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Hello,

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my paper for the Jewish studies workshop. This is a section from a chapter of my dissertation “‘My Eyes Grow Dim from Grief:’ A Jewish Visual Ethic of Death and Memory.” The larger chapter deals with the challenges to, and resources for, constructing a field of Jewish *visual* ethics. I am hoping this section can stand alone as an essay on the way Emmanuel Levinas, Mara Benjamin, and Joseph Soloveitchik use sight in their respective phenomenologies of obligation. I have tried to catch any references to other sections of the chapter, but apologies if I missed any.

My goal in separating out this section of the chapter (beyond not making you all read 50+ pages) is to see whether this could hold its own as an article. So I would be interested to hear reflections on its potential as a publishable journal article. One other question I have at the moment: in the original chapter this section follows a lengthy discussion of the history of Jewish thought and its ambivalence towards the visual. I've left much of that context out, beyond stating it at the very beginning. Do I need more of that information, or is the argument clear enough that I don't need to go over that history in much detail?

Thank you again,  
Ranana

## An Obligated Sight: Vision in Emmanuel Levinas, Mara Benjamin, and Joseph Soloveitchik

**Abstract:** Jewish thought is known for its focus on text and textuality, and in some cases, for an antipathy towards the visual and art. In this paper I turn to three seminal authors in Modern Jewish philosophy - Emmanuel Levinas, Joseph Soloveitchik, and Mara Benjamin - to argue that Jewish notions of *obligation*, a key concept in Jewish philosophy, require a conception of obligated sight. Although these three authors disagree about the nature of Jewish obligation - where it stems from and how it operates - they all agree that obligation is an embodied phenomenological reality of Jewish life. Therefore, they all have articulations of the way sight operates in a world of obligated bodies, even if they are unaware of or ambivalent to the prevalence of vision in their own accounts. The way one sees and what one sees, how one interacts with visual objects and understands visual experiences, are understood and made sense of through a lens of obligation for these thinkers. Considering Jewish vision as obligated vision gives is a powerful insight for doing Jewish ethics, particularly for doing Jewish ethics with visual objects and artwork.

There's been relatively little theological and philosophical engagement with visuality and visual art in Jewish thought.<sup>1</sup> This is due in large part to the influence of modern readings of the Second Commandment that were interpreted as making Judaism aniconic, if not downright iconoclastic.<sup>2</sup> That being said, sight is an inescapable facet of human experience and so is present, sometimes despite itself, in many accounts of Jewish philosophy. In this paper I analyze three influential modern Jewish thinkers for their engagement with sight and vision. None of these thinkers are philosophers of aesthetics or would consider visuality a major theme of their work, but when attention is paid to this phenomenon, sight not only appears present but becomes an interesting locus of moral experience. In particular, I am interested in how phenomenological accounts of obligation - in Hebrew theological language *hiyyuv* - discuss vision and its relationship to the

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Raphael's *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2009) would be an exception.

<sup>2</sup> These interpretation would make up the "myth of aniconism," the idea that Jews do not have art, that has held sway in both academic circles and the public imagination. For more see Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual*. New Ed edition. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Margaret Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art*. (Lincoln: London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

experience of always everywhere being obligated. For centuries Jewish thinkers, tied to the halakic system, have highlighted the notion of obligation within Jewish philosophy even while moving beyond the ritual categories of traditional Judaism. Michael Fishbane explains that this phenomenology of obligation rests on the fact that in a “primary sense” *hiyyuv* “is conditioned upon an awakening to the actuality of experience, to what is given us to hear and do.”<sup>3</sup> According to Fishbane “already with the opening of eyes, the hearing of ears, and the tactility of the body” the Jew is obligated: “at every moment the self is under a *hiyyuv*.”<sup>4</sup>

Already in this quote you can see how sight might be implicated in obligation - “the opening of the eyes” is a crucial part of the experience of being always under and embodied with *hiyyuv*. In the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, Joseph Soloveitchik, and Mara Benjamin, three modern thinkers who are writing Jewish phenomenologies of obligation, sight and visibility have a distinct role to play in their philosophical and theological systems. It is my contention that by reading these thinkers against the grain of assumed Jewish anti-visibility for their perspectives on sight and vision we can construct an ethic of obligated sight which can underwrite further work in visual Jewish ethics.

I will start my analysis with Emmanuel Levinas, since I believe he will throw into relief the more fulsome theories of obligation and sight argued for by Soloveitchik and Benjamin. Levinas was antipathetic to visual art and to sight and yet conceived a system of obligation and responsibility reliant on the phenomenological experience of “seeing” the Other. This creates a significant tension in his moral theory, one that I think remains frustratingly unresolved. For this reason I will construct my own conception of “obligated sight” mostly from the work of Soloveitchik and Benjamin, but include Levinas here for comparative purposes.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 192.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 192-193.

## Levinas: Ethics as Optics?

Levinas is well known for his emphasis on responsibility to the Other, particularly upon seeing the Other's face, and his phenomenological account of the encounter with the Other. He articulated his ideas of ethics as first philosophy and the face in "secular" works of philosophy such as *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. He did write a significant number of essays on particularly Jewish themes and texts and remained an observant Jew throughout his life. Many of the themes present in the secular works are discussed in relation to Talmudic and other Jewish texts in his Jewish essays. I will focus here mostly on Levinas' Jewish writings, and particularly one essay about revelation, since I am interested in a particularly Jewish ethic of obligated sight, which I think is more clearly expressed in the explicitly Jewish works.

