CHAPTER 3

Decalogue One: Witnessing a Responsible Ethics of Response from a Jewish Perspective

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When a minister, rabbi, or priest attempts to solve the ancient question of Job's suffering through a sermon or lecture, he does not promote religious ends but, on the contrary, does them a disservice. The beauty of religion, with its grandiose vistas, reveals itself to man not in solutions but in problems, not in harmony but in the constant conflict of diversified forces and trends.

—RABBI JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK

PAWEŁ (THE YOUNG SON): “For the peace of her soul.” You didn’t mention a soul.

KRYSZTOF (THE FATHER): It’s a form of words of farewell: there is no soul.

PAWEŁ: Auntie says there is [a soul].

KRYSZTOF: Some find it easier to live thinking that.

PAWEŁ: And you?

KRYSZTOF: Me? Frankly, I don’t know.

—KRYSZTOF KIEŚLOWSKI, Decalogue One

Creating a Tentative Relationship between Verse and Film

Viewers and critics commonly question the relationship between Krzysztof Kieślowski’s ten films entitled The Decalogue and the biblical Decalogue. Although the films and the screenplays receive diverse theoretical, theological, and emotional responses, few studies have considered Kieślowski’s work from the perspective of Hebrew scripture, even more precisely, from the perspective of specific rabbinic and halakhic traditions of responses to those verses.¹ Given that Kieślowski is portraying Poland, a Catholic country, most critics have privileged readings of the films from a Christian perspective. Yet in neglecting interpretations that offer rabbinic perspectives, we have failed to understand adequately the complex
relationship—one might even call it a hermeneutic encounter, both biblical and philosophical—between film and commandments, a relationship that Kieslowski himself claims informed his research. The director notes that although he and fellow screenwriter Krzysztóf Piesiewicz read widely from “both Old and New Testaments . . . we decided fairly quickly to dispense with all of this. . . . We didn’t want to adopt the tone of those who praise or condemn. . . . Rather, we wished to say: ‘We know no more than you. But maybe it is worth investigating the unknown, if only because the very feeling of not knowing is a painful one.’” Instead of creating a specific and direct correlation among the Ten Commandments and the film series, they “found it easier to solve the problem of the relationship between the films and the individual Commandments: a tentative one. The films should be influenced by the individual Commandments to the same degree that the Commandments influence our daily lives” (xiii–xiv).

By on the one hand seeking a direct correlation among the films and the Ten Commandments and on the other hand ignoring the origins of the verses—words first uttered in Hebrew scripture to the Jewish people—past criticism has failed to explore the presence of Jewish interpretations of the Ten Commandments that, as I will show, lie dormant in the films. Indeed, if we understand that Kieslowski’s reference to “our lives” can refer to more than the two screenwriters, then our analysis of the religious dimensions of the film ought to include Jewish responses as well. Becoming more aware of the ample Jewish exegetical traditions can help elucidate the nuances of Kieslowski’s film and the particulars of the Decalogue. At the same time, Kieslowski’s work presents critical challenges to Jewish readers of the Decalogue who do not stay attuned to complicated ways that these principles influence their “daily lives.” If the response to the biblical Decalogue remains routine and rationalized to such an extent that one disregards the verses’ intricacies and dilemmas, then the experiential and living significance of the yoke of these principles can become antiquated and irrelevant.

The commentaries I will adduce address existential and ethical significations from within the language and ethos of the biblical text. Moreover, we can better understand much of Kieslowski’s work once we experience it alongside the work of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993), one of the twentieth century’s preeminent scholars of Halakha and rabbinic hermeneutics, philosophy, ethics, and intertextual traditions. Though these two asymptotically related lines of thought never actually touch, the reverberations that resound as the lines get closer address those perennial questions that beset—and, in part, define—human existence.
I argue that the insights on traditional Jewish material suggested in many of the lectures and texts of R. Soloveitchik demonstrate that Kiesówski’s *Decalogue* might best be witnessed as enactments of a responsible ethics of response. By writing almost exclusively about the first two verses of Exodus 20—literally just sixteen words in the Hebrew text: “And God spoke all these words, saying: I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land Egypt, from the house of slaves”—I explicitly work against the tendency in Kiesówski criticism to omit altogether the opening of Exodus 20 from discussion. In addition, I demonstrate that although the words of the Decalogue in Exodus are indeed addressed to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, R. Soloveitchik’s exegetical works on these two terse verses portray many insights that Kiesówski’s film dramatizes, from a non-Jewish perspective and without clear resolutions, yet with utmost importance for those who continue to ask questions that challenge people of all faiths. Both Jewish and non-Jewish viewers can leave the film with stark situations and dilemmas that demand responsible responses. Here, I use the word “responses” to include characters’ responses in the film (such as Pawel’s [Wojciech Klat] father’s response to his son’s death or to the mysterious stranger or to the notion of a soul), the Jewish people’s responses to God in Exodus (as depicted in biblical verses and classic rabbinic commentaries), the divine response to humans (unique and ambiguous moments in the film such as the wax tears on the Madonna’s face, and God’s response to the Jewish people’s suffering in the house of bondage), and Kiesówski’s viewers’ responses to his work (such as those demanded by the camera).

I argue that with just this infinitesimally small portion of rabbinic interpretation that I cannot fully represent in these pages, viewers of *Decalogue One* will begin to notice the array of responses in the film building in intensity, creating a demand for responsible responses by anyone confronting Kiesówski’s film. While Kiesówski is less interested in specific answers, he is precise in presenting the daily ethical dilemmas and limitations his characters encounter with each other, which he channels via a mysterious sense of transcendence that haunts much of his film. Focusing nearly exclusively on framing scenes in *One* that have not been adequately addressed by film critics, I claim that lingering, haunting images and sequences of human responses and facial expressions actually demand that human beings who watch and listen to the film acknowledge the fullness of possibility in the cinematic event by responding to the ethical obligation Kiesówski announces. The exact nature of each participant’s response will vary, as I will discuss with R. Soloveitchik’s interpretation of an ancient conflict of interpretations—but a response is, dare I say, commanded.
Moreover, a complex rabbinic and halakhic perspective on the Decalogue is a necessary addition to any critical notion of how the commandments “influence our daily lives” in the empirical world as we experience it: “All the frames of reference constructed by the philosophers and psychologists of religion for explaining the varieties of religious experience cannot accommodate halakhic man as far as his reaction to empirical reality is concerned.” By presenting a minute portion of a detailed rabbinic perspective on the prefatory words of the Decalogue, I wish to refute the following kind of critical claim: “[One] is a meditation on what for Kieslowski would be the first of the Ten Commandments: ‘Thou shalt not worship false gods.’” Not only does this falsely overemphasize the “first” part of the biblical Decalogue (it summarily dismisses the very two verses that my entire essay, and, I claim, One, address), but it also suggests a far too exclusive “meditation” on “false gods.”

And God [Elokim] spoke all these words, saying . . . (Exod. 20:1)

The narrative of One begins not with a causal, Aristotelian sequence, but rather with a powerful sense of empirical reality: ice, water, a lake, and the banks of a lake. As viewers can attest, the first few moments of the film, while focused on empirical nature, present a luminescent and haunting musical and imagistic (though not static) preface to the narrative proper. Why? Let us go back to Exodus for a moment. Though not in many lists of the Decalogue, the first verse of chapter twenty in Exodus, according to traditional rabbinic exegesis, signifies an abundance of information with each of its seven words.

