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## “Do not grieve excessively”: Rabbis Mourning Children Between Law and Narrative in Rabbinic Laws of Mourning and Soloveitchik’s Halakhic Man

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**“DO NOT GRIEVE EXCESSIVELY”:  
RABBIS MOURNING CHILDREN BETWEEN  
LAW AND NARRATIVE IN RABBINIC  
LAWS OF MOURNING AND  
SOLOVEITCHIK’S *HALAKHIC MAN***

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“It is easier for a person to grow myriads of olive trees...  
than it is to rear one child...”

*Genesis Rabba* 20:6

“There are moments that the words don’t reach. /  
There is suffering too terrible to name ...”

*Lin-Manuel Miranda, “It’s Quiet Uptown”*

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Rabbinic literature abounds with stories of rabbis who have lost children.<sup>2</sup> Many such narratives lack any reference to parental grief, and some even seem to promote diminished mourning. One persistent trope is of the rabbi who continues to study and teach Torah after the loss of a child.<sup>3</sup> In the context of a rabbinic legal norm that mourners must refrain from Torah study,<sup>4</sup> these stories might be read as reflecting a culture of apathy in the face of the loss of a child, and an ethos in which children – even adult children – were not fully mourned.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars have identified “a largely disaffected attitude to children’s deaths among ancient families” in a world in which it was all too common for parents to outlive children.<sup>6</sup> Given the ongoing importance of rabbinic literature and rabbinic laws of mourning for modern Judaism, such stories can appear as touchstones of a general Jewish ethos that prioritizes the observance of commandments over the love of children.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Tal Ilan, “there are few tannaitic sages who are not accredited with the death or severe illness of a son.” Such stories often focus in particular on the deaths of sons, with some exceptions, and some of them have been identified as literary fictions, while the historical status of others is not known with certainty. See Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers: Retrieving Women’s History from Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 76-8. In my discussion, the loss of a child refers to the experience of a parent whose child – whether young or grown up – has died. Rabbinic stories about the deaths of the children of rabbis do not typically specify the age or stage of the child.

<sup>3</sup> See Masekhet Semahot (Avel Rabbati) 10:11, as well as b. Moed Katan 21a (including the Munich and Vatican Ebr. 108 manuscripts that include one such story omitted from the printed Talmud). See Masekhet Semahot 8:13 for an extensive story about Rabbi Akiva.

<sup>4</sup> B. Moed Katan 21a.

<sup>5</sup> To the law of abstaining from Torah study during the mourning period is appended an exemption for rabbis whose study and teaching of Torah is deemed an essential communal service. This is illustrated with stories of rabbis who continued to teach Torah specifically after losing a child. See b. Moed Katan 21a (including mss. Munich and Vatican Ebr. 108).

<sup>6</sup> See Maria E. Doerfler, *Jephtah’s Daughter, Sarah’s Son: The Death of Children in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 4, for a description of this longstanding consensus that her own work challenges, among other recent scholarship.

In the canon of modern Jewish thought, one such story has particularly troubled modern readers. In *Halakhic Man*,<sup>7</sup> Joseph Soloveitchik tells of his maternal grandfather, Elijah [Feinstein] Pruzna,<sup>8</sup> a community rabbi whose daughter was on her deathbed. After assessing that he would have enough time to complete morning prayers – including the supererogatory pious practice of donning two sets of phylacteries<sup>9</sup> – and still return to be present when his daughter passed, Elijah appears laser-focused on completing these commandments before entering the legal-halakhic status of a mourner.<sup>10</sup> In Soloveitchik’s account, Elijah’s behavior laudably epitomizes the character of “halakhic man,” a figure whose “affective life is characterized by a fine equilibrium, a stoic tranquility. It exemplifies the Aristotelian golden mean and the ideal of the well-balanced personality set forth by Maimonides; it is guided by the knowledge of inevitability and the means of triumphing over it provided by the rule of Halakhah.”<sup>11</sup> For some prominent readers, Elijah’s apparent lack of feeling for his child seems “inhuman.”<sup>12</sup> The apparent valorization

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<sup>7</sup> Originally published in Hebrew in *Talpiot* 1 (1944): 651–735, *Ish Ha-Halakhah* has also appeared in Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *Be-Sod Ha-Yahid Veba-Yahad: Mivhar Ketavim Ivriyim* (Jerusalem: Orot, 1976), 37–188 and *Ish Ha-Halakhah, Galui Ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem: Histadrut Hatsiyonit Haolamit, 1979), 9–113. It was translated for the first time as *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983). All quotations in this chapter refer to the English edition (HM).

<sup>8</sup> Elijah Feinstein (1842–1929) served as the community Rabbi in what is now Pruzhany, Belarus (Pruzna in Yiddish and Polish), and is better known as Elijah Pruzna.

<sup>9</sup> In the history of Jewish law, there was a controversy between two prominent halakhic authorities from medieval Ashkenaz, Rashi (1040–1105) and his grandson Jacob ben Meir, known as Rabbenu Tam (1100–1170), regarding the proper way to produce phylacteries. In communities of Ashkenaz, it became standard practice to follow Rashi’s approach, but it was associated with extra piety to don both sets of phylacteries as an extra precaution. This two-tiered approach is codified in the sixteenth-century *Shulhan Arukh*, an influential code of Jewish law (*Shulhan Arukh*, “Orah Hayim” 34:2).

<sup>10</sup> A mourner is exempt from prayer and tefillin in the time between the death and the burial of their relative (m. Brakhot 3:1).

<sup>11</sup> HM 76–77.

<sup>12</sup> David Hartman, *Love and Terror in the God Encounter: The Theological Legacy of Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), 51.

of this behavior within *Halakhic Man* has cast a shadow over the recovery of that work and the broader system of Jewish theology and philosophy it represents.<sup>13</sup>

Soloveitchik's story is strikingly similar to a rabbinic aggada about Rabbi Akiva.<sup>14</sup> Interwoven with a legal norm prescribing that one "not cease from the study of Torah until the soul [of a dying relative] departs," the story tells of Akiva's son languishing on his deathbed while Akiva teaches Torah in the study hall and receives periodic updates on the status of his son via messengers. When told "he is very ill," and then "he has grown worse," and then "he is dying," Akiva instructs his students, "[continue to] ask [questions]" (*sha'alu*). Only when the message comes that "he is spent," does Akiva put down the sacred books, remove his phylacteries, and desist from teaching. He rends his garment and announces to his students, "until now we were obligated to study Torah; now we must honor the dead." This story has been described as "hard to read" and Akiva's behavior, like that of Elijah Pruzna centuries later, as "almost inhuman."<sup>15</sup> Even if one contextualizes Akiva's behavior within the cruel realities of life expectancy in late antiquity, the extent to which it is similar to the modern story of Elijah Pruzna raises the stakes for how historical sources that have normative and philosophical meaning for moderns are interpreted.

In this article, I offer a framework for rethinking both the modern story of Elijah Pruzna and the rabbinic literary trope it inherits and reproduces. I argue that there is a hidden pathos in rabbinic stories of rabbis who exhibit diminished mourning for their children that can be uncovered by examining the literary tensions between these narratives and the legal norms that contextualize them, and that they are said to exemplify. These rabbinic stories present legal norms that encourage

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Kavka, "The Perils of Covenant Theology: The Cases of David Hartman and David Novak," in Leonard Kaplan and Ken Koltun-Fromm, eds., *Imagining the Jewish God* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 229-230.

<sup>14</sup> Masekhet Semahot 8:13.

<sup>15</sup> Naftali Rothenberg, *Rabbi Akiva's Philosophy of Love* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 172.

rabbis in mourning to suppress their grief or mourning practices in order to focus on Torah, commandments, and the needs of the community, and showcase rabbis who generally heed this norm of limited mourning. Yet the stories betray elements of resistance to diminished mourning in the case of the loss of a child, uncovering a hidden complexity and pathos. I argue that it is far too simplistic to read these stories as reflecting a muted love for children in antiquity and in a modern Judaism that inherits values and norms from ancient sources. Building a bridge from rabbinic literature into modern Jewish thought, I draw upon this literary analysis of the rabbinic stories toward a reconsideration of the story of Elijah Pruzna in *Halakhic Man* and, more broadly, the Maimonidean norm of “stoic tranquility” in contexts of grief and mourning in Soloveitchik’s thought more broadly. By bringing together rabbinic literature and the modern work of Soloveitchik I mean to cross disciplinary boundaries in a way that productively expands the scholarly toolbox for approaching the questions at stake in our reading of rabbinic texts, Soloveitchik’s oeuvre, and modern Jewish thought insofar as it inherits rabbinic texts.

