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# Searching For The Rav's Voice

This is about a man's search for a number of taped lectures by his famous father, tapes the son believes have been lost, hidden or stolen. But on a deeper level, it may well be about a son's quest for his father's soul, and a religious community's search for its voice — a means of justifying its past while seeking direction for the future.

That community is Modern Orthodoxy, and its voice still belongs to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a brilliant Talmudic scholar and man of letters known simply as the Rav (or, Rabbi), who died in 1993. For 31 years, from 1953 to 1984, Rabbi Soloveitchik's advanced Talmud classes at Yeshiva University, combining discourses and discussions with his students, were tape recorded as a primary source for future publication. His son, Haym, a professor of Jewish history at Yeshiva, claims that the overwhelming majority of those tapes are missing, and he is determined to find them, taking legal action now to do so.

"Their absence creates a vacuum," he says, noting that the Rav's views and pronouncements have been open to varying interpretations within the Orthodox community. "I have a responsibility as a son and as an executor to make sure his legacy doesn't go down a black hole."

But his is largely a private pursuit, and one senses that most leaders of the Orthodox community, including those who revered the Rav and consider the tapes to be a cultural treasure, would prefer that the matter simply disappear, perhaps like the tapes themselves.

Haym Soloveitchik refuses to speculate

publicly on where the tapes are, who may have taken them and why. But his inquiry has focused on Julius Berman, a highly respected New York attorney, communal leader and devotee of the Rav, serving for many years as his attorney, pro bono.

In the summer of 1984, at the Rav's request, Berman removed many boxes of tapes from the Rav's apartment in the Yeshiva University dorms and stored them in the basement of his own Brooklyn home for safekeeping. There they remained for nine years until, at the request of the Rav's estate, after his death, they were returned. Or so claims Berman, whose reputation is sterling.

But Haym Soloveitchik maintains that while 396 tapes were returned, at least 1,200 are still missing. In legal proceedings last fall, he had Berman deposed to testify about the discrepancy. The testimony revealed that the tapes were kept in a basement, near a bathroom that had water problems, though Berman insists the tapes were not damaged. Berman also said that he knew that a follower of the Rav, a Queens rabbi, had copies of the tapes made, though instructed not to. Berman also acknowledged that he himself had a set of tapes made, but insisted that he returned all of the tapes that he had stored.

Lost in the endless details of the 200-page deposition is the cultural and theological significance of those missing tapes, and the human dimension of a family in conflict and a community in disharmony, without their leader.

It is no secret that Haym Soloveitchik, a brilliant scholar with a reputation for eccen-

tricity, is alienated from his two sisters, largely over their father's care during his long illness and estate since his death. But this struggle is not about property or money. It is about how best to perpetuate the Rav's memory.

For most of his adult life, the Rav embodied Modern Orthodoxy. As a philosopher and Talmudist, he advocated both Torah scholarship and secular studies, a position that has been criticized increasingly in recent years by those on the Orthodox right.

Some feel that the Rav's halachic views and ideological insights, presumably to be found on the missing tapes, would shed light on and bolster the Modern Orthodox point of view. Indeed, Rabbi Saul Berman, a professor at Stern College, the women's division of Yeshiva, says the missing tapes represent "a communal tragedy" because their "core teachings" may be lost.

"Since so much of Modern Orthodoxy's positions are based on the Rav," says Rabbi Berman (no relation to Julius Berman), "these tapes would sustain his reputation as the master." Rabbi Berman fears that without the tapes, the Rav's "halachic impact may diminish over time, and disappear, even within Yeshiva."

"The philosophical and practical direction of Orthodoxy is in play now," agrees Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of the New Republic and friend of Haym Soloveitchik. "So many rabbis speak in [Rabbi] Soloveitchik's name," espousing different points of view, but the tapes could clarify issues of outlook and insight.

"The stakes for Orthodoxy are high," says Wieseltier, "because he was the greatest force standing in the way of the obscurantists."

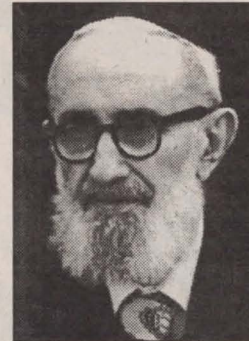
Others, though, insist that the Rav's wisdom and scholarship live on through his writings — he authored several books — as well as the teachings he passed down through his classes over the years, and the hundreds of tapes of his lectures that are intact and available to the public.

Several rabbis close to the case, who requested anonymity, described the controversy as an embarrassment and Haym's pursuit of the tapes as unnerving. "He just won't let go," said one. Some felt Haym was jealous of his father's close relationship with Julius Berman, others suggested that he is exaggerating the value of the tapes. "They would provide insight into the Rav's clarity and knowledge of Talmud," said one rabbi, "but precious little about current issues of public policy."

Haym Soloveitchik disagrees. "A vacuum has been created, and

my father's work is gone," he says. He plans to continue the slow, costly legal route, "wherever the trail leads." His goal is to recover the tapes, edit them and then "put them out there on the Internet" for all to see. "I have no doubt the tapes exist," he says.

Whether his is an obsessive search or noble quest is a matter of opinion. But even if the tapes are found, the effect they will have, if any, on Modern Orthodoxy remains to be seen. □



**Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik: Would his missing taped lectures shed light on Modern Orthodox conflicts?**