Let us first examine the rabbinic understanding of the word “Elokim,” which is too often simply translated as “God.” Indeed, this issue of translation stays attuned to Kieslowski’s film, for much of the father’s (Henryk Baranowski) academic lecture and work concern the problems inherent in translating what many consider to be untranslatable (he mentions, for instance, Eliot’s comments on poetry). Rashi (1040–1105 CE), who is the biblical and Talmudic commentator par excellence and is the starting point for many Jewish interpretations of the Chumash (Pentateuch), claims that the word “Elokim” signifies exacting punishment; “Elokim” invokes judges and adjudication. Rashi is actually stressing the uniqueness of the Ten Commandments. At times, the indication in the Torah is that people will not be punished if they do not observe volitional commandments. From Rashi’s perspective, people might have thought that there is also no punishment for not obeying these Ten Commandments. “Elokim” thus
informs us, claims Rashi, that if people do not observe the Decalogue, the judge will adjudicate and people will be punished. The commandments are not optional here.

Rashi is working within a traditional interpretation of Elokim as stated in the Mekhilta, a classic rabbinic commentary on much of Exodus. According to this earlier text, disobeying a command by Elokim causes punishment in one’s life (rather than in the afterlife). R. Soloveitchik builds on these commentaries by the Mekhilta and Rashi by bringing us back to “Elokim” as used in the creation narratives of Genesis. For R. Soloveitchik, God’s “dual relationship to creation” is expressed in two terms: Elokim and the tetragrammaton. Elokim stands for the ruler of nature; the tetragrammaton stands for the ruler of metaphysical laws.

Here, R. Soloveitchik refers to Rashi’s comments on Elokim in Genesis: Elokim connotes “a shalit [the ruler of the cosmos] and shofet [the judge of the sociopolitical order]” (Rashi on Genesis 2:5). What does natural rule mean in this situation and how does this natural power of Elokim relate to the opening of the Decalogue? We can better understand natural law by focusing on the opening shots of One.

First, let us notice the focus on nature in the film’s opening shot, which barely receives comment. We must ask what significance imbues Kieslowski’s mesmerizing depiction of the resplendent, organic complexity of nature, in the first moments of his Decalogue. The slow camera movement shows the partly frozen natural waters moving as if with massive, but inexplicit, meaning.

The partly frozen water, which has been altered by human intervention, indicates how people in the film have defied a crucial meaning of Elokim, or, as R. Soloveitchik explains the term in Rashi and the Mekhilta: dayan le’hiparah (a judge to exact punishment), that which legislates both cosmic and sociopolitical orders. Elokim signifies the principles of causality, mathematics, physics; moreover, a “violation of natural law always results in catastrophe” (Nor’ot ha-Rav 5:6). For R. Soloveitchik, this kind of violation also occurs when “modern technologically minded” people try to gain absolute control of the environment. Put tersely, “natural law is basically an existential law . . . [one] either accepts the natural law, or causes the termination of [one’s] own existence. This is Elokim Shalit [judge]” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:8). In addition, Elokim is shofet, a lawmaker who legislates moral laws, and the outcome is similar: A violation of moral law causes catastrophe. R. Soloveitchik’s reading of Rashi (and the Mekhilta) invites us to realize that Exodus 20 begins with Elokim to underscore that these “ten principles constitute the foundation for any civilized existence, and are placed on the same level as the laws governing nature” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:12).
The term “Elokim” also refers to God’s relationship with the universe and with man in the natural universe. In Genesis, for example, Elokim dominates the first chapter (“and Elokim said, ‘let there be light,’” and so on). One clear ramification of R. Soloveitchik’s reading of Elokim in Exodus 20:1 and in the first chapter of Genesis is that the term refers to a judge who exacts swift punishment in the world that humans inhabit. Violating natural law, such as adding heated water to a frozen pond, will cause a swift effect: Ice will melt (causing Paweł to die). Let us note that in Kiesłowski’s screenplay, though not in the film itself, this form of natural causation is given as the explanation for the ice on the lake breaking. The justice of natural law is exacting (which is why Elokim is used in the creation story of Genesis 1, when different dimensions and beings of nature are brought into existence). From this perspective, Exodus 20 begins with Elokim to announce that the basic moral laws contained in the Decalogue are not volitional; if disobeyed, dire consequences occur in this earthly, natural, existence.

Our focus on “Elokim,” however, is still insufficient to deal with Kiesłowski’s opening scene, for the partly frozen ice alongside the flowing water and above the natural world living beneath the icy surface ostensibly foreshadows the death of Paweł, the spilled ink bottle, and other haunting images. Indeed, it is not simply death that is foreshadowed, but natural life and death in sentient beings. For instance, the animal kingdom appears in unexpected figurations in this film. The opening shot before we move to Paweł and his father focuses on birds; then we witness Paweł happily responding to the pigeons through the window; shortly thereafter, Paweł encounters the dead dog; then at school Paweł encounters the living guinea pig in the arms of a female peer. At this point Kiesłowski switches to the father’s lecture, which deals with translation and symbolic transfers of meaning. From this point in the film, animals become representations of animals. For example, Paweł in bed looks at pictures of birds, and quite powerfully, in bed before the second half of the film, Paweł clutches his stuffed elephant. Indeed, this stuffed elephant echoes the unseen but mentioned Miss Piggy and Kermit—puppet creatures (but representing, however comically, animals) who inhabit the mathematical word-problem Paweł’s father gives his son toward the start of the film. The father’s response to the animal kingdom is exclusively symbolic; the son, though, in his first screen appearance, happily watches the natural drama of pigeons flying and taking crumbs. We can sense the joy on the boy’s face. Why should Kiesłowski intersperse all of these natural creatures into his metaphysical drama? Why should he move from
images of real natural beings to images of either illustrations or fake natural beings?

I would like to suggest, based on the rabbinic interpretation of Elokim as exacting judge of natural laws, that Kiesłowski's film intersperses, overlaps, and merges the Decalogue's earthly natural principles—causal, cosmic, earthly, animal nature, and sociopolitical, interhuman nature—with existential and spiritual principles. Just as we should not view part of the Ten Commandments in Exodus as being inherently more natural than other parts, we should not separate all the parts of Kiesłowski's Decalogue. The films go together, and both the natural and mysteriously transcendent moments are experienced, and responded to, by the same characters. Unlike critics who want to divorce the rational character from the spiritual character, or the natural element from the spiritual element, we can more effectively recognize the honesty and complexity of Kiesłowski's project by addressing the mixture of these parts “in our daily lives.”

To better understand this idea from a rabbinic perspective, let us return to Exodus 20:1, but now let us focus on the word kol (all): “Elokim spoke all [kol] these utterances.” The word “all,” it turns out, displays an enhanced notion of parts existing together. Once again, R. Soloveitchik becomes an exegete of Rashi, who is an exegete of the Mekhilta. A close reading reveals that the biblical verse does not need to use the word kol; it is superfluous on the level of simple plot, so it means, for Rashi, that God pronounced all the words simultaneously, in one statement. From a halakhic perspective, R. Soloveitchik points out that kol has two meanings: It is a mathematical, additional, integrated sum total of something, and it denotes a gestalt, a wholeness, an intrinsic oneness of total unity. The total of the second is intrinsic unto itself, whereas the total of the first is integrative (adding parts up to a sum total).

