

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Portrayal of the Patriarchs

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Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's ("the Rav", 1903-1993) oeuvre is distinctive for his use of typologies—idealized “types” which he uses to illustrate the concepts he is elucidating in his essays and lectures. He employs typology in his philosophic works,¹ his eulogies,² and his biblical expositions on Genesis, specifically those dealing with the story of Adam and Eve.³

However, a close examination of R. Soloveitchik's lectures on the Bible, from the story of Abraham onward, reveals another technique: the painting of vivid portraits of the biblical personalities, so lifelike that they seem to step out of their frames and stand beside us. In this paper, I will demonstrate that the Rav's portraiture of the Patriarchs is not just a by-product of his fertile imagination and talent for poetic expression, but the direct result of the way he viewed the Jewish concept of time, Masorah (tradition), and the covenantal community.

To understand how R. Soloveitchik's treatment of the later biblical heroes differs from his portrayals of Adam and Eve, it is essential to

¹ For examples, see Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Jewish Publication Society, 1984), Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Lanham: Jason Aronson, 1992), and Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Fate and Destiny: From Holocaust to the State of Israel*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 2000), among others.

² See his eulogies for his uncle Rav Velvel Soloveitchik, Rav Hayyim Ozer Grodzinski, Rav Hayyim Heller, and Rav Ze'ev Gold in Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Divrei Hagut ve-Ha'arakhab* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1982), Hebrew.

³ See “Adam and Eve” in Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 2002) and Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man* (New York: KTAV, 2005).

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examine how he uses the typological method in general, and how he typifies the first man and woman in particular. As I will elucidate below, his Adam and Eve remain frozen in their roles as paradigms for future generations, never developing into people in their own right, while Abraham, Jacob and Joseph are portrayed as both archetypes and individuals. I will also explore the constructs that enable R. Soloveitchik to enter these biblical personalities' minds and hearts, as it were.

R. Soloveitchik employs the technique of typology in many of his works, including *Halakhic Man* (1983), *Lone Man of Faith* (1965), *Fate and Destiny* (*Kol Dodi Dofek*, 1956), "Confrontation" (1964), and "Catharsis" (1978). Whether he refers to Halakhic Man or Cognitive Man, Majestic Man or Covenantal Man, Man of Fate or Man of Destiny, Natural Man or Confronted Man, the Biblical Hero or the Halakhic Hero, it is clear that in these works the Rav is describing a category of man, not a specific individual. His goal is to delineate an idealized type, which provides insight into the condition of man, his relationship with G-d and the community, and character traits worthy of emulation. In reality, no one person fits any of these categories totally, but rather each person is a complex mixture of many. As Eugene Borowitz states, "He does not deal with things as they are ... but rather pure possibilities of existence ... the elucidation of such forms and their characteristics can help us understand the complex humanity which is ours and others, and can clarify our goals and values."⁴

Here is how R. Soloveitchik explains his typology, in his first footnote on *Halakhic Man*: "Obviously, the description of Halakhic Man given here refers to a pure, ideal type... Real Halakhic men, who are not simple but rather hybrid types, approximate, to a greater or lesser degree, the ideal Halakhic Man, each in accordance with his spiritual image or stature."⁵ In this footnote, R. Soloveitchik credits Edward Spranger (1882-1963) with using a typological approach to the human sciences, and classifying them into different types.

David Shatz describes R. Soloveitchik's use of typology in this manner: "Indeed, one may say that when Rabbi Soloveitchik refers to these "men," he is in truth speaking not of people but characteristics—that is, constellations of personality traits and attitudes that human beings

4. Eugene Borowitz, "The Typological Theology of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik," *Judaism* 15, no. 2 (1966): 205-206.

5. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 139 note 1.

possess to a greater or lesser degree, but never to the utter exclusion of other traits.”⁶

The Rav's Adam I and Adam II in *The Lonely Man of Faith* are further examples of his use of typology. At the beginning of the essay he writes that when analyzing the two versions of Adam's creation, he is contrasting “two Adams, two men, two fathers of mankind, two types, two representatives of humanity...”⁷ Further on, he states: “Let us portray these two men, Adam the first and Adam the second, in typological categories.”⁸ In this work, R. Soloveitchik uses the words “man” and “Adam” interchangeably, another indication that “Adam” does not refer to the biblical character: “Man's likeness to G-d expressed itself in man's striving and ability to become a creator. Adam the first, who was fashioned in the image of G-d, was blessed with a great drive for creative activity.”⁹ R. Soloveitchik revisits the creation of Adam in several other essays, including “Confrontation” and “Adam and Eve.” In all of them, he depicts the first man and his wife in similar allegorical terms.¹⁰

When R. Soloveitchik interprets the Bible typologically, his goal is to convey a spiritual message via these categories, with the text providing a backdrop. As he writes in “Adam and Eve”: “The purpose of this paper is to gain insight into the nature and destiny of the woman and man whom G-d created in a specific way, and to begin to formulate on the basis of these insights a philosophy of man. Yet the frame of reference we will employ will be a Scriptural one.”¹¹ In the Rav's thought the figures of Adam and Eve are always conveyed as paradigms, not as individuals.

From the story of Abraham and onward, R. Soloveitchik's exegetical style changes. Sometimes he portrays the Patriarchs as archetypes, symbolic of a certain type of man, yet more often he treats each figure as an authentic person who once lived in the past and, as we will prove, is in

⁶ David Shatz, “A Framework for Reading Ish ha-Halakhah,” in *Turim: Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Michael A. Shmidman (Jersey City: Ktav, 2008), 187.

