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## RECKONING WITH A PERSONAL RECONSTRUCTION

In my mind I am in my childhood home: my father, a hasid of Ger, and me, *pe'ot* protruding from behind my ears, wearing a shiny satin *bekeshe* with a thick black *gartl*. Was my subsequent estrangement from my hasidic roots reflective of Professor Haym Soloveitchik's "Rupture"? Was my religious transformation an example of his "Reconstruction"?

I do not intend to analyze, in this essay, whether Soloveitchik's thesis is true today, or whether it was even valid when he wrote it twenty-five years ago. My intent is merely to present some of my experiences and thoughts, from my childhood home, from yeshiva and beyond. Perhaps it will illuminate Soloveitchik's thesis and shed light on some of his thoughts.

### *Zionism and Secular Education as Markers of Modern Orthodoxy*

*A generation ago, two things primarily separated modern Orthodoxy from, what was then called, "ultra-Orthodoxy" or "the Right." First, the attitude to Western culture, that is, secular education; second, the relation to political nationalism, i.e., Zionism and the state of Israel. Little, however, has changed in these areas... And the haredi camp remains strongly anti-Zionist, at the very least, emotionally distant and unidentified with the Zionist enterprise (64).*

My first awakening to the reality of a Jewish State came in the form of a broadcast in the mid-1950s from the Yiddish radio station, WEVD. Shloimeh ben Yisrael was broadcasting the news in his elegant Yiddish and my young ears picked up the phrase, "*der Yidishe medine*," the Jewish State. Excitedly, I ran over to ask my mother, "Did *mashiah* come?" Over the years I realized what a source of pride the State of Israel was for my Holocaust-surviving parents. Once, when visiting my parents, I remember the excitement in my father's voice: "Did you hear how many airplanes the Jews shot down today?"

I daven in two shuls, one a bit more haredi than the other. Both recite a *mi she-berakh* on Shabbat—in a hasidic *havara*—for the Israel Defense Forces. Today, the majority of haredim are proud of the State of Israel and concerned for its welfare. These are not flag-waving, *Yom ha-Atzma'ut hallel*-singing Zionists, but rather what I refer to elsewhere (*Hakirah* 19) as Practical Haredim: They send their children to Israel to study for a year or two, and they visit the land regularly for family celebrations and to rejuvenate by breathing the air of Jewish sovereignty. These Practical Haredim send their children to colleges and universities where they receive undergraduate and advanced degrees in law, accounting, marketing, management, medicine, therapy, and more.

Another example of the acceptance and celebration of the State of Israel by the haredi community is the Zionist iconographic images seen in their music videos. The starkest example is Lipa Schmeltzer's video, "Mizrach," which is dedicated to "Netzach Yehudah of the Nachal Charedi division." Lipa is seen wearing a shirt emblazoned with "I Love Israel" and dancing with IDF soldiers. Other haredi entertainers who show Zionist images in their music videos include: Yaakov Shwekey, "We Are a Miracle"; Beri Weber, "Yachad"; Mordechai Shapiro, "Schar Mitzvah"; and Simcha Leiner's tribute to Ari Fuld, *Hy"d*. To be sure, there are haredi performers such as Benny Friedman in whose music videos I have yet to notice any Zionist images.

Soloveitchik paints a "haredi camp" with too wide a brush. Practical Haredim existed at the time of the article's publishing and their numbers continue to grow. They are an important part of the reconstruction, as they engage with Israel and the secular world. In Lawrence, Hancock Park, Beit Shemesh, and Golders Green, it is often difficult to differentiate whether someone is Modern Orthodox or haredi. A sociological blurring of this type requires a common identity. The rupture of traditional communities certainly played a part in the movement across the barricades of past inter-communal conflicts. Yet, a shared language and practice of halakha enabled by common texts has likewise been essential to this process of coming together.

### *Humrot as a Tool of Commerce*

*There is currently a very strong tendency in both lay and rabbinic circles towards stringency (humra)... It is one thing to fine-tune an existing practice on the basis of "newly" read books; it is wholly another to construct practice anew on the exclusive basis of books (72).*

## TRADITION

In our home we went to extremes on Pesach to avoid any possibility of consuming *hametz*. For example, we did not use Domino sugar on Pesach; we used only Jewish brands. After opening the Jewish brand of sugar, however, we discovered the original Domino packaging beneath it. I could only conclude that this *humra* was a mere pretext to sell sugar at a higher price.

