

Boston Rabbi's "No" Almost Retired Golda

JERUSALEM (JCNS) — A telephone call from a Boston rabbi, Rabbi Dr. Joseph Ber Soloveitchik to Jerusalem doomed Mrs. Meir's chances of quickly forming a government with the National Religious Party as a member of a coalition.

There is a measure of irony in the fact that Israel's Chief Rabbi, Shlomo Goren, reversed his stand in favor of the National Religious Party entering into a new Israeli Government coalition only after consultations by transatlantic telephone with the leading Talmudist in the United States (some say the world), Rabbi Dr. Soloveitchik.

For Rabbi Soloveitchik would today have been sitting in Rabbi Goren's place had he not turned down an invitation to assume the Ashkenazi Chief

Rabbinate of Israel after the death of Chief Rabbi Herzog some fourteen years ago.

"One of the reasons why I did not accept the post of Chief Rabbi," he was to say later, "was that I was afraid to be an officer of the State. A rabbinate linked up with a State cannot be completely free."

Born in Brisk, Lithuania, in 1903, he stems from a family of notable Jewish scholarship. His grandfather was Rabbi Haim Soloveitchik, the "Brisker Rav", who was succeeded by his son, Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik, the father of the present Rabbi Soloveitchik. Both father and son have served as professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University and many of today's leaders of the so-called "Modern Orthodox"

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movement in American Judaism are products of their teaching.

Admiring the depth of his knowledge, the scope of his scholarship, and his towering authority in matters of Jewish law, religious authorities in many parts of the world — not least in Israel — have frequently turned to Rabbi Soloveitchik for his rulings. They have done so particularly when, for various reasons, they wanted to be certain of carrying the mass of American Orthodoxy with them. Thus, one of the factors which helped quiet some critics of Rabbi Goren's findings in the famous Langer "mamzerim" case was the fact that Rabbi Soloveitchik endorsed the Israeli Chief Rabbi's rulings.

But there are those, both in Israel and the U.S., who find his halachic interpretations unbending and immoderate. he has, for example, ruled absolutely against those synagogues where men and women sit together. To a young man who moved into an area of Brookline (where Rabbi Soloveitchik has his home) and who pleaded that he be allowed to attend one such synagogue on Yom Kippur if only to hear the sounds of the shofar (which otherwise he would have been unable to hear), the Rabbi replied: It would be better not to hear the shofar than to enter a synagogue whose sanctity has been profaned.

And later he added the opinion that such a gathering "has

none of the sanctity of a synagogue, any prayers offered there are worthless in the eyes of Jewish law." It amounted to "christianization" of the synagogue against which "Orthodoxy must mobilize all its forces and wage an indefatigable battle," he added.

At the same time, his defenders point out that this same Rabbi, who has been accused of "obscurantism" by his critics, raises no objection to the presence of women at his Talmudic discourses, which are held each Saturday night at the Maimonides School in Brookline.

The paradox in his advice to the NRP not to join Mrs. Meir's coalition lies in the fact that he has long argued in favor of separation of religion from politics in Israel, not, he stresses because he is in any sense in favor of "religious liberalism" or could accept a secular State, but because he doubts whether the struggle to maintain religious standards through political action was worthwhile.

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First of all, the religious community in Israel would not have incurred the animosity of the people. "The secularists would not have been able to blame us for interfering in Israel's way of life."

It would have been the State and not religion which would have suffered by separation. "It's own image would not have been tarnished." He had advised the then Mizrahi Party (now the NRP) not to press for religious legislation because "in cultural educational and spiritual projects we could manifest to the secular community that Judaism consists both of Halachic disciplines and all-embracing Judaism, giving self-fulfillment and meaningfulness to their lives.

"People would have looked up to us as religious leaders and would not have accused us of acting as politicians."

If now his detractors were to challenge his recent advice to the National Religious Party as being in contradistinction to his own recorded opinions, he would probably reply, as he has on a previous occasion, that the real danger lies in the attempt to make of the State an ideal in itself, standing above Jewish life and values.

Clearly, Rabbi Soloveitchik feels that the question of conversion according to the Halacha (rabbinic law) is one of those values on which a firm stand must be maintained, even at such a moment of national crisis for the State of Israel.

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