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REFLECTIONS FROM ACROSS THE POND

As readers of “Rupture and Reconstruction” are aware, Professor Haym Soloveitchik’s landmark essay touches on a considerable number of intellectual disciplines including halakha, theology, philosophy, and sociology. In response to the richness of Soloveitchik’s article, my various observations in this essay similarly range across different fields, but as I have no formal training in sociology, my remarks in that area are somewhat impressionistic. Additionally, at several points I focus particularly on the Orthodox community of the United Kingdom in order to add a UK perspective to this international discussion. (Soloveitchik clearly intends to include UK Orthodoxy in the purview of his essay, as the couple of references to “England” indicate. I refer to the United Kingdom as a whole in this discussion because although England indeed contains the great majority of the UK Orthodox population, significant, if relatively small, Orthodox communities exist in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.)

I first address an issue that, while it does not loom large in “Rupture and Reconstruction,” features at the beginning of the essay, and the importance of which makes it worthy of comment. Soloveitchik observes that Modern Orthodoxy is “more strongly Zionist than ever” whereas the haredi sector “remains strongly anti-Zionist” (64). There seems to me to have been a shift here in the UK (and quite possibly far more widely) in the past quarter-century, consisting in a notable softening of mainstream haredi attitudes towards the State of Israel. One indication is the willingness of many haredi rabbis to recite a formal prayer on Shabbat morning referring explicitly to “*medinat Yisrael*” without feeling the need to adopt the mealy-mouthed locution of “*abeinu yoshevei Eretz Yisroel*” (“our brethren dwelling in the *Land* of Israel”) popular in the past. A further symptom is the way in which the celebration of Yom ha-Atzma’ut seems less a focus of haredi-Modern Orthodox tension than in the past (though major differences certainly remain between haredi and Modern Orthodox shuls regarding how, and indeed whether, *Yom ha-Atzma’ut* is celebrated and whether any changes are made to the daily

TRADITION

tefilla). As a small example, my yeshiva high school-aged son returned home from his school—which includes both haredi and Modern Orthodox staff and students—this past *Yom ha-Atzma'ut* having enjoyed a well-attended celebratory *shaharit* including *hallel*, a special breakfast, and dancing. In my time as a student in the very same institution, I well remember that the school closed for *Yom ha-Atzma'ut* one year because of tensions surrounding its proposed celebration. A third signal is the rarity with which one hears any real anti-Zionist rhetoric, at least in the UK, from within the mainstream haredi community (as opposed to criticism of particular Israeli government policies). It should be conceded that the shift seems to be more a matter of a softening attitude than of ideological development: one has the impression that if one were to pin down a thoughtful haredi interlocutor and insist on hearing his assessment of the religious significance of the State itself (as opposed, of course, to “*Eretz Yisroel*”), one would receive a neutral or negative appraisal.

The reasons for this partial rapprochement regarding *medinat Yisrael* and Zionism are not entirely clear but a number of factors may be at play. Orthodox fears of a rampantly secular Israel hostile to Jewish tradition have not materialized. Despite huge tensions regarding haredi military enlistment and the continued existence of avowedly secular kibbutzim and other non-religious communities, Orthodoxy is flourishing in an Israel which is quantitatively and qualitatively the undisputed global center of Torah study and scholarship. From the increasing availability of kosher eateries in Tel Aviv to the presence of haredi units in the IDF to the stickers in buses reminding us “*mi-penei sevah takum*” (the biblical command to stand for the elderly), Orthodox people across a wide range of ideological stripes feel instantly more at home in Israel than anywhere else. A further factor strengthening the concern for and identification with the State of Israel of all Orthodox (and of course many other) Jews outside extreme anti-Zionist haredi factions may be the ongoing security issues faced by Israel and the impact of terrorist attacks, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran. As reported by Israel Army Radio and the *Jerusalem Post*, thousands of haredi Israelis attended *Yom ha-Zikaron* events in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak earlier this year.¹ A third element may be simply the rootedness that Israel now enjoys in the Jewish world in its eighth decade and as the largest global Jewish population center. Israel is not only a firm and longstanding reality but the critical center of the Jewish world, rendering ideological disapproval of Zionism something of an irrelevance.

I turn next to consider, in light of some of the insights of “Rupture and Reconstruction,” the impact of the internet and related technologies on contemporary religious practice and *pesak* halakha. As pointed out by

Rabbi Daniel Sperber, the fact that a *pesak* can nowadays receive instantaneous global exposure militates in favour of caution and conservatism since a *posek* has to justify his position not merely in his own locale but potentially to anyone in the world who wishes to challenge it.² Moreover, in place of the cassette-tape and telephone-facilitated Torah learning discussed in Soloveitchik's article (92–93), one can of course nowadays, with ease and without payment, hear and often even view on the internet halakha *shiurim* delivered by rashei yeshiva the world over, something which may lead to more exacting standards or *humrot* and a further shift away from mimetic home-based halakhic practice. In terms of further reinforcing the influence of traditional texts, the Internet and other technological advancements since the publication of “Rupture and Reconstruction” have massively facilitated the spread and accessibility of *daf yomi* studies (discussed by Soloveitchik on 92), bringing many more Orthodox Jews to greater familiarity with the rabbinic text par excellence and its commentaries.

