

Rabbi Dr. Farber is the director of ITIM and the rabbi of Kehilat Netivot in Ra'anana. He is the author of *An American Orthodox Dreamer: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Boston's Maimonides School*.

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

RABBI JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK'S EARLY ZIONISM

It is commonly believed in contemporary Modern Orthodox circles that Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik underwent a transformation regarding his attitude toward Zionism during the 1940s. Prior to the Holocaust, the Rav was a member of Agudath Israel and thus ambivalent to Zionism and only later did he embrace the Mizrahi movement.¹

The purpose of this introductory essay is to challenge this conventional approach towards Rabbi Soloveitchik's thinking. Through a review of the historical record, I argue that Rabbi Soloveitchik's affinity and identification with the religious Zionist cause preceded the onset of World War II and certainly the mass extermination of European Jewry. The heretofore unavailable and untranslated reported version of a speech that Rabbi Soloveitchik delivered in Boston on May 26, 1939, demonstrates, in my reading, that R. Soloveitchik's move toward Zionism was extant prior to common assumption.

¹ For an analysis of the significance of Zionism in Rabbi Soloveitchik's thought, see Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Urim, 2012), 290–298; Gerald Blidstein, "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik a Religious-Zionist Thinker, Indeed?" in *Society and Self: On the Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Ktav, 2012), 439–450. See also Bernard Rosensweig, "The Rav as Communal Leader," *Tradition* 30:4 (1996), 216: "The Rav himself was a card-carrying member of Agudath Israel. In 1935, he traveled to Israel, for the first and only time in his life, to try out for the position of Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. He made a brilliant impression with his *shiurim* and lectures, but he was not elected. The reason that was given was that he was too young. The real reason was that his great-uncle, Rav Meir Berlin, vetoed him because of his Aguda credentials." See also Shlomo H. Pick, "The Rav: A Pressing Need for a Comprehensive Biography," *B.D.D.* 10 (Winter 2000), 37–51 and "The Rav: Biography and Bibliography," *B.D.D.* 6 (Winter 1998), 41; Jeffrey Saks, "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and the Israeli Chief Rabbinate: Biographical Notes (1959–60)," *B.D.D.* 17 (September 2006), 45–67.

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Despite the fact that the Rav was recognized as a Zionist thinker, particularly after the publication of *Kol Dodi Dofek* in 1961, it seems that the assumption that Rabbi Soloveitchik “turned to Zionism” only in the wake of the Holocaust stems from a misreading of one of his lectures to the Religious Zionists of America, which was subsequently published in the volume known as *Hamesh Derashot*. There, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes under the headline “My Affiliation with Mizrachi”:

I was not born into a Zionist household. My parents’ ancestors, my father’s house, my teachers and colleagues were far from the Mizrachi religious Zionists.... If I identify today with Mizrachi, which is in opposition to my family tradition, it is because... I feel that the divine providence... utilizes secular Israelis as agents to conduct its grand plans in the Holy Land of Israel. I also believe that without the Mizrachi, there would be no place for Torah in Israel. I built an altar, upon which I sacrificed many hours of sleep, doubts and deliberations. But the years of Hitler’s Holocaust, the rise of the State, and the accomplishments of the Mizrachi in the Land of Israel convinced me of the just path of our movement.²

Scholars and students of R. Soloveitchik concluded from this passage that it was the Holocaust that shaped his thinking regarding Zionism.

Before addressing the historical record, I believe that two comments are in order regarding the use of this passage for historical purposes.

First, R. Soloveitchik doesn’t state that he joined the Mizrachi following the Holocaust or that he wasn’t a Zionist before. He uses the word “convinced” rather than “reversed my attitude,” which is a neutral phrase regarding his convictions prior to the Holocaust.

But perhaps more importantly, certainly from the methodological perspective, the passage was said (and written) within a homiletical context. In all likelihood, the Rav granted himself the liberty to recast the historical record for rhetorical purposes. This was not meant to be a definitive autobiographical statement, just as many things the Rav spoke about in his Talmud classes didn’t necessarily reflect historical reality. Instead, he was seeking, as many *darshanim* do, to accentuate and personalize the devastation of the Holocaust on one side, and the positive value of Zionism on the other.

And in fact, the historical record paints a very different picture than the one biographers of R. Soloveitchik would have us believe regarding his early Zionism. The fact that the Rav delivered a speech in 1939 in which he openly advocated financially supporting the Mizrachi movement suggests

² *Hamesh Derashot* (Tal Orot, 1974), 25 (translation is my own).

that significant materials still remain undiscovered that can help paint a broader picture of R. Soloveitchik's life and work.

