumed to be the *natural* world: histories of ancient peoples and attempts to draw political lessons from them; explorations of how best to conduct the life of the nation and the life of the individual; the writings of individuals who struggled with personal persecution and failure and their speculations concerning human nature and the search for the true and the good; attempts to get beyond the sphere of the here and now

and to try to reach a more general understanding of the nature of reality, of man's place in it, and of his relationship with that which is beyond his control.³²

What Hazony purports to find in the Bible is precisely that which R. Soloveitchik attributes to Adam the first:

However, the idea of majesty which Adam the first is striving to realize embraces much more than the mere building of machines...Successful man wants to be a sovereign not only in the physical but in the spiritual world. He is questing not only for material success, but for ideological and axiological achievements as well. *He is concerned with a philosophy of nature and man, of matter and mind, of things and ideas.* [emphasis added] (89)

Of course, R. Soloveitchik affirms this central, majestic aspect of Judaism:

The idea that certain aspects of faith are translatable into pragmatic terms is not new.

The Bible has already pointed out that observance of the Divine Law and obedience to God lead man to worldly happiness, to a respectable, pleasant and meaningful life. Religious pragmatism has a place within the perspective of the man of faith. (93)

But it cannot be the whole of Judaism. The project of "religious pragmatism" is in fact exemplified in Hazony's project of naturalizing Judaism. And for R. Soloveitchik, such a project, while laudable, is radically incomplete. Philosophical naturalism is disavowed by R. Soloveitchik in *The Lonely Man of Faith*.

In the writings of Yoram Hazony, we are treated to stirring portraits of the religion of Adam I. Yet it is with disappointment to discover that Adam II and his commitments are nowhere to be found, and this lacuna is especially disconcerting when a scholar is engaged in interpreting the works of R. Soloveitchik. Of course, we cannot, and should not, read *The Lonely Man of Faith* back into R. Soloveitchik's other works. R. Soloveitchik's *oeuvre* is not susceptible to such treatment. Indeed, I have highlighted one aspect in which the Kantian theme of discovering the moral law in *Emergence* is inconsistent with the act of faith as presented in *The Lonely Man of Faith*. Yet it is Hazony himself who has overreached, by claiming that nowhere does R. Soloveitchik contradict the doctrine of philosophical naturalism. This claim is simply mistaken, not only with respect to R. Soloveitchik's major works, but even with respect to *The Emergence of Ethical Man*—a bold and original work—but hardly the bombshell that Hazony would make of it.

NOTES

¹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man* (New York: Ktav, 2005).

² For the original article, see Yoram Hazony, “The Rav’s Bombshell,” *Commentary* (April, 2012) pgs. 48-55. The subsequent letters, along with Hazony’s response, appear in “An Exchange on The Rav’s Bombshell,” *Commentary* (September, 2012) pgs. 69-76. It should be noted that many of the letters to the editor were significantly truncated. Hazony also published a somewhat revised version of his original article online. See Yoram Hazony, “A Bombshell from the Rav,” *Jerusalem Letters* (April 2, 2012), accessible at: <http://jerusalemletters.com/jletters/articles/a-bombshell-from-the-rav>.

³ Point 5 is uncontroversial with respect to R. Soloveitchik, as it occupies a central place in *Halakhic Man*.

⁴ See Hazony, “The Rav’s Bombshell,” p. 52. It should be noted that R. Soloveitchik here is following the well-known *midrash* in which Abraham discovers God on his own, a view which Maimonides adopts and which, coincidentally, is at odds with the plain meaning of the Biblical verses, where God suddenly appears to Abraham and commands him. Further, R. Soloveitchik here slightly changes the *midrash* by depicting Abraham as discovering the moral law.

⁵ The contrast between Abraham and Moses with respect to how they each come to meet God can be found in Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Mada, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim*, Ch. 1, 1-17. In the first few laws Maimonides describes how Abraham discovers God, while in halakha 17, Maimonides writes that it is God who initiates the movement towards Moses in order to uphold His oath to Abraham.

⁶ Hazony, “The Rav’s Bombshell,” p. 52.

⁷ *Emergence*, pp. 61-62. Note that the discussion in *Emergence* of infinity contracting into finitude is a repetition of a theme that occupies several pages in *Halakhic Man* - and R. Soloveitchik even cites the same *midrash* in both works. And for R. Soloveitchik, this divine contraction is full of mystery and paradox, as he describes it in *Emergence*:

“In this wonderful prayer, Solomon formulated the most powerful mystery of divinity. Infinity and universality on the one hand, and self-contraction on the other... According to the Midrash, God revealed to him [Moses] the mystery of *tzimtzum* (“contraction”).” (*Emergence*, pgs. 51-52)

This emphasis on the mysterious nature of infinity contracting into finitude, i.e., of creation, revelation and prophecy, is not consistent with naturalism.