The question, then, is what kol means in Exodus 20:1. R. Soloveitchik claims that God did not speak “all” as in an additive sum, where each part has its own priority over the complete sum of the parts; if so, then “all” would indeed be superfluous in the verse. Rather, the Mekhilta and Rashi demonstrate that God spoke all Ten Commandments in a holistic, gestalt manner. The Decalogue is not the sum of adding ten, mutually independent and unrelated parts, but is an “organic unity” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:18). The practical consequence of this reading—as Kiesłowski might say, the influence on “our daily lives”—is that the “Decalogue is indivisible” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:18). When the Mekhilta claims that God says it “all” in one saying, the Mekhilta is asserting a powerful message to people: Accept “all” or none at “all.”
Unlike critics who want to accept a stark division between science (or reason) and faith in One, or a stark division between a ritual or theological notions of morality and secular, humanistic notions of morality, or even a stark separation between each of Kieslowski’s ten films, a rabbinic understanding of “all” in Exodus 20:1 would allow us to perceive that the very notion of the Decalogue itself is based on an “all” together or “none at all” attitude. Any question about God’s participation in this world cannot be limited to abstract theological conceptions, or those that might be asked in the rooms governed by Pawel’s father. Such a question must include Elohim’s participation in all natural principles as well. In other words—and this is crucial for an effective response to all of One—we need not wait for Pawel’s father to enter the church at the end of the film to start encountering the challenges of God’s participation in creation and destruction. The opening scene of ice, water, fire, and birds, with the mysterious man staring directly at us, not to mention the crosslike image of the building as the camera moves upward, challenges us to respond to all that we witness (Figure 3–1). Indeed, we are placed in a postevent position at the start of the film, for the aunt, Irena (Maja Komorowska), cries in response to the filmed vision of Pawel, who has already died, on screen before her. The cross-cut to the mysterious man crying suggests that he too has experienced Pawel’s death. The film’s plot is over before the film begins. What matters is the history of responses and responsible memories, the human responses to others and to moments that suggest mysterious transcendence—even, or perhaps especially, in nature.

Figure 3–1. The mysterious man staring directly at us in Decalogue One.
The consequences of this reading, both of the verse and the film, are far-reaching. For R. Soloveitchik, the Mekhilta and Rashi promote a notion of the Decalogue that cannot be based on a secular, social morality that relies for its authority and commandments on either one’s own judgment or the legislation of one’s moral conscience. R. Soloveitchik quotes a famous passage in the Tosefta (a Tannaitic source from the times of the Mishnah)\(^{17}\) to show that a Decalogue morality presupposes that “one does not steal from his neighbor unless he also denies the existence of God” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:20). Kieslowski’s film enacts for us the following traditional dilemma: Should one accept authority and legislation of moral norms from outside of oneself, or should one attempt to create a moral conscience that strictly comes from one’s own reasoning? One embodies the dilemma itself.

In fact, R. Soloveitchik’s understanding of the Tosefta brings us to a strange narrative, one that speaks to Paweł’s father’s agnostic comments in the film about the soul and God. When considering the question of whom society should “consider a contemptible creature,” the Tosefta says, “Rabbi Reuven answered that society should hate the atheist, the agnostic, the skeptic, one who denies the existence of his Maker. The philosopher did not understand. He asked, ‘How is this so? Why should a non-believer be held in contempt and hate? Isn’t faith the private affair of the individual? His skepticism is not harmful to society’” (Nor’ot ha-Rav 5:21). Tellingly, R. Soloveitchik emphasizes the social dimensions of a choice that the philosopher perceives affects only the individual: “Rabbi Reuven answered, ‘Honor thy Father and Mother, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not fornicrate, Thou shalt not steal; there is no man who will violate these precepts until he has denied the existence of his Maker’” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:21). For this Tosefta, if there is no faith in God, social relations on all levels will disintegrate.

Kieslowski, though, is surely not arguing that we should hate Paweł’s father or his skepticism. What he might be arguing is that in a society there might not be (typologically) Paweł’s father without Paweł’s aunt. How so? To better understand the social dimension here, let us move to R. Soloveitchik’s interpretation of the traditional rabbinic stance against secular ethics in terms of the opening words of the Decalogue, and, of all things, Marxism, which brings to mind the political history and context looming behind the massive edifice that is the main structural setting for Kieslowski’s film.\(^{18}\) For R. Soloveitchik, “Marxism is fundamentally an ethical credo . . . [since the] underlying idea of Marxist econometrics is justice. Labor, according to Marx, creates the economic value system, and
hence the so-called ibber-wurth belongs to the laborers and not to the in-
vestor or the Capitalist” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:24). Yet, based on his analysis of
Russian Marxism, R. Soloveitchik claims that this “ethical doctrine turned
into a gospel of brutality and tyranny” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:24), for without
adherence to a moral power beyond oneself, without the first verses of the
Decalogue, which stress human relations with the divine, there can be no
adherence to the second half of the Decalogue, which stresses human rela-
tions with humans.¹⁹

The kol (all) of Exodus 20:1 turns out to mean an ethical principle: The
Decalogue cannot be divided since it is a gestalt whole. One cannot re-
spond to parts of the Decalogue without responding to all of the Deca-
logue. Theological faith must be integrated into secular morality: “Man
cannot legislate his own moral laws” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:26). Moreover, ar-
gues R. Soloveitchik, ethos and ritual are so bound together that they are,
for most purposes, identical. There is no opposition between the sacred
and the mundane, the academic lecture hall or the hall of a house of wor-
ship. Sacredness, unlike what Pawel’s father might think as he bursts into
the church at the end of the film, is not limited to cultic gestures, to rituals,
to the ecclesiastical. R. Soloveitchik even calls this attitude of strict separa-
tion “moral schizophrenia” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:29). Unlike such schism, the
kol unity of the Decalogue means that no moral system can be divorced
from faith. Kiesłowski’s film as a whole, not a specific character within the
film, performs these very conflicts.

Not only should one not bracket One from all ten films, but one
should also respond to the whole of One in terms of metaphysical, spiri-
tual, and physical laws. In other words, the father’s lecture on theories
of translation needs to be applied to the film itself. Whether the film
translates real birds into illustrations; animals into stuffed animals; natu-
ral calculation into seemingly unnatural events, frozen ice into melted
ice; candle wax drippings on a painting into (possibly) real tears of the
Madonna; human memory into computer memory (or even, in the aca-
demic lecture, “unlimited memory” of a translator); digital commands
into locked doors and running water; Polish into English (Pawel is sup-
posed to take English lessons, but his tutor is sick); or Hebrew verses on
the Ten Commandments into Kiesłowski’s Decalogue: All of these trans-
lations suggest that responses to transcendence cannot be kept inside a
single location (the walls of a church) or a single time (either of happiness,
during the aunt’s time with Pawel or Pawel’s time with the birds; or of
horrible sadness, during the time after Pawel’s death, when the father’s
inward state is the focus of the screen or during Pawel’s response to the
dead dog). Just as the opening shot does not stay focused on fixed ice, but moves along frozen and flowing water, so too what was ostensibly mundane, even a bottle of ink, can suddenly translate into an intimation of mysterious transcendence and sacredness, and vice versa, as happens with the holy water turned into a block of ice in the shape of a tear on the father’s head at the film’s end.

Yet, while the array of responses is starting to come to the critical fore, the nature of this command is still not clear enough. That is because, in part, we have not yet addressed the last word in Exodus 20:1, laymor, which means “saying.” In a simple reading, the word appears to be superfluous. If God “spoke all these words,” then why should the verse add a word that means “saying as follows”? If, however, the act of saying became a performance by respondents, then the word accrues a constellation of meanings. God “spoke all these words” in order that the people respond by saying something in acknowledgment of “all” these words. As Rashi says, quoting Rabbi Yishmael’s opinion from the Mekhilta, “this teaches us that the people would answer ‘yes’ to the positive commandments and ‘no’ to the negative commandments” (Rashi on laymor in Exodus 20:1). The Mekhilta itself, as R. Soloveitchik points out, also includes Rabbi Akiva’s opinion that the people responded yes to both positive and negative commandments.