My reading of the rabbinic sources and of *Halakhic Man* is literary rather than philological or historical. I claim that through a complex dynamic interplay between law and narrative uncovered by literary analysis, Talmudic and halakhic texts that legislate suppressed mourning for children simultaneously also literarily reflect the deep pain of child loss, whether or not this meaning was intended or accessed by the various ancient layers of the texts. With respect to *Halakhic Man*, I uncover a tension between the story of Elijah Pruzna and the norm of stoic tranquility it represents in the text, but I do not claim that Soloveitchik intentionally placed this tension in the text. At some level, it should not be surprising that these tensions exist, even if they were not intended. Presumably, any text calling for the suppression of an emotion must posit the existence of the emotion being suppressed, and the more powerful the emotion, the stronger the suppression.<sup>16</sup> Beyond this general observation, these texts may point to a profound tension between the attempt to control

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<sup>16</sup> I thank Shlomo Zuckier for this insight and formulation.

or channel grief through a normative structure and the specific case of the loss of a child.

This work builds on recent trends in scholarship in three different fields. The literary reading of rabbinic texts draws on recent scholarship that examines the complex relationship between law and narrative in rabbinic legal texts.<sup>17</sup> The reading of *Halakhic Man* and of Soloveitchik’s relationship to grief and the norm of “stoic tranquility” draws on recent trends in scholarship on Soloveitchik that either emphasize tensions within *Halakhic Man*, or that highlight a complex relationship between Soloveitchik himself – especially in his later writings – and the ideal type of “halakhic man” that he constructs in the earlier work, *Halakhic Man*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Jane Kanarek, *Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Mira Wasserman, *Jews, Gentiles, and Other Animals* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Many of these works draw upon the theoretical framework put forth in Cover’s, “Nomos and Narrative,” which highlights the ways narratives and norms always imbue one another with meaning and also exist in tension with one another – and how much of the meaning arises from this tension; see Robert Cover, “The Supreme Court 1982 Term Foreword: Nomos and Narrative” (*Harvard Law Review* 97 (1983): 4-68).

<sup>18</sup> Dov Schwartz, in *Religion or Halakha: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), summarizes the scholarship on the question of whether the ideal type presented in *Halakhic Man* is an internally consistent figure, as the latter part of the text seems to present him, or a figure who reflects the tensions of a battle between two forces within himself (i.e., “cognitive man” and “*homo religiosus*”), as the first sections of the text seem to present him. Schwartz argues that halakhic man is meant to be an internally consistent figure who lines up with cognitive man and suppresses *homo religiosus*, but halakhic man differs from Soloveitchik himself, who is pulled significantly by the persona of *homo religiosus*. Thus, Schwartz would disagree with a reading of *Halakhic Man* in which the story of Elijah Pruzna intentionally complicates the portrayal of halakhic man as a person of stoic tranquility; but Schwartz’s separation of Soloveitchik from halakhic man belies the inherent complexities built into any text in which the author disagrees with or differs from the intended message of the text, opening the door to a more complex reading (see esp. 11-36). William Kolbrener, in *The Last Rabbi: Joseph Soloveitchik and Talmudic Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University

Finally, in offering a more nuanced understanding of rabbinic stories of child loss, I build on recent trends in scholarship on late antiquity that have pushed against the longstanding consensus regarding a disaffected attitude toward the death of children to uncover, instead, “[g]enuine, disinterested parental love and concomitantly authentic grief” among ancient parents mourning their children.<sup>19</sup>

My analysis proceeds as follows. In Part 1, I contextualize the story of Elijah Pruzna within the broader theme of the relation of “halakhic man” to death, a thread that runs through the entirety of *Halakhic Man* and forms the backdrop for most of the anecdotes in that essay. In Part 2, I present the biblical story of Aaron’s response to the deaths of his older two sons, which later was understood by Maimonides – whom Soloveitchik cites on this point – as the source of a biblical commandment to mourn for dead relatives. I argue that the story of Aaron, the high priest who continues to perform his public duties in the immediate aftermath of losing two children, is the biblical antecedent to the rabbinic trope, discussed in Part 3, of the rabbi whose continued service of the community after the loss of a child entails diminished mourning practices. I argue in parts 2 and 3 that the story of Aaron exemplifies tensions between law and narrative that can be seen, as well, in the rabbinic material and in the modern story of Elijah Pruzna. In Part 4, I show that the Maimonidean dictum that Soloveitchik cites as the normative basis for the “stoic tranquility” of Elijah Pruzna, when examined in its original rabbinic context, similarly reveals a tension between a norm that suppresses grief and a narrative that highlights parental bereavement. In Part 5, I analyze Soloveitchik’s broader use of the Maimonidean dictum to mourn with moderation. I show that in later works, he focuses on *exceptions* to the norm of stoic tranquility in grief, revealing a far more complex understanding of grief than the account in *Halakhic Man* suggests, one that comes remarkably

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Press, 2016), argues explicitly for a Freudian reading of *Halakhic Man* and embraces the internal inconsistencies within the text (see esp. 127-151).

<sup>19</sup> See Doerfler, *Jephtah’s Daughter*; for quotation, see 4; for a review of new scholarship on the death of children in antiquity in which Doerfler situates her claims about Christian late antiquity, see 217-218n10.



close to describing the emotions associated with parental bereavement. I conclude with a reexamination of the narrative sequence in *Halakhic Man* that leads up to the story of Elijah Pruzna in light of additional parallel rabbinic material on parental bereavement.

## 1. Death and Mourning in *Halakhic Man*

When *Halakhic Man* was written in 1944, the author was in a state of profound bereavement. The monograph can be understood, in part, as a philosophical eulogy for a world destroyed in the Holocaust. This was the world that had created and sustained the persona of "halakhic man," an ideal type Soloveitchik constructs based on the personas of certain exemplary giants of Torah associated with Eastern European *yeshivot* that had been destroyed. Perhaps because of this context, themes relating to death and mourning pervade the text. The story of Elijah Pruzna facing the death of his daughter is one of many anecdotes in *Halakhic Man* that relate to death.

Early on in the essay, Soloveitchik portrays halakhic man as a figure who is almost crippled by fear of death: "Halakhic man is afraid of death; the dread of dissolution oftentimes seizes hold of him."<sup>20</sup> The problem is twofold. On the one hand, one's own death is feared, for it marks the end of halakhic praxis, as halakha is a set of behaviors performed only by living and breathing human beings. On the other hand, mourning for others entails the suspension of some halakhic practices.<sup>21</sup> Thus, both dying and experiencing the death of a relative entail the suspension (either permanent or temporary) of halakha, the lifeblood of halakhic man.

The goal of conquering the fear of death is central to a feature of Soloveitchik's halakhic man that he develops in the essay, culminating in the anecdote about Elijah Pruzna, namely, halakhic man's emotional equanimity. Soloveitchik identifies as one of the functions of halakha the "objectification" of subjective experience into lawful categories: halakhic

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<sup>20</sup> HM 36.

<sup>21</sup> HM 31-32.

“statutes ... serve as a dam against the surging, subjective current coursing through the individual *homo religiosus*.”<sup>22</sup> The objective external act of halakha creates “structure and order” within the subjective individual.<sup>23</sup> Soloveitchik recalls how a Habad Hasid who wept while blowing the shofar was berated by his father Moshe Soloveitchik, an exemplary halakhic man who believed that all commandments were mere objective acts and did not call for particular emotions or any expression of subjectivity.<sup>24</sup> The objectifying function of halakha achieves its apex in the claim that “Halakhic man vanquishes even the fear of death ... by means of the law and the Halakhah, and he transforms the phenomenon, which so terrifies him, into an object of man’s observation and cognition.”<sup>25</sup>

Soloveitchik comes to the extreme conclusion that “Halakhic man fears nothing. For he swims in the sea of the Talmud.”<sup>26</sup> An anecdote about the fear of death, however, shows that this conquest of fear is at best a temporary achievement:

[W]hen the fear of death would seize hold of R. Hayyim [of Brisk], he would throw himself, with his entire heart and mind, into the study of the laws of tents and corpse defilement. And these laws, which revolve about such difficult and complex problems as defilement of a grave, defilement of a tent, ... etc., etc., would calm the turbulence of his soul and imbue it with a spirit of joy and gladness.<sup>27</sup>

Hayyim of Brisk did not reach some telos of “fearing nothing” or “vanquishing the fear of death.” Rather, he continually faced this fear and was only able to alleviate it temporarily, through the study and practice of halakha.