⁷ Soloveitchik, *Lone Man of Faith*, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ Maimonides, who was R. Soloveitchik's lodestar in many ways, also described Adam and Eve metaphorically. In the *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part 1, Chapter 2, he relates the story of the Garden of Eden as an allegory. Scholars have argued that Maimonides believed that either the story actually occurred but its meaning is psychological and anthropological, or the entire story is a philosophical parable about humankind's choices and their aftermath.

¹¹ Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed*, 3.

a sense still living today, within us, his descendants. Here is how he describes this double aspect of the biblical (and rabbinic) figures:

The biblical and Masorah heroes must be treated under a double aspect. First they are to be treated as ideas, or rather ideals ... setting standards of conduct ... second, they are treated as individuals who could not free them from the ontic confinement their Creator cast them ... There is the universal Abraham and also the individual Abraham, Moses within the community and Moses in his tent far away from the people. They were great in both roles.¹²

The following are examples of how the Rav portrays the Patriarchs as “ideal” types. In “A Wandering Aramean,” he describes Abraham facing his first trial, leaving his home, in typological categories:

Disengagement, the main theme of prophecy, can be traced back to the very dawn of our history, to Abraham. Abraham had to go *mi-moladteka*, “from your birthplace.” The prophet must remove himself from his native environment. A prophet is a wanderer, a *na ve-nad*, a nomad. He dwells wherever G-d wills him to abide. He must not be a man of property and rest... You have a task to fulfill, a message to put across ... In this verse, the Torah describes the destiny of the prophet.¹³

This passage is clearly not about the flesh and blood Abraham. It is characterizing Abraham as an archetype of the lonely, homeless and wandering prophet. The Rav depicts Abraham in archetypal fashion in several other places as well.¹⁴

In “Catharsis,” R. Soloveitchik describes Jacob as a type, one he terms the “biblical hero,” in his struggle with Esau’s heavenly counterpart. He posits that Jacob manifests heroism when, on the cusp of victory, he withdraws and lets the angel depart. “The impossible and absurd had triumphed over the possible and the logical: heroism, not logic, won the day. Is this merely the story of one individual’s experience? Is it not in fact the story of *keneset Israel* (the collective Israel), an entity which is engaged

¹² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakic Morality: Essays on Ethics and Masorah* (Maggid, 2017), 28.

¹³ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, ed. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler (New York: KTAV, 2008), 77-78.

¹⁴ In *Abraham’s Journey* he is portrayed as the estranged religious leader (80-84), partner of G-d (87-88), the covenantal teacher (96-99), the man-child or young-old personality (187-188).

in an absurd struggle for survival thousands of years?"¹⁵ In various other lectures, Jacob is a paradigm for the Jew of the double commitment,¹⁶ the builder of a bridge between two worlds¹⁷ and the first Jewish grandfather.¹⁸

Joseph is also delineated in symbolic terms in "Joseph the Dreamer." In R. Soloveitchik's view, the Jewish slave promoted to Egyptian viceroy represents the quintessential Jew of the *Galut* (Diaspora), who balances dreams with pragmatism. Despite all the opposition Joseph faces, he refuses to change his aspirations, or assimilate, and clings to his ideals. At the same time, he is the statesman par excellence who saved the Egyptians from a terrible famine.¹⁹ In the Rav's words:

The Jew represents the same ambivalence; he has inherited Joseph's dual nature. On the one hand we are very practical people... We have a down-to-earth approach and emotions do not sweep us off our feet... On the other hand, like Joseph, we are dreamers, prophets and visionaries beholding the whole universe, hoping and believing that even though it is slow in coming...the Messiah will finally arrive.²⁰

The Rav employs the figure of Joseph multiple times to represent different "types." He is the "dreamer,"²¹ the "king-teacher,"²² and the "saintly one."²³ When presenting the biblical figure as a paradigm, he focuses either on a certain character trait or a life-altering decision that Patriarch made, and uses it as a model for the Jewish people and the individual Jew to emulate.

When Rabbi Soloveitchik chooses to bring the Patriarchs and other biblical figures to life as *people*, he focuses more on their joys and fears, hopes and disappointments, and existential angst. Suddenly, they are no longer ancient heroes from a prehistoric past, but living, breathing

¹⁵ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Catharsis," *Tradition* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1978), 41.

¹⁶ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition* (Spring 1964), 5-29.

¹⁷ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses on Israel, History and the Jewish People* (Judaica Press, 1982), 123-125.

¹⁸ Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought Adapted from the Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (New York: KTAV, 1993), 17-18.

¹⁹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, ed. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: Ktav, 2013), 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

²² *Ibid.*, 12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 45-47. See also Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "He-Hasid Ha-Meualah ve-ha-Moshel be-Nafsho," in Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikkaron*, ed. Shlomo Schmidt. trans. Moshe Kronch (Jerusalem: WZO, 1986), Hebrew.

individuals, reaching out their hands to clasp ours across the generations. Here is how the Rav depicts the moment when Abraham finally reaches his awesome conclusion that there is one G-d:

We can visualize the excitement and the tremor that Abraham experienced when he finally came to the conclusion that there is, behind the millions of stars and flying nebulae ... an omniscient, omnipotent, eternal and infinite Being Who created and sustains His creation. Abraham ... completely intoxicated with love and longing, would have fallen on his face and prayed. "Dear G-d, please show me a sign that You are there, beyond everything outside of time and space ... Please say one word to me. Let me hear Your voice. Let me see Your countenance. Let me feel Your breath on my pale fatigued face ..." However, the Almighty did not respond to Abraham.²⁴

In this passage it is Abraham the *man* who is depicted, not Abraham the archetype. In another example, R. Soloveitchik describes the dialectical tension experienced by Abraham when on the one hand, he was told by G-d to renounce the world, yet on the other hand, he longed to spread G-d's word among the people:

Our lonely father was a loving man with a sincere affection for people. He was lonesome for companionship, the warmth and coziness of a life together. How could he be satisfied with his secluded life, with a hermit-like existence, with loneliness and continual withdrawal, when he was burdened with a great message which he had, willy-nilly, to deliver? ... In despair, he cried out to G-d, "L-rd G-d, what will you give me, seeing I go *ariri*?" (Gen. 15:2) *Ariri* does not only mean childless; it means lonely ... Abraham wanted a child upon whom to pour out his love and affection. He wanted to love and be loved.²⁵

Abraham is depicted in these examples not as a type or a category, but as a passionate man who on the one hand is ecstatic that he has found what he has been searching for, and on the other hand **is** a lonely human being, struggling between two ideals.²⁶

²⁴ Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, 47-48.

²⁵ Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, 84-85.

²⁶ Maimonides also treats Abraham as a personage, not a "type." In his *Mishneh Torah*, in his introduction to *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* (The Laws of Idol Worship) he describes in great detail the background of Abraham that is not written in the Torah: his discovery of the one G-d at age forty after many years of observing nature; his engagement in philosophical discussion with those who

Another example of how R. Soloveitchik treats the Patriarchs and their children as actual people can be found in the way he describes Joseph's first meeting with his brothers after seventeen years of separation. He addresses the repetition of the phrase, "And he recognized them" (Gen. 42:8-9). When Joseph first looked at his brothers, he based his recognition on past experience. He noted the "same characters, the same excitability, the same quick tempers, the same ruthless natures, and so on." Bad memories were awakened, "all the pain, all the chicanery, all the beatings, and all the abuse he had taken."²⁷ Therefore, he disguised himself. The second statement, "Joseph recognized them," hints to us that he discovered a change in his siblings:

Levi's and Simeon's faces had softened; they did not reflect ferocity and hardness. There was a different glimpse in their eyes; the steely gray eyes had turned blue, dreamy. Judah's face had matured; there was a firmness and determination in his features. They all looked as if they were suffering from a depressive mood, as if they lacked inner peace, as if some grisly fear had haunted them ... Suddenly Joseph realized that the ten people who stood before him were not the same people who had sold him into slavery. His ire subsided.²⁸

After reading this passage, who can doubt that, in R. Soloveitchik's eyes, Joseph and his brothers were real people, locked in a drama of betrayal, repentance and reconciliation? The question is—what mechanism allowed him to step into their shoes?

It is clear that R. Soloveitchik does not arrive at his solution to the repeated phrase, "and he recognized them" by merely analyzing the context and finding a logical answer. His penetrating insights into the psyche, motivations and actions of the Patriarchs are derived from his ability to enter their minds and hearts. To him they are not ancient forebears, separated from him by thousands of years, but people who are, somehow, alive today. "When we speak about Abraham, we must always remember that the Bible is not only a book narrating events that transpired so many millennia ago. *It speaks of events that are still taking place before our eyes*" (italics mine).²⁹

challenged him and his winning over many minds to monotheism; his journey to Canaan to spread the word even further. R. Soloveitchik devoted an entire lecture to analyzing this chapter and elaborating upon it (See *Abraham's Journey*, pp. 19-48).

²⁷ Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership*, 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

²⁹ Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, 18.

R. Soloveitchik explains this concept further in an essay analyzing “Charismatic Man” as a historical personality. He quotes the verse in Genesis 13:14-15, in which G-d tells Abraham: “Lift up now your eyes, and look from the place where you are ... for all the land which you see, to you will I give it, and to your seed forever ...” and poses a question: How could G-d say that He will give the land to Abraham if only his descendants will inherit it?³⁰ The answer, R. Soloveitchik continues, lies in G-d’s words to Moses hundreds of years later, meant for the Jewish people. “I will bring you into the land, which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, and I will give it to you for a heritage” (Exodus 6:8). G-d meant, I shall give the land to you by having *your children* inherit it. Therefore, the promise will be fulfilled on a historical level. There is a quasi-mystical union between the charismatic personality and his descendants, the Rav explains. “The historical covenant community is *the continuous incarnation of its father*” (italics mine).³¹ In other words, we do not merely emulate our ancestors, as many other nations do—we *are* our ancestors. The Patriarchs are not just paradigms for ethical behavior. When we affirm their values and model our actions after theirs, they live again, within us.

How is this possible? How can people long since vanished from this earth still live on within their descendants, three thousand years later? In R. Soloveitchik’s opinion, this can only occur if one views time in a non-linear manner. He differentiates between two ways of experiencing time. The first he terms “*quantitative* time,” a concept he adopts from the French philosopher Henri Bergson. Quantitative time is a time measured by the clock, quantified and frozen in geometric space. This type of time is uniform, empty and non-creative.³²

Then he contrasts this with “*qualitative* time,” which is transient, intangible, and evanescent, and on the other hand, creative, dynamic, and self-emerging.³³ He uses this dichotomy to describe the paradox in historical time. On one hand, history is measured in the fleeting, vanishing change of events. Each event is experienced as something transient which can never be recaptured or retained. The past is remote and unreachable, the future is non-realized and dim.³⁴ On the other hand, historical time

³⁰ Soloveitchik, *Emergence*, 166.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

³² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Sacred and Profane: Kodesh and Chol in World Perspectives,” *Jewish Thought* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1993), 64-65.

