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## WHAT RUPTURE?

**T**he enduring relevance of Professor Haym Soloveitchik’s “Rupture and Reconstruction” lies in its deep resonance with the reader’s own intuition. Many readers knew before encountering the essay that their Judaism was somehow different from that of yesteryear, yet they encountered difficulty in articulating (those who tried) the distinction. This was until Soloveitchik came and did so on their—and our—behalf, explaining how the Jewish dynamic has indeed shifted. Like much great writing, reading “Rupture and Reconstruction” causes us to experience a sense of rapport at the meeting point between our own intuition and its elegant expression.

However, reading Soloveitchik also causes many readers, myself included, some discomfort. Rupture? Reconstruction? Really? Minus technological advances, I would hazard that a nineteenth-century Jew from Bialystok and a yeshiva student from Slobodka would feel quite at home in Monsey and Lakewood, respectively. The latter might raise an eyebrow at changes in halakhic minutiae such as those noted by Soloveitchik—sitting or standing for *havdala*, the quantity of matza we consume on seder night, or the omission of certain *piyutim* that time has not been kind to—but these changes do not amount to rupture.

Rupture suggests something torn apart abruptly. Relationships can be ruptured by tragedy and pipes by overly high water pressure. We generally do not employ the word for something done in a controlled, intentional manner, certainly not when the relevant act involves an ongoing historical process. For this reason, as I will try to explain below, the word rupture is misplaced in describing the trends that Soloveitchik discerns.

That is of course not to say that there was no change. Change there surely was, and significantly so. Identifying the underlying cause of this change will help in understanding why rupture seems to be an inappropriate term, and why the same change is today experiencing something of a recession.

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Post-war yeshiva society deviated from traditional societies of pre-war years in one highly significant way—at which both the Jew from Bialystok and the yeshiva student from Slobodka would rub their eyes in disbelief. This is the exponential growth of the yeshiva world itself, and specifically that of the *kollel* institution. It is important to realize that this was the engine that induced the change in halakhic praxis identified by Soloveitchik. And while a small, mirror experience took place in the US, the engine itself ought to have “Made in Israel” stamped on it in big, red letters.

Rabbi Simcha Elberg, an American rabbi and scholar, writing at the end of 1964 described the city of Bnei Brak as *olam ha-humrot*, “a world of strictures.” Reflecting on his recent visit to the city, he wrote that

The Bnei Brak ideal embodies a great revolution in the entire gamut of religious life. Bnei Brak searches for stringencies rather than for leniencies. The rest of the world, even the observant, generally searches for leniencies. [...] Not so in Bnei Brak! A kollel student living under the spiritual influence of the Hazon Ish [...] will search for the opinion that prohibits, the stringency. He does not search for and does not rely on the lenient opinion, but rather on those who are stringent. Bnei Brak embodies a totally separate world, a world of the highest ideal of Torah elevation. In the presence of the purity of the ideal, all must bow their heads.<sup>1</sup>

The *kollel* model he references, of which a limited edition was later established in the US, empowered the shift in halakhic mindset that Elberg is so deeply stricken by. The swiftness of the change reflects the remarkable growth of the model, which is justifiably described by the former Slonimer Rebbe as a miracle and wonder:

The matter of the *kollel* students, who have the merit of their Torah being their vocation, is also among the wonders of the generation that is very difficult to understand with common sense—how so revolutionary a change came suddenly to pass, thanks to Hashem, which continues to prosper especially in the past ten to fifteen years, in which the majority of *avrechim* stay in the tent of Torah, and this is the trend for their entire lives. A person born into this generation cannot correctly evaluate the greatness of the wonder. Only those who knew previous generation stand in amazement, astonished at the wondrous vision that is being realized before our eyes.<sup>2</sup>

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A “learners’ society,” to use the expression coined by Israeli sociologist Menachem Friedman, serves to isolate its members from the walks of life the average citizen experiences. In turn, and not by chance, this isolation influences the internal dynamic of the study hall and its halakhic mindset. In an article entitled “The Secluded Torah World,” Eliyahu Levi writes of how “Yeshiva study is by definition detached from the real world, for the very goal of the bet midrash is to create an alternative reality from that on the outside.”<sup>3</sup> The detachment of the yeshiva study hall from the “real world” is its inherent strength; it molds a human archetype that lives a different reality, speaks a different language, and is beholden to different value and ethical systems than those “on the outside.”

In contrast, the community rabbi, while thoroughly engrossed in Torah study, breathes the same air and shares the same life experiences as his congregants. His halakhic mindset, the spirit in which he infuses the word of God into everyday human life, is attuned to the reality of this experience. In the newly formed yeshiva community, the student breathes the “pure air” of the bet midrash and experiences its isolated reality, without the stimulus of meeting people with different values and convictions. As opposed to the former, the latter’s halakha, that of thousands of high-level students engaged in textual scrutiny, will naturally tend to the textual, ascetic, and strict.

