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## THE RAV: ON ZIONISM, UNIVERSALISM AND FEMINISM

**R**av Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man* ends with the following paragraph:

These are some of the traits of Halakhic Man. Much more than I have written here is imprinted in his consciousness. This essay is but a patchwork of scattered reflections, a haphazard collection of fragmentary observations, an incomplete sketch of but a few of Halakhic Man's features. It is devoid of scientific precision, of substantive and stylistic clarity. Indeed, it is an indifferent piece of work. But it is revealed and known before Him who created the world, that my sole intention was to defend the honor of the halakha and halakhic men, for both it and they have oftentimes been attacked by those who have not penetrated into the essence of halakha and have failed to understand the halakhic personality. And if I have erred, may God, in His goodness, forgive me.<sup>1</sup>

Who are these people who attack the halakha because they have not "penetrated" its essence and have "failed to understand the halakhic personality"? Why, indeed, did the Rav *zt"l*, write *Halakhic Man*?

Rabbi Moshe Meiselman asserts that the Rav defended the halakha from those who viewed it as "primitive", and who did not appreciate the intellectual sophistication of the halakhic system. The "goal of . . . his classic essay *Halakhic Man*", according to R. Meiselman, was to defend the halakha from its detractors.<sup>2</sup>

In the opinion of this writer, however, *Halakhic Man* was written not only to defend the halakhic system from those who were so enamored by modernity that they were willing to throw the entire halakhic corpus into the ocean. The Rav believed that *Halakhic Man* was misunderstood even by those who were loyal to halakha and lived according

to its dictates. He also felt the need to explain the halakha against misunderstanding by those, who in their loyalty to traditional piety, encumbered it with layers of non-halakhic baggage which, with the best of intentions, ultimately can lead to its falsification.

Once my father entered the synagogue on *Rosh Hashana*, late in the afternoon, after the regular prayers were over and found me reciting *Psalms* with the congregation. He took away my Psalm book and handed me a copy of the tractate *Rosh Hashana*. “If you wish to serve the Creator at this moment, better study the laws pertaining to the festival.”<sup>3</sup>

A person reciting *Tehillim* on *Rosh Hashana* is certainly not a heretic. But to Rav Moshe, this act of “*frumkeit*” falls short of *limmud Torah*. “If you wish to serve the Creator . . . study.”

This perspective has its roots in the classical Lithuanian mitnagdic opposition to *hasidut* and in what mitnagdic leaders felt was a piety not rooted in learning, a piety that becomes ritualized and devoid of any spiritual significance. This is illustrated by a story told of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. He once observed a person who while performing the *mitsva* of *netilat yadayim*, followed the advice of *Shulhan Arukh* not to be parsimonious with the water. When R. Yisrael Salanter saw the abundance with which that person used the water, he remarked, “It is true the *Shulhan Arukh* requires ample water for the performance of the *mitsva*. But in one’s zeal to perform the *mitsva* of *netilat yadayim*, one should not forget the poor maid servant who has “to *shlep*” this water from the well to the house.”<sup>4</sup>

While the position of the Rav towards the musar movement is ambivalent, there is a point of contact—the stress on *hesed*. In fact, according to the Rav, the uniqueness of the halakhic personality is expressed in *hesed*. Hence an act that *prima facie* seems laudable and pious, but is devoid of *hesed*, is in reality a distortion of the halakha itself. An act may seem laudable and still distort the halakhic experience.

Even those moments in life that demand an outpouring of emotion, such as the calamity of death, the joy of marriage, the festivity of *Yom Tov*, must, according to the Rav be regulated by halakhic norms. Excesses, “even for the sake of piety”, were viewed by the Rav as an aberration.<sup>5</sup>

It is related that a hasidic rebbe was present with R. Yitzhak Ze’ev Soloveitchik *zt”l* during a *shiur* given by the Brisker Rav on Hanuka afternoon. When the time came to light the candles, the Brisker Rav interrupted the *shiur*, got up, lit the Hanuka candles and continued

with the *shiur*. The hasidic rebbe was amazed. “No *Vibi No’am* seven times, no *Ranenu Tsadikim* three times, no *Maoz Tsur*.” “It must be,” the rebbe continued, “that in Brisk, all that matters, all that is important is the pure halakha. The pure, unadulterated halakha takes care of all preparations. The simple halakhic obligation is so demanding, creates such a reality, that one needs no other reinforcements.”<sup>6</sup>

Just as halakha loses its authenticity by being psychologized or historicized, so too, the halakha loses its authenticity by being pietized.<sup>7</sup> Even well meaning, genuine and innocent piety can at times, distort and falsify halakha. The genuine Halakhic Man will inveigh against such a distortion.