As time passed, I saw similar cases. Jewish businessmen would introduce new food products that were “more kosher” (and usually more expensive) than those they sought to replace. I remember seeing a short-lived sign hung up by a clueless baker, “We use only *hadash*.”

*Ta’anit* (9a) homiletically reinterprets the verse *aser te-aser*, meaning, “You shall surely tithe” (Deut. 14:16), to read, *aser bishevil she-titasher*, “tithe so that you will become rich.” R. Ben-Zion Halberstam (the second Rebbe of Bobov) is purported to have taken this homiletic reading a step further. Lamenting an attempt by a food producer to denigrate the kashrut of his competitor’s product, R. Halberstam declared that the new producer was reading the word *aser*, “tithe,” as if it were spelled *alef, samekh, resh*. Prohibit (your competitor’s product) to become rich.

Recently, we witnessed other *humrot* created by commerce. For example, to compete with a dominant Orthodox English newspaper, newer ones adopted a policy of not showing pictures of women—no matter how properly dressed, and even if she might be the Secretary of State. When questioned about this policy some responded in economic terms: If they omit pictures of women, they are able to distribute their newspaper to more Jewish homes. This *humra*, like a self-fulfilling prophesy, became *de rigueur*. It was heartening, however, that girls and women do appear in all the above-mentioned music videos, even in the ones by the artist who does not include Zionist iconographic images.

Even more heartbreaking was the decision of a prominent publisher of Jewish books to not publish *sefarim* authored by, or with commentary of, Rabbi Soloveitchik, *zt”l*, lest it offend an extreme segment of the haredi community who resent the Rav’s embrace of Zionism and secular education.

In all the above it was neither the home nor the yeshiva that dictated the new “*humrot*” but, rather, the economic imperative: to maximize returns for shareholders. While commerce may not be the main source for new *humrot* it certainly contributes toward this trend.

### *Difference Between Hasidic and Yeshivish Communities*

Several times throughout “Rupture and Reconstruction” (87, 94, 97, 98, 110n20), Soloveitchik writes that what is true for the yeshivish community

may or may not be true for the hasidic community. It is important to note that in addition to the obvious differences between these two camps, there is also a major structural difference: hasidim attempt to create a self-contained community. They have their own shuls, schools, slaughterhouses, kosher establishments, *mikva'ot*, etc. This allows them to institute *takkanot* which apply to everyone in their community and it helps prevent some of the crises facing other segments of Orthodox Jewry: the (impossibly) high cost of tuition for Jewish day schools, and the inability of some parents to get their children into decent schools. Not all parents are rich and not all children are above average. This problem affects both Modern Orthodoxy and the yeshivish world—but not the hasidic communities; they take care of their own. The flipside, of course, is that members of a hasidic community who feel stifled by its rules and codes, have very few options short of leaving their world, which may result in the loss of their spouse and children.

I am reminded of an incident that purportedly took place in the Ger community in Israel. At one point the price of a *spodek* (the tall *shtreimels* worn by hasidim of Ger) spiked. The Rebbe of Ger promptly announced that if the price of a *spodek* does not come down he himself will wear a regular black hat and he will instruct his hasidim to do the same. Immediately the price of a *spodek* reverted to its original price.

Text's role in Soloveitchik's reconstruction story depends upon a degree of autonomy that does not exist in hasidic circles. Communal norms and commands retain more of their pre-rupture relevance, although ideas have a way of getting through even these walls.

### *Lack of Yirat Shamayim*

*Upon reflection, I realized... there was no fear in the thronged student body... Over the subsequent thirty-five years, I have passed the High Holidays generally in the United States or Israel, and occasionally in England, attending services in haredi and non-haredi communities alike. I have yet to find that fear present, to any significant degree, among the native born in either circle. The ten-day period between Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur are now Holy Days, but they are not Yamim Noraim—Days of Awe or, more accurately, Days of Dread—as they have been traditionally called (98–99).*

Soloveitchik notes that even among the most *frum* communities there is a lessening of *yirat shamayim*, fear of God. He attributes this, in part, to Jews today having a better understanding of causality in nature and thus being less inclined to attribute such events to God.

