

PEOPLE

They're still heeding words of 'the Rav'

By JONATHAN MARK

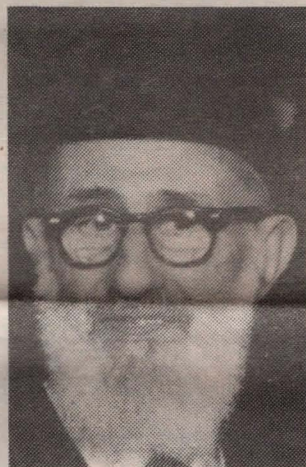
SUMMER IN CAPE COD, 1967. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik sits dazed in his cottage, still mourning his wife, Tonya, who had died that winter. His goatee is now a majestic beard. Soloveitchik had not been by Tonya's side when she died, and he can't forgive himself. At the funeral he says he feels like Jeremiah, knowing that Jerusalem's days are numbered but believing his love alone can protect her forever.

Three of his students from Yeshiva University drive from New York to comfort him. They rent a bungalow near the man they reverentially call "the Rav" — rabbi par excellence.

"We were there," recalls Rabbi Meir Fund, one of those students, "so he was stuck with us. When he went to go to shul Friday night, we were on the porch ready to walk him.

"He came to the door and glared at us with a look that could kill. He walked, we walked. We asked him questions about our learning. The first question was met by a grumble,

'It was his love of Torah, this desire to share, that drew him out.'



Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

but over the course of the Shabbos he became a different man. We literally brought him back from the dead.

"It was really his love of Torah, this desire to share, that drew him out," Fund says. "And he thanked us for coming."

In his wife's honor, Soloveitchik would teach his visitors "Likueti Torah" and "Tanya," two of the theological centerpieces of the Chabad-Lubavitch chasidim. In his loneliness, even the phonetic similarity of Tanya and Tonya would be a consolation.

Soloveitchik first came to Tanya when he was 7 years old, and was surreptitiously taught it by his teacher. When his father, Moshe — an adamant opponent of chasidus — found out, the teacher was run out of town.

But as Soloveitchik would say decades later, "The damage was done. To this day I'm indebted to Chabad. Otherwise I wouldn't know the difference between one *Yontif* and another."

Starved for love at home, young Joseph became intoxicated by Judaism's non-legal hemisphere, the world of prayer and passion. The contrast was startling with the Soloveitchik home.

"I am held captive," Soloveitchik wrote of his childhood. "I was taught to hold in my feelings, not to show anything of my emotional world. My father and master, may his memory be a blessing, used to say: 'The holier a feeling, the more it requires hiding in the depths.' ... Never once did I have the privilege of being kissed by him."

Almost alone among the great Eastern European rabbis, there are but a few romantic tales or legends about the Soloveitchiks. The family's personality was mirrored both by Joseph's kissless memory and their Brisker method, which analyzed the Talmud as would a mathematician rather than a poet.

Soloveitchik left home, with his mother's blessing, at 22 to enroll in the University of Berlin. It was an era when

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going to college was considered heresy by Orthodox Jews, but in the mid-1920s Weimar Berlin became home to a Jewish "Lost Generation" that would change the course of Judaism.

Soloveitchik, the future oracle of Modern Orthodoxy, enrolled at the university in 1925. He was joined two years later by a young student from Russia, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was to become the spiritual heart of Conservative Judaism and New York's Jewish Theological Seminary. In 1929 the new Orthodox fellow on campus was 27-year-old Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who was to become the Lubavitcher rebbe. That same year Isaac Hutner arrived, a rabbi who was to become an icon in New York's post-World War II yeshiva world.

The impact of these four friends on their field may be rivaled only by the impact of John, Paul, George and Ringo on their's.

It was at the university that Soloveitchik met Tonya. She was a secular Jew, a butcher's daughter who returned to Orthodoxy one Saturday night after hearing the words of Havdalah. Yet Tonya always remained her own person, refusing to cover her hair like most other Orthodox wives.

Soloveitchik married her after a fight with his father that had Joseph storm out of the house.

Although Soloveitchik earned his doctorate in philosophy, his pain at the breach with his father and grandfather over going to university and marrying Tonya was something that was to pain him for decades. Fund once asked him: "Why did you study in the university?"

Soloveitchik "reacted like someone stuck a needle in him," said Fund, "as if this was still a sore spot. For him it was a tremendous act of betrayal to his father, on some level, to go to Berlin," and all that Berlin and the university symbolized as a city of intellectual and spiritual synthesis and ferment.

In 1932 the Nazis redefined Berlin as their own, and the Soloveitchiks immigrated to Boston. In 1941 Joseph was appointed to succeed his father as the *rosh yeshiva* [rabbinical dean and Talmud teacher], as well as philosophy professor, at Yeshiva University.

Soloveitchik was a reluctant heir to his father's throne. He refused to move to New York and for almost 50 years commuted twice a week from Boston to Y.U.'s Manhattan campus. Some students, missing him in his absences, complained that for all practical purposes he was a perennial visiting professor rather than a presence on the campus, as is usual for a rosh yeshiva at other more traditional yeshivas.