One of the most interesting engagements Levinas has with Jewish text and ideas, and his conception of obligation or responsibility, appears in his essay "The Temptation of Temptation," published in the collection *Nine Talmudic Readings*. In the essay, Levinas comments on a lengthy passage from the Talmud Bavli Shabbat 88a-b<sup>5</sup> about the Israelites' (forced) acceptance of revelation and the Torah. In the text the rabbis discuss whether the Torah was truly freely accepted by the Israelites at Sinai: "Rabbi Avdimi bar Ḥama bar Ḥasa said: the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial."<sup>6</sup> This text allows Levinas to question whether one is already obligated before the revelation of obligation, or in his words "already responsible when one chooses responsibility?"<sup>7</sup> The text thus feeds into Levinas thought that one is always and ever responsible, even before

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<sup>5</sup> The midrash also appears in Avodah Zarah 2b.

<sup>6</sup> Bavli Shabbat 88a (translation Steinsaltz)

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 37.

consciously choosing that obligation. In the same essays he writes “To receive the gift of the Torah—a Law—is to fulfill it before consciously accepting it. [...] We see that this free acceptance amounts to practicing before adhering. Not only does acceptance precede examination but practice precedes adherence.”<sup>8</sup> Or in more direct language “one accepts the Torah before one knows it.”<sup>9</sup>

For Levinas this acceptance of Torah is acceptance of responsibility for the Other.

Obligation is inherently an Other-regarding and moral concept. As he writes in “The Temptation of Temptation:”

The reception of Revelation—can only be the relation with a person, with another. The Torah is given in the Light of a face. The epiphany of the other person is ipso facto my responsibility toward him: seeing the other is already an obligation toward him. A direct optics—without the mediation of any idea—can only be accomplished as ethics. Integral knowledge or Revelation (the receiving of the Torah) is ethical behavior.<sup>10</sup>

Revelation for Levinas here is not necessarily a Torah scroll, or the rabbinic tradition, or the halakhic system altogether. Rather that revelation is the “person,” the “Other.” For our purposes what is notable is that even in this short passage we see Levinas engagement with sight as the locus for ethical engagement. “Torah is given in the *Light* of a face.” Revelation to responsibility is made possible in the visual experience of seeing the Other, of seeing the reflection from the “beams of light” shining off the face after revelation.<sup>11</sup> As Levinas puts it “a direct optics” is what “can only be accomplished as ethics.” Ethics is sight, a way of seeing, the visual encounter with the Other that is akin to Divine revelation.

Despite Levinas’ own use of the word “optics” to describe what occurs in ethics, his eschewal of visual art and culture is well known among those who study his work. In a famous essay,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>11</sup> A reference to the *keren or*, beams of light, that were shining from Moses face as he descended Sinai. See Exodus 34:30.

“Reality and its Shadow,” Levinas decries visual works like portraiture, considering it to render the “Other” frozen in time and like dead, thus releasing the individual from their responsibility for the Other. Levinas writes that “every artwork is in the-end....a-statue - a stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself.”<sup>12</sup> Martin Jay has shown how Levinas’s embrace of the myth of aniconism helped fuel the “powerfully antiocular impulse in postmodernism.”<sup>13</sup> According to Jay, Levinas explicitly connected ethics to “the Hebraic taboo on visual representation” and contrasted Jewish ethics with “the Hellenic fetish of sight, intelligible form, and luminosity.”<sup>14</sup> He went so far as to state: “The proscription of images is truly the supreme command of monotheism.”<sup>15</sup> Although Levinas writes about seeing the face of the Other and face-to-face encounters, at times he redirects that language to insist that it is truly hearing the Other’s call that matters in ethical experience: “It is the face; its revelation is speech.”<sup>16</sup> Some of Levinas’s antipathy to sight comes from his rejection of reciprocity - the Other is above and beyond me, and so cannot be seen in equal relation. As he wrote “The face is not in front of me (en face de moi), but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death.”<sup>17</sup> Although ethics may seem in his system at times to be a “direct optics” that is “given in the Light of a face,” in reality “real ethical responsibility came from an eminently nonvisual source.”<sup>18</sup>

A significant number of scholars have written about Levinas’s relation to visual art, some positioning him as an iconoclast while others attempt to reconcile his work with more positive

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<sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 137.

<sup>13</sup> Jay, 546.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 555. Similar contrasts were made by Hermann Cohen and other earlier thinkers.

<sup>15</sup> Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow,” 141.

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 193. For more on speech and hearing in Levinas see Lisbeth Lipari, “Rhetoric’s Other: Levinas, Listening, and the Ethical Response,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 45, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 227–45.

<sup>17</sup> Richard A. Cohen, *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 23-24.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993), 556-557.

conceptions of the visual.<sup>19</sup> For Jewish theologian Melissa Raphael for example, Levinas, with his focus on seeing the “face” of the Other, is doing a disservice when he totally rejects figural images. His repudiation of portraiture ignores the aesthetic quality of his ethics of the face which “turns ethical obligation into a particular type of seeing.”<sup>20</sup> Aaron Rosen describes Levinas’s thought as having “a strong aesthetic vein [that] runs throughout, often almost in spite of himself.”<sup>21</sup> Rosen argues that in some instances when Levinas discussed a particular artwork (Rosen mostly references an encounter with a Christian painting of Hannah and baby Samuel), he was “prepared to recognise the capacity of certain works to invite meaningful dialogue with the Other.”<sup>22</sup> There is also another way of reading Levinas’s account of art that makes the work of bringing images into conversation with ethics a vital project. Richard Cohen<sup>23</sup> explains that Levinas is not as allergic to images as he seems at first and throughout his work cited many works of visual art as a way of illustrating his philosophy.<sup>24</sup> Although “Levinas’s philosophy is ultimately an ethics and not an aesthetics,” the act of criticism can redeem visual objects and makes them part of responsibility for the Other.<sup>25</sup> For Levinas the work of art criticism is “not extraneous to art but an essential component of it,” and through the act of critical engagement we can bring art into dialogue with the world, moving away from Levinas’ anxiety that art ultimately is frozen and disengaged from relations with the Other. According to Cohen there is a dialectical movement between art and criticism in Levinas thought:

Artworks have an inner tendency toward self-closure, disengaging in a centripetal movement

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<sup>19</sup> For an example of this reconciliation see Aaron Rosen, “Emmanuel Levinas and the Hospitality of Images,” *Literature and Theology* 25, no. 4 (2011): 364–78.