What parts of the verse troubled the Mekhilta? For R. Soloveitchik, there are two issues: one halakhic, the other semantic. In terms of Halakha, there are intricate legal procedures for a convert to undergo to accept “the yoke of the commandments” (Nor’ot ha-Rav 5:32). To accept this yoke fully, it was insufficient to say, “we will do and we will hear/learn” in response to the whole Torah. God required that each dibur, each saying, “each law, each principle, be accepted individually” (Nor’ot ha-Rav 5:32). In terms of semantics (the second issue), the word laymor in Hebrew often means “to be repeated” by someone (usually Moses) to an audience (usually the Jewish people). The exegetical problem here is that God addresses the people directly; God does not use Moses as a hermeneutic intermediary. Thus, laymor semantically appears to be logically irrelevant. The Mekhilta therefore claims that laymor actually indicates responsiveness, acceptance, assent, or confirmation by the people: “laymor’ has the connotation of being accepted, of taking upon oneself, of being committed, of responding to the great challenge” (Nor’ot ha-Rav 5:33).

With this hermeneutic of response in place precisely during the opening verse and scene of the Decalogue, we must ask what the difference is between Rabbi Yishmael’s account and Rabbi Akiva’s. Here, R. Soloveitchik explores the psychological, legal, and ethical distinctions between the
two to such an extent that he connects this dispute to the critique of secular ethics whenever the concept of chok (commandments that human reason cannot rationalize) gets removed from practice “in our daily lives.” According to Rabbi Yishmael (which is Rashi’s only account), the Jews accepted, that is, responded to all the positive commands with the affirmative “yes”: “I am your God”—“yes.” The people accepted, that is, responded to all the negative commands with the negative “no”: “You shall not accept other gods”—“no.” On the other hand, according to Rabbi Akiva, the people responded “yes” to everything. Phrased in a modern philosophical manner, the foundation of this conflict emanates from different interpretations of “the philosophy of motivation” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:34). Here R. Soloveitchik provides a quotidian anecdote to explain the ancient dispute. If R. Soloveitchik were to tell his grandson Moshe not to play with another child because the child is poorly behaved, his grandson might respond either by saying “‘No, Zeidy. I won’t play with him,’ or he may answer, ‘Yes, Zeidy, I shall not play with him!’” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:34–35). For R. Sloveitchik, what distinguishes this answer is whether his grandson agrees with his assessment, or whether he agrees to be obedient: “When Moshe tells me, ‘No Zeidy, I shall not play with him,’ he means to say that he concurs with me as far as my evaluation. . . . [But if ] he answers ‘Yes, I will not play with him’ [it] means . . . ‘I shall respect your wishes. I myself do not see any harm in fraternizing with Johnny. . . . However, your order will be carried out’” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:34–35). This fictional distinction of responses—narrated clearly in terms that affect our daily lives—embodies an essential question in Halakha and, for that matter, a question any individual who seeks to obey a commandment might ask: What motivates one’s obedience to a law? Should a person follow Rabbi Yishmael—answering “No, I won’t play”—out of an existential motivation that expresses an inward urge to agree with an ethical norm? Or should a person follow Rabbi Akiva, answering, “Yes, I will not play”: an act of obedience that is imposed from without?

R. Soloveitchik’s distinction applies to the two kinds of decrees uttered in the Decalogue. The majority of commandments in the Decalogue are mishpatim, usually defined as norms that one considers to be reasonable, not chukim, usually defined as ritualistic norms that do not have explicit reasons. The stereotypical division between mishpatim and chukim keeps these norms in mutually exclusive categories, if not in opposition. Chukim are not to be understood fully by means of rationally derived principles, but are to be accepted out of submission to the law. Mishpatim, such as the decrees that deal with interhuman relationships, are comprehensible by reasonable people. This, for R. Soloveitchik, is Rabbi Yishmael’s philoso-
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phy of motivation: We use our reasoning to find negative acts, like stealing or killing, despicable, so we reject them.

However, Rabbi Akiva’s philosophy of motivation presents a radically different psychology and ethics: We conform to the negative commands because of the normative decree. For Rabbi Akiva, there is no motivational difference between the mishpatim and the chukim. Without using any Derridean language, R. Soloveitchik deconstructs the standard opposition between chukim and mishpatim to claim that a “clearly defined distinction between chukim and mishpatim is almost non-existent. It is a sheer illusion” (Nur’ot ha-Rav 5:41). Although R. Soloveitchik demonstrates that there are occasions when stealing or murder might be accepted by one’s own conscience, and even acceptable by society, he claims that whether one truly understands the full nuances of the decree or not, the judge in these cases cannot be human criteria of ethics or justice: “Left to its own conscience, society, little by little, simply destroys the very fabric of its morality” (Nur’ot ha-Rav 5:45). Ethical reasonableness is an insufficient source for social justice; people cannot defer to their own sensitivity. The responses of hatred to the atheist (in the Tosefta) is not necessarily a hatred of a human being, but a hatred of an ideological ethics that remains grounded in pure inwardness, a rationality understandable by a person’s own cognitive powers. Marxism as an ethical system is to be despised, from this perspective, because it attempts to base the ethics of the Decalogue entirely on human cognition: “It is not atheism that can replace God, but a new godless religion such as Communism” (“Aseret ha-Dibrot,” 117).

In his own precise manner, Kieslowski’s opening film presents this ancient debate about motivation for all (kol) the episodes to follow. What is the natural motivation behind both Paweł’s father’s and his aunt’s beliefs, fidelities, trusts, and behaviors? The word laymor in Exodus 20:1 signifies acceptance by those who receive the Decalogue. The nature of this acknowledgment is precisely what Kiesłowski demands of his viewers when he has his characters and his scenes dramatize the conflicting motivations. Instead of seeing One as only depicting a conflict between scientific and religious beliefs, which is a more traditional understanding of the film, I argue that we should now see the first episode as dramatizing the ethical tension of responses to noncognitive, nonrational experiences and obligations as well as to cognitive, rational, mathematically calculated experiences—particularly through the camera’s intense focalization on facial responses of the natural father and aunt, the facial responses of the iconic Madonna mother (with her tears of wax), the facial response of the chess master to the father-son winning team, the facial response of a perplexed human to a
computer screen that is “ready” for something, and the facial responses of the mysterious man at the fire. As R. Soloveitchik claims, “God may be found in science, aesthetics, and morale, in crisis or in triumph” (“Aseret ha-Dibrot,” 116); we might add, in an aunt’s hug with her nephew. Even in an academic room, which ironically and sadly anticipates the father’s silent rage and inward struggles at the front of the church, the camera lingers on the responses of the father’s audience, and most intensely, on the young Paweł’s directorial responses of framing his father from different angles and perspectives (all occurring as the professor discusses aesthetic potentials for computers and the problem of translating what might be un-translatable). When searching for a source of human morality, a response to scientific order is not, at base, that much different from a response to beauty. Moreover, if we understand R. Soloveitchik’s interpretation of Rabbi Akiva, then as Kieslowski shows, human beings are fully capable of reasoning and killing, of cognitive rationality and immorality, of creating artificial systems of translations, computing, beliefs, and a felt sense of a divine gift in a human embrace. For Rabbi Akiva, though, the first way to stop murder is to submit to a force outside of oneself, to obey a divine decree that comes from outside human invention. Kieslowski films these philosophical differences to demand a response to it “all” from us, his film’s respondents.

From this perspective, one in which, as the Mekhilta underscores, there are not ten utterances, but a single utterance by God, the entire series of films relies on our initial response to the natural opening and to these first characters’ responsive and affective convictions and motivations. Kieslowski’s film moves us to a crucial realization: Ritual commandments cannot be separated from commonsensical ethical ones. Building in incremental intensity, the frozen (natural) water that cracks and the freezing water that flows beneath the icy surface—the opening and simultaneously the absent narrative center of the entire film, since we never see the moments of Paweł’s death in icy water—is also the frozen (spiritual) water that Paweł’s father puts to his head at the end of the film. Natural cosmic orders cannot be separated from socioeconomic orders, which cannot be separated from social justice, which cannot be separated from the motivation behind a response. I would even claim that Kieslowski is, ironically, at his clearest when he does not film the event of Paweł’s death: What better way to say to us that the film is about the responses to that event, from start, to middle, to end? Again, even the face of the watcher seen toward the start of the film—before we even see Paweł with his father—demands our response to a felt acknowledgment. Even without knowing ancient Talmudic
and halakhic disputes, Kieślowski films the utterly intense, even horrific, resolve of human beings’ responses to *cbok*. Do we, those of us watching in the audience, want to say “yes” or “no” to Kieślowski’s pronouncement?