³³ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁴ Joseph D. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, ed. Michael S. Berger (New York: KTAV, 2005), 164.

presents itself as three dimensional, encapsulating past, present and future. "To live historically means to live through all phases of history, both past and future. ... A historical community extends into both the past and the future. Its membership includes the living, the dead, and the not-yet born."³⁵ Thus, Abraham can be promised a land only his children will inherit, for the future is as close as the present to him, and we can relive the experiences of Abraham in our lives, because the past is part of us.

This concept of qualitative time surfaces in R. Soloveitchik's works in various places.³⁶ In *Halakhic Man*, R. Soloveitchik points out that (Jewish) repentance would be impossible if time was viewed quantitatively. The law states that when a Jew repents sincerely, he wipes out his past and recreates it. His past sins are converted into merits.³⁷ This proves that the past does not vanish forever; it can be recalled and redeemed. In the Rav's words:

There is a past that persists in its existence that does not vanish and disappear but remains firm in its place. Such a past enters into the domain of the present and links up with the future. Similarly, there is a future that is not hidden behind a thick cloud but reveals itself now in all its beauty and majesty. *Both—past and future—are alive; both act and create in the heart of the present and shape the very image of reality* (italics mine) ... past, present and future merge and blend together, and this new three-fold time structure arises before us adorned with a splendid unity.³⁸

In *The Halakhic Mind*, R. Soloveitchik adds a cyclical dimension to time. He writes, "The experience of time as repetition is rooted in the typically religious time awareness and is closely associated with the concept of the calendar that is indeed pure repetition ... No organized religion can dispense with such a notion of time; it is irreplaceable for the practical worshipper."³⁹ If time is a circle, we move through "past" and "future" again and again within our "present." This is why the Jewish

³⁵ Ibid., 164-165.

³⁶ See Jeffrey R. Wolf, "Time Awareness as a Source of Spirituality in the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik," *Modern Judaism* 32, no. 1 (February 2012), and David P. Goldman, "Rav Soloveitchik's New World View," *Hakirah: Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought* 24 (Spring 2018), for further examples.

³⁷ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 116.

³⁸ Ibid., 114.

³⁹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind: An Essay on Jewish Tradition and Modern Thought* (New York: Seth Press, 1986), 48.

calendar is so essential—when a Jew celebrates the festivals, he is not merely remembering past events, but reliving them.

The idea of non-linear, three-dimensional time, where the past and the future meet and blend in the present, also affected the way R. Soloveitchik viewed the Masorah—the transmission of Torah from one generation to the next. He describes the process by quoting the first verse in the Mishnah in *Avot*: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua” and then explaining it thus:

The *masorah*, the process of transmission, symbolizes the Jewish people’s outlook regarding the beautiful and resplendent phenomenon of time. This wonderful chain, which originated on that bright morning of the revelation and which stretches forward into the eschaton, represents the manner in which Jewish people experience their own history ... The consciousness of Halakhic man, that master of the received tradition, embraces the entire company of the sages of the *masorah*. ... All of them merge into one time experience. He walks alongside Maimonides, listens to R. Akiva, senses the presence of Abaye and Rabah. He rejoices with them and shares their sorrow.⁴⁰

The Rav then brings proof texts for this phenomenon: “David, king of Israel, lives and endures” (*Rosh Hashbanah* 25a); “Our father Jacob did not die” (*Taanit* 5b); and “Moses, our teacher, did not die” (*Zohar* I 37b). He continues: “There can be no death and expiration among the company of the sages of tradition. Eternity and immortality reign here in unbounded fashion. Both past and future become, in such circumstances, ever present realities.”⁴¹ Why are the biblical figures and the sages so vivid for the Rav? He believes that the chain of Masorah, operating with non-linear time, ensures that they are actually present in one’s life if one is engaged in Torah study.

Thirty years later, in a famous speech given at a *pidyon ha-ben* of a student’s son, R. Soloveitchik shared how he and his students experienced this phenomenon in the classroom:

Whenever I start the *shiur* (lecture), the door opens, another old man walks in and sits down ... His name is Reb Hayyim Brisker, without whom no *shiur* can be delivered nowadays ... and then more visitors show up ... Rabbi Akiva, Rashi, Rabbenu Tam, the Raavid, the Rashba ... I introduce them to my pupils and the dialogue

⁴⁰ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 120.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

commences. Suddenly, a symposium of generations comes into existence ... we all pursue one goal, we are all committed to a common vision. This unity of generations ... dialogue between antiquity and the present will finally bring the redemption of the Jew.”⁴²

The Rav viewed himself as a link on this chain of the Brisker tradition. After his father's passing in 1941, he and his brother, Rav Aharon, were the only representatives of Rav Hayyim's Torah in America—his grandfather's other descendants had migrated to Israel in the wake of the Holocaust. He was also a link to the vanished world of European Torah scholars—he had learned with Rav Hayyim and discussed Torah with some of his grandfather's great disciples. This made his need to transmit what he had learned all the more powerful. In the words of one eulogizer, he saw himself as “an ember plucked from the fire” (*Zechariah* 3:2).⁴³ Students in his Talmud class often heard the phrase: “*Ich hub gebert fun meyn Tatte in numen fun meyn Zeyde.*” (I heard from my father in the name of my grandfather.)

From what source did R. Soloveitchik derive this idea that the act of Masorah, learning the Torah of one's ancestors and transmitting it to descendants, is what unites one generation of the Jewish people to the next, and that without this there would be no historical and covenantal community? He finds the answer in the Bible, in the life of one of the Patriarchs.