Soloveitchik’s discussion of the objectifying function of halakha culminates in the claim that the general “standard of halakhic man” in the

<sup>22</sup> HM 59.

<sup>23</sup> HM 59.

<sup>24</sup> HM 60-61. See my discussion of this anecdote in the Conclusion.

<sup>25</sup> HM 73.

<sup>26</sup> HM 74.

<sup>27</sup> HM 73.

entirety of the "affective realm" is represented in a dictum from Maimonides' "Laws of Mourning" that Soloveitchik presents in a sloganized form: "One who does not mourn for dead relatives as prescribed by the sages is cruel; but one who grieves more than is customary is a fool."<sup>28</sup> This section concludes with the story of Elijah Pruzna exemplifying the emotional moderation and "stoic tranquility" of halakhic man, even in the face of a child's death.

Scholars have noted the seeming tension within *Halakhic Man* between the depiction of halakhic man, on the one hand, as a figure who continually faces the fear of death and processes that terror on an ongoing basis through detached scientific-halakhic analysis, and the portrayal of halakhic man, on the other hand, as a figure who achieves stoic tranquility. There is disagreement about the implications of these divergent strands for our understanding of the character of halakhic man, understood by some as a highly complex fusion of multiple impulses and by others as a stable, unified persona.<sup>29</sup> Since my own reading is literary and does not venture into claims about authorial intent, my analysis below takes no firm stance in this debate. My reading of the story of Elijah Pruzna fits more naturally within scholarship that sees halakhic man as a complex figure, but it does not necessitate that reading of *Halakhic Man*. Even if Soloveitchik intended to construct a unified persona, my reading notes literary tensions within the text that are nevertheless present. Either way, however, my reading builds upon and contributes to scholarship that emphasizes distinctions between positions Soloveitchik advances in his later work and the halakhic man he describes in the 1944 essay.

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<sup>28</sup> HM 77. This paraphrase reverses the order in the original text (Maimonides, "Laws of Mourning" 13:11-12), where Maimonides first admonishes not to grieve excessively and afterward warns against mourning insufficiently.

<sup>29</sup> See note 18 above.

## 2. When a Community Leader Loses a Child: Tension Between Narrative and Norm

To understand the full literary complexity of the story of Elijah Pruzna in *Halakhic Man*, it is useful to consider earlier versions of the rabbinic trope of which it partakes: the rabbi who continues to teach Torah and perform commandments in the face of the death of a child, and the normative encouragement of that behavior. The first example is found at what Soloveitchik calls “the very foundation and source of the commandment to mourn” in Maimonides’ “Laws of Mourning.”<sup>30</sup>

According to Maimonides, the biblical source of the commandment to mourn comes from the story of the deaths of Aaron’s sons: “There is a positive commandment to mourn for relatives, as it is written, ‘Had I eaten a sin offering today would that have pleased the Lord?’ (Lev. 10:19), and the biblical commandment refers only to the first day, i.e., the day of death and burial. The seven days of mourning are not a biblical law.”<sup>31</sup> Maimonides makes the simple legal statement that mourning is biblically commanded, and he includes a biblical proof-text that points to a narrative. A closer examination of that narrative reveals a tension between the need of the community to contain the mourning of its leaders for their children and the impossibility of fully so doing.

In Leviticus 10 Aaron’s older two sons die suddenly and unexpectedly at the climax of the celebration of the dedication of the Tabernacle. One of the first things Moses tells Aaron and his remaining sons is not to mourn.<sup>32</sup> After instructing them to continue to perform their public duties, he

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<sup>30</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition* (Hoboken: Ktav, 2003), 59. See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Shiurim L’Zekher Abba Mari z”l, Maran R. Moshe Halevi Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2002), 185.

<sup>31</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Mourning,” 1:1. Many halakhic authorities have differed from Maimonides, understanding the entirety of the laws of mourning as rabbinic commandments; see Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind* (henceforth: *Whirlwind*), 59. (See Soloveitchik’s discussion of this Maimonidean position in another context, at *Whirlwind*, 26).

<sup>32</sup> Lev. 10:6: “Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes, lest you die.” This verse is the origin of the notion that priests are exempt from many mourning practices, and the high priest from all or nearly all mourning practices. See HM 35-36 and 149n40.

discovers that Aaron had refrained from one of these: he had not eaten the sin offering. "You should have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded," Moses admonishes.<sup>33</sup> Aaron's response is the full verse of Maimonides' proof-text: "Behold, on this day they offered their sin offering and their burnt offering, and things such as this have befallen me. Had I eaten a sin offering today, would that have pleased the Lord?"<sup>34</sup>

This exchange reveals a pathos, a grief, that was obscured throughout the action-focused chapter, both by Aaron's actions (in which he did not mourn his children) and by the normative framing in which it is commanded that he not mourn. Moses had told Aaron that he could not express his pain over the deaths of his sons, and he was commanded to continue to perform all of his public, priestly functions. Aaron was silent for most of the chapter, and his actions followed what Moses commanded, with this one exception. To an outside observer – indeed to the reader, who is told nothing of Aaron's inner life – Aaron's silence could be evidence of a "stoic tranquility" in accepting the divine decree. But he reveals that he is in deep pain and grief through one small act of resistance, one act of mourning – refraining from one public duty. And this, according to Maimonides, is the foundation of the laws of mourning.

Once we are attuned to this small but crucial moment of resistance in this original story of the community leader who continued to perform his communal duties while mourning children, a door is opened toward uncovering more moments of resistance or complexity in rabbinic stories that build on this trope. These stories are often presented positively, as exemplifying a norm, but norm and narrative intersect in a more complex way, destabilizing the simple proof-text function of the story. A closer look at the story of Rabbi Akiva summarized above illustrates this complexity. Each time Akiva receives a message about his son's further decline, his students stop asking him questions, effectively pausing the Torah study, which only continues once Rabbi Akiva reminds them each time to

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<sup>33</sup> Leviticus 10:18.

<sup>34</sup> Leviticus 10:19.

“[continue to] ask [questions].” I suggest that the fact that the Torah learning is continually paused and then restarted through this admonition or request reflects a subtle resistance to the norm, whether on the part of Rabbi Akiva, or his students, or both.

One reading might suggest that the students could not countenance the norm. The norm counseled not to desist from Torah study until the moment of death, but the students were troubled by this, and each time the messengers came with further bad news, they resisted anew while the teacher insisted on continuing the study, perhaps with stoic apathy, or perhaps with harsh rebuke, “Ask [more questions][!]” Another possible reading is that each time the messengers came, the teacher reacted viscerally with an emotional response and paused to regain composure. The students became silent in the face of their teacher’s emotion until the teacher instructed the students to continue asking question, perhaps uttering this instruction through tears and visible grief. Either way, the story preserves some level of resistance to the norm, by recording the fact that the students had to be reminded (or admonished) anew to uphold the norm each time news came about Rabbi Akiva’s dying son.<sup>35</sup>

In *Moed Katan*, the norm that a rabbi must continue to teach Torah even when he is a mourner is presented through stories of rabbis who have lost children that, taken together, make space for more emotional complexity than initially meets the eye. This norm is presented as a specific exemption for community leaders in mourning:

The sages taught: The mourner is prohibited from engaging in the following: working, bathing, rubbing oil on the body, sexual intercourse, and wearing shoes. And it is prohibited to read from the Torah, Prophets, or Writings; to study from the Mishna, from the Midrash and laws, and from the Talmud and narratives. But if the community needs him, he does not refrain. (b. *Moed Katan* 21a).