In the words of the Rav,

Halakhic Man will not be overly lenient; but at the same time he will not be overly strict. The truth will call into account those who distort it, be they extreme rigorists or extreme permissivists.<sup>8</sup>

When the halakha is invoked, it must be done with precision, rigor and without falsification.

R. Moshe Meiselman, in his article in *Tradition*,<sup>9</sup> discusses the views of the Rav on a number of controversial issues such as Zionism and Feminism. R. Meiselman is responding to the public’s perception of the Rav as a person who affirmed and lived in both the worlds of Torah and *hokhma*. He sets out to correct the public’s perception of the Rav as affirming Zionism and *Medinat Yisrael* and that he embraced the totality, not only of the Jewish experience but also of the universal experience. “Some people have portrayed the Rav as the universal man deeply concerned with the universal moral and social issues of the day,”<sup>10</sup> says R. Meiselman disapprovingly. This perception of the Rav as a liberal, as a non-parochial type *Rosh Yeshiva* disturbs R. Meiselman, and he feels impelled to say *lo hayu devarim me’olam*.

Actually R. Meiselman makes a few claims about the Rav’s positions which, if correct, give us a totally different portrait of the Rav than the one we know.

His basic position is that the Rav was no different from his contemporary *rashai yeshiva*. The Rav’s goals for American Jewry, though mitigated by tactical considerations, were the same as those of Rav Aharon Kotler *zt”l*.<sup>11</sup> R. Meiselman also insists that the Rav “in all his concerns was exceedingly parochial”.<sup>12</sup> He further states that the Rav “vigorously opposed all activism for Soviet Jewry”.<sup>13</sup> “I do not believe,” continues R. Meiselman, “that one can find a single instance where the Rav was

involved in any of the universal issues of his day”.<sup>14</sup> Hence, obviously “within this context”, the Rav opposed all changes proposed by Feminists.

R. Meiselman makes one more claim. The Rav’s views on Zionism and *Medinat Yisrael* were the same as those of his uncle, the Brisker Rav *zt”l*. R. Meiselman states:

In his eulogy for his uncle, Rav Yitzhak Ze’ev Soloveitchik (the Brisker Rav) published subsequently under the title *Ma Dodekh MiDod*, the Rav said that whereas a secular Jewish government in Israel does not fit into any halakhic categories, it is religiously irrelevant. This was not just a formulation of his uncle’s position, but it was his as well. This is the essential theme of his essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*, in which he states clearly that the importance of the State of Israel has to be evaluated in exclusively pragmatic terms.<sup>15</sup>

I believe, and will show, that R. Meiselman is incorrect in all of these assertions. Still we must come to terms with R. Meiselman’s arguments.

R. Meiselman uses two arguments to support his version of who the Rav really was. First he argues from relationship.

I write these lines not only from the perspective of a close disciple, but also from that of one who was privileged to be part of his family and household and who was able to know him, speak to him and learn from him as only a family member can.<sup>16</sup>

As a member of the Rav’s family, R. Meiselman contends that he was privy to information that others were lacking. By virtue of this relationship, he could interpret not only the Rav’s words, but also the Rav’s nuances. He learned not only from the Rav’s talk but also from the Rav’s silence.

Had R. Meiselman limited himself to such an argument, there would be little basis upon which to respond. Only a family member equally close could respond with any authority.

But R. Meiselman does not stop here. He realizes that the widespread perception of the Rav as different from his contemporaries cannot be easily dismissed. The Rav differed from them in dress, in language, in mode of communication, in his frames of reference and, seemingly, in his policy goals for American Jewry. R. Meiselman must account for these obvious differences.

He does so by positing the following thesis:

In many senses, the Rav viewed his task as that of a minimalist. He felt that to save the future of Torah, one had to identify that which was minimally permissible and insure that this minimal position was accept-

able, both intellectually and practically, to as many people as possible. To demand a maximal position from the general public at that time would push Judaism, in his words, from the *reshut ha-rabbim* to the *reshut ha-yahid*, from the public domain to the private domain.<sup>17</sup>

According to R. Meiselman, the Rav used a strategic ploy to allow time for his real agenda to triumph. When that time would come, the Rav would emerge with his maximalist position for American Jewry which, as noted before, was no different from that of the contemporary *rashei yeshiva*, such as Rav Aharon Kotler *zt"l*.<sup>18</sup>

To assert that the Rav's position for the majority of his tenure was merely instrumental and strategic cannot be supported by the Rav's own words, his actions or for that matter by the halakhic positions, the *pesakim* that the Rav rendered on the important issues in his days.