<sup>20</sup> Raphael, 56.

<sup>21</sup> Rosen, 366.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>23</sup> I discuss the article and apply it to some work in Jewish visual ethics through vaccine selfies in my article “Publicizing the Miracle of Vaccination: ‘Vaccine Selfies’ as a Jewish Visual Ethic of Embodied Obligation,” *Journal of Jewish Ethics* 8, no. 2 (July 6, 2022): 149–76, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jjewiethi.8.2.0149>.

<sup>24</sup> For another reading of Levinas on art see Jill Robbins, “Aesthetic Totality and Ethical Infinity: Levinas on Art,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 35, no. 3 (1995): 66–79.

<sup>25</sup> Richard A. Cohen, “Levinas on Art and Aestheticism: Getting ‘Reality and Its Shadow’ Right,” *Levinas Studies* 11, no. 1 (2016): 150.

from the larger world for the sake of their own world, centering on themselves to the exclusion of all else, and at the same time, in a centrifugal movement, art and artworks are inextricably engaged in the larger world, engaged via what Levinas calls ‘criticism,’ meaning both art criticism and philosophical exegesis.<sup>26</sup>

Good art criticism restores the visual world from entanglement with evasive disengagement; it “reminds humans not to be inhuman, evil, unjust, reminding even art lovers that there are higher loves, greater exigencies.”<sup>27</sup> For Levinas there can be significant value to visual objects for ethics within images’ “position between two times and their ambiguity.” Philosophy grasps art “by interpretation. This is to say that the artwork can and must be treated as a myth: the immobile statue has to be put in movement and made to speak.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus to work with Levinas’s thought alongside visual images would require the ethicist to make the statue, or another visual object, “speak.” Although I am dedicated to this interpretation of the role of art criticism and believe it is profitable for certain types of visual-ethical analysis, I remain unsure whether it is worthwhile constructing an obligated *way of seeing* out of Levinas’s phenomenological account of responsibility and the face of the other.<sup>29</sup> There is too much contradictory and cryptic language regarding sight and optics and its role in the ethical encounter to be certain how vision operates in obligation, although it is clear to me it plays a significant role. Instead, I take from Levinas the general idea of a phenomenology of obligation and its ethical ramifications, that this obligation is unchosen, and that this phenomenology implicates the body, including the eyes, in *hiyyuv*. Levinas inspires the work of others, including Mara Benjamin below, who think about what it means to always and forever be under obligation, an obligation not straightforwardly chosen or with a clear starting point. Benjamin is less worried about sight, and so I

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>28</sup> Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 142.

<sup>29</sup> I use Cohen’s work on art criticism in Levinas to justify my own work of analyzing vaccine selfies as ethical objects within Levinas’ lexicon. See “Publicizing the Miracle of Vaccination: ‘Vaccine Selfies’ as a Jewish Visual Ethic of Embodied Obligation,” *Journal of Jewish Ethics* 8, no. 2 (July 6, 2022): 149–76, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jjewiethi.8.2.0149>.



outline below how obligated vision operates within her conception of *chiyyuv*. Levinas's ambivalence about visuality will also carry through in the work of Joseph Soloveitchik, but I think Soloveitchik too offers a more robust, specific, and less contradictory, account of a Jewishly obligated sight.

### Benjamin: Obligated Self, Maternal Gaze

Mara Benjamin's 2018 book *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* has already made a large impact on the fields of Jewish theology and ethics.<sup>30</sup> With its use of feminist thought, autobiographical anecdotes about mothering, and references to rabbinic text it offers a compelling account of the phenomenological experience of Jewish obligation. For the argument being developed here - that there is a form of Jewish obligated sight that has relevance for ethics - her work is useful for coherently describing the embodied experience of obligation and for lacking the antipathy and ambivalence towards sight and visual art we found in Levinas (and will see return in Soloveitchik). Although Benjamin is in no way focused on vision, a close reading of her text finds recurring visual metaphors and examples of sight in the descriptions of the experience of obligation. We can pull on these passages to understand how obligated sight functions and changes our everyday experience of engagement with the world.

Benjamin's goal in *The Obligated Self* is in large part to show how the most common and all-consuming example of bodily connection intertwined with obligation is motherhood.<sup>31</sup> She argues that the sense of obligation between a mother and baby, enacted in and through the body, is representative of Jewish theological notions of obligation. Benjamin explains that motherhood for Jewish women has served, like the tefillin (phylacteries) worn traditionally by Jewish men in prayer,

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<sup>30</sup> See for example the work of Sarah Zager, Jason Rubinstein, and Judah Isseroff. Martin Kavka's review of the book in the *Journal of Jewish Ethics* discusses how the book could uproot the field: Martin Kavka, "The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought," *Journal of Jewish Ethics* 6, no. 2 (May 1, 2020): 267–81, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jjewiethi.6.2.0267>.

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin notes that fathers can also live this kind of obligation and sometimes uses the language of parent. She feels, however, that in contemporary society it is still mothers who experience the kind of obligation and subjectivity she describes. Mara H. Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), xvii.

as a physical sign of obligation:

Jewish women, like many other women throughout the centuries, have intimately known their own distinctive form of boundedness and attachment: the boundedness of living with, being responsible for, and attending to children. As with *tefillin*, this boundedness is marked on the body: carved on muscles taut from the weight of carrying children; etched on the face in lines of sleeplessness, worry, and delight; engraved in the visceral response to the cry and needs of one's child.<sup>32</sup>

To be a mother is to be obligated—and to watch that obligation change the body as it responds to the ever-present needs of the baby (regardless of whether the mother is the biological parent). Like a Jew's relationship of love and of commitment towards God, the relationship of a mother to her child overflows with both love and obligation.