It is Jacob who should be credited for discovering the concept of the unity of the generations, posits R. Soloveitchik. In “The First Jewish Grandfather,” he poses the following questions: Firstly, why did Jacob merit to have his name become the one associated with the Jewish people, and not Abraham or Isaac? We are referred to as the “House of Jacob” or the “Children of Israel.”⁴⁴ Secondly, why is Jacob referred to as *zaken*, the old one (*Genesis* 43:27) and as *Yisrael Saba*, our grandfather, in the Talmud? The Rav's answer: he was the first Patriarch to establish direct communication with his grandchildren. Jacob conquered time and space when he said to Joseph: “Your two sons ... are mine. Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, no less than Reuben and Simeon” (*Gen.* 48:5). They received portions in the land of Israel, because Jacob equated them

⁴² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Unity of Generations—Pidyon HaBen,” *YU Torah*, last modified 1974, <http://yutorah.org>.

⁴³ Jonathan Sacks, “Hesped for Rav Soloveitchik,” *YU Torah*, last modified 1993, <http://yutorah.org>.

⁴⁴ Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Man of Faith in the Modern World* (New York: KTAV, 1989), 17.

with his own sons.⁴⁵ Jacob also blessed his grandchildren before he blessed his own sons. The text describes how he placed his hands on their heads, an act not mentioned when he blesses his own children. This action symbolized that there was a direct transmission from Jacob to Ephraim and Manasseh.⁴⁶

Jacob was able to leap over the gulf of the generations and transmit the Masorah of Abraham directly to his grandchildren. Therefore it is appropriate that he, out of the three Patriarchs, be the one we are named for, the *Benei Yisrael* (sons of Israel). He created the Jewish community that ensures our continuity. “It was not until Jacob that the secret of the *masorah* was discovered,” declares Rav Soloveitchik.⁴⁷ There is a Midrash that tells us that the sons of Joseph studied with their grandfather daily. (*Tanḥuma va-Yehi*, quoted by Rashi in Genesis 48:1) It was the *zaken* (grandfather) who listened to their problems, worked closely with them, played and planned with them. He knew the secret of uniting the generations.⁴⁸

Thus far, we have shown that R. Soloveitchik treats the biblical figures from Abraham on, not only as archetypes, but also as authentic, flesh and blood persons, as opposed to the purely typological approach he uses with Adam and Eve. He portrays them in an extremely lifelike manner, illuminating their struggles and dreams, successes and failures. He contends that the historical community is an incarnation of its father—that our forefathers live on within us. R. Soloveitchik’s concept of non-linear time makes this belief possible: If I am part of a chain that stretches back to the past and forward to the future, then, by continuing their tradition, my ancestors live on within me, and I can change the future by teaching their Masorah to my descendants.

There is one more aspect to R. Soloveitchik’s self-identification with the Patriarchs: it leads him to empathize with their travails and to view his personal plight through their eyes. As Pinḥas Ha-Cohen Peli puts it, there is a special kind of *derush* where, “The preacher transports himself, with all his thoughts, beliefs and traits, into the biblical situation or into the person of the biblical hero, out of complete, empathetic identification. He seeks to discover himself, without severing ties to his own time and place.”⁴⁹ According to Peli, this describes R. Soloveitchik’s hermeneutics perfectly.

⁴⁵ Besdin, *Man of Faith*, 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁹ Peli, *Hermeneutics*, 15.

This empathetic relationship to the biblical figures began in R. Soloveitchik's childhood. In the essay, "Avelut Yeshanah and Avelut H'adashah," he poignantly recalls, "The story of Joseph and his brothers, the story of the destruction of the temple, the story of Moses' death, all used to move me to tears as a boy. It was not just because I was a child, it was not an infantile reaction on my part. It was very much a human *gestalt* reaction. These stories do not lie in antiquity; they are part of our time awareness, part of our historical destiny."⁵⁰

We see this self-identification in "Pesah, Writing a Story Upon a People." In it, Arnold Lustiger recounts how the Rav related to the stories of the Patriarchs:

The written word allows us to delve into man's thoughts and identify with them. When we study *Humash*, we are not merely learning of events that took place thousands of years ago. Through the skill of *ketav and hamikhtav* we become contemporaries of the protagonists. The Rav recounted how, as a child in *heder*, he studied the *parashah* of *Lekh Lekha* towards the beginning of the school year, during the raw Polish autumn. As the Rav would trudge through the muddy streets to school, he imagined how Abraham traveled to Canaan under similar circumstances. As a young boy, the Rav lived with the drama of the *akedah* and with the tragedy of Sarah's death. His heart would pound in fear that perhaps Esau would return early from the hunt before Isaac completed his blessing and Jacob would be caught red-handed.⁵¹

Of course, the young Soloveitchik could not yet articulate how or why he empathized so strongly with the heroes of the Bible; he did not yet understand the theory of qualitative time, but he intuitively felt the Patriarchs were not just characters in a long-ago story but were woven into the fabric of his own life.

This also manifested itself in his connection to his more recent predecessors in Jewish history. A particularly poignant example is when the Rav recounts how, as a young boy, he imagined that Maimonides was sitting on his cot as he listened to his father, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, defend the Rambam's honor against those rabbinic scholars who wished to defeat him:

The Rambam was a frequent guest at our house ... I used to sit on my bed and listen to my father lecturing. He would always speak

⁵⁰ Joseph D. Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition* (New York: KTAV, 2003), 16.