Soloveitchik taught his students that the key role of a rabbi is "to redress the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone, to protect the dignity of the poor, to save the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor. ... Neither ritual decisions nor political leadership constitute the main task of halachic man." And yet, Soloveitchik became inundated with questions and requests that were overwhelmingly about ritual rather than the redress of social wrongs.

As the lone rabbi of his stature to support the "Modern Orthodox" religious orientation, he became the court of last — and often first — resort for hundreds. He was looked up to as a chief judge. But Soloveitchik preferred to act in the manner of a chasidic rebbe. A rebbe rarely makes ritual decisions, but rather attempts to inspire his disciples to fulfill their own potential. But Soloveitchik's students would often take his encouragement as an imprimatur, creating the odd yet frequent situation in which two opposing rabbis would both claim to have Soloveitchik's "total" support on ritual or philosophic matters.

In fact, Soloveitchik's greatness so overwhelmed Y.U. rabbis that with the exception of some of the more authoritarian chasidic groups, no other group has come to be so reliant upon one authority or more resistant to criticism of that one teacher. There is rarely a religious ruling made by a Y.U.-ordained rabbi that does not seek to find some refuge in a previous statement by Soloveitchik.

According to Fund, Soloveitchik's style of teaching was never to be satisfied. "He was always pushing the frontiers further back. He'd try to draw the student out to ask the question, being more interested in questions than answers. He was extremely confrontational with students in his *shiur* [rabbinical class]. He'd embarrass people, yell at them, abuse them. All just to shake them up and get them to learn.

"Nevertheless, under that anger was a tremendous gift of love, obviously. It was a gift to the students that he took them so seriously."

Hillel Goldberg, author of "Between Berlin and

Slobodka," a collective biography of Soloveitchik, Heschel, Hutner and others, writes that Soloveitchik would spill "forth in lectures and writings the most intimate of thoughts, expressing, for example, feelings toward his wife, conflicts with family and anguished struggles with God."

However, Goldberg adds that Soloveitchik "trained most of his talmudists so narrowly that they presume that 'real' religious thought can only be produced by a method of Talmud-like rigorous logic — surely not by passionate subjectivity and confession. ... He built respect for talmudic-philosophic synthesis — respect, but not understanding nor actualization. His synthesis is forbiddingly idiosyncratic," rooted in his own influences and personality; requiring a depth of talmudic and Western learning and religious imagination "that only an elite can hope to acquire."

Goldberg points out that "the ironic indicator of his failure to mold students in the framework of his synthesis is the collective split personality of his disciples: There are disciples in talmudic learning and disciples in Jewish thought, but only rarely are they the same person."

Soloveitchik's first years at Y.U. coincided with the Holocaust, and while he attended various strategic gatherings and parlor meetings concerned with the rescue of European Jewry, he later confessed to his students, "I will have to answer to the heavenly court for why I did nothing" during those years. "I was not a hero."

Perhaps it was this regret that led Soloveitchik to his moment of greatest rabbinic heroism just several years later. Alone among America's Orthodox sages, and despite the anti-Zionism espoused by earlier Soloveitchiks, he supported and gave religious sanction to political Zionism, declaring that it is religiously preferable to live in an Israel ruled by secular Jews than to live anywhere else.

Soloveitchik, however, visited Israel only briefly and once. In 1959 he declined the nomination to be Israel's chief rabbi. Nevertheless, his impact on American Zionism was singular: He is the only leading Orthodox sage to support the singing of "Hatikvah" (the Israeli national anthem), the celebration of Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day) and the synagogue prayer for the State of Israel. Without Soloveitchik, Orthodox Zionism in America would barely have a pulse.

Soloveitchik also was the only Orthodox authority to legitimize participation in interdenominational rabbinic and synagogue groups such as the New York Board of Rabbis and the Synagogue Council of America, albeit with strict guidelines and limitations against theological debate.

Although Soloveitchik developed a reputation as a halachic liberal, he also issued several rulings that helped establish a tall wall between Orthodoxy and the other denominations. He ruled, for example, that it is better to stay home on Rosh HaShanah than to hear the shofar blown in a non-Orthodox service.

The spiritual godfather of the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America, Soloveitchik admonished his students that "A rabbinical organization is not a professional fraternity," dedicated to economic and political ends, but must remember its primary obligation to the Jewish people and principles.

Soloveitchik was honored recently by the Orthodox Union, but he was confined to his home in Brookline, Mass., paralyzed by a neurological disease that has plagued him since 1986. It has been years since he has been allowed visitors or exchanged correspondence.

His mind is "gone now," reports the Boston Globe, a mind that has gone where few others have.

Readers write

We welcome letters for publication but ask that they be legible—typewritten and doublespaced—and as brief as possible. We cannot print all letters, especially if they are similar to others, and letters may be edited. Unsigned letters will not be considered, but, when appropriate, signature will be withheld on request.

Flawed portrayal

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the towering figure at the center of the renaissance of Orthodox Jewry in America, is a complex and multifaceted figure — teacher, theologian and philosopher. But at his core he is an halachist. He believes that the halacha, the body of Jewish law, is the ultimate expression of God's will through which we can discern His design for mankind and the universe. To the study of Torah, the Rav brings the rigorous, analytical Brisker methodology, inculcated in him by his father.