Notably for Benjamin, like for Levinas, obligation is not a freely chosen state. She refers to Levinas's reflections in "The Temptation of Temptation" on the *midrash* about Mt. Sinai being held over the heads of the Israelites, compelling them to accept the Torah. She explains that "we always stand 'under the mountain,' positioned only to respond to the conditionality of our being and of the others who constitute our being in the world."<sup>33</sup> Of course, one can violate these obligations, but that does not deny the fact of being obligated; a Jew does not assent to being obligated, but rather is always already subject to the yoke of the Torah. In the case of her child, Benjamin explains,

I could only violate the law through inattention or frustration; I could not cast it off. I transgressed the law as often as I fulfilled it, leaving my crying baby or comfort-seeking toddler to calm herself when I could not bring myself to respond. Nonetheless, it was clear to me that there was a law, and the law applied to me by virtue of being my child's parent.<sup>34</sup>

But for Benjamin, like for Levinas, this obligation began in some respects before the choice to become a parent was made or before the child appeared in her life. As a queer woman Benjamin notes how she had actively "pursued having a child, needed medical intervention for my partner to

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, xiv.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

conceive, but still she “could not agree to the law before I was already subject to it.”<sup>35</sup> Obligation, the law of the baby, is always and ever present in some respects even as it is particular to the child in front of you.

Clearly Levinas is a major influence in Benjamin’s work on obligation, and she agrees with him that obligation is total, unchosen, not necessarily reciprocal,<sup>36</sup> and deeply relational. Her work is also very much a critique of Levinas and some of his philosophical forefathers.<sup>37</sup> Benjamin explains that in modernity Jewish thinkers, sitting in a philosophical environment hostile to traditional Jewish practice and halakha, forged an “ingenious strategy for retaining but transforming the significance of obligation.”<sup>38</sup> Instead of locating obligation in the divine law, thinkers from Cohen to Buber to Levinas conceived of obligation as rooted in the interpersonal intersubjective encounter. They also described this encounter in “decidedly abstract terms.”<sup>39</sup> As she explains, these male thinkers pictured the other as having “no specific social location or set of needs.”<sup>40</sup> The Other in Levinas is never messy, never clingy. The other is never seen as a screaming toddler who is unable to articulate their needs, but who the parent, through the intimacy of motherhood, may be able to interpret as hungry or soiled. Benjamin’s work is a call to turn to concrete obligations, to the particular child before you.<sup>41</sup> This desire for the concrete opens a useful door for the visual and the embodied - we

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Reciprocity is less a focus for Benjamin while it is a key point of Levinas’ philosophy. Although parenthood can be thought of as having real reciprocal benefits, Benjamin is focused in her work on very young children who do not provide their own parents with anything close to reciprocal care, financial benefit etc.

<sup>37</sup> In his review, Kavka half-jokingly nicknames this set of thinkers “The Great Men of Modern Jewish Thought,” referring to Benjamin’s earlier use of the term in a previous article. The “Great Men” refers to Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Emmanuel Levinas.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin has been critiqued by Sarah Zager for this focus on particularity and concreteness which itself might build upon anti-Jewish tropes that non-Jewish care ethicists have assimilated into their work. Zager writes, for example, that Nel Noddings “invokes a long history of anti-Jewish rhetoric which accused Jews of prioritizing the ethical needs of members of their own group over and against those of others [...] by arguing that her reader should work hard to avoid becoming someone who is too focused on ‘ceremony,’ ‘ritual’ and ‘circumcision’; she is asking her readers to avoid becoming too Jewish.” Zager instead argues, reflecting on her own experience of infertility treatment, that there are forms of abstract care that are still concrete and particular. Writing about caring for her not-yet child through regular

are not seeing here simply a “face” which can be cryptically described by Levinas as “above me” or “before death.” This face has her father’s smile, or is crying uncontrollably, or was born with a full head of hair. We can visually describe the baby’s face and we can respond to its particular expressions. Indeed, Benjamin at times describes the source of her obligation, while still a face made in the divine image, as a material thing:

To leave the house, even for a short time, required gathering an enormous number of things I anticipated needing. Her accouterments weighed me down. Even more disorienting was the fact that baby herself became “stuff” to haul around. I apprehended her not only as a living, animate soul but also as material, as a package to be moved or carried or clothed, the epicenter of a vast apparatus of objects.<sup>42</sup>

Notably, unlike Levinas, Benjamin does not express any ambivalence in particular toward sight, while not making it an obvious focus of her analysis, either. But sight does do important work in her text when you begin reading closely. Benjamin describes one’s sight as changing in accordance with the phenomenological experience of obligation. Under the command of the baby one sees anew, and one thus *sees* their obligation. Visual objects and symbols become the signs of obligation, and explaining what and how to see becomes the work of the obligated parent. Therefore, I argue that Benjamin has a notion of obligated sight - the way an individual who realizes they live in a world of obligation sees the world through their lens of *hiyw*, and how objects and subjects call out their relation to obligation through *hiyw* tinted glasses.