⁵¹ Arnold Lustiger, *Derashot ha-Rav* (Union City: Ohr Publishing, 2003), 144-145.

about the Rambam ... two impressions coalesced in my young simple brain. (1) The Rambam was surrounded by “opponents” and enemies who wanted to do him a bad turn. (2) Father was his sole defender. Were it not for Father, who knew what would have happened to the Rambam? I would feel that the Rambam himself was present, here in the parlor, listening to Father ... what did he look like? I did not know exactly. But it seemed that his appearance before Father was most comely and handsome ... Father’s face radiated joy. He had defended his “friend,” our master Moshe son of Maimon. A happy smile could be seen on his (the Rambam’s) lips...⁵²

The above examples illustrate how R. Soloveitchik fulfills the first part of Peli’s definition of *derush*, quoted above, “where the preacher transports himself ... into the biblical hero, out of complete, empathetic, identification.” The Rav also exemplifies the second part, seeking “to discover himself without severing ties to his own time and place.” This is when the Rav as an adult, explicitly portrays himself in a similar situation as a biblical character. He shares with his audience either a pertinent scene of his youth or a current personal anecdote. The pedagogical purpose of these personal revelations may have been to forge a connection with students.⁵³ These anecdotes also serve as examples of how strongly he identified with the Patriarchs. This technique gave the Rav insight into their situation, and perhaps into his own as well. There are also places in his exegesis where he does not draw any outright parallels between himself and the text, but anyone familiar with R. Soloveitchik’s biography will notice a striking similarity between his description of the episode and his own life.

One example of how R. Soloveitchik “discovers himself” within the life of a Bible personality can be found in “Joseph the Dreamer,” in which he explains why G-d wanted the House of Jacob to be exiled to Egypt for so many years. Why was all the torture, enslavement and humiliation necessary? His answer: G-d wanted the children of Israel, especially Joseph, to appreciate Abraham’s code of morality. Joseph and his

⁵² Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning* (New York: KTAV, 2003), 222-223, citing and translating an excerpt from Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “U-Vikashtem mi-Sham,” *Hadarom*, September, 1979, pp. 1-83.

⁵³ In fact, the Rav is known for his haunting, self-revelatory public confessions, out of character for someone in his position as head of a prestigious Yeshiva. This habit of confiding in his audience has been attributed to pedagogical purposes—he felt that modern American boys needed to relate to their Rebbe. See “Student and Teacher,” in Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Volume 2 (New York: KTAV, 1999), 241-243.

brothers had been born into the House of Jacob, and Abraham's ethics of charity and kindness was all they knew. They had never experienced evil or cruelty. Joseph was brought up with Abraham's principles and therefore took them for granted. He didn't appreciate Jacob's greatness. Perhaps, since he was so young and talented, he was critical of his old father. This is why he had to leave his father's house, and spend time in an executioner's house, who administered justice of a very different kind than the Halakhah requires. He had to meet Potiphar's wife to appreciate his mother's modesty. He had to spend two years in jail. Above all, he had to learn to sacrifice.⁵⁴

R. Soloveitchik connects this startling idea—although there is something exalted about the Torah, one cannot always find it from within—with his own experience:

Many times I could not understand what was so great about our household. I was brought up in a house of rabbis, in a scholarly home, but I used to find fault with my father, with my grandfather, and so forth. No one could convince me until I spent a number of years among Gentiles, among Germans. I spent my time among the best of society in the academic community, and I saw many people who were supposed to be very ethical and moral. But I began to compare them with my grandfather or father, and I realized the difference ... It was as if a shining star had appeared on the horizon, as if a comet had suddenly exploded. I realized that my grandfather Reb Hayyim would have acted differently, that my father would have helped this person...⁵⁵

A more direct identification with the biblical Joseph occurs in the Rav's Mizrachi address, "And Joseph Dreamt a Dream." In this speech, delivered to Mizrachi party members in the United States, he uses the story of Joseph's mistreatment at the hands of his brothers as an analogy for the way he and the members of the Mizrachi were misunderstood, maligned, and ostracized by the leaders of the religious right (who identified themselves with the Agudah party) for supporting the cause of the Jewish state. The fact that he shares this biblical hero's name makes the analogy all the more powerful. In the Rav's words:

We were lonely, as Joseph the dreamer was lonely among his brothers who mocked him. Our brethren also suspected us of many sins and looked at us "from far off" ... It was not a pleasant

⁵⁴ Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership*, 17-19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 17-18. For another example of this technique, see "An Old Father," *ibid.*, 61-63.

experience to be far off from the Tribes of G-d, from the great ones of the generation. ... To be separated from his outstanding brothers, ostracized, as it were, not only by “part of the Sanhedrin” but by the majority of them, was a tragedy for Joseph. They (the contemporary anti-Zionist religious brethren) drove “Joseph” (religious Zionists) from the *shtibelach* (small centers of prayer and study in Eastern Europe), forced him out of the rabbinate, and expelled him from the society of Torah scholars. They humiliated him everywhere...⁵⁶

In the remainder of the lecture, R. Soloveitchik explains how Joseph’s dreams symbolized his vision of the future, and how they paralleled the experiences of the Mizrachi. The first dream about sheaves of wheat represent the shift from a pastoral life to an agricultural one, which G-d required from Jacob’s family if they were to survive their sojourn in Egypt. And the second vision of the sun, moon and stars was a portent of the new economic and social order for which they had to be prepared.⁵⁷

The Mizrachi also had a vision, “a dark foreboding of something terrifying, an apocryphal vision of catastrophe...”⁵⁸ They realized that the world of the *shtetel* was doomed, and that they needed to help establish a homeland where they and their brothers could find sanctuary. They understood that this would require sacrifice of an entire way of life, and a confrontation with a new world order, which radiated scientific learning and technology.⁵⁹ For these ideas they were vilified by the religious right, who declared that leaving the walls of the synagogues and study halls, and joining the “freethinkers” in any endeavor, was heresy. Asks the Rav: And how do we know who was right? His answer: In historical matters, as opposed to matters of Halakhah, it is G-d himself who decides! Just as G-d decided that Joseph was correct in paving a path for his brethren in Egypt, so too the Creator of the universe decided that the historical law would be as the religious Zionists predicted, as evinced by the creation of the modern state of Israel! And the involvement of the religious Zionists ensured that there would be a place where the yeshivot and Torah scholars rescued from the inferno could take root and grow.⁶⁰

This powerful lecture is the only instance where the Rav publicly shared the loneliness and pain he endured as a result of the disrespect and

⁵⁶ Joseph D. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses on Israel, History and the Jewish People* (Judaica Press, 1982), 25-26.