⁸ See also n. 9 for Hazony’s unsuccessful attempt to naturalize the encounter between God and Abraham.

⁹ See also this quote: “All life is considered by Judaism as belonging to God. He has exclusive, absolute ownership rights to all living creatures...there is no contractual legal protection of the tenant against the will of the owner...On the contrary, the living being owes Him unequivocal allegiance...Murder is the usurpation of something belonging not to me...” (42-43). As this passage shows, for R. Soloveitchik, the most basic commandment in ethics, the prohibition of murder, stems in part from God’s absolute dominion over his created beings. The idea that God has absolute ownership rights over human beings is not always associated with naturalism, although some accounts of natural law do incorporate it. I doubt, however, that Hazony would be inclined to label this idea part of what he means by naturalism.

¹⁰ R. Soloveitchik is clearly describing what in his mind is a genuine relationship of love and friendship between two beings, one of whom is surely supernatural. In his response to Lawrence Kaplan’s letter in the September, 2012 issue of *Commentary*, where Kaplan argues that according to R. Soloveitchik, humans can in fact have knowledge of a transcendent God, Hazony unsuccessfully attempts to naturalize the encounter between God and Abraham, by asserting that Abraham utilizes his finite mind to hear God. Hazony’s attempt to place prophecy under the banner of ‘naturalism’ by asserting that Abraham heard God through his finite mind renders the term overly expansive, thereby draining it of much of its

explanatory force. If the term ‘naturalism’ includes prophecy whereby God speaks to Abraham and commands him, where is the bombshell? Finally, in *Emergence*, R. Soloveitchik presents the encounter between God and man—which requires a divine contraction—as laden with “mystery” and paradox, language that is hardly consistent with philosophical naturalism. See n. 7. Where is the mystery according to Hazony? The scholar Dov Schwartz has provided an ingenious reading of the doctrine of divine contraction in *Halakbic Man*, a reading which ultimately seeks to explain away the mystery. See Dov Schwartz, *Religion or Halakha: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Volume 1*, trans. Batya Stein (Leiden: Brill, 2007). However, Schwartz’s reading depends on a highly controversial thesis regarding the esoteric nature of *Halakbic Man*. See my forthcoming review of Schwartz’s book titled “Hermann Cohen in Disguise,” in *Modern Judaism* (February, 2013).

¹¹ Hazony, “The Rav’s Bombshell,” p. 52.

¹² See Jon Levenson, “Category Error,” *Jewish Review of Books* (Fall, 2012).

¹³ R. Soloveitchik here essentially asserts that the moral laws are made true by *both* human reason and God’s will. He does not explain how this can be so, but Hazony’s translation of God’s will into something akin to the world outside of us confirming our truth-claims renders God’s will superfluous as that which forms the basis of the moral law. Ordinarily, if one discovers the moral law through reason, one is also necessarily engaged in the project of justifying or grounding that law. R. Soloveitchik’s treatment of the relationship between ethics, reason and God’s commands requires further exploration.

¹⁴ While we can sometimes know God’s ‘will’ through the commands that are issued, Maimonides had famously argued that we cannot know God’s essence. So it is puzzling that Hazony then seems startled by R. Soloveitchik’s claim that “we cannot have knowledge of a transcendent God.” But what exactly, is the bombshell here? That R. Soloveitchik was following Maimonides? Or that R. Soloveitchik was a neo-Kantian thinker who recognized that unfettered access to a transcendent world is problematic?

¹⁵ Hazony, “The Rav’s Bombshell,” pp. 52-53.

¹⁶ See various letters to the editor in the September, 2012 issue of *Commentary*, cited in n. 2. There are two issues here, what Hazony implies that R. Soloveitchik himself believed, and what Hazony implies that R. Soloveitchik believed about what the Bible itself says. Hazony clearly meant to imply that for R.

Soloveitchik the Bible does *not* endorse the doctrine of personal immortality. As Hazony writes: “If the biblical concept of man offers immortality only through the merger of one’s living consciousness...”

What does Hazony mean by the word “only”? Hazony backpedals here in his response to some letters.

¹⁷ To see this point more clearly, it is worth contrasting R. Soloveitchik’s position in *Emergence* with David Hartman, whose writings come much closer to religious naturalism than R. Soloveitchik’s. Naturalism is ill-equipped to explain why an ancient promise to an ancient people must be realized. Hartman recognizes this and therefore seriously entertains the possibility of ‘radical tragedy,’ that is, the possibility that Israel could in principle one day be wiped out and the promises never realized.