Benjamin describes the experience of having a child for the first time, as opening her eyes to a new reality of total and utter obligation. Suddenly the crushing fact of responsibility can be seen, like a blindfold being removed from her eyes. It is not that this kind of obligation had not been

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infertility treatments, she explains that “the other I cared for was closer to the Levinasian abstract other that Benjamin rejects. [...] This other demanded my care in specific, embodied ways, but it remained abstract.” See Sarah Zager. “The Pain of Imagining Others: Caring for the Abstract and the Particular in Jewish Thought.” In *Care Ethics, Religion, and Spiritual Traditions*, ed. Maurice Hamington et al. (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2022): 49-88. And Sarah Zager. “Water Wears Away Stone: Caring for Those We Can Only Imagine,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 37, no. 1 (2020): 116–31.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 8.

present before (indeed, if the baby is a stand-in for God and halakha, it has been throughout her Jewish life), but suddenly it can be seen in full technicolor:

This aspect of our existence [of obligation and constraint] can be veiled from us; we can be oblivious to the fact of being tied to the world until various experiences open our eyes to it. To live with and be responsible for a newborn, a baby, a toddler, is to suddenly wake up to one's un-freedom. It means having the concrete experience, dozens of times each day, of being beholden to another. This un-freedom feels at times like slavery ('avdut) and at times like service ('avodah). But this condition, so acutely, viscerally, and materially experienced in caring for a young child, reveals a basic, but easily occluded, fact of existence. Maternity lifts, sometimes rips, the veil from our eyes, opening us to recognizing our conditionality.<sup>43</sup>

For Benjamin the reality of caring for a child made her see anew; it ripped a veil from her eyes and made her recognize her own unfreedom, her own entanglement in a world of obligation. Obligated eyes recognize a world of *hinyuv* where others may remain blissfully unaware. Part of this way of seeing is recognizing the visual details that are clues to the source of obligation. Benjamin describes a level of intimacy with the child that makes the obligated subject constantly see “difference and strangeness within the familiar.” The mother becomes able to see “the subtle but sudden change in gait, in expression, in shape of the face, in gesture” that reveals the child's distinctiveness.<sup>44</sup> Eyes that are not obligated to that particular being may not be able to see these subtle differences, but the eyes trained in *hinyuv* take notice. Similarly, verbal children can also make their parents see anew. Benjamin describes how the “unprompted” questions of young children “provoke new ways of thinking and seeing and understanding the world for parents.”<sup>45</sup> The wonderfully strange, creative, and at times inappropriate questions children ask make their parents take notice of unseen objects and hidden details. Obligated eyes are always and ever seeing anew in response to the child.

In a particularly memorable passage, Benjamin describes how her now-older toddler had a total

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 113.

meltdown on the subway, and the kinds of interactions it sparked with the others on the train. This was a particularly acute experience of *hiyuv* - where the locus of command was incoherent and uncontrollable. After dropping her daughter off after this incident, Benjamin could have experienced a moment of freedom, untethered from her child. But the kind of obligated sight Benjamin has assimilated into her very being remains:

After the terrible train ride had ended that day, I dropped off my daughter to play with a friend and slowly walked back to the subway. I took a seat, surrounded by other people, an adult alone, a neighbor amidst other neighbors. I was no longer visibly tethered to my daughter; I was temporarily responsible only for myself. It was a vantage point of disorienting and exhilarating solitariness. I took in the crowded scene: tourists looking at city maps, laborers slouching against poles, elders with shopping bags, young people involved with their phones. My gaze settled on the women tending to children in strollers: mothers, neighbors, human beings.<sup>46</sup>

Even without the source of her obligated status present, Benjamin still gazes upon the other obligated subjects and obligating forces. She cannot avoid looking at the mothers and at the babies. As an obligated mother herself, parental obligation is now what she sees, what she notices. Obligated vision is always attentive to the signs of a life of *hiyuv*, even in a moment of relative “freedom.”

Visual objects are also importantly the symbols of *hiyuv*. Visual symbols are how the obligated subject recognizes their own unfree status. These symbols are traditionally connected to the masculine; Benjamin will try to shift the sign of obligation away from only the male body to the stretch marks and bent back of the mother. But *tallit* and *tefillin*, ritual garb historically worn by men, have been the “visible tokens of the physical intimacy of God’s love.”<sup>47</sup> Even when undressed and in the bathhouse, the Jewish male body has a *visual* symbol of their obligation through circumcision. Benjamin quotes a midrash that describes that when King David entered the bathhouse and

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin, xiv. In the past several decades more and more women have begun wearing these ritual items as well.

undressed, he was saddened that he was “naked of commandments.” But then “he saw his circumcision, he felt comforted and began to compose praise: To the choir leader, on the eighth day [i.e., the day of circumcision], a psalm of David.”<sup>48</sup> Although Benjamin pushes against the gendered nature of this visual symbolism, she doesn’t reject the need for signs as part of obligation. For Jewish women obligation is in a different way “marked on the body” and “etched on the face.”<sup>49</sup> Obligation is experienced partially through a new form of sight and is made present through its visual effects on the obligated body.

Finally obligated sight, the kind of vision learned through caring for the child, allows us to see the divine. The attention and love that one has for the child ought to show how each individual is made in the divine image. As Benjamin explains when one sees others - the neighbor, the third<sup>50</sup> - one becomes more connected to the world through knowing that these other individuals were once someone’s baby, someone’s obligating force. Benjamin argues that the experiences of becoming a parent, becoming a new kind of obligated subject, can enable us to see that “each distinctive human is an occasion for seeing some aspect of God, since humans are made in the divine image.”<sup>51</sup> Benjamin now sees “other people as being (or having been) loved in all of their distinctive particularity, and of being perceived (or having been perceived) as a wonder of creation as much as I do my own child.” And this enables us to see the “divine image multiplied and refracted” throughout the world through the strangers and individuals we see on the ordinary city street.<sup>52</sup> Benjamin describes powerfully that caring for her child awakened her to the visual presence of the divine in the world: “When I saw, in my child, an image of divinity, I began to newly see others as

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<sup>48</sup> Benjamin quoting *Sifre Deuteronomy* 36, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, xiv.

<sup>50</sup> Language Benjamin uses for everyday encounters with strangers which she takes from Levinas.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.

reflections of the divine as well<sup>53</sup>.” Eyes trained by care and by obligation see not only in a way that is attentive to the phenomenon of *hinyuv*; they are also able to gaze upon the divine presence in the ordinary world.

