

# “RUPTURE AND RECONSTRUCTION” RECONSIDERED: A SYMPOSIUM

## EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

In the sixty-year history of *TRADITION*, few essays have had as sustained an impact as Professor Haym Soloveitchik’s “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy” (Summer 1994). Its arrival on the scene a quarter century ago introduced the terms “text-based authority” and “mimetic tradition” to the lexicon of Modern Orthodox Jewry, and the essay has served as a lens through which our religious community examines and understands itself these many years.

To mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of “Rupture and Reconstruction” we asked a variety of educators, rabbis, writers, and academics to share their reflections on the enduring messages of this essay. The result, in the following pages, is an appraisal, assessment, and reevaluation of the communal self-understanding wrought by Soloveitchik.

We asked our contributors to consider any or all of the following questions in crafting their responses:

- 1) No doubt the single largest societal change since the essay’s appearance in 1994 has been the digital revolution of the Internet, related technologies, and social media. (The essay appeared the same year as the first primitive full-text web search engines; it would be four years before anyone heard of Google.) Do the insights of “Rupture and Reconstruction” help us understand the manner in which technology has influenced contemporary religious practice, *pesak* halakha, and rabbinic authority? If the mimetic tradition gave way to a *text*-based tradition, what has occurred in the last twenty-five years when it gave way further still to *hypertext*-based halakhic communities?
- 2) The essay provided an explanation of how the nature of religious authority changed in the contemporary world, outlining the shift in authority from community rabbis to *rashai* yeshiva, and offered reasons for the ascendance of the doctrine of *Da’at* Torah (94–98). What is your assessment of this approach? From our remove of twenty-five years, how have these issues played themselves out in light of the essay’s insights?
- 3) The author admitted that among the topics “notably missing” is women’s education. “While the religious practice of both men and women had in the past been mimetic, their educational paths had diverged: male instruction had been predominantly textual, female

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instruction predominantly mimetic. The disappearance of the traditional society and the full-scale emergence of the text culture could not fail then to impact on women's education" (109). Now, a quarter century further on, how do more recent developments in women's education intersect with the transformation depicted in "Rupture and Reconstruction"? Beyond the specific realm of women's education, how do those trends impact women's lives, especially regarding larger phenomena such as home-based vs. synagogue-based religiosity, relationships to *posekim* and *rashei yeshiva*, child-rearing as an activity never subject to textual rules, etc. Do women experience the "ruptures" differently than men? If yes, what are the causes of those differences? How have women's Torah education and evolving roles within Orthodox society accommodated (or failed to accommodate) for the transformations described in the essay?

- 4) Many Modern Orthodox Jews welcomed "Rupture and Reconstruction" because it was interpreted as criticizing the *humrot* that emerged from abandonment of the mimetic tradition in favor of texts. Large *shiurim* [measurements] served as a paradigmatic example of this development; the expanding definition of *kitni'ot* was another often-touted example. On a broader and more controversial scale, some observers pointed to a variety of practices of previous generations, including even mixed dancing, as phenomena validated in the mimetic society of American Orthodoxy now challenged by the new text-based culture. In light of more recent developments, how do you see the relationship of the various streams in contemporary Modern Orthodoxy to mimesis versus texts? Have you observed polemical uses of the essay's thesis?
- 5) How would you evaluate the article's position that, largely due to the impact of the scientific outlook on the contemporary world, a sense of the immanent divine presence has been largely lost, even among traditionalist or haredi Orthodoxy (98–103)? How does this assertion appear to you today, especially in light of a perceived rise in neo-Hasidism and spiritualism within the Orthodox community?
- 6) Beyond the issues outlined above, the essay includes many other fascinating topics and passages. Among them are: (a) The assertion that modern Jews' attitude to physicality differs from that of their predecessors (80–81). (b) A discussion of the nature of history books produced by the haredi world (84–85). (c) An exploration of why yeshiva education has become more central to Jewish identity (87–93). (d) An analysis of the differences between *Mishna Berura* and *Arukh ha-Shulhan* (notes 6 and 20). Aside from the famous central thesis, for which "Rupture and Reconstruction" is a true

classic, what are some of the essay's most enduring insights for you personally? How have they impacted your own understanding of your personal and communal religious identity?

As you will see in the following seventeen essays, not every one of the aforementioned points was directly addressed. It should not be surprising that the topics of women's education and role in Orthodoxy, along with our contemporary digital reality, received the most attention; clearly, these have been the ways in which our world has most significantly transformed since 1994.

Aside from these two areas of particular interest, the varied responses show how wide-ranging and stimulating the original essay remains. Respondents address the quest for God's presence, the nature of rabbinic authority, the originally overlooked move from mimesis to books as a source of leniency, Zionism and the State of Israel, and more—all naturally flowing from the essay itself. As might be expected when looking afresh at even the most classic of works from such distance, some authors now question or reevaluate certain aspects of Prof. Soloveitchik's thesis.

We are proud of the array of respondents who answered *TRADITION*'s call to contribute to this symposium. Readers will take note of the wide ideological spectrum represented (the typical disclaimer about the views of the authors only representing themselves applies). We deliberately solicited a few contributions from writers who do not identify with the larger Modern Orthodox camp (on both the right and the left), both for the quality of their writing and the integrity of their viewpoints, as well as to demonstrate the far-reaching relevance of “Rupture and Reconstruction” in the larger Jewish world. Additionally, we are pleased to present voices of certain younger authors, some of whom were not mature enough to read the essay when it was originally published, but who grew up in a religious community where its entrenched templates were omnipresent.

In the coming weeks we will be publishing additional related content and responses to this symposium at the newly relaunched TraditionOnline.org. At our website's open access archives you can find “Rupture and Reconstruction” itself. Re-reading it (or encountering it for the first time!) may make your perusal of these pages more profitable.

In ways similar to many of the writers in this symposium, and many of the essay's readers over the years, I vividly recall my first encounter, as a young adult, with “Rupture and Reconstruction.” In my memory the experience is cataloged alongside T.S. Eliot's well-known lines from the end of his *Four Quartets*: “We shall not cease from exploration/ And the

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end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.” Indeed, for very many then, and presumably as many today, the essay served as an explorer’s map of one’s own personal and communal religious autobiography, leading him or her back to a starting point of self-knowledge. That is why Professor Soloveitchik’s “Rupture and Reconstruction” is a classic and will remain so for generations to come.

*JEFFREY SAKS*