

## The Halakhic Rebbe

It is a scene not likely to be repeated for a long time to come: a large assembly hall with several thousand people in attendance— young and old, men and women, learned rabbis and scholars, members of the academic community, Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. They listen intently. Tape recorders whir, pencils take rapid notes.

On the podium is a tall, lean, gray-bearded figure delivering a *shiur*/lecture on the fine points of *halakha* and Jewish thought. His subject is complex and subtle, but he will hold his diverse audience in thrall for two to three hours.

The speaker is Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a *rosh yeshiva* enigmatic yet open, charismatic yet unaffected, distant yet accessible. Born in Poland in 1903, scion of several generations of world-famous Talmudic luminaries, Rav Soloveitchik was one of the preeminent and most intriguing Torah personalities of the twentieth century, a *mitnaged's mitnaged* with a taste for *hasidut*, an analytic philosopher with a gift for the poetic.

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When the mysterious resurrection of American Orthodoxy in the twentieth century is recorded by historians, they will give due recognition to the various great *roshei yeshiva* and hasidic *rebbeim* who, together, with the newly arrived immigrant survivors of World War II, brought with them the stubbornness and the vision which were the catalysts for the renewal of Torah in America. The schools they founded, the *yeshivot* they nurtured, the attitude of self-confidence and pride which they created, the personal examples that they set—all gave birth to the committed corps of Jews who are the vanguard of today's renewed Orthodox Judaism.

At the same time, the historians will have to note a more subtle truth: that it was the unique approach and background of a *rosh yeshiva* like Rav Soloveitchik that provided the intellectual framework that was uniquely suited to present classical Judaism to twentieth century men and women. More than any other religious leader, he was able to demonstrate to a wide audience the intellectual rigor and discipline of *halakha* as well as the pro-

found world-view inherent in the minutiae of the daily halakhic regimen—a world-view which addresses itself not only to the mind but also to the troubled heart and soul of the lonely modern man.

This demonstration of the universality of Torah, presented with such clarity and passion, also contributed immeasurably to the morale of an Orthodox community which, in mid-century, was being buffeted on all sides and was beset with self-doubt and dispiriting retreats on many fronts.

In particular did he have a major impact on the American-trained Orthodox rabbinate. Not all of them studied under him at *Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzhak Elhanan*/Yeshiva University, but they all benefited directly from the spiritual support and inspiration which his teaching provided at a critical juncture in American Jewish history. The undersigned, not a student at Yeshiva University, can directly attest to this. Not only did Rav Soloveitchik help keep at bay those debilitating forces of modernity that threatened to overwhelm and drown the fledgling Orthodox; he was also a major architect of the bridge upon which many marginal Jews were able to return to the tradition.

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That he was able to touch the contemporary soul was in great measure due to his recurring themes. The motif of alienation is sounded regularly in his work. We hear of “the dark night of the soul”; the meaning of death and mourning in human life; loneliness (prayer as a dialogue between the lonely Jew and the lonely God); defeat, despair, retreat and anguish; the absurdity of existence without God: the entire lexicon of contemporary existential thought. Whether it be in the moving eulogy for the Talner Rebbetzin or a theoretical excursus into the realm of spiritual authority, the listener is caught up short by the recognition of his own inchoate vexations and anxieties. The message is clear: it is only the saving quality of Torah and halakha which makes it possible for dust-and-ashes man, whose life without God is inherently tragic and whose physical end is in the grave, to reach out confidently to the King of Kings.

Rav Soloveitchik's ability to strike responsive chords within his listeners was in great measure due to his unique gift for language. Whether he spoke in his native Yiddish or in his adopted

English, his use of words was at once precise and poetic. His great intellect was expressed in a corresponding gift of articulation and communication. This fusion of rigorous thought and lyrical language is at the heart of Rav Soloveitchik's power, and made him a teacher par excellence, both on the public platform and in the confines of a classroom. In fact, he often described himself not as a philosopher or professor, but as a *rebbe* and a teacher.

In the era of the seven-word-sound-bite-and-on-to-the-next-commercial, the very idea of an audience sitting entranced for several hours at an arcane lecture is astounding. On the lecture platform, he was a study in the use of voice, gesture, inflection, pathos, humor—all done without artifice and guile. Although he crafted his lectures meticulously, rewriting and editing mercilessly, his talks were marked by a deep passion, by a spontaneous, incisive wit, by questions to the audience—particularly an audience of rabbis—which were not simply rhetorical, but to which he expected answers from his listeners; by an affect and emotion which did not hesitate to bare his personal life and upbringing. He was a consummate platform teacher.

Perhaps most striking about Rav Soloveitchik was his independent and innovative persona. He once wrote that he had

a liking for pioneers, for experimenters, for people who do not follow the crowd. I have always admired the first ones, the beginners, the originators. Even in my *derashot* I prefer to speak about those who defied public opinion, disregarded mockery and ridicule, and blazed new trails leading men to God.\*

He was a traditional *rosh yeshiva* with a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin; a brilliant Talmudic authority who was *au courant* with contemporary thought; a preeminent authority on Maimonides who also was familiar with Kant and with Kierkegaard. Deeply religious, he was the classic *rebbe*, giving regular *shiurim* in Talmud and relentlessly teaching his students the underlying logical core of halakhic discourse. But, perhaps symbolic of the maverick within him, he eschewed the traditional garb of the *rosh yeshiva*: the *kapote* and the black hat or Homburg. While constantly upholding the supremacy of

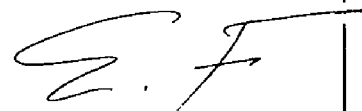
\* *Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Memorial Volume*, ed. Leo Landman (N.Y., 1980) p. 338.

Torah learning in all its manifestations, and while emphasizing the strict, disciplined, and uncompromising allegiance to the totality of halakhic living, he did not hesitate to call upon the resources of secular thought whenever they could undergird or clarify his message.

It was because of this attempt to create a symbiosis between the classic world of Torah and the world of contemporary thought that he was occasionally viewed askance by the mainstream world of *yeshivot*. They recognized his formidable genius and scholarship—one great *rosh yeshiva* once told this writer that those who carped at him “do not come close to him in learning and do not understand him at all”—but they were skeptical about his attempts to apotheosize the secular into the sacred.

His life was precisely the epitome of the religious pioneers he so admired. Shunning publicity, unconcerned with what others might think of him, authentically humble before God and man, he blazed new trails in the understanding of every aspect of Torah and in the application of that understanding to the modern world.

Rav Soloveitchik was many things: a *rosh yeshiva*, a *rebbe*, a halakhic decisor, a *ba'al mahshava*, a philosopher, an orator. In each of these he was extraordinary. But over and above all else, he was a genuinely religious personality. For him, Torah and halakha were not abstractions nor platforms for exciting intellectual gymnastics. They were not philosophy or mathematics or physics, all of which he was fond of citing, but all of which were for him merely subjects for study. Torah and halakha were not intellectual subjects, but life itself, the voice through which the soul of Israel speaks, and the prism through which the God of Israel is apprehended.



EMANUEL FELDMAN