Benjamin thus presents us with a powerful concept of an obligated gaze: a gaze that experiences sight through the prism of one’s own *hinyuv* and that is attentive to the granularities of obligation as they present themselves in the world. Obligated vision is also able to see godliness, to recognize the divine as it manifests itself in the visual world. The obligated gaze is an ethical one: it is about how we are able to see in order to care for vulnerable others. Obligated sight is attentive to the subtleties of other’s needs, to the ways that relational obligations characterize all interactions in our world. We will now turn to the phenomenology of obligation of Joseph Soloveitchik, which is less attentive to relationality and care, and rather returns us to the traditional language of the halakha. Although different from Benjamin in many respects, his use of vision in terms of how one sees the halakha bears some resemblance to the *hinyuv* sight articulated above.

### Halakhic Sight

In his time Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was the preeminent scholarly authority for American Modern Orthodoxy and is still considered one of the major thought leaders of that movement. In many Modern Orthodox circles 30 years after his death he is referred to simply as “the Rav.” He is recognized for articulating in many respects the ways to live a life dedicated to halakhic observance and Torah study while participating in the modern world. His own scholarly biography in many ways encapsulated this intellectual straddling: he was the scion of an Eastern European rabbinic dynasty and received a PhD in philosophy from the University of Berlin in 1932.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



Although Soloveitchik wrote in several different genres on numerous subjects, his more philosophical works will be our focus here and particularly his philosophy of *halakha* and conception of *hiyuv* articulated in the extended essay *Halakhic Man*.

Both Soloveitchik and Benjamin are interested in the phenomenological experience of obligation. Whereas Benjamin analogizes Jewish *hiyuv* to the all-consuming experience of being a mother, Soloveitchik describes how the halakhic person moves through the larger world by projecting ideal halakhic categories on empirical reality. Soloveitchik and Benjamin (alongside Levinas) make for a thought-provoking comparison. Although both are interested in the phenomenon of obligation, Benjamin notably does not cite Soloveitchik, despite the fame of his work in the field of Jewish philosophy.<sup>54</sup> Soloveitchik, although a contemporary of Levinas, does not cite the French thinker in his work,<sup>55</sup> drawing more on Kantian and Existentialist thought along with his own rabbinic ancestors (particularly Rav Hayyim of Brisk, his grandfather). One major distinction between the Soloveitchik and Benjamin can be seen in their very titles: Soloveitchik is not attentive to issues of gender in his work, imagining an idealized halakhic male, while Benjamin writes from an explicitly feminist (and queer) perspective.<sup>56</sup> However, both Benjamin and Soloveitchik champion a vision of Judaism where the obligated life is central, and both, according to Daniel

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<sup>54</sup> For a more thorough comparison of the two thinkers see Daniel Mackler, “Phenomenology of Chiyuv Out of the Sources of Ethics: Joseph Soloveitchik and Mara Benjamin” (Reconstructing Judaism, April 2020), [https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/files/phenomenology\\_of\\_hiyuv\\_final\\_2020.pdf](https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/files/phenomenology_of_hiyuv_final_2020.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> *Halakhic Man* was written in 1944, although not published until the 1970s. It would thus precede the publication of most of Levinas’ works. However it is not clear to me how familiar Soloveitchik was with Levinas and his work is generally uninterested in the work of contemporary European theorists, focusing more on Neo-Kantian and Existentialist thought. For a comparison see: Seymour Kessler, “Soloveitchik and Levinas: Pathways to the Other,” *Judaism* 51, no. 4 (2002): 440–56.

<sup>56</sup> There’s a significant amount of literature on Soloveitchik and gender including: Adam S. Ferziger, “Feminism and Heresy: The Construction of a Jewish Metanarrative,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 494–546; Yitz Kurtz, “The Rav, Feminism and Public Policy,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 33, no. 4 (1999): 95–97; Simcha Krauss, “The Rav: On Zionism, Universalism And Feminism,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 34, no. 2 (2000): 24–39.; and Miriam Attia, “Like the Beasts That Speak Not: Soloveitchik and the Disappearance of Women” (Reconstructing Judaism, April 2021), <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/files/attia-soloveitchik.pdf>.

Mackler, “celebrate blood-and-guts obligation.”<sup>57</sup> Both these scholars, despite their differences, consider how embodiment (the blood and guts) impacts the experience of obligation. Both share the idea that “the most profound sort of obligation is also the most material and bodily.”<sup>58</sup>

Before turning to Soloveitchik’s philosophy of halakha and conception of obligation, I want to spend time with his aesthetics as background to the work that sight does in his thought. Like our other thinkers, Soloveitchik was not a philosopher of aesthetics, and art is not a focus of much of his work. But he, like Levinas and his philosophical predecessors before him (Hermann Cohen, Immanuel Kant), is also wary of art and beauty. In one essay, *Confrontation*, from 1964, he deliberately contrasts the materialistic and shallow aesthete with the authentic Jew.<sup>59</sup> In typical fashion, he begins by establishing a binary between two different types of men: confronted man and non-confronted man. For Soloveitchik the “confronted man” is the person who is able to see the transcendence of God *and* the limited, obligated, nature of man. “Confrontation” is the moment when:

Man becomes aware of his singularly human existence which expresses itself in the dichotomous experience of being unfree, restricted, imperfect and unredeemed, and, at the same time, being potentially powerful, great, and exalted, uniquely endowed, capable of rising far above his environment in response to the divine moral challenge.<sup>60</sup>

According to Soloveitchik’s thinking, observant Jews are doubly confronted, experiencing God’s transcendence while simultaneously living as a minority within a foreign, and at times hostile, society (later in the essay Soloveitchik outlines his ambivalent feelings about interfaith dialogue). For Soloveitchik this *Jewish* “confronted man” is contrasted with the “non-confronted man” who is unable to see “his assignment vis-à-vis something which is outside of himself” and also lacks the awareness “of his existential otherness as a being summoned by his Maker to rise to tragic