## TRADITION

I believe there is another reason for the lessening of *yirat shamayim*: we are more educated about our religion. Let me give an example. Imagine an illiterate Jew who enters a synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur. Everyone is dressed in white, the *aron kodesh* is open and the *hazzan* is singing *Kol Nidrei* in his sweetest, most solemn voice. The illiterate Jew imagines a deep mystical moment between the Jewish people and their Creator. Now imagine a religiously educated Jew witnessing the same scene, hearing the same *Kol Nidrei*, and wondering, “What is so special about annulling my vows?”

Soloveitchik writes, “We teach a child, for example, that crime does not pay. Were this in fact so, theodicy would be no problem” (85). I wonder what effect the Holocaust has had on Jewish religious consciousness. In theory, the religious problem presented by the Holocaust—why do bad things happen to good people?—applies equally to the case of a baby born with an incurable disease, who suffers every day of its life. But, the two cases are very different. Most people are not forced to focus on the troubles of such a baby. The Holocaust, however, was such an overwhelming event that it cannot be hidden from Jewish consciousness. Does the memory of the unjustness of the Holocaust cause Jews today to wonder if there really is a correlation between the quality of their Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur prayers, and what befalls them in the coming year?

### *My Rupture and Reconstruction*

At a very young age I already knew that I would leave my hasidic garb behind once I left my parents’ home. I realized this one morning as I sat in bed, sick with the measles—drawing a boy’s face. When I looked at the finished picture, I realized that the boy I had drawn was wearing a small yarmulke and had no *pe’ot* behind his ears.

What caused my rupture from the warm hasidut I experienced at home? There are several factors and I am at a loss to understand which are primary, which secondary, and which are mere rationalization. For one, the yeshiva I attended as a child was nominally hasidic but its students, my friends, were not. We were the first generation born after the War, and our yeshiva was a melting pot for all kinds of students whose parents were struggling to stay out of poverty.

I remember a Thanksgiving holiday when my father brought me with him to the sweatshop where he worked. There was a long row of tables, with mostly hasidic men on either side bending over their sewing machines, making caps or hats. I did not want this type of labor to be my fate and I resolved to go to college. I imagined my hasidic garb as a hindrance to this goal.

I soon learned that Hasidism dates back, not to Sinai, but to the 1700s. If so, I reasoned, it is not an integral part of classical Judaism and thus expendable. This was my rupture from the tradition of my parents' home.

How did I finally reconstruct my Jewish soul? Throughout my life I experienced different aspects of different types of Jewish communities. I admired the joyful camaraderie in hasidic circles. I respected the *lishmah* learning of the yeshivish world. I loved the tunes sung at Young Israel shuls. I longed for the word-for-word melodic prayers in the synagogues of my Syrian neighbors. I admired Yeshiva University's synthesis of religious studies and secular education, and above all, I became infatuated with the writings and thought of Soloveitchik's esteemed father, *zt"l*. I am not a part of any of these communities but I did Reconstruct myself as an observant Jew who tries to synthesize, with mixed success, the best from each of these disparate Jewish communities. My rupture opened all these communities and experiences to me. Freedom and a culture of individual choice allowed me to choose the best of each to reassemble my Jewish identity.

My father's main passion was to study Torah, to "be *mehaddesh*," and to publish. These I try to emulate. I live to study, research, and write. I spent two five-year periods investigating two topics and the result was the publication of two *sefarim*. In turn, I was invited to join a scholarly group which studies together each Shabbat. *Hakirah* was a byproduct of this group.

Do I have any regrets about leaving my hasidic community? Of course. When I get together with hasidic family members I feel like an outsider, like I betrayed them. Will I revert to the hasidic life of my youth? No. Am I happy with the way I turned out? I guess so, but there are holes in my heart that will never be filled. I will never sing the song my father sang as he traveled with his friends to the rebbe for *yontif*. I will never sing the song of Ger.