The Rav does not lend himself to easy definition. Nor can his seething intellect be easily plumbed. Thus, one can only be dismayed by the pedestrian notions, sophomoric psychoanalysis and outright inaccuracies contained in the profile of him (Dec. 25-31).

Contrary to the contention in the article that there existed a deep-seated and long-term chasm between father and son, the opposite is the fact. The Rav cherished his relationship with Rav Moshe above all others. Indeed, the Rav's first major essay, "*Ish Halachah*," "Halachic Man," is an intellectual portrait modeled on his father. Rarely a *shiur* (lecture) would go by in which the Rav did not quote his father.

To the Rav, much in life is hidden, mysterious, beyond human comprehension. That which is most holy is most cloistered. It is in that context that the Rav spoke of the intense

relationship between his father and himself, which was not confirmed by a kiss or outward expression of affection — a fact seized upon by the author — because it was so deep a love.

The article trivializes this relationship, and in the process misrepresents a man of historic dimensions, and of great integrity and passion, who ought not be measured by the yardstick of the commonplace.

The Rav's intense feelings of love for his father were reciprocated by the latter. Although the university experience was not that conventional during the Rav's formative years, by no means did it provoke any estrangement with his father. Indeed, in a 1936 letter to a Rabbi Bauminger of Israel Rav Moshe, in reflecting great pride concerning the Rav's brilliance and achievements, underscore the latter's accomplishments at the University of Berlin, where he earned his Ph.D. in philosophy.

Contrary to the suggestion in the article, the Rav is much, much more than the intellectual centerpiece of Modern Orthodoxy. Rather, his extraordinary talents have preserved for all the tradition of Torah and expanded its realm in America, thereby allowing an ancient tradition to speak to, and prosper in, a new, otherwise secular and inhospitable climate.

The thousands from every strata of Orthodox Jewish life and beyond who attended each of his public *shiurim* and lectures testify to the fact that the insights he

offered were universally acclaimed within Orthodoxy.

Moreover, the Rav's published works are studied in every yeshiva that is worthy of the name, and, in response to popular demand, have been translated into numerous languages. The requests for permission to translate still come in.

Julius Berman
New York, N.Y.

The writer is honorary president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and a former chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations.

The portrayal of Rav Soloveitchik is marred by so many half-truths that I can hardly recognize in it the image of my revered teacher and mentor, whom I have had the privilege of knowing close to a half century. Admittedly, it is difficult to properly depict such a spiritual giant when one proceeds on the basis of assumptions about psychological motivations.

In the attempt to dramatize the alleged conflict between the Rav and his late father, you fail to mention the extraordinary close bonds of love between them. The father was so overawed by the greatness of the son that he often minimized his own historic role. With boundless humility, he described himself merely as the son of the illustrious Rav Chaim of Brisk and the father of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Conversely, the Rav hardly ever delivered a *shiur* on any talmudic subject without citing an opinion of Rav Moshe, his father.

I also find it difficult to believe that the Rav regarded his studies at the University of Berlin as betrayal of his father. Rav Moshe himself taught at the Tachkemoni School in

Warsaw, which did not oppose secular studies. Moreover, I had many conversations with the Rav in which he referred to his university studies. It is true that he spoke of the difficulties in pioneering reconciliation between the world of Brisk with that of Berlin. But I could never detect the slightest guilt feelings about his confronting the world of modernity.

It is also wrong to attribute the Rav's unwillingness to move to New York to reluctance to step into his father's position. His passionate commitment to the cause of Jewish education and his insistence that girls as well as boys should receive a sound grounding in halacha was the real reason he chose to remain in Boston, where rather than being confined to an academic ivory tower he was able to influence the educational policies of the Maimonides Day School, which he had founded, and to have an impact upon the Boston community.

Rabbi Walter S. Wurzburger
Lawrence, N.Y.

The writer is a past president of the Rabbinical Council of America and the Synagogue Council of America. He was editor of the RCA journal Tradition, where many of Soloveitchik's writings appeared.

I was sickened by the article about Rav Soloveitchik. The muddled thoughts and the shallow, inane statements can perhaps be forgiven, as they indicate defects of knowledge. But the lack of reverence for Rav Soloveitchik, one of the greatest Torah personalities in centuries, is inexcusable and unpardonable.

It was an awesome experience to be a student of the Rav. After years of study I was able to gain some insight into the marvelous workings of this great mind. The passage

“Music were your laws to me (Psalms 119:54)” was truly actualized by the Rav’s Torah. Listening to his clear, logical talmudic thought was like listening to a great symphony.

The notions of the Brisker method, the Rav’s family and the Rav’s personality are so inaccurate they are unworthy of comment.

The writer thinks he can enlighten people about a great mind when he strings together a few disconnected facts from which we are supposed to deduce the character of the Rav. But he has not the slightest idea of the stature of the Rav, a true giant whose deeds and actions stem from a deep internal source of which only those who knew him had an inkling.

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