For example, Rabbi Louis Bernstein *zt"l*, in his history of the Rabbinical Council of America, relates how and when the Rav was a *mahmir*. The Rav does not allow a *shetar mekhira* for Shabbat. The Rav reiterated his stand on *shetarei mekhira* at many of his *shiurim*. He was even challenged from the audience about the fact that he is more of a *mahmir* than R. Hayyim Zanter, author of the *Divrei Hayyim*. The Rav did not yield and indeed, the Rabbinical Council of America never allowed its members to use a *shetar mekhira* for Shabbat.<sup>19</sup> This *humra* position was not issued at a time of Orthodox ascendancy. It was issued at a time when sociologists predicted the demise of Orthodoxy. Is this the work of a minimalist?

Likewise, the battle for *kedushat bet ha-keneset*, where the Rav's commanding voice was so dominant, was fought before Orthodoxy turned the corner. And the Rav, true to his fashion, did not base his position on a minimalist-maximalist matrix which, as we shall see, was not his style. Rather, the Rav based his position only on halakhic justification. Because there was no halakhic justification for a synagogue without a *mehitsa*, the Rav declared boldly, honestly and courageously, it was better to forfeit the *mitsva* of *shofar* on *Rosh Hashana* than to worship in a synagogue devoid of sanctity.<sup>20</sup> Is this the position of a minimalist?

Furthermore his stand on Christian/Jewish dialogue was clearly not that of a minimalist. When the issue first arose in the early 1960's and the Jewish community was invited to send representatives to the Vatican II Council, there was a strong inclination on the part of the established Jewish community to accept the invitation. As one observer put it, the "inclination" was not just to go but to "run".<sup>21</sup> The Rav, however, felt

that these religious dialogues were but a ruse, a call to conversion. He organized a strong opposition. In public addresses and in his essay "Confrontation" published in *Tradition*,<sup>22</sup> the Rav outlined the theoretical basis for his opposition to these ecumenical dialogues. Except, perhaps, for Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, *zt"l*, few voices supported the Rav.<sup>23</sup> But the Rav was undaunted. Ultimately, his position prevailed in the Orthodox community. But it is important to remember that this position was taken at a time when Orthodoxy was still manning the barricades. Again, the Rav did not act as a minimalist.

Let us now turn to R. Meiselman's understanding of the Rav's positions vis-à-vis *Medinat Yisrael* and Zionism. As stated above, R. Meiselman asserts that the Rav's position was indistinguishable from that of his uncle, the Brisker Rav, *zt"l*. This assertion is not a new one. "In theory", argues Michael Rosenak, Rav Soloveitchik is closer to his uncle, Harav Yitzhak Ze'ev Soloveitchik, than one would expect.<sup>24</sup> But Rosenak makes this assertion tentatively. He realizes the *biddush* of this assertion. R. Meiselman has no doubts or qualifications. He is absolutely certain that the Rav was not a Zionist. So emphatic is R. Meiselman in his view that he expresses amazement and is "puzzled" by the fact that *Kol Dodi Dofek*, the essay many believe is the Rav's classic statement on Zionism, was reprinted and disseminated by *Mizrachi* and that they "use it as a text in their school system".<sup>25</sup>

Let us see what the Rav said and also where he stated his positions. In the 1950's and 1960's, *Mizrachi-Hapoel Mizrahi* Religious Zionists of America were at the zenith of their power and influence on the American Jewish scene. Their annual conventions attracted thousands. Particularly well-attended were the sessions addressed by the Rav *zt"l*. These addresses were major expositions of religious Zionist ideology. We are fortunate that we have those addresses in print.<sup>26</sup>

So let us examine the record. R. Meiselman asserts that it was the Rav's position that "a secular Jewish government in Israel does not fit into any halakhic categories, and is religiously irrelevant".<sup>27</sup>

In *The Rav Speaks*, he discusses the contribution of *Mizrachi* to the *mitsva* of settling *Eretz Yisrael*. He says,