⁵⁷ Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks*, 28.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 30-31

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

humiliation he was subjected to throughout his career from the religious right as the religious leader of the Mizrachi party in America. His position as Rosh Yeshiva in an institution which many of his rabbinic colleagues did not view as a true yeshiva, due to its embrace of a Torah U-Madda ideology, and his innovations in the area of women's education, only added to the ostracism.⁶¹ It is interesting to note that he ends the lecture on the following wistful note:

I sometimes think that were the great brethren of the "Joseph" of 5662, the world-renowned genius personalities in Torah and sublime saints, living today, they would discern the miracle in the establishment of the State of Israel, and they would utter song and praise to the Holy One, blessed be He.

As the above excerpts reveal, R. Soloveitchik sees in Joseph's experiences reflections of his own life struggles. However, powerful as these examples are, I submit that the Rav relates *even more* to Abraham as a personality. This was because he typifies Joseph as the quintessential *ba'al ha-bayit* (layman), while he categorizes Abraham as a philosopher and a teacher, which are roles that he himself embodied and could relate to.

Although he does not say so in so many words, when R. Soloveitchik discusses how Abraham was estranged from society, he could be describing himself. "The religious leader is a person who retreats from society into seclusion and loneliness ... the covenantal community's religious leader must be capable of being alone in his universe of values and ideals..."⁶² R. Soloveitchik, upon his own admission, was lonely for a variety of reasons: as a man of faith living in a modern world, as a world-class Torah sage and philosopher living in Boston, far from like-minded

⁶¹ For example, in 1956 eleven leading American Roshei Yeshiva signed a public announcement prohibiting rabbis and synagogues from becoming members in groups which also included non-Orthodox clergymen (Reform and Conservative). This was obviously aimed at curbing involvement with the Synagogue Council of America, and Rav Soloveitchik was not even asked for his opinion on the matter. By the time he was aware of their intentions, it was a fait accompli. (See Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, 47.) After giving the inaugural Talmud lecture to Stern College for Women, a group of *rabbanim*, led by R. Yitzchak Hutner and R. Shimon Schwab, decided to put the Rav and the college in *herem*, but when they could not get Rav Moshe Feinstein, the leading *posek* of the day, to join them the plan was abandoned. (See: Saul Berman, "Forty Years Later: The Rav's Opening Shiur at the Stern College for Women Beit Midrash," Lehrhaus, October 9, 2017, <http://www.thelehrhaus.com>.)

⁶² Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, 81.

colleagues.⁶³ “The leader must be ready and willing to tolerate abuse and humiliation.”⁶⁴ In the early days in Boston, R. Soloveitchik’s authority was challenged, and he was even taken to court, accused of taking personal profit from the tax on kosher meat.⁶⁵

He continues his description of Abraham thus: “The crowd hates the individual who displays unique talents and hence departs from established patterns ... that is why Abraham the stranger, Abraham the wandering Aramean, was an object of mockery and derision. He was looked upon as a maverick, a peculiar sort of a person, a dreamer, a visionary, and particularly, more than anyone else, a troublemaker.”⁶⁶ R. Soloveitchik, a *talmid hakham* par excellence and an expert in secular philosophy, who did not hesitate to use this knowledge to illuminate concepts in Judaism, was looked upon as a maverick by his fellow Roshei Yeshiva. Although they may have admired his erudition in Torah, he was not accepted into their “inner circle.” Nevertheless, like his forefather Abraham, he did not waver in his stand for what he believed in.⁶⁷

One can see other echoes of R. Soloveitchik’s persona in “Abraham the Teacher.” He describes G-d’s partnership with Abraham: G-d says: “Walk before Me and be perfect” (Gen. 17:1). G-d needed Abraham’s help in perfecting and ennobling man. “The catharsis of man is linked with the act of teaching. Abraham, walking with G-d, became the pedagogue par excellence.”⁶⁸ Abraham goes on to build worlds: “Yet the religious leader is also a builder of society, a sociable man who yearns for friends and companions. He is a teacher and educator who has indomitable faith in human potential, in man’s ability to do what ought to be done instead of just letting things happen at random.”⁶⁹ R. Soloveitchik also viewed himself as a *melamed* (Torah teacher). Of all his accomplishments, this was what he took the most pride in: his pupils, the young men he taught and ordained—over 2,000 of them—the children who attended his groundbreaking day-school Maimonides located in Brookline, Massachusetts, the laymen who faithfully attended his lectures

⁶³ See Soloveitchik, *Lonely Man of Faith*, 3-4 and Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, volume 1, 63.

⁶⁴ Soloveitchik, *Lonely Man of Faith*, 81.

⁶⁵ Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, Volume 1, 31.

⁶⁶ Soloveitchik, *Abraham’s Journey*, 82.

⁶⁷ See Marvin Schick, “Remembrances and Reflections VIII – Rav Aharon and the Rav,” Marvin Schick, April 12, 2012, <http://mschick.blogspot.com>, regarding his complex relationship with R. Aharon Kotler.

⁶⁸ Soloveitchik, *Abraham’s Journey*, 96.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

in Boston and New York City, the thousands who flocked to his *yabrtzeit derashot*.