What Soloveitchik refers to as “the new ubiquity of Torah study” (92) has been evident in the UK too and has gathered pace with the aid of technologies that have become widespread since the mid-1990s. *Daf yomi* seems far more widely studied than a generation ago both in actual shiurim and through internet-based resources. Weekly *divrei* Torah on *parashat ha-shavu'a* purveyed by means of the new technologies are very popular, as are high-level textual learning programs for young people returning from periods of study in Israeli yeshivot and seminaries. A further salient example, this time cross-communal, is the extraordinary success, growth, and global export from the UK of Limmud Conferences since the mid-1990s.

Our hyper-connected world is, however, something of a double-edged sword. On the other side of the ledger, it should be noted, the internet and related technologies can generate pressure in a “leftward” direction precisely because Jewish communities are “hyper-aware” of what other communities are doing. This is particularly noticeable in the crucial area of women's involvement in Orthodox ritual, a field in which there have of course been very significant developments in the past quarter-century. Women's *megilla* readings in Orthodox communities worldwide, for example, have undoubtedly been strengthened by the fact that this is now a global phenomenon, with groups in Israel, North America, the UK, and elsewhere fully aware of each other's existence and activities through the Internet and sometimes using the same Internet-based learning aids. Partnership *minyanim* may be a more controversial development, but they have similarly been assisted by instant global communication—and are, of course, too recent a phenomenon in Orthodoxy to be based on mimesis. In the realm of religious doctrine and belief, things can cut both ways. On

TRADITION

the one hand, the new technologies allow instant and extensive access to innovative recent thinking. As Chaim Waxman notes, websites such as TheTorah.com exemplify “more open theological discussion.”³ On the other hand, there is an abundance of websites, blogs, email discussion lists and Facebook groups pulling in an opposite, conservative direction.

There is an interesting recent trend which I believe is, to an extent, similarly the product of technology-driven hyper-awareness, one which has been particularly pronounced (though little discussed) in the mainstream UK Orthodox community. I refer to the increasing reference by synagogue organizations and the wider community to both pulpit rabbis and rebbetzins as spiritual leaders. Sometimes even haredi *shuls*' websites trumpet their successes under the leadership of “Our Rabbi and Rebbetzen.” Why this shift has not been perceived as threatening in more “right-wing” quarters is itself deserving of analysis. One suspects that the development may be in part an implicit response to the fraught issue of women Orthodox rabbis—an attempt to signal advancement for Orthodox women’s leadership in a “strictly kosher” manner. The relevant point in the context of this discussion is that the pressure to demonstrate progress in this direction is in significant measure generated by the technology-facilitated transparency of developments in women’s public spiritual leadership in the global Modern Orthodox community.

Some of the broader insights of “Rupture and Reconstruction” resonate across both the spatial divide of the Atlantic and the temporal gap of a quarter of a century. Soloveitchik’s discussion of increasing confidence in Jewish cultural distinctiveness (78) strikes a chord in the context of UK Orthodoxy. To adopt his illuminating example focusing on first names (n. 39), there is a marked generational shift in Modern Orthodox circles here, the ubiquitous Michael, Jonathan, Rachel, and Judith of my (middle-aged) generation more often than not being superseded in our children’s generation by Yoni, Amitai, Shira, and Yael—reflecting also, of course, a proud and open adoption of names popular in religious circles in Israel. Similarly reflecting a heightened minority-culture self-confidence, yeshivish and hasidic dress are much more apparent in the public square than a generation ago, and where they are underplayed, it is often a reflection of physical security concerns rather than a perceived need to conform to any cultural norm.

A further clear cross-Atlantic parallel is the way in which Jewish tradition is transmitted to the next generation. The replacement of the mimesis of home and street by the instruction and religious apprenticeship of the school, as Soloveitchik puts it (91), is marked in the UK as well, and has continued apace since the publication of “Rupture and Reconstruction.”

The Jewish day school population in the UK has vastly increased, mirroring the developments in the USA, albeit on a far smaller scale. In 2016, the UK-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research reported a near-doubling of the number of Jewish children in Jewish schools since the mid-1990s, rising from 16,700 to more than 30,000, while the number of Jewish schools more than doubled, from 62 to 139, during the same period. In January 2019, a further report by the Institute and the Board of Deputies of British Jews recorded that the number of Jewish children in Jewish day schools had been “climbing consistently” over several decades and that there were now almost seven times as many Jewish children in Jewish schools as there were 60 years ago.