What have we contributed that is novel to the *mitzvah* of settling *Eretz Yisrael*? First, we were the first to explain that the establishment of the State has halakhic significance, since by its means we shall be able to fulfill the *mitzvah* of possessing and settling it. We said, this *mitzvah* is fulfilled not only by building up the country economically, but also by our sovereignty there. The existence of the State of Israel and the fact that

Jews and not Englishmen determine *aliya*; that Jews and not Arabs are the political masters in the country; and that a Jewish government, police force and army exist, is the greatest possible fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of settling in *Eretz Yisrael*. Let us not forget that this *mitzvah* stems from the Biblical decree: “And ye shall drive out the inhabitants of the lands, and dwell therein” (*Num.* 33:53), and this is in fact driving them out and inhabiting it. To drive out means conquest, governmental rule. Dwelling therein means economic restoration. These two activities are the twin bases for the fulfillment of the *mitzvah*.

Nahmanides long ago formulated the truth that political sovereignty in *Eretz Yisrael* is the fundamental criterion of possession and habitation. “For we are enjoined to possess the land which God gave to our forbears . . . and not forsake it in the hands of others of the peoples, or in desolation. And I say that the *mitzvah* of which the Sages speak with such hyperbole, i.e. living in *Eretz Yisrael*, is all part of the positive precept commending us to possess the land and dwell therein. It is impossible to understand Nahmanides otherwise. Our movement understood this and welcomed the State’s existence as a fundamental religious value within our scale of values.

True, we are not always happy with certain actions and tactics of the government. But this does not detract from the importance of the State of Israel as the instrument for the realization of possessing the land. We know that the government is not itself the State. Governments come and governments go, rulers come and rulers go, but the land—and the State, we hope to God—remain forever!

Only our movement expressed itself unequivocally for the State of Israel and *granted it halakhic status*.<sup>28</sup>

Jewish political control of *Eretz Yisrael*, according to the Rav’s own words, is not religiously irrelevant. This is important because some of the Rav’s “peers”, to use R. Meiselman’s term, held otherwise. They held that as long as the political entities in *Eretz Yisrael* lacked the full power to eradicate *avoda zara* from the land, the *mitsva* of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* lacks fulfillment.<sup>29</sup> The Rav, however, reiterated the point many times, that simply clinging to power in *Eretz Yisrael* is a fulfillment of the *mitsva* of *Yishuv Eretz Yisrael*.

In a powerful talk at Moriah Synagogue in 1958 (the tape is available), the Rav pleads with his audience to look at the events of the establishment of the *Medina* by leaving the “money bags and dirty shoes” outside.<sup>30</sup> And, continues the Rav, if we interpret the events of *Hakamat haMedina* from that perspective, we will see the great religious and halakhic significance of the *Medina*.

Says the Rav:

I know that many will not agree with me in this assumption, but for me this approach is axiomatic, the truth of the beginning. My sense of “beginning”, the primal point, whispers to me that just as the sages of the Talmud and Midrash, and of the Middle Ages, decided that “nature does nothing in vain” (*Sab. 77b, Guide iii: 25*), but that everything in creation has a purpose, and God did not create even the sea worm just so, without purpose, so I feel that *there is nothing in Israel’s history in vain; and if on the Friday, fifth of Iyyar 5708, God said: “Let there be a State of Israel”, His words are not in vain, neither do they meander, far be it, as empty souls in the world of waste. The “let there be—tehe” of God is the opposite of tohu—waste!*<sup>31</sup>

All this should be sufficient proof of the Rav’s Zionism. But, it is important, in order to see the full depth of the Rav’s commitment to Zionism, to put his position on Zionism into a broader perspective.

The Rav considered himself a loner. Though a person recognized as a master of *kol haTorah kulla*, a characterization given to him by *Mori ve-Rebbi*, Rav Hutner *zt”l*, the Rav was a loner. The Rav himself admitted to his “loneliness” and in a moving talk he articulated the pain and anguish that his separation from the leaders of Torah on this issue had caused him.

Let us ascertain that to be estranged from the *gedolei hador . . . the man-bigei hador . . . the hasidei hador*, who lived in the time in four cubits of the law, in sanctity and piety, was not a pleasant experience. After all, Yosef himself possessed greatness in Torah, in leadership and in piety and the chasm that separated him from his brothers caused him much anguish.<sup>32</sup>

And the Rav goes further. He justifies this separation with its entire attendant pain and anguish.