Thus while Soloveitchik’s frame of reference is American yeshiva culture, it seems that the American experience was to a large degree an export from Israel, where it developed under Hazon Ish and his disciples. It was specifically in Israel that the halakhic ascendancy of *Mishna Berura* was established. In the United States, Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin ruled that *Arukh ha-Shulhan* is the more definitive and authoritative decisor of halakha.<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, whose great halakhic opus followed the classic tradition of leading European rabbis, is reported to have agreed. Not so Hazon Ish. It was also in Bnei Brak that the new model of total rabbinic leadership, as noted by Soloveitchik, became entrenched; and it was there that rulings of the Vilna Gaon became ubiquitous custom, overruling previous tradition. The new halakhic phenomenon, characterized by Soloveitchik as a shift from a mimetic tradition to a textual one, was a predominantly Israeli novelty.

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How did the new model come about? Like every major sociological shift, the establishment of the *kollel* model cannot be attributed to any single factor. Several should be mentioned, most notably the urgent need to reestablish the decimated institutions of Torah study. Coupled with this

was the social imperative to isolate from general Israeli society and (the great success of) secular Zionism, and the arrangement whereby deferral from compulsory army service (considered a dire threat to religious observance and to haredi identity) was made contingent on full-time Torah study.

Though far-reaching, and not without numerous unintended consequences,<sup>5</sup> the measure was deemed essential in order to rehabilitate the past.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it was intended as a temporary measure, to be reassessed at a later time.<sup>7</sup> Looking to the present, it is clear that the process continues to unfold and develop, switching direction in keeping with changing circumstances.

Haredi-yeshiva society in Israel is today undergoing a trend of increasing integration into broader Israeli society. This involves a slow and challenging process, encompassing such areas as workforce participation, higher education, high school education (which is key to better success rates at high-level integration), and even participation in the IDF.<sup>8</sup> It remains in its early stages, and questions over how to facilitate deeper integration while preserving core community values loom heavily over the various elements of the project. Communities and institutions for so-called “working haredim” (among a range of other names) are gaining traction, even as questions of religiosity and identity remain to be answered.<sup>9</sup>

In the haredi yeshiva bet midrash, a parallel restlessness is starting to show. Young Torah scholars of today, even those fully immersed in their studies, are more involved in the ways of the world than those of yesteryear. The atmosphere in which they grow is far removed from the ideological wars of the mid-to-late twentieth century. Internet has transformed the hermetic isolation of their parents’ generation to a “soft isolation” permeated by significant elements of popular culture (even among the staunch, few remain unexposed to the wildly popular *Shtisel* TV series). They also tend to think about their future more than was common in the past, whether in terms of making a living or in terms of self-fulfillment; some even invest in learning rudimentary English and mathematics. Many are involved in Torah occupations that they can do “on the side” (such as writing and editing or selling *arba minim*), while others assist their wives in their professions.<sup>10</sup> And by and large, notwithstanding lingering tensions and the vociferous opposition of extremist groups new and old, most feel a strong identification with the State of Israel.

The all-important question, voiced inside and outside of the bet midrash, is simply, “How is our Torah study relevant for life outside the study hall?” To once again cite Levi, who ultimately left his yeshiva

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studies for academic horizons, “My attempts to apply Torah knowhow in the harsh reality of the world outside the study hall, to make it relevant and contemporary, came to naught.”<sup>11</sup> The quest for contemporaneity is among the foremost causes of fresh energies leading the yeshiva world in uncharted directions. *Kollelim* and study programs have been established for study of Tanakh, an area hitherto unexplored in haredi study halls; a haredi journal for the study of Tanakh was even recently established.<sup>12</sup> Young Torah students flock to external *shiurim* given by a range of rabbis, disciples of such original thinkers as Rabbi Leib Minsberg and Rabbi Yitzchak Shlomo Zilberman, who engage in reflective thought and translate yeshiva codes into a modern Hebrew resonant with Israeli culture. Some (albeit fewer) go so far as to study under religious Zionist rabbis, including such colorful figures as Rabbi Yisrael Ariel (of Yitzhar, a popular destination for haredi pilgrims). External study programs that merge Torah thought with policy issues including economics, nationalism, and political theory have also become commonplace.<sup>13</sup>

The embourgeoisement that Soloveitchik mentions, referring to America, is taking place today in Israel—the typical *avrekh* might even own a car, a rare phenomenon twenty years back—but with altogether different effects. While Soloveitchik believes that American embourgeoisement led to a process of halakhic textualization, in Israel the opposite is the case: closer encounters with the worldly are leading Torah scholars to question how their Torah is relevant for the world, and to search for layers of meaning previously lost in the endless sea of Talmudic text.