¹⁸ This statement must be understood against the backdrop of R. Soloveitchik’s understanding of miracles that do not violate natural laws and against his further statement that Moses’s mission as an agent is a fully human mission. What is supernatural about his powers is not that he can perform miracles that violate nature but that he can effectuate an almost complete alignment of nature with ethical purposes as God’s agent.

¹⁹ This sentence is not technically inconsistent with what Hazony says about redemption, where Hazony’s focus is on the fact that redemption takes place in this world, and not in some spiritual afterlife. But surely that isn’t sufficient to claim that a concept is a naturalistic concept. If God must seize Moses through an apocalyptic command in order to initiate the process of redemption, and God must also do His part in guiding nature to its ultimate ethical goal, we cannot claim that redemption is an entirely naturalistic process.

²⁰ See n. 5.

²¹ Hazony, “The Rav’s Bombshell,” p. 50.

²² In the general philosophical literature, Kantian morality is often *contrasted* with naturalistic approaches to ethics. Insofar as R. Soloveitchik affirms that the *natural* desires of human beings are legitimate from a moral point of view and that they play a role in shaping the moral law, he is more “naturalistic” than Kant, as that term is often used.

²⁴ See Daniel Rynhold, “Review of *The Emergence of Ethical Man*,” *Religious Studies* (Sep., 2006) 364-68.

²⁵ Hazony seems to partially pursue this strategy in his *Jerusalem Letters*. But how far can we stretch the meaning of “naturalism”? I note that *none* of the elements above could be accommodated by, for example, John McDowell’s version of ‘relaxed’ naturalism in his *Mind and World*, or even Thomas Nagel’s recent advocacy of ‘teleological naturalism’ as found in his *Mind and Cosmos*. R. Soloveitchik in *Emergence* moves far beyond even the most expansive versions of naturalism championed by contemporary philosophers (although a comparison to Nagel’s views is complicated given the problems Nagel points out with the emergence of mind from matter. In *The Halakhic Mind*, R. Soloveitchik espouses a kind of qualified dualism; much less so in *Emergence*). I note McDowell here simply because in his *Jerusalem Letters*, Hazony himself references McDowell and makes the connection. But the connection between McDowell’s naturalism and R. Soloveitchik’s ideas in *Emergence* is limited. See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) and Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁶ See n. 2.

²⁷ “A Bombshell from the Rav” in his *Jerusalem Letters*. This statement is surprising, to say the least. What about the central contrast between the natural and revelational consciousness in *U’bikashtem Mi’sham?* Or the sacrifice of the intellect in *Catharsis?* Or the centrality of apocalyptic, revealed religion in *The Halakhic Mind?* Hazony’s claim leads one to question just what he means by “naturalism.” If the above can be accommodated by naturalism, as Hazony might maintain, the term has become so expansive as to have become drained of its bombshell potential.

²⁸ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday: New York, 1965).

²⁹ R. Soloveitchik sharply differentiates his position from Kierkegaard, so this quote needs to be read in light of the footnote on pgs. 101-02. See the discussion of R. Soloveitchik’s criticism of Kierkegaard in Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik* (Boston: Maimonides School, 2012), pp. 168-69. This qualification does not alter the main point above.

³⁰ As noted above in the text, there are at least five general senses of Hazony’s use of the term ‘naturalism’ in his article. One of the components of naturalism—the moral-rational component, which includes claims that man discovers the moral law within himself (i.e., Abraham in *Emergence* and Kant) and that the Bible is a philosophical attempt to illuminate what constitutes the good and just life—insofar as Judaism is seen only in that light, is rejected by R. Soloveitchik as leaving no room for the commitments of Adam II. Autonomy and religious pragmatism have their place in Judaism, an important and even central place, but they are not the whole of Judaism and their ultimate worth (for R. Soloveitchik) is derived from Adam II’s more primal commitments.

³¹ It is a misreading of Adam I’s personality to claim that he is not an ethical being. In the first ‘pure’ stage maybe he is not, but as he borrows and appropriates the categories of Adam II, he certainly becomes an ethical being. As R. Soloveitchik writes: “Furthermore, as I commented previously, Adam [the first] distinguishes himself not only in the realm of scientific theory but in that of the ethico-moral and aesthetic gestures as well. He legislates norms which he invests with validity and great worth.” (90) As noted above, R. Soloveitchik references Kant in *The Lonely Man of Faith* (92) as an example of how Adam I appropriates the language of Adam II, so it is clear that R. Soloveitchik views Kant as a noble embodiment of Adam I. Further, R. Soloveitchik’s reference to “worldly happiness” in the text is meant to link Adam I’s project of religious pragmatism to that of *eudaimonia*.

³² Hazony, “The Rav’s Bombshell,” p. 55.