I am God [tetragrammaton], your God [Elokekha], Who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves. (Exod. 20:2)

The next verse is often quoted as the first official saying in the biblical Decalogue. It might at first seem more familiar to Kieślowski’s critics, but the rabbinic exegesis will defamiliarize it by taking us to vastly different dimensions of divine expression and human conflicts, specifically, the relation between doubts and responses. The first word stresses the speaker’s ethos—*Anokhi* (meaning “I”)—by referring to a particular event, the exodus from Egypt and bondage, rather than to a universal emphasis on nature or genesis. Why, as classic Jewish commentators ask, does God not describe Himself as the Creator of the cosmos rather than as the Redeemer? Rashi provides multiple responses. First, he says, “taking you out of Egypt is sufficient reason for you to be subject to Me.” This interpretation agrees with that of Ibn Ezra, who “quoting Yehudah Halevi, says that the reason for this was that the Jews had not experienced Creation but had experienced the Exodus” (“Aseret ha-Dibrot,” 114–115). They needed to respond to their personal redeemer. This personal experience might also help to explain why Kieślowski stresses the extremely personal experiences of his characters. Unlike a philosopher or theologian, Kieślowski does not film an abstract philosophical treatise on the powers of creation. His characters live in the ethical conflicts and emotional turmoil of their personal, daily lives. One cannot quite relate to the Decalogue if it does not address the intimately felt, lived experiences of human beings who suffer, who are in bondage, who are enslaved.

Rashi augment this explanation by observing the strangeness of the word *Anokbi* (“I”). In terms of the Hebrew language, one must ask why God does not use the more standard Hebrew word for “I,” *Ani*. Here, R. Soloveitchik distinguishes the semantic valences of the two words for “I.” One would use *ani* when “I” is the subject of the sentence, but the “emphasis [of the sentence] is on the action” (“Aseret ha-Dibrot,” 115). One would use *anokbi* when one wants to proclaim and stress one’s very identity. The verse, in other words, has God proclaiming that his identity is God. Why? Because people at the time, claims Rashi, encountered different appearances of the divine. During the exodus, at the parting of the waters, God appears “as a mighty warrior,” but now, here at Mount Sinai, God appears “as an old man, full of mercy.” Out of concern that
the people would confusingly think that there are multiple divinities, God says “Anokhi”—it is I, the same God, the same identity. Crucially, what R. Soloveitchik claims we learn here is that “God’s actions differ . . . since actions are in response to different needs, to different situations” (Nor’ot ba’Rav 12:109). Since imitatio dei in rabbinic discourses demands the human imitation of divine characteristics, we need to learn degrees of change and appearances in response to different confrontations. That is, unlike a perception of God as an actor fixed in the same motion or appearance constantly, R. Soloveitchik’s interpretation shows how beings need to respond differently, to behave differently, depending on the situation and needs.24

It is precisely here (with God in both warrior and merciful guises), however, that our analysis brings us to a crucial difference between one of the film’s notions of God (and the human response to the divine) as expressed by Paweł’s aunt, and R. Soloveitchik’s emphasis on rabbinic Judaism’s conceptions of divine manifestations. After Paweł says that he feels love when embracing his aunt, his aunt says that that is where God is. This utterance by the aunt does not mandate that God is found exclusively in interhuman embraces, but her comment about God’s location or felt presence does appear to emphasize love more than anything else. This particularly Christian view does not correspond with R. Soloveitchik’s halakhic perspective. The divergence in the asymptotic relation I have created intensifies here. Namely, “Judaism, as a moral discipline, is not a homogenous discipline of love and compassion. Judaism is also very practical; it knows that man cannot protect himself with love alone” (“Asert ha-Dibrot,” 115). In other words, complex moral discipline is precisely what the opening of the Ten Commandments stresses. When we consider the notion of imitatio dei or when we seek God’s appearance in the world, we should understand that God assumes multiple guises on earth, at times a being who exacts punishment and justice, at times a being who is imbued with and expresses love and mercy.25 The translation, so to speak, depends on the situation’s responsible responses. The aunt’s notions and expressions of love and God are not necessarily wrong, but they are insufficient to express or depict the manifold nature of the divine. It is not the case that we should leave the film insisting that only Paweł’s father needs to add his sister’s faith to his own existence; it is the case, rather, that the sister also needs to add her brother’s understanding of the cosmos to her notion of God and love. In both cases, moments of violence and death would destroy any person’s conception of the divine if the divine only includes a human sense of love in the living embrace of two humans. Human beings “cannot protect [themselves] with love alone.”

24

25
Rashi does not leave us with just a focus on multiple responses and guises. He adds another interpretation, one that stresses difference in sound, voice, and direction. In turn, I argue, we can use his commentary to address the significant direction of technological sounds in the second half of One. The people at Sinai might have been confused about multiple identities of God due to His different actions and appearances (“Aseret ha-Dibrot,” 115). Thus, the Decalogue teaches people to resist a fixed position; as part of the injunction to imitate the divine, we must learn to adapt to needs and circumstances. In addition, claims Rashi, the people might have also been confused “because [they] heard many sounds [during the revelation], as it says ‘the sounds’ (Exodus 20:15) coming from four directions and from the heavens and earth” (Rashi on Exodus 20:2). Here, the potential doubt in the people’s responses addresses the relation between identity and difference: Because voices were coming from all directions—the word kolos in Exodus 20:15 is in plural—people might have inferred that there are many divinities. Hence, God announces “Anokhi”—I, with my unique identity—am the only God speaking. R. Soloveitchik claims that the multiple directions “demonstrate . . . the universality of Jewish law [which] is not bound nor confined to one area” (Nor’ot ha’Rav 12:111). Speaking in America and aware of the Diaspora, R. Soloveitchik posits that regardless of location, people must abide by identical commandments.

Whereas this interpretation explains the four directions, it does not account for the additional claim of two directions and voices “from heaven and earth.” For this reason, R. Soloveitchik shows a dialectic that, I argue, works effectively to explain Kiesłowski’s need to have both the sister and the father respond to Paweł, as well as his need to have Paweł’s father and sister respond, each in different locations and at different times, to screens (television and computer) and representations that point to the divine (the picture of the Pope and the artwork representing the Madonna). Additionally, it turns out to address the multiple sounds that play such crucial roles in the transformations of the father’s ethos and the narrative structure. God’s voice needs to come from above, or the heavens, to respond to people who wish to live the lives of saints, lives “in defiance of society” (Nor’ot ba’Rav 12:113), for Torah principles and an ethical existence. At the same time, God’s voice needs to come from the earth below to respond to people who live within society, in an earthly, carnal existence—people who do “not work to surrender nor withdraw from joys of this world” (Nor’ot ba’Rav 12:113). In other words, God does not only address the saintly life of the Pope in Irena’s picture; God also addresses those who toil in the
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frozen earth and water, those who need to light fires for warmth and for
heating water (which includes both Pawel and the mysterious man).