If I now identify with the Mizrachi, against my family tradition, it is only because, as previously clarified, I feel that Divine Providence ruled like Joseph and against his brothers; that He employs secular Jews as instruments to bring to fruition His great plans regarding the land of Israel. I also believe that there would be no place for Torah in Israel today were it not for Mizrachi. I built an altar upon which I sacrificed sleepless nights, doubts and reservations. Regardless, the years of the Hitlerian holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the accomplishments of the Mizrachi in the land of Israel, convinced me of the correctness of our movement’s path. The altar still stands today,



with smoke rising from the sacrifice upon it: "This is the burnt offering on its pyre all the night. (*Lev. 6:2*)."<sup>33</sup>

Would the Brisker Rav have made such a statement? Would he have admitted to going against his "family tradition"? Would he have paid the price that the Rav paid for being a member of *Mizrachi*?

R. Meiselman also states that the Rav strongly opposed the recitation of *Hallel* on *Yom Ha'atsma'ut*. Here too, I believe, R. Meiselman overstates the case. I remember a particular *Yom Ha'atsma'ut* (ca. 1965) when I davened with the Rav's *minyan* at Rubin Hall of Yeshiva University. That *minyan* said *Hallel*. There was a parallel *minyan* in which *Hallel* was not recited. Someone ran to the Rav and asked, "Isn't this a problem of 'Lo Titgodedu'?" The Rav smiled and said, "There is no problem of *Lo Titgodedu*".

But there is more than memory.

The Talner Rebbe, Rav Prof. Yitzhak Twersky, *z"tl*, was the Rav's son-in-law. He certainly qualifies as a "close disciple" and as "part of his family and household." He too was able to speak to the Rav "and learn from him as only a family member can." Here is a description of what transpired in the Talner *bet midrash* headed by Rav Yitzhak Twersky, *z"tl*.

There was a unique atmosphere of love of Torah and love humanity in the Talner *bet midrash* which he headed (for which, it should be added, he never received compensation). The *bet midrash*, where R. Twersky faithfully preserved hasidic custom, was open to all, and Jews from all walks of life found their place there. The night of *Simhat Torah* was unique. The *bet midrash* itself was small, but hundreds, most overflowing into the streets, would come to celebrate in song and dance, demonstrating the special attraction of the Talner *bet midrash* for Jews from all walks of life. *Shavu'ot* night had its own special magic, as the Talner Rebbe would give an almost continuous *shiur* in Talmud the entire night. The Rebbe's tremendous range of knowledge of Talmud was particularly evidence on that evening, as he would allow himself to range widely from topic to topic. Notably, the *Tefilla li'Shlom Medinat Yisrael* was recited every *Shabbat*, and *Yom Ha'atsma'ut* and *Yom Yerushalayim* were celebrated with the recitation of *Hallel*.<sup>34</sup>

That R. Meiselman, a native of Boston, has not alluded to this fact is truly *tsarikh iyyun gadol*.

There is another difficult statement in R. Meiselman's presentation of the Rav's positions.

The Rav, in all of his concerns was exceedingly parochial. . . . He vigorously opposed all activism for Soviet Jewry because he felt it was pragmatically counterproductive. I do not believe that one can find a single instance where the Rav was involved in any of the universal issues of his day.<sup>35</sup>

To assert that the Rav was, in any way, parochial, is strange. Rav Moshe Soloveitchik *zt"l*, wrote a letter recommending his son, the Rav, for the position of Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. Speaking about the Rav's strengths, he said that his son is not *ba'al melakha ahat*.<sup>36</sup> One need not go too far to prove Rav Moshe's evaluation. Even a superficial glance at *Halakhic Man*, or other writings of the Rav, will show the non-parochial universe of the Rav. References to Ibsen, Kierkegaard, Husserl, Tolstoy, Aristotle, Peretz abound throughout. Indeed, the Rav didn't just "drop" these names. The Rav was a master of Western thought and ideas.

In the Rav's eulogy of his uncle, he discusses the novelty and the revolution that R. Hayyim Soloveitchik caused in the methodology and analysis of learning. The Rav likens R. Hayyim Soloveitchik to Immanuel Kant.

Kant, in his period, declared the independence of the pure reason of scientific mathematical understanding. R. Hayyim fought the war of independence of halakhic understanding and demanded for it full autonomy.<sup>37</sup>

Is this the mindset of a parochial person? This non-parochial, this universal concern that is *hovek zero'ot olam* has its roots in the Rav's understanding of *yahadut* and the demands it imposes on its adherents.