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The first step toward healing Soloveitchik’s rupture is to redefine it—not as a rupture but as a dynamic progression. Many Jews continue to live a life deeply infused with tradition, notwithstanding the growth of the yeshiva world. While our mindset vis-à-vis the study and practice of halakha has shifted, this has occurred as part of a dynamic essential for the preservation of the Jewish People and its core values in ever-changing circumstances. This was surely the impetus of Hazon Ish when he founded the “learners’ society” to rehabilitate the decimated Torah world. It was indeed a novelty, but one finely attuned to the needs of the hour.

We should not anticipate a return to the transmission of tradition as things were in yesteryear (or as we might like to think they were). The next phase is not the abandonment of textuality, but rather its realization—not as arbitrary and untraditional strictures, but as philosophical and practical principles that infuse everyday life with Jewish meaning.

Narrowing the gulf that separates between the bet midrash and the “real world” is the very healing we await; but we should also realize that absent the initial gulf—absent the isolated development of yeshiva society—we would not be able to reap the advantages of the final reconciliation.

Let us not rupture and reconstruct, but rather let us continue to write the next chapter in a coherent serial forever transmitting, sometimes more smoothly and sometimes less, from chapter to chapter. The current chapter includes moving parts of tremendous consequence, far beyond the intricacies of halakhic minutiae alone. They relate to the big questions of what Jewish living looks like in today’s world, of the Jewish approach to engaging modernity, of how we experience the encounter with God, and of how to define Jewish morality and ethics in times of deep moral confusion. Haredi rabbinic figures are beginning to address these issues for the first time, responding to growing demand on the haredi and non-haredi street.<sup>14</sup> The yeshiva itself is forging fresh paths to new horizons.

As we participate in the formidable task writing the serial’s next chapter, we can only hope and pray that our contribution will meet the same *siyata di-shemaya* and success as those initiated by our forebearers.

<sup>1</sup> Simcha Elberg, “*Yerushalayim Shel Ma’ala ve-shel Mata*” [Hebrew], *Diglenu* (Kislev-Tevet 5725).

<sup>2</sup> Shalom Noach Berezovsky, *Diglenu* (Nissan 5743 [1983]).

<sup>3</sup> Eliyahu Levi, “The Secluded Torah World,” *Tzarich Iyun* (November 2018), <https://iyun.org.il/en/sedersheni/the-secluded-torah-world>.

<sup>4</sup> Yehuda H. Henkin, *She’elot ve-Teshuvot Benei Banim* [Hebrew], (1992)2:8.

<sup>5</sup> For some of the challenges of the *kollel* system today, see Yaakov Botchkovsky, “Kollel For its Own Sake,” *Tzarich Iyun* (Tamuz 5779) [Hebrew] (<https://iyun.org.il/article/avreichim>), and the response articles published alongside.

<sup>6</sup> See Yehoshua Pfeffer, “Toward a Conservative Chareidi-ism,” *Hakirah* 23 (2017), 17–42.

<sup>7</sup> The temporary nature of the system whereby virtually all men spend many years in *kollel* study and working outside of Torah professions is generally shunned is often noted in the name of Hazon Ish; I have heard first-hand testimony of similar statements made by Rabbi Elazar Menachem Shach. See, for instance, Dov Lipman, “A Leading Haredi Rabbi’s Revealing Words,” *The Jewish Press* (December 3, 2015, citing from Rabbi Yehoshua Eichenstein, a leading rosh yeshiva in Israel): “The Holocaust came and there was a destruction of Torah. The Chazon Ish said, ‘Now we have to establish the world of Torah anew. The Torah world was destroyed, the Torah world has to be rebuilt anew. But in order to rebuild the Torah world anew, all have to sit and learn after their weddings.’ . . . Now, is someone going to try to tell me that that was not a temporary decree? If the generations before that time did not do this and the Chazon Ish said, ‘Because of the Holocaust we must do this.’ I want

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to know based on defining the words – what is this? This is not a temporary decree? Now the Torah leaders have to decide – that temporary decree of the Chazon Ish, when does it end? Is it over or if it's not over, when will it be over?"

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, the Taub Center's *State of the Nation Report 2017* on haredi integration in the workforce, available at; for the IDF, see Yonatan Branski, "Integrating without Changing: Military Service as a Catalyst for Haredi Integration in Israeli Society," *JISS* (October 31, 2017; <https://jiss.org.il/en/haredi-integration>).

<sup>9</sup> See Pfeffer, above note 9.

<sup>10</sup> For one aspect of male intervention in women's breadwinning role, see Leah Fishoff, "Let Them Choose," *Tzarich Iyun* (February 2019).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, above note 5.

<sup>12</sup> Following the famous words of Rashbam (Genesis 37:2), the journal is entitled *Peshatot ha-Mithadeshot*.

<sup>13</sup> Examples are study programs hosted by the Van Leer Institute, the Tikvah Fund, the Shacharit Institute, the Hartman Institute, among others.

<sup>14</sup> An good example of this is Rabbi Asher Weiss, who is frequently consulted in a halakhic capacity by hospitals, by the army, by the police force, and by other government institutions.