Thus, for R. Soloveitchik, when God announces “Anokhi/I am God
[tetragrammaton], your God,” God is asserting that there are multiple
ways for people to reach the divine. On the one hand, for example, one can
be a great scholar and academic, demanding the most from one’s intellect
in order to use one’s intellect to reach the divine. Indeed, one of R. So-
loveitchik’s major contributions to Jewish notions of imitatio dei (developed
extensively in Halakhic Man) is the obligation to imitate God’s creativity;
thus, R. Soloveitchik is a major advocate of advanced, intellectual creativ-
ity and self-creativity.26 One might even say that R. Soloveitchik’s heroic
paradigm for the typological halakhic person is the mathematician who
calculates an ideal system, who desires to bring the divine down to earth,
much more than the emotionally zealous religious figure who desires to
leave this natural existence and reach the divine. On the other hand, one
can approach the divine more experientially and emotionally, not just as
Pawel’s aunt suggests, but also as Pawel’s father does in the last scenes of
the film, in which the force of the film arrives not in the viewer’s clarity of
whether or not the father finds God or finds answers, but rather in the poi-
gnant approach of this human being who has been forced to acknowledge
a clear limitation of human existence. Kieslowski has us ponder an act of
rebellion (overturning the table, or even coming into the church at all) if
one does not believe at all in a divine transcendence. Kieslowski does not
show us that there is no atheist in a foxhole (the cliché of turning to God
in times of duress); in a more challenging way, he takes us on the inward
journey of the father’s range of responses.

Indeed, it is at this turning point in the film’s narrative, once the living
Pawel no longer appears in the film (though he will reappear on the taped
film shown on the television monitor at the end), that we should listen to
the sounds of the film. Kieslowski’s critics have brought much critical acu-
men to bear on the ink bottle and spreading ink, but what of the sounds the
father starts to hear while he tries to wash all the ink off his hands? From
this point until the father realizes it is Pawel who had died beneath the ice,
we hear the sounds of a plane, an ambulance, a helicopter: technological
sounds announcing a terrible revelation. This indeed might be the film
director’s own translation of the first two biblical verses immediately fol-
lowing the Decalogue in Exodus: “And all the people could see the sounds
[kolos] and the flames, the sound of the shofar and the smoking mountain;
the people saw and they moved and they stood from afar. They said to
Moses, ‘You speak to us and we shall hear; let God not speak to us lest
we die” (Exod. 20:15–16). The aesthetics of synesthesia (seeing sounds), the mixture of sense perceptions, is precisely what Kieslowski has us witness as both the start of the father’s recognition, and the heterogeneous, experiential, inward journey that the father endures for the rest of the film. Indeed, the rest of the narrative is structured as a response to terrible technological sounds that reverberate in, and confront, this parent’s very being. His changing facial expressions and speeds, his decisions to take the stairs or the elevator, his emotionally wrenching stare, are all responses to the mixed sounds and sights that announce a profound encounter with absolute limitation, not just a revelation. The long stretches of silence and haunting sounds from a wind instrument on the soundtrack not only contrast with the extensive use of logos by the father (not to mention his lecture on language) in the first half of the film, but set up the confrontation with the divine in the church.

Before I accentuate this notion of limitation in the film and in the biblical Decalogue further, we should ask how Exodus 20:2 might lend credence to this rabbinic emphasis on each person’s response to the divine, and the divine’s address to each individual. It turns out that the grammar of the verse provides potential support for such a claim. In Hebrew, the Decalogue in Exodus (and in Deuteronomy) has God use the singular “Elokekha” (your God); however, those commandments and phrases from the Decalogue that appear in Leviticus, starting in chapter 19, have God speak in plural “Elokeikhem” (your God). The grammatical difference stands out even more when one reads what God says after the Exodus Decalogue: “You have seen that from the heavens I have spoken” (Exod. 20:19). In Hebrew, “You have seen” is plural, yet the Decalogue is in the singular. Why? Basing himself partly on the Ramban’s exegesis of the verses, R. Soloveitchik reinterprets the Ten Commandments in terms of the classic conflict between an individual and a social group (the one and the many).27 A person should not assume that God only addresses the group of people in the plural. If an individual disobeys, the individual will be punished. Similar to the halakhic analysis of kol, the analysis here relies on the halakhic sense of “following the majority.” For R. Soloveitchik, one cannot rely on what the majority accomplishes. Every individual is unique and must observe the law “regardless of what the members of society do” (Nor’ot ba’Rav 12:120). The singular form of the Decalogue addresses each and every individual personally. For each respondent to Kieslowski’s film, the obligation addresses not the group of critics or academics; it matters not what the majority rules about the film. The personal response to the film is an integral part of its haunting power.
In addition, a rabbinic approach in the manner of R. Soloveitchik must also stress the strong force on limitations, on retraction and contraction. How does this emanate from the multidirectionality of divine voices, which complicates the relationship between diversity and unity? For R. Soloveitchik, God, omnipresent, contracts in order to create the revelation at Mount Sinai: “Just as God presents himself in both modes, so man must emulate him in both expression and in self limitation. Man is duty bound to manage his own moral law as modern man is inclined to do” (“Aseret ha-Dibrot,” 116). Is there a more effective response to the very first spoken words in Kieslowski’s film? Unlike critics who ignore the complicated and resonant beginnings of the film, again, the first spoken words by Pawel and his father present to us in quotidian, experiential terms, this exact conflict between human self-creation/expansion and human self-limitation/negation. The first words uttered by Pawel’s father are numbers: He is counting aloud his push-ups, a physical enactment of self-creation and expansion. Pawel announces clearly and nicely, “That’s my limit.” The boy recognizes and articulates his limitations. From this perspective, the film contains the narrative of the boy’s actualized limitations, including the literal embodiment of human finitude. The father confronts, and must respond to, a dramatic, horrific law of limitation that as a modern man he might have been too disinclined to apply up to that point.

This stress on singular, personal responses, though, is only part of the biblical emphasis. To account for the locations of “Your God” in the plural form, R. Soloveitchik argues that this plural grammatical number is also crucial, for it teaches us an ethics of responsibility, namely, one for others: “The plural form binds us all to one another” (“Aseret ha-Dibrot,” 116). In other words, introspection, repentance, and self-creation are all obligations, but too much introspection neglects the significance of the obligations each individual has to others. This distinction between group and individual comes forth powerfully in at least two scenes that contrast Pawel’s father with larger groups. One encounter occurs when Pawel’s father goes outside to test the ice on the lake personally. As he walks he encounters first the face of the mysterious man staring back at him (suggesting a potential epiphany, however quotidian it might be) and then “a nighttime gathering of silent men and women in front of a church (a wake, perhaps? A political gathering? Whatever it is, the occasion is solemn, and the people holding hands)” (Kickasola 173). While apt, Kickasola’s description misses a significant inference: At the very least, “people holding hands” indicates a group. Kieslowski has filmed Pawel’s father, the introspective, cognitive, modern man, encountering a group that could
provide a responsible response. No such response appears from the solitary father.

Another encounter that accentuates the stark contrast between the individuality of modern man—Pawel’s father—and the larger group appears when the camera films the utterly painful inward response by the many and one to Pawel’s dead body. While Kickasola astutely notes the juxtaposition between the group’s response to kneel, and the father’s refusal to kneel (173), I suggest that this reverential movement invokes the people’s awe-filled response at Mount Sinai (Exod. 20:15–16). I would argue that Paul Coates’s description here manages to express part of the scene’s significance: “The . . . piercing wind instrument breathes mystery and mortality . . . mournfully marking the fishing of Pawel’s body from the icy water as the crowd sinks to its knees to acknowledge the mysterium of the event.”

The critic’s language of “fishing” and “sinking” marks precisely the response of acknowledgment to the “mysterium.” Krzysztof’s face and actions wonderfully portray his encounter with the self’s limitation when confronting the mysterium of existence. He is still not ready to acknowledge any meaningful relation with a group (other than possibly his tzimtzum students, with whom he clearly holds a position of power). Dramatized before us, this threshold demands our own responses to the film. How will we respond to a nearly inexpressible exhibition of an ethical norm: Will we engage in tzimtzum, in contracting, in kneeling, or will we continue to count onwards, building up our bodies and minds (like the father does with his push-ups)? In what context might one response be more effective than the other?