The Historical Record

R. Soloveitchik tended towards Mizrachi at least a decade before the Holocaust. He was very close to his father, Rabbi Moshe, who from 1920 had served on the faculty of the Tachkemoni School in Warsaw, one of the flagship institutions of the Mizrachi (although R. Moshe never self-identified as a Zionist). R. Soloveitchik's original invitation to serve as a rabbi in Boston came from Rabbi Yehuda Leib Forer, an avowed Zionist who was close with Rabbi Moshe. On the day of his arrival in Boston, R. Soloveitchik was met at the train station by Rabbi Wolf Gold, one of the most outspoken leaders of the Mizrachi movement.³

Once he arrived in Boston, R. Soloveitchik had affiliations with other prominent Zionists such as Rabbi Aaron Gorovitz, who was the representative of New England to the Basel Zionist Congress in 1905. Gorovitz was one of the founders of R. Soloveitchik's educational institution in Boston, the Maimonides School.

In 1940, long before the mass extermination of Jews began in Eastern Europe, R. Soloveitchik employed Zionists (local figures such as Shachno Stein and Mandel Tumoroff) to serve in the yeshiva Torat Yisrael and later the Maimonides School, educational institutions that he founded, and as early as 1933 he advocated publicly for the teaching of Hebrew as a natural language (*Ivrit b'Ivrit*), something clearly identified as a Zionist initiative.⁴

In the years preceding the Holocaust, Rabbi Soloveitchik wasn't satisfied with merely identifying with institutions or individuals who were Zionists. In records available from the local Jewish newspaper in Boston, *The Jewish Advocate*, it is clear that Rabbi Soloveitchik participated in Zionist committee meetings, particularly those of the Mizrachi. When Rabbi Soloveitchik ran in the election for Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv in 1935, at least some Mizrachi voters cast their ballots for him.⁵

In February 1937, R. Soloveitchik was a speaker at the national Mizrachi convention, and subsequently participated in a number of

³ As reported in *The Jewish Advocate* (June 17, 1931). See also the interview with R. Soloveitchik in *The Jewish Advocate* (September 27, 1935) upon his return from *Eretz Yisrael*.

⁴ See Seth Farber, *An American Orthodox Dreamer* (University Press of New England, 2004), chapter 2; Shachno Stein, *Arnei Chen* (Brooklyn, 1936), vol. 1, *Bereshit*, ix.

⁵ *Haaretz* (October 30, 1935).

Mizrachi meetings. He also delivered a talk at a reception for representatives who attended the Zionist Congress.⁶ R. Soloveitchik's close connections with Rabbis Wolf Gold and Meir Berlin, leading religious Zionists, no doubt played a role in his participation in the Zionist movement.

R. Soloveitchik's early affinity for Zionism is perhaps expressed best in a telegram sent to him by the Governor of Massachusetts, Leverett Saltonstall, following the issuing of the May 1939 White Paper. The British Government's White Paper rejected the partition plan for Palestine as being unviable, stating that the British no longer planned to pursue a Jewish State in Palestine, and significantly limited Jewish immigration to *Eretz Yisrael*. From Saltonstall's telegram it is clear that Rabbi Soloveitchik had called for a "day of prayer" in all Orthodox synagogues to protest the White Paper, an initiative that Saltonstall supported.⁷

All this demonstrates that R. Soloveitchik's association with Zionism and his identification with it preceded the Holocaust, notwithstanding common assumptions and his own comments in the 1960s, published in *Hamesh Derashot* as we saw above.

The most compelling evidence I have found to support the argument that R. Soloveitchik had already drawn near to Zionism in the year prior to the war is a speech I discovered in *Die Yiddische Welt*, a short-lived Boston area Yiddish newspaper. During the newspaper's run it carried some coverage of R. Soloveitchik's activities. The text below, transcribed and reported by the newspaper, presents the speech that R. Soloveitchik delivered at that 1939 rally. I discovered this text in the late 1990s in what appears to be the only extant microfilm copy of *Die Yiddische Welt*, available in the Boston Public Library. The article was published on page 4 of that Yiddish newspaper on Friday, May 26, 1939.

The rally protesting the White Paper took place in the Blue Hill Avenue Shul (Adath Jeshurun) in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston on May 22, 1939. In his speech, R. Soloveitchik called upon the community to tender financial support to the fledgling *yishuv*, and specifically mentioned the Mizrahi and Jewish National Fund (*Keren Kayemet*). Rabbi Soloveitchik spoke of the *yishuv* as the expression of the beginning of the process of national redemption (a sentiment that would largely be absent from his later Zionist thought), evidence that supports his Zionism sympathies being in place prior to the war.⁸

⁶ *The Jewish Advocate* (February 11, 1937; December 17, 1937; October 6, 1939).