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<sup>57</sup> Mackler, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Joseph Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition* 6, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1964): 5–29. Particularly pages 5-17.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

greatness.”<sup>61</sup> Importantly, in Soloveitchik’s imagination the non-confronted man is an aesthete who indulges in the visual and the sensual, which keeps him from experiencing the moral call of God:

The hêdoné-oriented, egocentric person, the beauty-worshipper, committed to the goods of sense and craving exclusively for boundless aesthetic experience, the voluptuary, inventing needs in order to give himself the opportunity of continual gratification, the sybarite, constantly discovering new areas where pleasure is pursued and happiness found and lost, leads a non-confronted existence. At this stage, the intellectual gesture is not the ultimate goal but a means to another end – the attainment of unlimited aesthetic experience. Hence, nonconfronted man is prevented from finding himself and bounding his existence as distinct and singular. He fails to realize his great capacity for winning freedom from an unalterable natural order and offering this very freedom as the great sacrifice to God, who wills man to be free in order that he may commit himself unreservedly and forfeit his freedom.<sup>62</sup>

Soloveitchik’s writing in *Confrontation* and elsewhere has led scholars to describe his approach to art and visuality as deeply ambivalent. In different works Soloveitchik can be read as having a “qualified affirmation, hostile parody, and relative indifference” to visuality.<sup>63</sup> Soloveitchik’s anti-aestheticism is probably most on display in *Confrontation* and does not always carry through in his other texts.<sup>64</sup> In works that seem to have more space for aesthetic experience, however, he occasionally puts down artwork and beauty for what he believes to be more transcendent or intellectual phenomena. For example, in *Halakhic Man*, whose phenomenology of obligated sight we will turn to next, he describes the “profound depth and a clear penetrating vision” of cognitive man as being “more splendid and beautiful than all the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.”<sup>65</sup>

Despite this ambivalence and at times outright hostility towards art and beauty, in his phenomenology of halakha Soloveitchik gives the faculty of sight a fairly large and unambiguous role to play. The significance of sight in his account of *hinyuv* is announced at the very beginning of the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Zachary Braiterman, “Joseph Soloveitchik and Immanuel Kant’s Mitzvah-Aesthetic,” *AJS Review* 25, no. 1 (2000): 3.

<sup>64</sup> For more see Braiterman’s essay. Also for an interesting if some unsatisfying analysis of Soloveitchik and architectural experience see Ken Kolton-Fromm’s chapter “Material Place: Joseph Soloveitchik and the Urban Holy” about thinker’s relationship to *eruv* in *Material Culture And Jewish Thought In America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Hoffman (Philadelphia PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), 84.

text with the epigraph, which states “At that moment the image of his father came to him and appeared before him in the window.” - Sotah 36b. The statement obliquely refers to Soloveitchik’s grandfather, R. Hayyim of Brisk, the hero of the text and the ideal “halakhic man.” It is remarkable that out of all of the texts about honoring one’s parents or ancestors in Judaism, Soloveitchik chose one specifically about images and vision. Appearances, images, and visual experience will thus be significant to the way halakhic man moves through the world.

As mentioned above, although Soloveitchik is quite focused on cognition and Kantian categories, he strongly affirms that the halakha is grounded in reality; the halakhic man’s “hands are soiled with the gritty realia of practical Halakhah.”<sup>66</sup> Soloveitchik insists that it is humans who must practice the halakha since the “earth and bodily life are the very ground of halakhic reality.” Conversely the angels “who neither eat nor drink, who neither quarrel with one another nor are envious of one another, are not worthy and fit for the receiving of the Torah.”<sup>67</sup> Although the halakha obviously plays a role in ritual performance in sacred spaces like the synagogue and Beit Midrash (study house), the real location of the halakha is “the sphere of our daily, mundane activities.”<sup>68</sup> Halakha thus is grounded in what we can see, touch, and smell; it deals in daily sensory experience and cannot be divorced from real experiences.<sup>69</sup> Halakha is deeply embodied, meaning that for seeing people the halakha requires a kind of vision. Thus Soloveitchik describes the halakhic man as one who looks upon the world and sees its sacred fullness:

The halakhic man who gazed at the first rays of the sun and reflected upon the beauty of the world and the nothingness of man in an ecstatic mood of joy intermixed with tragedy is a this-worldly man, an individual given over to concrete reality, who communicates with his Creator, not beyond the bounds of finitude, not in a holy, transcendent realm enwrapped in

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 94-95.

<sup>69</sup> Soloveitchik’s focus on empirical reality is also a polemic against mysticism and mystical experiences.

mystery, but rather in the very midst of the world and the fullness thereof.<sup>70</sup>

What does the halakhic man do when he gazes upon the world? For the Neo-Kantian leaning Soloveitchik, it is through the experience of sight that the halakhic man applies a priori categories to the visible world. For Soloveitchik obligation lies in the ideal law of the halakha, which the seeing human imposes upon the messy reality. In what Soloveitchik calls a “cognitive-normative approach” the halakhic man “orients himself to reality through a priori images of the world which he bears in the deep recesses of his personality.”<sup>71</sup>

Using his visual faculties, the halakhic man applies these “a priori, ideal principles and precepts” to empirical phenomena, like, in one example, a spring. The halakhic man “gazes” at the spring and “carefully examines” it in order to determine “normative law” - as in “does the real spring correspond to the requirements of the ideal Halakhah or not” to be considered a mikvah?<sup>72</sup> In one of the text’s most famous passages, Soloveitchik, returning to the image of the “rays of the sun,” describes how the halakhic man *sees* a sunrise or sunset:

When halakhic man looks to the western horizon and sees the fading rays of the setting sun or to the eastern horizon and sees the first light of dawn and the glowing rays of the rising sun, he knows that this sunset or sunrise imposes upon him anew obligations and commandments. Dawn and sunrise obligate him to fulfill those commandments that are performed during the day: the recitation of the morning *Shema*, *tzitzit*, *tefillin*, the morning prayer, *etrog*, *shofar*, *Hallel*, and the like.<sup>73</sup>

Halakhic vision for Soloveitchik here is a kind of sight that is deeply attuned to the experience of obligation - it is through sight that the halakhic person knows that he or she is in a state of *hiyuv*, bound to the morning prayers and similarly to other time-bound commandments.<sup>74</sup> The halakhic person looks at the world through halakha-tinged glasses, seeing within the empirical reality halakhic

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> In another notable connection to gender here woman traditionally are exempt from time-bound commandments, although some of the ones listed here are obligatory for them.

specifications. The halakha is in “visible reality,” in the “the sunrise and sunset, the dawn and the appearance of the stars.”<sup>75</sup> In the seen world the halakhic requirements appear and become binding. For Soloveitchik, halakhic man looks at the world through a priori halakhic concepts in a way similar to how the mathematician experiences empirical reality: “Both the mathematician and the halakhist gaze at the concrete world from an a priori, ideal standpoint and use a priori categories and concepts which determine from the outset their relationship to the qualitative phenomena they encounter.”<sup>76</sup> For both the mathematician and the halakhic man look at the world in order to ask, “Does this real phenomenon correspond to their ideal construction?”<sup>77</sup> Soloveitchik here explicates a certain kind of halakhic or obligated sight - one in which the halakhic man (or woman) sees the world as the place to live out the details of the life of *hiyuv*. Halakhic sight sees the world as a playground for the law, as a hermeneutical space to be seen through the *Mishnah Torah* and the *Shulchan Arukh*. Any visual object is a chance for halakhic sight’s reinterpretation of the objects purpose and fittingness for the playing out of Jewish law.

Ultimately Soloveitchik articulates that the halakha itself is an aesthetic ideal. In the second half of *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik argues that it is the purpose of *hiyuv*-bound individuals to create and build the world in partnership with God. The halakhic man in this vision becomes a kind of sacred obligated artist: Man's task is to "fashion, engrave, attach, and create," and transform the emptiness in the world into a perfect and holy existence, bearing the imprint of the divine.<sup>78</sup>

Soloveitchik even evokes the theology of divine diminishment in order to leave room for humankind, the halakhic artist: “The Creator of the world diminished the image and stature of

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 23. Soloveitchik’s work *Halakhic Mind* explores more the overlap between halakhic consciousness and abstract mathematics and physics.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 101. For more on this see Ranana Dine, “A Religion Without Visual Art? The Rav and the Myth of Jewish Art,” *The Lehrhaus* (blog), September 11, 2017, <https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/a-religion-without-visual-art-the-rav-and-the-myth-of-jewish-art/>.

creation in order to leave something for man, the work of His hands, to do, in order to adorn man with the crown of creator and maker.”<sup>79</sup> Halakhic man is expected to use his particular obligated sight to create, construct, paint, and sculpt. Obligated sight is part of a creative refashioning of the world. And indeed, halakhic life is the most beautiful of all. Soloveitchik ends the first part of *Halakhic Man* with the statement: “Thus have true halakhic men always acted, for their study and their deeds have blended together beautifully, truly beautifully.”<sup>80</sup> Ultimately halakhic life is an aesthetic life, one of beauty, creativity, and fulfillment, and one in which obligated eyes are trained to see the beauty of *biyuv* in the everyday.

So what is obligated sight for Soloveitchik? In my reading he presents a robust and vital role for vision in a life of *biyuv*, one in which sight takes part in normativity. Obligation, the halakha, does not originate in vision since it is a priori, coming before any sensory experience - much like how obligation is before choice or freedom for Levinas and Benjamin. But if one recognizes that he or she is living under the halakha, then one sees the world differently. The eyes are the interpretive tool for changing the world from a secular space into a location for Jewish law, obligated life, and the divine presence. One sees the world as an *biyuv*-bound person, viewing and interpreting empirical reality in terms of one’s obligations to it. Obligated sight sees a sunset, a spring, and the built environment and considers how it is subsumed into its world of obligations, rather than ignoring, taking for granted, or even engaging in straightforward aesthetic wonder. One sees differently, uniquely, as a halakhic person and ultimately that sight is part of the beauty of a life of *chiyuv*.

## Conclusion

Reading Benjamin and Soloveitchik with an eye to their use of sight within their

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 95.

phenomenologies of obligation shows that these two giants of Modern Jewish thought provide us with resources to construct a particular way of seeing for the field of Jewish ethics. The theological concept of *hiyuv*, although articulated differently by Benjamin and Soloveitchik, has direct effects on sight. Jewish sight is obligated sight. We can think about that obligation as stemming from traditional halakha with Soloveitchik, or from interpersonal relations and care with Benjamin. But both loci of obligation involve and affect sight - the Jew sees the world through the prism of obligation and interacts with visual objects as sacred items that participate in the fulfilling one's *hiyuv*. Levinas, Benjamin, and Soloveitchik all agree that sight is not the locus of obligation (for Levinas it would be the Other, Benjamin the baby, Soloveitchik the a priori halakha), but sight is the method by which one experiences and lives out the ethical or the commanded life. Obligations of care and of the divine law color our world and make us see differently. The fact of obligated sight is a crucial insight into the Jewish moral landscape and should be taken up by Jewish ethicists investigating the everyday lives and objects of Jewish moral agents. Jews take up regular visual objects – candles, cups, spice holders, photo albums – and imbue them with obligation and thus moral significance. Understanding better the way that visual objects are part of the experience of obligation, and thus function within the Jewish moral landscape, will help ethicists incorporate art and visibility into their accounts of the Jewish moral life.