This brings us to the last words of the second verse in Exodus 20: “Who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves.” Why are the last two words necessary (mi-beis avadim, from the house of slaves), and are they not implied in the previous phrase? First, R. Soloveitchik offers Rabbi Hirsch’s distinction between two types of slaves: a free individual who is sold into slavery, and an individual who is born into a family and heritage and tradition of slavery. The first individual knows to detest slavery and explicitly desires freedom. The second type of slave does not necessarily know what freedom means. It was not until these slaves suffered physical tortures that they cried out to God, but even then they did not truly understand freedom. Therefore, God says, in Exodus 20:2, according to R. Soloveitchik’s exposition of Rabbi Hirsch, “You never asked for freedom, because you did not know what freedom meant. Yet, I took you out of the house of bondage” (Nor’ot ha’Rav 12:133). This reading provides an additional insight as to why the Decalogue is addressed in a personal, expe-
riental manner rather than from a voice reminding the people exclusively of the narrative of creation in Genesis. It also announces a clearly political dimension to Kieslowski’s seemingly apolitical film. Do the Polish people reveal an awareness of their political state of existence? Are the people of this concrete complex asking for freedom from the current Polish state, for release from physical duress, for human acknowledgment, for clear answers? Is Kieslowski subtly suggesting that Poland is caught in generational bondage, or is he filming a free individual who is suddenly experiencing existential bondage? Here, too, the film’s respondents are obligated to provide their own responsible responses.

R. Soloveitchik, however, makes these questions more emotionally poignant and relevant to modern people, for he does not leave the verse alone with Rabbi Hirsch’s exegesis. Instead, he adds Rashi’s perspective to connect the verse to political torture, to totalitarian and Nazi regimes. According to Rashi, one can be a slave to the state or a slave to a private citizen. Whereas an individual master might be slightly generous, inclined to practice ethical laws, and merciful, according to R. Soloveitchik, the state, state officials, state taskmasters, “are generally sadists, murderers, and criminals, who find joy in torturing people” (Nor’ot ha’Rav 12:133–134). The correspondences to Poland’s history are an intrinsic part of Kieslowski’s implicit vision for us to acknowledge and to which we must respond.

Before we leave the second verse (Exod. 20:2) and its implied pronouncements concerning bondage and suffering, as well as personal relationships, let us focus on one more word to help address the film’s famous scene with the portrait of the Madonna: botzeitikha, which means “who took you out” (of the land of Egypt from the house of slaves). According to traditional rabbinic sources, this can be translated syntactically to mean: “I [God] have gone out with you from the land of Egypt. We both were oppressed. We both were in bondage. We both gained freedom. This singular relationship which binds [God] with man, within one fellowship, is a result not of creation [hence, verse two does not refer to God the creator of the cosmos]” (Nor’ot ha’Rav 12:48), but of redemption and freedom from Egyptian bondage and slavery. God was, in this figurative sense, in bondage with the people, feeling and experiencing the suffering, humiliation, pain, and degradation right alongside each person. Indeed, this reading links back to the notion of tzimtzum or contraction. Based on the Ramban’s exegesis, R. Soloveitchik asserts that God “contracts,” as it were, to be—in suffering, in oppression, in bondage— with the individuals who are unaware of the meaning of freedom (Nor’ot ha’Rav 12:50).
Perhaps the most understudied response in the film, one that aptly demonstrates the rabbinic tradition of God’s Transcendent Presence, is the explicit framing device of the aunt’s facial response. Critics tend to use Catholic and Protestant frameworks to focus on the father’s response. For Haltof, Krzysztof “in frustration purposely destroys the makeshift altar with the icon of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa (Matka Boska Częstochowska) . . . The dripping wax forms a few ‘tears’ on the Madonna’s face and she looks as if she is crying” (83) (Figure 3–2). For Coates, the “miracle of the Weeping Virgin is both bitterly and poignantly ironic: her hot tears are wax, and it is really the father who weeps” (96). Kickasola suggests, “Perhaps the Madonna does cry, symmetrical with the tears of Theophanes [the mysterious man/angel figure]: a film beginning and ending in divine grief. Such would be the Catholic perspective; a Protestant might reflect Coates’s interpretation: she could not protect the child because ‘perhaps she is mere mortal.’ Garbowski suggests the tears are not for Paweł, who now has ‘all the answers to his innocent questions,’ but rather for Krzysztof, ‘the one who is most in pain’” (173–174). But what would a response informed by a rabbinic tradition look like? While the Madonna herself would not be part of the picture, Kiesłowski’s perfectly ambiguous, magically realistic, depiction of wax and tears, responds nearly directly to the rabbinic tradition that has God “contract” to be with those who suffer physical, metaphysical, social, familial, and personal devastation and abrupt, utter, unexpected duress, finitude, and limitation. Moreover, God is not simply with those who suffer; God “contracts” for those others. Exodus 20:2 expresses God’s words as utterances signified by the Redeemer who also joined the people to gain freedom. The wax tears are
perhaps the limit-test of what Kieślowski can intimate through filmic representation of the unrepresentable. It is not necessarily a deity crying tears of grief over “His Creation affected by the Fall” (Kickasola 174). It is not the relation to Genesis here; it is the personal relationship experienced by those who suffer now, in their daily lives. In addition, whereas Kickasola presents a persuasive argument for connecting the tears to Kiesłowski’s respondents, I would further develop this claim. Transcendence is with and for us in suffering, but the divine commands us to respond. We, the respondents, should perform an act of imitatio dei by contracting and creating ourselves. Therefore, unlike Kickasola’s question, which asks the Divine for justification—“Why haven’t you done anything about this?” (174)—my own question tries to emulate a contraction of self: Why have I (not “you”) not done anything about this? What can I do for the other who suffers?

Kieślowski accentuates the creation of mechanisms that might mollify other people’s suffering, from Pawel’s comments about helping others to the father’s technological advances, which Pawel proudly displays to his aunt. Along with R. Soloveitchik, Kieślowski asks us to consider that the “logos can easily be stretched in various directions. . . . Without chok, every social and moral law can be rationalized away” (Shapiro, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat ha-Omer and Shavu’ot, 238). A responsible ethical response demands that one’s obligation to respond emanates from a decree beyond one’s own rationalized conscience. Before one “rationalizes away” rituals and the “grandeur of religion [which] lies in its mysterium tremendum, its magnitude, and its ultimate incomprehensibility” (“Sacred and Profane,” 6), one might achieve more by limiting oneself, acknowledging the chok that cannot be rationalized away.

“Religion . . . deepens the problems [of life] but never intends to solve them,” writes R. Soloveitchik (“Sacred and Profane,” 6). Kieślowski might indeed be a major religious filmmaker who seeks to deepen the problems of life and what we experience as incomprehensible. To redeem those who are slaves—to the state, to an individual human master, to a computer, to oneself—the director and the Orthodox rabbi use different expressions and traditions to articulate how and why people respond to the Decalogue’s principles. If we maintain a fundamental division between the mundane and the sacred, we might continue our present, agonizingly inward journey, a movement that fails to limit constructively one’s ego or to create oneself. Indeed, as Kiesłowski states, we have already “become too egotistic, too much in love with ourselves and our needs, and it’s as if everybody else has somehow disappeared into the background” (KK, 145).
NOTES


1. Halakha, often defined as the ideal normative legal system of Judaism, can refer to the entirety of Jewish law, or the legal decision after a discussion, or one particular law. Yet, for Rabbi Soloveitchik such definitions are too static and atemporal; Halakha “is best understood as a mode of thinking, a way of interpreting man and his environment” (Shiurei HaRav, 130). Etymologically, “Halakha” comes from “halakh,” going, walking, or being underway.