R. Soloveitchik often refers to his family tradition of *hesed* and *kedushab* as he sketches Abraham's devotion to this principle. In "Abraham the Teacher," he posits that Abraham has a two-fold mission: to achieve *tzedakah u-mishpat* (charity and righteousness) and *kedushab*. The former refers to Abraham's universal activities, which required him to propagate the morality of justice and charity, and the latter refers to his covenantal obligation to follow in the way of the Lord. Although both are important, *kedushab* encompasses much more and demands sacrificial action. To clarify this point, R. Soloveitchik tells the story of his namesake, R. Joseph Baer Soloveitchik (1820-1892), rabbi of Brisk, who one holiday eve noticed a flower stand that was still open on his way to the synagogue.⁷⁰ When the woman who owned the stall confessed to him she had not sold any flowers, and therefore had no food for the holiday, he told her to step aside and began to hawk the flowers himself. The townspeople were amazed to see their dignified rabbi selling flowers in the marketplace, but bought them all in spite of the high price he was asking. Whether the story is true or not, says R. Soloveitchik, the fact that such a folk story exists teaches us that "to help someone in distress, you must sacrifice not only your money but your very dignity and pride."⁷¹ This is *kedushab*.

There is one instance where R. Soloveitchik explicitly makes the connection between Abraham and himself. In "The Visit," he infers the close relationship Abraham had with G-d from the verse, "The Lord appeared to him in the groves of Mamrei, as he sat in the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day." He asks, why does the text read, *va-yera eilav Hashem* (And He appeared to **him**, G-d), an awkward formulation, and not *va-yera Hashem eilav* (And G-d appeared to **him**)? By putting *eilav* first, the Torah is emphasizing that Abraham was very close to G-d, that G-d longed to see him. This revelation is quite different than the one at the *brit bein ha-betarim*, which filled Abraham with dread and awe. This is a more redemptive experience, inspiring confidence and joy. G-d doesn't even utter a word, just as no words are necessary between good friends.⁷²

R. Soloveitchik then inserts a poignant anecdote, illustrating how he, too, feels G-d's intimate presence:

If I may introduce a personal note, many times I feel very close to G-d. I feel His hand on my shoulder. This happens not only during

⁷⁰ Ibid., 107.

⁷¹ Ibid., 108.

⁷² Ibid., 164-165.

tefillah, prayer, but during *talmud Torah*, when I am studying ... I feel happy not only because this is creative work, but because I feel the presence of *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* (the Holy One, blessed be He) over my shoulder, looking into the book, at the text. I then feel that all my prayers will be implemented if I *daven* properly. Our experience of the Holy One should be intimate, as if I can touch Him and feel Him looking at me. Thus God came to Abraham *lish'ol be-shlomo*, to inquire after his health, to show friendship and involvement.”⁷³

In this final example, we see how the Rav related to Abraham to such an extent that he even identified with the relationship the founding father of the Jewish people had with G-d, a much more visceral connection than the one he forged with his namesake Joseph. Yet all these illustrations demonstrate how R. Soloveitchik, due to his unique understanding of qualitative time, was able to reach back into the past and “clasp hands” with his ancestors in remote antiquity, and through this connection was able to discover himself, and shed light upon some twentieth century dilemmas.⁷⁴


I have demonstrated in this paper how the Rav used “the magic hand of *derush*”⁷⁵ to bring the Patriarchs and their children to life. As opposed to his typologies, where he describes a biblical character as an idealized type rather than an actual person (i.e. Adam I and Adam II), his portraiture of the Patriarchs, while sometimes archetypal, more strikingly portrays them as real human beings struggling with existential issues, sometimes torn, sometimes triumphant, and so lifelike that one can believe they are actually in the lecture room. I posited that this is not merely a result of the Rav’s flair for the dramatic. He was able to achieve this because he believed that, in a sense, they *are* actually with us today. According to his understanding of non-linear, cyclical time and the chain of Masorah, the Patriarchs live on, within us, their descendants. He explains that as we uphold the tradition we received from them, and pass it on to our children, we can experience the past and the future in our present. Qualitative time also enables us to transport ourselves back to

⁷³ Ibid., 165.

⁷⁴ I would like to point out that R. Soloveitchik’s tendency to vividly evoke the biblical characters, as well as famous personalities whom he eulogized, and his nostalgia for the past, which seems to transcend time, has been attributed by a noted Soloveitchik scholar to the presence of the philosophy of Romanticism in the Rav’s thought. See Moshe Sokol, “Transcending Time: elements of Romanticism in the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (October 2010), pp. 233-246.

⁷⁵ Peli, “Hermeneutics,” p. 16.

the past and view our own travails in the context of our forefathers' struggles.

In a word, R. Soloveitchik is able to create such lifelike portraits of the Patriarchs, to the extent that they seem to be beside us, since he is not merely engaging in the intellectual exercise of interpreting texts—he is traversing time, connecting past, present and future. He participates in his ancestor's travails, and discovers the key to his own destiny within their stories. As we read and listen to his unique portraiture of the Patriarchs, we too are transported on this journey of self-discovery. We become links on a chain—one end reaching back to our forefathers and revelation, the other stretching forward to our descendants and redemption.⁷⁶ And sometimes, as R. Soloveitchik teaches us about Abraham's journey, Isaac's sacrifice, Jacob's anguish, or Joseph's dreams, we can feel our ancestors' presence in the room, looking over our shoulders. 

⁷⁶ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Bris Bein ha-Besarim," Yiddish lecture, Bergen County Bais Midrash.org. <http://bcbm.org>.