I turn finally to philosophical and theological issues. I found Soloveitchik’s discussion of asceticism (80–81, and in the substantial and informative footnotes to those pages) of particular interest. He refers to “the gradual disappearance of the ascetic ideal that had held sway over Jewish spirituality for close to a millennium.” This may be contrasted with his father Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s position which portrays much more of a continuity of Jewish anti-asceticism through the ages. Whereas for Prof. Soloveitchik, “[t]he legitimacy of physical instinct is the end product of Orthodoxy’s encounter with modernity that began in the nineteenth century,” and prior to that, “distrust of the body was widespread, if not universal,” his father insists, regarding “the condemnation of natural drives or the deadening of the senses and the repression of the exercise of the natural faculties of man” that “[n]othing of that sort was ever preached by Judaism. On the contrary, it displayed full confidence in the inner worth of the naturalness of man.”⁴ Prof. Soloveitchik refers to “the slow but fundamental infiltration of the this-worldly orientation of the surrounding [modern] society,” whereas R. Soloveitchik views a this-worldly orientation as integral to the religious *Weltanschauung* of halakhic man, famously championing such an approach over the other-worldly focus of *homo religiosus*. Of course, father and son are fully entitled to offer competing assessments of attitudes to asceticism in the history of Jewish thought. And despite their differences, there may be an important congruence here: R. Soloveitchik’s this-worldly focus and anti-asceticism may well be a key component of his *Modern Orthodoxy*, an appropriate and liveable Jewish theology for precisely the contemporary this-worldly and anti-ascetic environment that Prof. Soloveitchik describes.⁵

Regarding the essay’s celebrated thesis that a sense of the immanent divine presence has today been largely lost, even among traditionalist or haredi Orthodoxy, I wonder about Soloveitchik’s example in his final endnote (n. 103), referring to Israeli Minister of the Interior Rabbi

TRADITION

Yitzhak Peretz's remark in 1986 that the seventeen children and five adults killed when a train collided with their school bus died because of instances of public desecration of Shabbat in Petah Tikva. I am unconvinced that Ashkenazi haredi silence regarding R. Peretz's comments had to do with no longer experiencing individual divine providence as a simple reality. I believe that it had more to do with the realization, even by many who may have accepted R. Peretz's position, that deep offense would be caused by highlighting his remarks.⁶ More optimistically, perhaps the Ashkenazi haredi reticence stemmed from appreciation of the vast and complex nature of the problem of evil and the knowledge that classic rabbinic literature encompasses many and sometimes mutually incompatible approaches to it, by no means limited to a straightforward linkage between sin and punishment.

Beyond the specific instance of R. Peretz, one wonders about the accuracy of Soloveitchik's diagnosis. In the daily discourse of the traditionalist Orthodox world one hears constant references to "*hashgaha peratit*" and to "*bashert*" occurrences, often about mundane matters. Doubtless these locutions are not always sincere, but surely sometimes (and, one hopes, mostly) they are, reflecting a genuine sense of God's presence as a "simple reality." Even if they are not, they suggest (as perhaps does the *de rigueur* response, in many Orthodox circles, of "*Baruch Hashem*" to inquiries after personal welfare) that a culture of aspiration towards acknowledging God's daily, natural presence is alive and well.

"Having lost the touch of His presence, they seek now solace in the pressure of His yoke" (103). The famous final sentence of "Rupture and Reconstruction" has remained with me since I first encountered it twenty-five years ago. Rav Kook writes:

Who knows the depth of my pain, and who can gauge it . . . I am imprisoned in many straits, in various boundaries, while my spirit yearns for exalted expanses. My soul thirsts for God . . . a large faith in God, without any hindrances, whether natural, logical, based in etiquette, or moral, is the joy of my life. Whatever is limited is profane by comparison with the supreme holiness that I seek. I am lovesick. How difficult for me is learning, how difficult for me is adapting to details . . .⁷

Perhaps, then, Soloveitchik's stark conclusion to "Rupture and Reconstruction" captures not so much a spiritual failing of our particular generation as a perennial challenge of a way of life with halakha at its center: to strive that God's laws not obscure His presence but lead us to it.⁸

¹ Rossella Tercatin, “Thousands of Ultra-Orthodox Israelis Attend Memorial Day Events,” *Jerusalem Post* (May 8, 2019) <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Thousands-of-ultra-Orthodox-Israelis-attend-Memorial-Day-events-589110>.

² Daniel Sperber, “Paralysis in Contemporary Halakha?,” *TRADITION* 36:3 (2002), 10.

³ Chaim I. Waxman, *Social Change and Halakhic Evolution in American Orthodoxy* (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2017), 149.

⁴ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships* (Ktav, 2000), 75–76. See also, e.g., *And From There You Shall Seek* (Ktav/Toras Horav Foundation, 2008), 111: “The Torah has never forbidden man the pleasures of this world, nor does it demand asceticism and self-torture.”

⁵ For a much more extensive discussion of R. Soloveitchik on these issues, see Daniel Rynhold and Michael J. Harris, *Nietzsche, Soloveitchik, and Contemporary Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), ch.3.

⁶ Hillel Goldberg makes a similar point in his “Responding to ‘Rupture and Reconstruction,’” *Tradition* 31:2 (1997), 33; as does Mark Steiner in the same issue of *TRADITION* in his “The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy: Another View,” 42.

⁷ Abraham Isaac Kook, *Eight Compendia*, 3:222 (author’s translation).

⁸ My thanks to Ben Davis, Ian Gamse, and R. Gideon Sylvester for their most perceptive comments on earlier drafts of this essay.