7. Out of respect to the traditions I am working with, I intentionally print “Elokim” with a “k” rather than with (the more appropriate, at least phonetically) “h.”

8. R. Soloveitchik provides examples of commandments to be observed only when “the conditions specified are present,” whose fulfillment is voluntary: If I choose not to have a doorframe, I will not be punished if I do not put a mezuzah on my doorpost (Nor’ot ha-Rav 5:53); if “one wants eggs from a nest, he must first send the mother away” (“Aseret ha-Dibrot,” Shiur HaRav 112).

9. The exact date of the Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael is unknown, though Jewish tradition estimates its redaction around the second or third century CE.

10. The root of Elokim (aleph-lamed) “always suggests power or might” and the tetragrammaton root (heh-vav-heh) “means ‘existence’” (Shapiro 227). The latter signifies mercy; Elokim signifies judgment. God’s “immanence [is] represented by Elokim, and His transcendence [is] represented by [the tetragrammaton]” (Shapiro 228).

11. Natural law signifies laws that make nature what it is and what it does (physics, mathematics), not the philosophical discussion of the “natural law” of cultures.


13. Unlike Elokim, the tetragrammaton addresses not the natural but the metaphysical person. In other words, the latter term is used with commandments that do not save “natural society from disintegration, but . . . raise natural society to [a] committed covenantal community. Those mitzvos [commandments such as shofar or not eating the fat or blood of animals] hallow and redeem the human spiritual personality” (Nor’ot ba-Rav 5:12–13).

14. In the second chapter of Genesis, when a closer relationship develops between God and humans, the tetragrammaton and Elokim are both used.

15. Critics often focus on the image of the dead dog when they discuss the foreboding opening (see Haltof 82). This focus ignores Kieslowski’s subtle focus on animals. In fact, as Annette Insdorf notes in a parenthetical statement, “Pawel’s pigeon suggests danger: spots of blood can be glimpsed on its side.” Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski (New York: Miramax Books, 1999), 74. Further references to Insdorf’s work are cited in the text.

16. There are also sounds of a dog in the background noises during the scene at the lake when Pawel’s father (and the crowd of people) await the
news, but the animal certainly does not get any clear time on screen. For Insdorf, even the mysterious man played by Artur Barcis “is part of this landscape, the furry collar of his coat adding a primitive, animal look” (73).

17. Many Tannaitic texts were not included in the Mishnah. One such “supplementary” text is called a Tosefta.

18. Here I think Santilli is right to underscore what might be one standard critical reception of Kieslowski’s work: “All ten films of The Decalogue are set in the same massive apartment complex in Warsaw at a time when Polish society was still suffering from the spiritual and economic deprivations of communist rule” (149).

19. Because I focus solely on the first two verses of Exodus 20, this is not the place to address R. Soloveitchik’s claims about communism. For those who wish to embark on such an enterprise, they might note that the third verse states, “You shall have no other Gods before Me.” According to R. Soloveitchik, “We must not think that avoda zara (idolatry) is limited to idol worship. Whenever anything that is not God is given an absolute value, we have avoda zara. . . . [If] Jews worship avoda zara, it will betray them. One modern example of this is Communism. Many Jews worshipped Communism. But Russia later betrayed them and all Jews. ‘Al Panai’ (‘before my face’). Onkelos translates this as ‘bar mene’ (‘to replace Me,’ ‘before Me’). Interestingly, there are many injunctions against idol worship, but none against atheism. When man revolts against God, he may think himself free; but soon, even he will build his own idol. It is not atheism that can replace God, but a new godless religion such as Communism” (“Aseret ha-Dibrot,” Shiurei HaRav 117).

20. Here R. Soloveitchik relies on his understanding of the halakhic system to state that if it were up to him, he would “rule as Rabbi Akiva whenever he disagrees with one of his contemporaries, but not when he disagrees with many of his contemporaries” (Nor’ot ha-Rav 5:41).

21. Kieslowski underscores the revelatory resonance of the computer’s “ready” and the human responses by changing the usual computer prompt of “ready” to include the biblical “I am” in the English onscreen prompt “I am ready” (thus echoing God’s response to Moses in Exodus). If the father (and perhaps the son) thinks he can store Paweł’s biological mother in the computer’s memory (which the aunt shows, with the question about the mother’s dreams, is quite insufficient a notion), then after Paweł’s death, the computer may be “ready” to store the son as well. From this perspective, the father’s poignant response to the computer at the end includes a fundamental questioning of his beliefs in computers, memory, and human identity.

22. “Why, after all, was it necessary at this moment to refer to ‘what I did to Egypt?’ The answer: ‘From the viewpoint of Elokim, all the miracles
which transpired in Mitzrayim [Egypt] could not have taken place.’ In
Elokim’s relationship with the world, ‘there is no departure from the laws of
nature. Not a single particle will act in violation of its natural law’ (Shapiro,
*Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat ha-Omer and Shavu’ot*, 234). This
explains why, when God mentions his role as Redeemer from the house of
bondage, the name of God as the tetragrammaton appears.

23. Ibn Ezra (Abraham) (1089–1164) was a poet, philosopher, grammar-
ian, and biblical commentator. Judah Halevi (c. 1070–1141) is one of the
great Hebrew poets and philosophers, especially famous for his theological
and philosophical work, the *Kuzari*.

24. This rabbinic notion of multiple appearances stands in stark contrast
to the stereotypical perception of God in Hebrew Scripture. On this note,
Kiesłowski and R. Soloveitchik are worldviews apart. Kiesłowski admits that
he tends to consider “the God of the Old Testament [to be] a demanding,
cruel God; a God who doesn’t forgive . . . [who] leaves us a lot of freedom
and responsibility, observes how we use it and then rewards or punishes,
and there’s no appeal or forgiveness. . . . And that’s what a point of reference
must be, especially for people like me, who are weak, who are looking for
something, who don’t know.” Krzysztof Kiesłowski, *Kiesłowski on Kiesłowski*,
ed. Danusia Stok (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 149. This passage
almost sounds as if Kiesłowski is commenting on the differences between
Elokim and the tetragrammaton. It suggests that Kiesłowski the filmmaker
is a much more sophisticated thinker than Kiesłowski the essay writer. Such
stereotypical thinking is precisely what *One* forces respondents to question.
Further references to *Kiesłowski on Kiesłowski* are cited in the text using the
abbreviation *KK*.

25. The notion of God the merciful father is based in part on the lan-
guage used in Exodus 24:10 (see Rashi on Exodus 20:2). If one etymologi-
cal root of the aunt’s name is the Greek *eirênikos*, from *eirêne* (peace), then
Kiesłowski might move closer to R. Soloveitchik’s position. Irena, being
irenic, appears to be full of peace and conciliation when she is with the live
Pawel, but love alone might not be enough to create lasting peace. Perhaps
the implication here is that, sometimes, for people to achieve peace, people
must become militant, but without losing mercy and love.

26. The usual paradigm for self-creativity, in R. Soloveitchik’s thought, is
the act of repentance.

27. Nachmanides (1194–1270), known by the acronym Ramban (Rabbi
Moshe ben Nahman), was a classic halakhic, biblical, and Talmudic scholar.

28. *Lucid Dreams: The Films of Krzysztof Kiesłowski*, ed. Paul Coates (Trow-
bridge, UK: Flicks Books, 1999), 95. Further references are cited in the text.
29. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) was one of the great rabbinic leaders in Germany during the nineteenth century.

30. Coates nicely relates the Madonna’s tears to Paweł’s mother’s absence. However, this point should not obscure Kieślowski’s depiction of Paweł’s aunt crying at the start and at the end of the film. She frames, and is framed by, the screen.


32. In this regard, respondents can acknowledge the film’s earlier scenes of joy between Paweł and his aunt as he uses the computer to lock the door and turn on the water.