Let us again, use the Rav's own words to make our point. The Rav points out that *Rosh Hashana* has a dual nature. On the one hand the:

central motif of this Yom Tov is the creation of the world. . . . It is a day of judgement for all mankind. . . . On the other hand, we mention on Rosh Hashana the revelation on Mount Sinai and the chosenness of Israel . . . and we pray for its redemption. . . . Isn't this a contradiction. Heaven forbid! Our Rabbis have taught us the first revelation at Sinai is God's revelation to the particular, His people, and also a general revelation. . . . The separation that was formed at Sinai did not result in the separation of the nation from the world and did not revoke the hope of universal unity. . . . The separation of the nation at Sinai will end in its return to it.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, the Rav pointed out many times that the *siddur* has two versions of the *berakha* of *shome'a tefilla*. One version has it that God "hearkens to the prayers of you and the people Israel". The other version has it that God "hearkens to the prayer of every mouth." Indeed, says the Rav, both versions are accurate. A Jew has prayers that he shares with humanity in general. He prays with all people for health, peace, and security together with "every mouth". A Jew also prays for the realization of his specifically and particularly Jewish dreams. He prays for the restoration of the Davidic kingdom, the rebuilding of the *Bet haMikdash*, "the prayers of your people Israel".<sup>39</sup> It is true that for a long time in our history, we were uninvolved with the rest of the world. We played a very limited role. But this was not of our choosing. This was forced upon us by others. The Rav states:

Of course, as long as we were exposed to such a soulless, impersonal confrontation on the part of non-Jewish society, it was impossible for us to participate to the fullest extent in the great universal creative confrontation between man and the cosmic order. The limited role we played until modern times in the great cosmic confrontation was *not of our choosing*. *Heaven knows that we never encouraged* the cruel relationship that the world displayed toward us. We have always considered ourselves an inseparable part of humanity and we were ever ready to accept the divine challenge. "Fill the earth and subdue it", and the responsibility implicit in human existence. We have never proclaimed the philosophy of *contemptus* or *odium seculi*. We have steadily maintained that involvement in the creative scheme of things is mandatory.<sup>40</sup>

And the Rav acted on his beliefs. During the Israeli Lebanese War in 1983, the Israeli Defense Force was implicated in the tragedy at Sabra and Shatilla. While some authorities were willing to shrug off this episode, the Rav insisted that the N.R.P., which controlled the votes, call for an independent commission to investigate the incident. He threatened to resign from the leadership of *Mizrachi* if this was not done.<sup>41</sup> This is hardly the act of a parochial person.

The statement by R. Meiselman about the Rav's opposition to activism on behalf of Soviet Jewry also needs to be examined.

This writer was present at a particular *shiur* given by the Rav on *Parashat Bereshit* (ca. 1980). Inter alia, the Rav discussed the silence, even of the Jewish community, during the *Sho'a*. He then contrasted the silence of that period (1939-1945) to the activism and the public protests

of our period. Nowadays, said the Rav proudly, our youth is different. They are not silent and they have a sense of responsibility as Jews.<sup>42</sup>

Let us now turn to the Rav and his position on Feminism. This issue, more than any other, is at the core of R. Meiselman's ire. R. Meiselman states:

. . . for the record, that the Rav *halakhically forbade, without equivocation*, women's prayer groups, pseudo *keriat ha-Torah* and all forms of women's *hakafot* with *sifrei Torah*. He viewed all of the above as silly and hoped that they would pass.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed in a previous issue of *Tradition*,<sup>44</sup> Rabbi Mayer Twersky also rises to rescue the Rav from the heresy of Feminism. He also argues that the Rav's opposition to women's *tefilla* groups was dictated by *halakhic* values, not *halakhic* details.<sup>45</sup>

The Rav's position, however, even on this issue was much more complex. The Rav addresses the issues raised by the Feminist critique of society and in particular, with the Feminist critique of *yahadut*. He stressed the idea that since men and women "were created in God's image, the only basis of ultimate worth, both have equally infinite endowments".<sup>46</sup> To the Rav this was not mere theory. At his Maimonides High School in Boston, girls partook in the same rigorous curriculum as boys, *limudei kodesh* and *limudei hol*. Indeed, the Rav inaugurated the study of *gemara* at Stern College for Women. At that *shiur* he stressed that teaching *gemara* to women has to be no less serious and no less demanding than the way it is taught to men. I wonder, at times, what the Rav's reaction would have been to the current practice in many institutes of higher learning, both here and in Israel, of teaching women *gemara* from photocopied sheets and not from the text itself.