Chief among those needed by the community, and therefore required to continue to study Torah, were rabbis. This is exemplified through a concise anecdote: “It once happened that the son of Rabbi Yosi of Zippori

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<sup>35</sup> See Rothenberg, *Rabbi Akiva’s Philosophy*, 172-4.

died, and he entered the study hall and expounded [Torah, Mishna, etc.] all day long."<sup>36</sup>

The barebones story of Rabbi Yosi teaching "all day long" after the death of his son is painfully succinct, with no reference to the rabbi's emotional state. If this story refers to a genuine historical event, it is equally possible that Rabbi Yosi lost a child and with "stoic tranquility" immediately resumed his communal duties at full capacity, or alternatively, that he taught "all day long" with the image of his dead son before his eyes, battling tears and struggling to focus on the texts, sacrificing his own need to express grief in the face of the needs of the community. In the context of the sugya, the story of Rabbi Yosi serves a specific function as a proof-text for the norm, and thus narrative and norm appear to mutually reinforce one another. However, the continuation of the sugya complicates this simplistic picture with two additional stories. In one, a grieving rabbi attempts unsuccessfully to resist the norm requiring him to continue to teach Torah while in a state of mourning. In another, Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai comes to the study hall to expound Torah after his son died, just as Rabbi Yosi had done, but his grief is palpable: he comes to the study hall accompanied by a colleague who sits by his side; the grieving rabbi whispers his teaching, and the colleague helps disseminate his words. The effect of these two stories in the context of the norm and the narrative of Rabbi Yosi is to complicate both of them.

This brief analysis draws upon a general insight from scholarship on rabbinic literature about the interplay between halakha and aggada (law and narrative), which is that narratives within rabbinic legal discourse in the Talmud often delicately subvert or add nuance and complexity to apodictic legal norms or programmatic normative declarations. I suggest that similar literary insights can be useful in adding nuance and complexity to the story of Elijah Pruzna and its role in *Halakhic Man*.

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<sup>36</sup> B. Moed Katan 21a.

### 3. Elijah Pruzna in *Halakhic Man* and in Historical Context

In the section of *Halakhic Man* where the story of Elijah Pruzna appears, Soloveitchik declares “the standard of halakhic man in the affective realm”<sup>37</sup> to be exemplified in the slogan adapted and generalized from Maimonides’ Laws of Mourning: “One who does not mourn for dead relatives as prescribed by the sages is cruel; but one who grieves more than is customary is a fool.”<sup>38</sup> This norm of the halakhic man is illustrated by three anecdotes. The first describes the controlled “rapture and enthusiasm” that characterized the Vilna Gaon’s<sup>39</sup> celebration of Simhat Torah, the joyous festival that marks both the conclusion and the commencement anew of the annual cycle of Torah portions.<sup>40</sup> The second recounts how the Vilna Gaon found out on the Sabbath, a day on which mourning practices are suspended, that his brother had died; he displayed no emotions of grief until the Sabbath ended, at which point he immediately “burst into tears.”<sup>41</sup> The third is the story of Elijah Pruzna’s daughter’s death, which follows immediately, with no transition.<sup>42</sup>

Taken together, the stories portray halakhic man as a persona who neither rejoices nor grieves excessively, illustrating Soloveitchik’s generalization of the Maimonidean dictum regarding mourning to the entire affective realm. But there is a fundamental difference between the controlled joy and the controlled grief illustrated through these anecdotes. The Vilna Gaon’s joy on Simhat Torah is a legally mandated joy. It is one thing to produce an emotion that halakha requires and then to

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<sup>37</sup> HM 77.

<sup>38</sup> HM 77.

<sup>39</sup> Elijah of Vilna (1720-1797) was a famed Torah scholar and halakhic authority. His top disciple was Hayyim of Volozhin (1749-1821), founder of the famed Volozhin Yeshiva, and ancestor of Soloveitchik. Most of the paradigms of “halakhic man” described in *Halakhic Man* are Soloveitchik’s own ancestors or their relatives, but the Vilna Gaon was the intellectual founder of this lineage of “halakhic men.”

<sup>40</sup> HM 77.

<sup>41</sup> HM 77. I return to this story below in the Conclusion.

<sup>42</sup> HM 77-78.



appropriately and moderately express it. In the other two stories, emotional moderation is expressed through suppressing a naturally arising emotion. In the story of the Vilna Gaon who lost a sibling, his emotion is temporarily suppressed until the end of the Sabbath, at which point the pain is released; the fact that the release happens immediately upon the conclusion of the Sabbath demonstrates that the pain and grief were present within him on the Sabbath, even if they were not revealed in his actions. In the story of Elijah Pruzna, who quickly completes his morning prayers and dons a second pair of tefillin before he will become exempt from these commandments upon the death of his daughter, no emotion at all is shown in Soloveitchik’s account. I want to suggest, however, that the literary context invites us to imagine a release of emotions outside the frame of the story, and the invisible presence of profoundly felt emotions while the action is taking place.

A close reading of the story in this section expands upon this initial literary possibility. Following is Soloveitchik’s complete account:

The beloved daughter of R. Elijah Pruzna took sick about a month before she was to be married and after a few days was rapidly sinking. R. Elijah’s son entered into the room where R. Elijah, wrapped in *tallit* and *tefillin*, was praying with the congregation, to tell him that his daughter was in her death throes. R. Elijah went into his daughter’s room and asked the doctor how much longer it would be until the end. When he received the doctor’s reply, R. Elijah returned to his room, removed his Rashi *tefillin*, and quickly put on the tefillin prescribed by Rabbenu Tam, for immediately upon his daughter’s death he would be an *onen*, a mourner whose dead relative has not yet been buried, and as such would be subject to the law that an *onen* is exempt from all commandments. After he removed his second pair of tefillin, wrapped them up, and put them away, he entered his dying daughter’s room, in order to be present at the moment his most beloved daughter of all would return her soul back to its Maker.<sup>43</sup>

This story has long disturbed readers of *Halakhic Man*. For Martin Kavka, “such stories of moral saints can be of little help to those who fall short of

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<sup>43</sup> HM 77-78.

the ideal type. Furthermore, such stories of moral saints can be of little help to even the greatest of minds.”<sup>44</sup> For David Hartman,<sup>45</sup> R. Elijah comes across as “inhuman,” an unfeeling “machinelike personality” and even “repugnant.” He claims that “When a child is dying, one would not expect a father to worry about” the halakhic status of mourners and how many commandments one will perform. Rather, “one would expect a father to be engrossed entirely in his immediate tragedy and by the basic human need to comfort his daughter.” He finds it troubling that R. Elijah is cast here as a “paradigm of halakhic heroism.”

On my reading of this story, Soloveitchik’s account suppresses the wellspring of suffering while still leaving access to it. Deep pain lurks beneath the surface of a narration that obscures this pain, but this pathos is nevertheless literarily available to the reader who wishes to uncover it. Soloveitchik concludes the story with a final flourish, supporting his constructive account of halakhic man’s apatheia: “We have here great strength and presence of mind, the acceptance of the divine decree with love, the consciousness of the law and the judgment, the might and power of the Halakhah, and faith, strong like flint.”<sup>46</sup> Small details, however, betray the magnitude of what lies inside the heart of this man whose actions alone are reported.

We are told that this daughter was R. Elijah’s “most beloved daughter of all,” and her death came relatively suddenly after a short bout with illness. She was to be married just a few weeks later. The family had shifted gears from planning a wedding to planning a funeral. There can be no doubt that the father was devastated. Even if he took care to perform certain commandments before becoming an *onen*, that does not necessarily imply, as Hartman suggests, that he had “lost all the natural feeling of a parent for a child.”<sup>47</sup> It is not necessary to read this account as the story of a man whose commitment to halakha superseded his love for his child

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<sup>44</sup> Kavka, “Perils of Covenant Theology,” 229-230.

<sup>45</sup> Hartman, *Love and Terror*, 51.

<sup>46</sup> HM 78.

<sup>47</sup> Hartman, *Love and Terror*, 51.

and the pain of losing her. Perhaps he wanted to pray for her one last time before she died. Perhaps in a moment when his world was crashing down, he sought to grasp onto a familiar and grounding practice, similar in some sense to Hayyim of Brisk, described earlier in the text, who would study halakha to help himself pass through moments of great fear. As we saw with my literary reading of the emotional possibilities latent in the rabbinic stories of Akiva and Yosi of Zippori, there may be a profound pathos here that the narration either suppresses or simply fails to articulate.