⁷ *The Jewish Advocate* (May 19, 1939).

⁸ The association of the *yishuv* with a process of national redemption might have greater significance than simply highlighting R. Soloveitchik's Zionism. The term

Though a full biography of R. Soloveitchik remains a serious desideratum, it seems to me that sources like the one below tell a story that is different from the conventional understanding widely held by scholars and laypeople alike. His 1939 call to support the Religious Zionist Mizrahi organization demonstrates that his Zionism was not only a response to the Holocaust, but rather catalyzed earlier by the significance he saw in the founding of a State for the Jewish people.

[Visit TraditonOnline.org to view the original Yiddish text of this speech as reported in Die Yiddische Welt.]

The speech of the Gaon Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik delivered at the public protest meeting in the Adath Jeshurun Synagogue.

Together with the entire Jewish people, we announce triumphantly today, Monday, the fourth of Sivan, 5699 [May 22, 1939], that our rights to the Land of Israel did not originate with the Balfour Declaration and they will not be lost because of the treachery of the British. Our right to the Land of Israel began with the covenant of God with Abraham our father and continued through the promises and guarantees to our forefathers and prophets. It is based on the Torah of Moses and in the eternal books of the Bible.

We value the Land of Israel not only from the political and ethical point of view, but also, from a religious perspective. The truth is that from a political-ethical perspective, this [the White Paper] is a desecration of a martyred people, who have been chased and brutalized, with no one offering them refuge. They don't even receive the benefits afforded to animals: "Yea, the sparrow hath found a house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young" (Psalms 84:3).

But the Land of Israel is not only a refuge for us, but also a place of holiness. The return to Zion as the beginning of the redemption is closely tied to our holy faith. Our prayers are connected and directed to the Land of Israel. Any attempt to weaken the building of the Land of Israel is considered an attack on our faith.

The Jewish people, who for thousands of years have sacrificed themselves for the Torah and martyred themselves for their faith in sanctification of God's holy name, will understand now as well and will defend the Land of Israel with dedication. They will not cease their struggle until God assists us in full victory. We have not forgotten the oath "Surely I will

"redemption of the land" may have messianist overtones, something that is almost completely absent in Rabbi Soloveitchik's later writings.

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not come into the tent of my house, nor go up into the bed that is spread for me; I will not give sleep to mine eyes, nor slumber to mine eyelids; until I find out a place for the Lord, a dwelling-place for the Mighty One of Jacob” (Psalms 132:3–5).

We will remain steadfast to this with holiness. There are three principles we must remember:

1. It is forbidden for a Jew to doubt, even if we are at a loss politically, today or tomorrow, because of some Parliamentary decision. No political intrigue can destroy the promise “He that sits in heaven laughs, the Lord has them in derision” (Psalms 2:4). The Land of Israel will be ours.
2. With a greater effort and sacrifice, we must support the building of the Land. Every Jew must give beyond his means to the Jewish National Fund, and to the other funds for the Land of Israel. At a time when our brothers in the Land of Israel are standing in battle, prepared to sanctify God’s name with their blood, we here, keeping to ourselves, must offer a small sacrifice of charity. “Then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul unto the Lord, when thou number them” (Exodus 30:12).
3. We must know that the Land of Israel which God promised does not have to be exclusively a geographical or political entity but, rather, a holy one according to the characterization of the Torah. Our victory depends on the manner in which we build the Land of Israel. The Land of Israel without Shabbat, without Kashrut, without the sanctity of marital life, without Torah, without *yeshivot*, cannot exist. This is the first condition that God established with us. “If ye walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, and do them” (Leviticus 26:3).

The Land of Israel is singularly identified with our religion; the Land of Israel where religion is not defiled; where Shabbat is observed; where education is predicated on our sacred traditions, and where we are not afraid of anyone; “A thousand may fall at Thy side, and ten thousand at Thy right hand; these evils shall not touch you” (Psalms 91:7).

We must support religious institutions in Israel, *yeshivot*, schools, the Mizrahi institutions, the old *yishuv*, and those who have long stood on defense of the walls. We must protect the holiness of the Land, for the redemption of the Land is predicated upon this.

My brothers: Remember the words of the High Priest anointed for war: “Hear, O Israel, ye draw nigh this day unto battle against your enemies; let not your heart faint; fear not, nor be alarmed, neither be ye affrighted at them; for the Lord your God is He that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you” (Deuteronomy 20:3–4).