It is true that the Rav opposed women's *tefilla* groups on halakhic grounds. He did state that "the ineligibility of women to be counted in a *minyan*" has to be understood from within the halakhic context itself-and that no value judgement about the nature of women could be inferred from the fact that the halakha excludes women from counting in a *minyan*. This should not be confused with his opposition to women's *tefilla* groups. R. Meiselman asserts that the Rav, "without equivocations", halakhically forbade all forms of women's *tefilla* groups. R. Mayer Twersky, in his article in *Tradition*, also focuses on this issue.<sup>47</sup> He too stresses the Rav's opposition to women's *tefilla* groups and that this opposition was based not on "technical issues and legalities" but on the Rav's belief that the whole vector of the halakhic

value system points against the acceptability of women *tefilla* groups.

As an example of the halakhic value that operates against women's *tefilla* groups, R. Twersky refers to an article by the Rav which ends as follows:

It is not my intention to enter into the halakhic details with regard to the prohibition of standing on a platform for *tefilla*, but one thing I know, that standing in a place above that of the congregation is at odds with service of the heart, which expresses the sentiment of "from the depths".

And R. Twersky continues:

In his unwavering fealty to and sensitive understanding of halakha, the Rav could not be content with technical halakhic conformity while extroverted ceremonialism distorted the concept of *tefilla*. Accordingly, the Rav forcefully registered his disapproval.

The Rav's consistent, unequivocal opposition to women's *tefilla* groups was of the same ilk. Once again a shift in focus (but not substance) directs the Rav's words to the contemporary issue and provides the compelling rationale for his steadfast opposition to such groups: It is not my intention to enter into halakhic technicalities of women's *tefilla* groups, but one thing I know, that desiring and emphasizing active participation and leadership are antithetical to authentic service of the heart, which expresses the sentiment of from the depths.<sup>48</sup>

And there's the rub. Indeed, the Rav was opposed on good philosophic, hashkafic and halakhic value grounds to people (the Rabbi and/or President of the *shul*) standing and "davening" on a platform above the community. Did the Rav tell any of his numerous students to leave the *shul* that has a platform? Did he write letters publicly prohibiting these synagogues? Was he involved in any campaign against synagogue platforms? Or, perhaps the Rav thought that while there are good "halakhic value" reasons to oppose synagogue platforms, the opposition to such cannot be articulated on clear halakhic grounds. Hence, while the Rav was extremely sensitive to issues of *kedushat bet ha-keneset* as his earlier-noted position on *mehitsot*, here the Rav behaved differently. Why? It is precisely because the issue was not one of halakha. The issue of synagogue platforms is a matter of the subjective experience of the person standing on the platform vis-à-vis *tefilla*. This experience can be redirected or reeducated towards a *tefilla* consonant with *kavvana*.

Likewise, the evidence shows that women's *tefilla* groups may have been seen by the Rav as problematic, but certainly not beyond the pale. In fact, Aryeh and Dov Frimer inform us that the Rav chose not to join the *pesak* of five *Rashei Yeshiva* of RIETS opposing women's *tefilla* groups. The Rav was quite insistent that "if anyone should ever assert that he did" agree to this *pesak*, that his *shamash* at the time, Rabbi Kenneth Brander, should publicize the falsity of that claim.<sup>49</sup>

Had the Rav believed that women's *tefilla* groups are beyond the pale, totally anti-halakhic, he would have joined the *pesak*. Certainly the dramatic way in which he chose not to sign leads one to believe that he did not oppose women's *tefilla* groups as radically and as vehemently as Rabbis Meiselman and Twersky would make us believe. Perhaps Rabbis Meiselman and Twersky have good reason to oppose women's *tefilla* groups with the passion they exhibit in their opposition. Perhaps Rabbis Meiselman and Twersky are pursuing an agenda that, to them, justifies this absolute unequivocal opposition to women's *tefilla* groups. However, there are good reasons to argue that this was not the Rav's agenda.