In contrast with the rabbinic stories, where we lack corroborating accounts, let alone further historical details, we have an independent account of the story of the death of Elijah Pruzna’s daughter written by Shulamit Soloveitchik Meiselman, Soloveitchik’s sister. Meiselman’s account affirms the pathos that is hidden or denied in Soloveitchik’s stylized anecdote in *Halakhic Man*. My purpose in furnishing this alternative account is not to take a firm stance on which version more closely represents the truth of what happened, although there are good reasons to suspect that Soloveitchik’s version is stylized, with details (including emotional ones) removed, to exemplify a certain norm.<sup>48</sup> Meiselman’s version, at the very least, brings into relief and lends affirmation to the interpretive possibilities for uncovering the pathos that I suggested is present – albeit perhaps unintentionally – in Soloveitchik’s text.

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<sup>48</sup> Soloveitchik himself repeats the story in another context, with some crucial differences in the details, some of which parallel details in Meiselman’s account (including the presence of Elijah Pruzna’s son in the story, though with crucial differences in emotional valence). But in this other context, Soloveitchik’s description of Elijah Pruzna is explicitly typological – representing a typology of the emotionally and spiritually tranquil rabbinic leader – in contrast with the opposing typology of a spiritually conflicted and passionate rabbinic leader. See Rabbi Joseph Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron* [Hebrew], Mosheh Kroneh trans. [from Yiddish]. (Jerusalem: Sifriyat Eliner, 1986), 78-9.

Meiselman devotes an entire chapter of her memoir to the death of Sheyndel Feinstein, who is not named in *Halakhic Man*.<sup>49</sup> She paints a portrait of a young woman with hopes and dreams who faced disappointment with strength and resilience, and she recounts her sudden fatal encounter with typhoid fever amid the excitement of her preparations for her imminent marriage. Meiselman presents, as well, an account of Elijah Pruzna's actions in the moments before Sheyndel's death:

Reb Ele [i.e., Elijah Pruzna] was in the middle of his morning prayers [when informed of his daughter's imminent death]. He interrupted his worship and rushed to the sickroom. Sheyndel was still alive. Reb Ele turned to the doctor and asked, "How long will it take?" "About half an hour" was the answer. Reb Ele hurried back to his study to conclude his devotions while his daughter was still alive. According to Halacha, a mourner is excused from all the precepts of the Torah until interment. He is not allowed to utter any benedictions from the moment a very close relative dies until after the burial takes place. Reb Ele concluded his morning prayers and began to fold the two sets of tefillin (phylacteries) that he used in his daily observances; one was arranged according to the opinion of Rashi, and the other according to Rabbenu Tam, Rashi's grandson ... This morning ... he was so shaken and perturbed that he could not even take off the phylacteries. His hands began to shake and he lost his composure. His son Yitzchak, who was waiting for him, took the tefillin from his arm and head, saying, "I'll take care of them." Broken and shattered, Reb Ele reentered his daughter's room just in time to witness her departure from the world of the living. The members of the family, heartbroken with grief, rent their garments in accordance with the Laws of Israel. Following Sheyndel's death, there was a hushed silence in the house, a silence that spoke louder than weeping...<sup>50</sup>

There are key similarities between the two accounts. As in *Halakhic Man*, in Meiselman's version Elijah Pruzna rushes to his daughter's room, while still wearing his tefillin, and only leaves to complete his prayers once he

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<sup>49</sup> Shulamit Soloveitchik Meiselman, *The Soloveitchik Heritage: A Daughter's Memoir* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1995), "Sheyndel," 100-105.

<sup>50</sup> Meiselman, *Soloveitchik Heritage*, 103-4.

is informed that there is still some time left. In both accounts, the desire to complete the prayers has some relationship to the fact that he will soon enter a legal status in which he will be exempt from praying, and both stories mention the pious practice of donning two sets of phylacteries. For Meiselman, however, these details are not the moral of the story, which is not a story about a halakhic hero. In contrast with Soloveitchik's account, in Meiselman's version Elijah does not maintain a calm composure; he represents no portrait of stoic apatheia. He is so broken that he is unable to organize his halakhic, ritual objects, and requires assistance in this basic task from his son. In Meiselman's version, as in Soloveitchik's, there is an absence of external expression of emotion after Sheyndel's death ("a hushed silence in the house"). But Meiselman takes care to clarify that this is not a silence of apathy. It is "a silence that spoke louder than weeping," intensely expressive of emotional pain.

#### **4. "Do not grieve excessively"**

The principle of emotional moderation is central to the persona of the ideal halakhic man, and Soloveitchik's source for this norm comes from Maimonides' "Laws of Mourning." A close look at the Talmudic context from which Maimonides derives his principle of emotional moderation reveals a complex literary connection to parental bereavement. We find a tension between law's aim to contain and control emotion, and narrative's reflection of the overwhelming and uncontainable nature of the grief over the loss of one's child.

The full version of Maimonides' dictum, which Soloveitchik abridged and reordered into a pithy programmatic statement, reads as follows:

One should not grieve excessively for one's dead, as it is written: "Weep not for the dead, neither bemoan them." (Jer.22:10) That is to say, ["weep not for the dead"] excessively, for that is the way of the world. And one who suffers over the way of the world is a fool. Rather, what should one do? Three days for crying, seven days for eulogizing, thirty days without

a haircut and the other mourning practices. Whoever does not mourn to the extent prescribed by the sages is cruel.<sup>51</sup>

In composing these lines, Maimonides draws upon a pericope in the Babylonian Talmud, *Moed Katan* 27b, omitting an aggada that appears between the initial admonition not to grieve excessively and the exegesis on *Jer.* 22:10. An examination of the missing aggada reveals that in the original sugya, there is a profound awareness of the tension between mourning children and limitations on “excess” grief, and at the same time it seems that this admonition is constructed on the basis of a need to contain or suppress that pain.

The passage begins with a rabbinic pronouncement against grieving excessively. This is immediately followed by an anecdote about a woman who grieves “excessively” for her children, against a rabbi’s explicit instructions. This story is followed in turn by the verse from *Jeremiah* which resumes the legal discussion, adding biblical support to the initial rabbinic pronouncement:

Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rav: “Anyone who grieves excessively for their dead will weep for another person.” A certain woman who was in Rav Huna’s neighborhood had seven sons, and one died. She wept excessively over him. Rav Huna sent her a message: “Don’t do this.” She did not heed him. He sent a message: “If you heed me, it will be well. If not, prepare shrouds for another death.” And they all died. In the end he said to her: “Ready shrouds for your own death.” And she died. “Weep not for the dead, neither bemoan them.” (*Jer.* 22:10) “Weep not for the dead” – excessively. “Neither bemoan them” – more than the set amount.

This sugya begins with a generic legal principle admonishing “anyone who grieves excessively for their dead,” and concludes with the generic pronouncement “‘weep not for the dead’– excessively.” In theory, this admonition is concerned with all death, but the narrative sandwiched between these pronouncements focuses on mourning children. The fear of excess grief is born out of an anxiety about the impossibility of containing

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<sup>51</sup> Maimonides, “Laws of Mourning” 13:11-12.

the grief of mourning children. But the narrative also betrays the cruelty laden in attempts to control how children are mourned.

There are familiar elements in this story. A parent loses a child – children – and is told, effectively: "Do not mourn, lest you die," as in the biblical story of Aaron.<sup>52</sup> The difference between Aaron and the mother in the Talmudic story is that he mostly heeded these instructions, resisting only in subtle ways, whereas the mother resists completely. Refusing to be told how to grieve for her children, she faces the consequences with which Aaron was only threatened. In the story of Aaron, however, his resistance was ultimately vindicated, and according to Maimonides became the foundation of the laws of mourning. In the Talmudic story of the bereaved mother, her refusal to refrain from mourning is penalized rather than vindicated; she is presented in fateful opposition to the norm. I suggest, however, that there is a vindication of her resistance to the norm in the preservation of her story in the redacted sugya.

Although the sugya frames the story of the grieving mother as a cautionary tale, there is something ironic about this story and its role in context. The legal aspect of the sugya is worried about excess (excessive grief), but it also tells a story that is itself excessive. The death of an entire family – seven children and their mother – is excessive.<sup>53</sup> How much mourning could be too much for the loss of seven children? There is a dissonance produced within the text when it cautions against an excessive reaction to an excessive situation. The legal pronouncement would be far

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<sup>52</sup> See Leviticus 10:6.

<sup>53</sup> The death of seven children is a literary trope that seems to exemplify extreme loss. For example, in *Masekhet Semahot*, when Akiva loses one son, he says "even if I had lost seven sons" as a way of indicating a very excessive bereavement. There is also the Maccabean mother (unnamed, but often known as Hannah) of seven martyred sons (2 Maccabees, chapter 7); see Elisheva Baumgarten, "Mothers and *Ma'asim*: Maternal Roles in Medieval Hebrew Tales," in Marjorie Lehmann, Jane Kanarek, and Simon J. Bronner, eds., *Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination* (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2017), 345-358, and Gerson D. Cohen, "The Story of Hannah and Her Seven Sons in Hebrew Literature," *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Culture* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 36-60.

more compellingly bolstered by a narrative in which the grief was obviously exaggerated, rather than a situation of total devastation. In another sense, then, the story can be read as a testament to the absurdity of the demand to contain or limit grief over the loss of a child, reflecting a challenge parental bereavement poses to the entire structure of the laws of mourning.

It is possible that Maimonides himself betrayed an awareness of the complexity of the intersection of narrative and norm in this sugya. In his dictum, the second half of the sentence, judging one who does not mourn a minimal amount as “cruel,” is Maimonides’ own invention. The Talmudic sugya worries about mourning in excess and does not speak of cruelty. But there is a cruelty in how the grieving mother, who has lost one child and then six more, is treated by the rabbinic authority and the legal context. Perhaps Maimonides subtly incorporates a critique of Rav Huna into this latter statement, recognizing, to some degree, that there is an irresolvable tension between parental bereavement and attempts to contain its emotional expression through counseling moderation in grief.

To return to *Halakhic Man*, I suggest that the story of Elijah Pruzna losing his daughter coexists in a similarly tense way with the Maimonidean dictum – drawn from this sugya – that frames the anecdote in Soloveitchik’s account. The narration suppresses Elijah Pruzna’s grief but also provides windows into that grief. Regardless of the literary intentions of the author, the reader is invited to supply some of the emotions that exist between the lines. The story exemplifies the Maimonidean dictum, on the one hand, presenting a father who “did not grieve excessively” in a moment of profound loss. At the same time, just as we saw an irony in the Talmud’s presentation of a bereft mother as the model of someone who failed to heed the general norm of not grieving too much, it is comparably ironic to present a parent bereft of a beloved young adult daughter to a sudden illness weeks before her wedding as the paragon of not grieving excessively. In a 1977 lecture, Soloveitchik himself stated, “Parents who have lost a child will never forget their grief. Their



distress is endless; nothing can offer them solace.”<sup>54</sup> In some sense, then, mourning for a child is by nature excessive, or, put differently, the term “excessive” is perhaps categorically problematic as a descriptor of expressions of grief in this context.

In the next section, I examine Soloveitchik’s discussion of the Maimonidean dictum to grieve with emotional moderation in the context of this 1977 lecture. There, Soloveitchik offers a more nuanced and emotionally complex interpretation of Maimonides. Through this and several other examples from his oeuvre, I argue that the view of Maimonides Soloveitchik presents in his later work is more complex than the emotionally limiting understanding put forth in *Halakhic Man* in the normative framing of the Elijah Pruzna anecdote. There is a further tension between Soloveitchik’s later discussions of the Maimonidean dictum and his earlier account of it in *Halakhic Man* with respect to the specific case of parental bereavement. As I demonstrate below, later examples of Soloveitchik’s more nuanced reading of Maimonides provide an emotional language that is strikingly relevant to the grief of parents mourning for children. The proximity of Soloveitchik’s later discussions of Maimonides to the pain of parental bereavement enhances the irony I have already highlighted of *Halakhic Man*’s presentation of a father’s suppressed mourning over the death of his child as the exemplar of the Maimonidean dictum.

## **5. Revisiting Maimonides: Do not grieve excessively; do grieve excessively**

The 1977 lecture where Soloveitchik briefly notes the unique grief associated with parental bereavement was published posthumously as “Abraham Mourns Sarah,” a sermon on the Torah portion that begins with Sarah’s death in Genesis 23. In his discussion of Abraham’s mourning for his wife, Soloveitchik offered a reading of the Maimonidean

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<sup>54</sup> *Whirlwind*, 33.

dictum that makes space for expressing emotion at moments of profound grief, in striking contrast with the use of the dictum in *Halakhic Man*.

Upon Sarah's death, "Abraham arrived to eulogize Sarah, and to cry for her" (Gen. 23:2). Of Abraham's tears, Soloveitchik writes, "We are not accustomed to seeing tears on our father's face. He was a strong and courageous personality."<sup>55</sup> However, in such a circumstance, "Apparently it is befitting for a great man to cry like a child."<sup>56</sup> Here Soloveitchik cites Maimonides' dictum with a focus on its second half – to suggest that remaining cold and unemotional is "not always the sign of greatness."<sup>57</sup> In a sentence reminiscent of the negative responses to Elijah Pruzna from readers of *Halakhic Man*, he adds: "When man remains emotionally neutral he loses a lot of his *humanitas*."<sup>58</sup> At the same time, he continues, returning to the first half of the dictum, "man must not react hysterically to pain and suffering. He must not surrender to them."<sup>59</sup> According to Soloveitchik, this is the balance that Maimonides was trying to strike in his dictum, which Abraham exemplified, as follows: "Abraham mourned and grieved for Sarah endlessly. However, the grieving and mourning took place in the privacy of his house."<sup>60</sup> Abraham "withdrew from the open in order to cry."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Whirlwind*, 34.

<sup>56</sup> *Whirlwind*, 34. It is worth noting that Soloveitchik experienced intense grief upon the death of his wife Tonya (Lewitt) Soloveitchik (1904-1967), who had died a decade prior to the delivery of this lecture. The following statement was attributed to Soloveitchik: "After my father's death, I felt like a wall of my house had fallen down. After my wife's death, I felt like the entire house had collapsed." Quoted in Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2012), 32. See also Soloveitchik's anecdote in which he describes consulting with his wife about some matter after her passing, only to receive silence in response, in Pinhas H. Peli, ed., *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 259-260.

<sup>57</sup> *Whirlwind*, 34.

<sup>58</sup> *Whirlwind*, 34.

<sup>59</sup> *Whirlwind*, 34-35.

<sup>60</sup> *Whirlwind*, 36.

<sup>61</sup> *Whirlwind*, 37.

In reading the verses about Abraham's grief and mourning for Sarah in light of the Maimonidean dictum, Soloveitchik makes a crucial distinction between public and private in the interpretation of Maimonides' ideal of moderation in mourning. The call for moderation refers to one's public life, whereas intense expressions of grief, pain, and emotion are expected and condoned – albeit in the private sphere – to such a degree that their absence is deemed inhuman. It is important to emphasize how different this is from the appearance of the Maimonidean dictum in *Halakhic Man*. On the one hand, my literary reading of the stories of rabbis and community leaders who exhibit diminished mourning for their children makes use of a similar distinction. I have argued that private feeling of profound emotional pain and grief are not precluded by the continued participation in routine public-facing actions, and that we ought to look for clues or literary openings that make space for that emotional expression. I have argued this even with respect to Elijah Pruzna's story in *Halakhic Man*. That said, in *Halakhic Man*, written in 1944, Soloveitchik does not say of Elijah Pruzna what he says, in 1977, of Abraham. He does not say that Rabbi Elijah grieved endlessly in private but in public comported himself with an affect of emotional moderation. He describes Elijah Pruzna's actions in the most intimate private space – his daughter's death bed – as exemplary of "stoic tranquility." It is not clear that the Maimonidean ideal in *Halakhic Man* includes intense expression of grief on the part of halakhic man in some other sphere.

Soloveitchik's more complex reading of the Maimonidean ideal articulated in the 1977 lecture opens the door to expression of profound grief in the *private* sphere. Soloveitchik's account of Maimonides is further nuanced through his discussions of the dictum in the context of the *public*, communal mourning associated with the Ninth of Av, the annual day of mourning that commemorates the destruction of the two temples in Jerusalem and many other communal tragedies in Jewish history, to which I now turn. Soloveitchik reads the Maimonidean ideal as one that not only accommodates intense grief in the private sphere, as with Abraham, but also accommodates intense grief in the public sphere, with respect to the Ninth of Av. In both cases, Soloveitchik's analysis comes strikingly close

to articulating the exceptional pain of parental bereavement, in marked contrast with his initial discussion of this norm in *Halakhic Man*, where an actual case of parental bereavement is presented, but the norm is far more emotionally rigid.