These lines are written with trepidation recognizing fully the complexity of the issues discussed and with a keen awareness and appreciation that the Rav needs to be understood on his own terms. I tried to conform to Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein's wise warning against the "attempt to pigeonhole the Rav within the confines of a current narrow camp".<sup>50</sup> If I failed, I will take the liberty to say, as the Rav said at the end of *Halakhic Man*, "And if I erred, may God, in His goodness forgive me".

## NOTES

I want to thank my wife, Esther, for helping me in the clarification of some issues. Thanks to Rabbi Shalom Carmy and Rabbi Jonas Prager for their help.

1. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, Translated from the Hebrew by Lawrence Kaplan, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983, p. 137.
2. "The Rav, Feminism and Public Policy", *Tradition*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Fall 1998.
3. *Halakhic Man*, p. 87.
4. Rav Kook called it "crude piety". See Zvi Yaron, *The Philosophy of Rav Kook*, Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 1991, p. 37.

5. *Halakhic Man*, p. 77.
6. Told to me by a witness.
7. See "Ma Dodekh MiDod", *Divrei Hagut Ve'Ha'arakha*, Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, p. 78.
8. *Halakhic Man*, p. 90.
9. *Tradition*, loc. cit.
10. *Ibid*, p. 27.
11. *Ibid*, p. 6. R. Meiselman is careful not to take sides even in this watered down debate.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
18. See note 12.
19. Louis Bernstein, *Challenge and Mission*, New York: Shengold Publishers, 1982, p. 63.
20. For the full background, see Baruch Litvin, *The Sanctity of the Synagogue*, New York: Spero Foundation, 1959. This particular *pesak* is on p. 105.
21. Rabbi Bernard Rosenzweig, "The Rav as Communal Leader," *Tradition*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Summer 1996.
22. *Tradition*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 5-29.
23. Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, New York: Ktav, 1973, Chapter II.
24. "Ha'Adam Ha-Yehudi ve-Hamedina," in *Sefer Yovel, Likhvod Morenu Hagaon Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, shlita (zt'l)*, Edited by Rabbi Shaul Israeli, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, Dr. Yitzhak Raphael, Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, p. 168.
25. *Op. cit.*, p. 29.
26. These talks were given in Yiddish. They are reprinted as follows:
  1. *A Drosho: Fun Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik*, Jerusalem: Mizrachi-Hapoel HaMizrachi, 5732.
  2. *Fir Droshos Fun Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik*, (Full and authorized text of Four Speeches by the Rav *Shlita*.) New York: Tal Orot Institute, 5727. These have been translated into Hebrew as *Hamesh Derashot*, ed. David Telsner, Jerusalem, 1974. There is also an English version *The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, trans. by S.M. Lehrman, New York: Tal Orot Institute, 5743. For easier reference I have, with two exceptions, referred to the English translation.
27. Meiselman, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
28. *The Rav Speaks*, pp. 137-138.
29. Heard personally from *Mori ve-Rebbi* Rav Yitzhak Hutner *zt'l*. This position is also reprinted in *Sefer Hazikaron le-Maran Ba'al "Pahad Yitzhak" zt'l*, ed. Yosef Boksbaum, Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 5740, p. 52.
30. Allusion to *Berakhot* 54a.
31. *The Rav Speaks*, p. 171. Emphasis mine.
32. *Fir Droshos*, p. 93.

33. *The Rav Speaks*, p. 36.
34. Carmi Horowitz, "Professor Yitzhak Twersky-The Talner Rebbe z"l: A Brief Biography", *The Torah U'Madda Journal*, Vol. 8, 1998-1999, p. 46.
35. Meiselman, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
36. The full letter is published at the end of the second volume of *Sefer Yovel, Likhvod Moreinu Harav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik*, *loc. cit.*
37. "Ma Dodekh Midod" *loc.cit.*
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.
39. *Fir Droshes*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
40. "Confrontation," *op. cit.*, p. 20. Emphasis mine.
41. Michael Rosenak, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
42. This talk is published. *Divrei Hashkafa, Harav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik*, Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 5752, pp. 11-19.
43. *Tradition, Ibid.*, p. 5. Emphasis mine.
44. *Tradition*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 5-18.
45. Emphasis mine.
46. *Shiurei Harav, A Conspectus of the Public Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. Joseph Epstein, Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1994, p. 110, note #5.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Tradition*, Vol. 32, No. 30, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.
49. Aryeh A. and Dov I. Frimer, "Women's Prayer Services Theory and Practice: Part I, Theory", *Tradition*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Winter 1998, p. 43.
50. Letter to the Editor, *Forward*, March 12, 1999.