Soloveitchik touches briefly on the unique pain of losing a child in his 1977 analysis of Abraham's grief over a spouse,<sup>62</sup> but his focus is on Abraham's loss of Sarah, and he does not give much attention to the case of parental bereavement. In Soloveitchik's discussions of the Maimonidean dictum that arise in his analysis of the Ninth of Av, the case of parental bereavement hovers just above the surface of his discussion, whether intentionally or unintentionally. This comes into relief upon examination of two examples of Soloveitchik's use of the Maimonidean dictum in his analysis of the Ninth of Av.

On the Ninth of Av, many behaviors that are halakhically proscribed for individual mourners in the event of a loss are avoided by the entire Jewish community. In several places Soloveitchik contrasts personal mourning upon the death of a relative with this communal mourning, drawing upon the Maimonidean admonition against grieving excessively to claim that it does not apply on the Ninth of Av. He writes:

The Talmud says, "Anyone who grieves over his dead to excess will ultimately weep for another deceased." When we react emotionally, we may react too strongly, become hysterical, and then transgress and sin. But the Talmud never said, "Anyone who grieves over Jerusalem to excess." Never! ... There cannot be enough mourning for Jerusalem .... Maimonides says that a mourner may not mourn excessively, because death is the natural order of the universe. One who does so is a fool. But the destruction of Jerusalem was not in keeping with the natural order of the universe .... There can be no "excessively" when it comes to mourning for Jerusalem.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> "Parents who have lost a child will never forget their grief. Their distress is endless; nothing can offer them solace" (*Whirlwind*, 33).

<sup>63</sup> This quote is adjusted slightly from the published version to reproduce Hebrew phrases and names in translation and to remove internal references to sources already cited in this article.

There is a recognition here that sometimes a loss cuts against "the natural order." For such a loss, there cannot be too much mourning. Within the rabbinic tradition of halakhic mourning, this could be said overtly and unabashedly about Jerusalem. But while this may equally apply to the case of a parent who buries a child, this emotional truth seems to be relegated to the interstices between halakha and aggada, preserved by the tradition in the laws of mourning, but largely underneath and in between.

A second example illustrates this point even more starkly. One of the practices on the Ninth of Av is the recitation of elegies (*kinot*) about tragic moments in Jewish history, many of which were composed in the sixth century and the Middle Ages. Soloveitchik taught and commented extensively on these elegies over the course of his lifetime.<sup>64</sup> The final elegy in the liturgy of the Ninth of Av is a dirge of anonymous authorship from the medieval period. Entitled "Eli Tziyon" ("Wail, O Zion"), it has a repeating chorus: "Wail, O Zion and her cities, like a woman in labor pains, and like a maiden (lit., virgin) clad in sackcloth for the husband of her youth."<sup>65</sup> Soloveitchik's interpretation of this second person imperative, "Wail, O Zion!" repeated over and over again, is that it is an imperative to continue to mourn and cry for Jerusalem forever. He interprets the poetic analogy to a woman in labor as follows:

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<sup>64</sup> See the compendium posthumously published as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tish'ah be-Av Kinot*, J.J. Schacter, ed. (Ktav: Jersey City, 2006).

<sup>65</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to examine this, but there seems to be a consensus in the reception of this elegy that the woman in the pain of labor is someone who will, at the end of her labor, deliver a live baby. Soloveitchik reads these lines according to this standard reading. I think it is literarily plausible to read the chorus as referring to a woman in labor with a baby that will not survive, thus linking this passage further to the emotions surrounding the loss of a child. The chorus provides two analogies for the kind of weeping that is called for: a woman in labor, and a young woman (or virgin; Hebrew: *betula*) mourning the husband of her youth. These weepings would be far more parallel if the woman in labor were facing a loss; both would be the weeping of mourning or grief. Furthermore, if the word "virgin" is taken literally, then the second analogy refers to a woman who has lost her husband before the marriage was consummated, i.e., on her wedding day. There is a further analogy between a wedding day that ends in loss, and a birth that ends in loss.

You cannot tell a woman who is in labor pain, “Do not cry. Do not make noise. Do not raise your voice.” Anyone who would say this to a woman at that time is a fool! Because a person in such terrible pain as labor pain *must* react by emitting a sound, by crying and weeping and shouting. It cannot be otherwise. It is a part of human nature! And the same applies to *the destruction of Jerusalem* ... [I]t is simply ridiculous to tell us to stop weeping over Jerusalem, to tell us to apply the rule of not overdoing our mourning for Zion and Jerusalem.<sup>66</sup>

Soloveitchik then cites the Maimonidean dictum to contrast mourning for Jerusalem with individual mourning. In the latter case, “if we mourn ‘too much,’ says Maimonides, we are fools. But here we can never mourn ‘too much.’”<sup>67</sup> It is hard to read these sentences alongside the aggada that accompanied the original talmudic source, where Rav Huna told a woman in pain over the loss of her child to stop crying. Here Soloveitchik recognizes that there are situations where you cannot tell a woman in pain, “Do not cry.” There are situations where pain is so terrible that a person “must react ... by crying and weeping.” These sentences could equally describe the state of a parent in the aftermath of losing a child. And yet Soloveitchik, perhaps following the precedent of the rabbinic sources, does not directly face this pain when he discusses the Maimonidean dictum in the case of a father who has lost his daughter, in *Halakhic Man*. As with the rabbinic sources, we can only find this grief by reading halakha and aggada, narrative and norm, together.

Thus, the reading of Maimonides’ “Laws of Mourning” 13:11-12 expressed in Soloveitchik’s later work is far more nuanced and emotionally complex than his reading of the ideal in *Halakhic Man*, where it advances and lauds a “stoically tranquil” interpretation of Elijah Pruzna’s actions surrounding the loss of his child. Moreover, Soloveitchik’s later depictions of the Maimonides’ dictum – to show that sometimes excess grief *is* both necessary and appropriate – come

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<sup>66</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Lord is Righteous*, 313-314.

<sup>67</sup> This quote is adjusted slightly from the published version to include Hebrew phrases and names only in translation and to remove internal references to sources already cited in this article.

strikingly close to describing the pain of losing a child.<sup>68</sup> While in *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik does not directly address this pain and seems to even diminish it, I have argued that this pain is literarily available to us in multiple ways, both within *Halakhic Man* and Soloveitchik’s oeuvre more broadly, and in the rabbinic texts Soloveitchik inherits and their blending of story and norm.

By way of conclusion, I return to the section of *Halakhic Man* that builds toward the ideal of stoic tranquility culminating in the story of Elijah Pruzna. I take a second look at two of the anecdotes that precede this final story in light of the above analysis to further complicate the norm of the ideal halakhic man’s response to the death of a child, gesturing at a further way to push the generative relationship between Soloveitchik’s modern writings and earlier rabbinic sources I have advanced in this discussion.

### **Conclusion: Reconsidering the Weeping Shofar Blower and Tears upon the Sabbath’s Conclusion**

There are two anecdotes from *Halakhic Man* that make no mention of mourning children but present men crying in emotional turmoil. Gently prodding these anecdotes draws out a connection to classical aggadot related to mourning children that may not have been in Soloveitchik’s consciousness when he composed *Halakhic Man*, but with which he was

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<sup>68</sup> It is possible that Soloveitchik’s later reading of Maimonides differed from his earlier one. However, based on other examples where Soloveitchik’s own views are demonstrably different from views of halakhic man in *Halakhic Man*, there is an increasing scholarly consensus that Soloveitchik is not himself a halakhic man. In this case, I suggest that it is also possible that Soloveitchik’s later reading of “Laws of Mourning” 13:11-12 reflects his own view, whereas *Halakhic Man* reflects the view of an ideal “halakhic man.” This may explain the tensions I identified between norm and narrative in *Halakhic Man* with respect to this Maimonidean dictum and the anecdote said to exemplify it. (See note 18 above.) I am indebted in my reading of these passages in particular to Yonatan Y. Brafman’s discussion of the story of the Habad Hasid who wept while blowing the shofar, in the context of Soloveitchik’s broader oeuvre. See Yonatan Y. Brafman, *Critique of Halakhic Reason: Divine Norms and Social Normativity*. (Forthcoming), Chapter 2. I return to that story below.

undoubtedly familiar. The first anecdote is the story of the weeping shofar blower on Rosh Hashana; the second is the story of the Vilna Gaon receiving news on the Sabbath that his brother had died.

In the first story, Soloveitchik recounts:

Once my father was standing on the synagogue platform on Rosh Hashanah, ready and prepared to guide the order of the sounding of the shofar. The shofar-sounder, a god-fearing Habad Hasid ... began to weep. My father turned to him and said: "Do you weep when you take the lulav? Why then do you weep when you sound the shofar? Are these not both commandments of God?"<sup>69</sup>

Although Soloveitchik's father is one of the great halakhic men who serves as a model for halakhic man, recent scholarship on Soloveitchik's theory of the emotions has demonstrated that Soloveitchik disagrees with his father's position in this story.<sup>70</sup> His sympathy with the weeping shofar blower is expressed in a lengthy discussion of the distinction between blowing the shofar and taking the lulav that would justify the man's weeping in the former context even if it would be inappropriate in the latter context.<sup>71</sup> After this sympathetic analysis, Soloveitchik abruptly concludes, "Not so is the manner of halakhic man!" followed by two quick sentences reiterating halakhic man's lack of concern for the transcendent sphere.<sup>72</sup>

From among his various justifications for why one might reasonably weep upon performing the commandment of the shofar, Soloveitchik shows that one classical understanding of the shofar blast is a sound that intentionally mimics human weeping. He mentions the Targum, an ancient Aramaic translation of the Pentateuch, that translates the word for "shofar blast" (*terua*) in Num. 29:1 into an Aramaic word for weeping or

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<sup>69</sup> HM 60-61.

<sup>70</sup> See Brafman, *Critique of Halakhic Reason*, Chapter 2.

<sup>71</sup> HM 61-2.

<sup>72</sup> HM 63.



moaning (*yevava*).<sup>73</sup> Although he does not cite it, Soloveitchik is here alluding to Rosh Hashana 33b:

As it is written, "a day of the blast (*terua*) shall it be for you" (Num. 29:1), and the Targum translates, "a day of moaning (*yevava*) shall it be for you," and it says with respect to the mother of Sisera, "At the window she watched, and the mother of Sisera moaned (*va-teyabev*)" (Judg. 5:28).

This *sugya* connects the Targum's translation of the shofar blast with a mother's weeping – the mother of the Canaanite general Sisera – when her slain son fails to come home from battle. Elsewhere Soloveitchik discusses at length this linkage of the shofar to the tears of Sisera's mother.<sup>74</sup> A lesser known strand in the midrashic tradition, of which Soloveitchik was presumably aware, associates the shofar blasts with the cries of Sarah when she learned that Abraham had taken Isaac to be sacrificed and believed her son was dead.<sup>75</sup>

In his analysis of the anecdote of the weeping shofar blower, Soloveitchik approaches this strand within rabbinic literature that associates the sound of the shofar with stories about mothers weeping while mourning children. I have no reason to suggest that he intended to invoke or even allude to parental bereavement in this context. Nevertheless, he cites the Targum on *yevava* – which evokes the weeping of Sisera's mother over the loss of her child and connects it to the shofar blasts – in an analysis of a story in which a paradigmatic halakhic man tries to suppress weeping upon producing and hearing the shofar blasts.

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<sup>73</sup> HM 62.

<sup>74</sup> See Hershel Schachter, ed. *Mi-peninei Ha-rav: Maran Yosef Dov Ha-levi Soloveitchik: Likutei Amarim, Te'urei Ma'asim, ve-divrei ha'arakha* [Hebrew] (Flatbush Beth Hamedrosh: Brooklyn, 2001), 122.

<sup>75</sup> Leviticus Rabba 20:2; Midrash Kohelet 9:7. See Menahem Mendel Kasher, *Torah Shleimah* on Genesis 23:2, comment 17. In some versions of this midrash (e.g. in Midrash Kohelet), it was in the presence of the living Isaac, reporting to his mother what had transpired on Mount Moriah, that Sarah emitted shofar-like cries and then died. In that version, the mere contemplation of the counterfactual version of the story in which her son had been killed, even while knowing he had survived, caused a pain on par with that of actually losing a child.

Thus, traditions about the overt expression of grief over mourning children lurk nearby, even though they are not explicitly acknowledged or brought into the discourse. Given that we know that Soloveitchik understands and sympathizes with the pain and longing associated with the shofar, I suggest that he had access to a resource that could have helped him give a better account of the story of Elijah Pruzna. The presence of this reference can also perhaps be read back into the nearby story of Elijah Pruzna, as another resource for the more pathos-sensitive literary reading I am offering.

The second story in *Halakhic Man* in which a man cries in emotional turmoil is the one that immediately precedes the narration of Elijah Pruzna's daughter's death. Soloveitchik relates how the Vilna Gaon received news on the Sabbath that his brother had died and did not react on the Sabbath when mourning is proscribed, but immediately burst into tears when the Sabbath ended. This story, read together with the story that follows it – the story of Elijah Pruzna – describing a parent's stoic forbearance and focus on halakha upon the death of a child, is reminiscent of a well-known midrash recording the simultaneous deaths of the two sons of Rabbi Meir.<sup>76</sup> I have no evidence that this midrash was on Soloveitchik's mind when composing this part of *Halakhic Man*, but I conclude with it, as in some ways it brings together two central aspects of the analysis I have furnished above: (1) the tension between law and narrative in rabbinic stories about rabbis mourning their children, and (2) the generative possibilities for modern Jewish thought when interdisciplinary bridges are constructed between the scholarly disciplines that study ancient and late antique Jewish sources and those that examine modern ones. The story of Rabbi Meir can be seen as a counter-text to Soloveitchik's story of Elijah Pruzna, or as a confirmation of my call for more complexity when reading stories of rabbis mourning their children, or both.

In this midrash, Rabbi Meir's sons die on the Sabbath while their father is teaching in the study hall. It seems that these deaths are sudden

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<sup>76</sup> Midrash Mishlei 31:2.

and unexpected, as we learn that Rabbi Meir had looked for his sons in the study hall and was surprised not to see them there. He returns home upon the conclusion of the Sabbath and asks about them. The children's mother seems to want to ensure that Rabbi Meir perform certain halakhic obligations before revealing to him that he is now legally a mourner. He keeps inquiring, "Where are my two sons?" and she responds evasively until after he performs the ritual that marks the conclusion of the Sabbath and also eats a meal and recites the appropriate blessings. She then asks him a halakhic question about whether guardians must return objects to their original owner, to which he replies that of course they must. When she finally reveals to him that his sons have died, he reacts with great emotion: "He cried and said, 'My sons, my sons! My teachers, my teachers!'" She reminds him of his own halakhic ruling that objects under guardianship must be returned to the owner, implying that the children God had entrusted to him now needed to be returned to their owner. This prompts him to accept what has happened with more emotional forbearance.

As with the Vilna Gaon, who did not cry until after the Sabbath ended, Rabbi Meir does not mourn until after the Sabbath. As with Elijah of Pruzna and Rabbi Akiva, he completes the performance of several commandments before he (knowingly) enters the status of a mourner exempt from such commandments. As with Rabbi Yosi of Zippori and Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai, Rabbi Meir teaches Torah to the community after his sons have died. But in this story, the resistance to such stoic expectations of halakhic men is palpable. Rabbi Meir can only be an ideal halakhic man as long as the information about his loss is withheld from him. There is an expectation that his own halakhic ruling will help him approach the deaths with emotional equanimity, but that strategy initially fails. He forgets the ruling and expresses intense, raw grief. Only after being reminded of the ruling and effectively being told "do not grieve excessively," does Rabbi Meir accept God's decree. In this story, it is impossible to be "halakhic man" in the face of the pain of mourning children.

The story of Rabbi Meir is a far more realistic portrayal of even the greatest of halakhic men when faced with profound grief. Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man* constructs a simpler account that suppresses these emotions, but it is my argument that the anecdotes in that essay, especially understood in the context of relationship between halakha and aggada in the laws of mourning, preserve the very complexities suppressed by the norm of "stoic tranquility," making room for the possibility that these rabbis, ancient and modern, are in reality far more like Rabbi Meir than the ideal of "halakhic man."