

The Rav's Enduring Pedagogical Relevance

On the 120th anniversary of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's birth, and 30 years since his passing, the question arises: Is the Rav's philosophy relevant today? Will current students respond to and find meaning in studying his works and encountering his thought? Or has the present cultural climate created an environment in which the Rav's philosophy is outmoded and outdated, incapable of speaking to the needs, questions, and issues of this generation?

The current cultural and intellectual mood is often characterized by a sense of relativism, skepticism about the ability to apprehend objective truth and objective moral principles, and a strong focus on individual inclinations as being at the center of one's personal philosophical perspective and way of living. Can the Rav's thought, which was crafted during, and often dealt with, the issues that concerned the modern era, speak to those growing up in or preoccupied by the issues of a post-modern world?¹

There are writers and intellectual movements that students find directly relevant to the issues of our times. For example, the writings of Rav Shagar, and the neo-Hasidut movement, speak in various ways to many of the spiritual and intellectual searchers of our day. At the same time, however, I believe that R. Soloveitchik's thought has much to offer us, not merely as an alternative to current modes of thinking, but also, as precisely the panacea that is needed for students struggling with some specific contemporary issues.

This is a challenging time to be a young adult. According to various studies, diagnoses of anxiety and depression are increasing,² and attention spans appear to be decreasing.³ The time frame of the process

1 I am using the word post-modern here in a way it is rarely used—absolutely literally, that is, as referring to the current era of the late twentieth century and beyond. Regarding the general spirit of our age described above, how much is due to the formal movement of postmodernism, and how much is due to other social and cultural factors, I am leaving as beyond the scope of this essay.

2 See for example Lydie A. Lebrun-Harris, Reem M. Ghandour, Michael D. Kogan, and Michael D. Warren, "Five-Year Trends in US Children's Health and Well-being, 2016-2020," *Pediatrics* 176:7 (July 2022).

3 A rash of articles appeared regarding this issue after a study that claimed attention spans were shortening, see Alyson Gausby, et al., "Attention Spans," *Consumer*

of maturing and entering into full adulthood also appears to be getting longer.⁴ Whatever the myriad causes, it can be a difficult world to navigate for a young person.

C.S. Lewis observed, “If one has to choose between reading the new books and reading the old, one must choose the old: not because they are necessarily better but because they contain precisely those truths of which our own age is neglectful.”⁵ In other words, while our own era provides unique perspectives, and new ways of thinking and of experiencing the world, it may be precisely the wisdom of the past that can fill in the lacunae that are a part of the present experience. What are these gaps in contemporary life and thought, and how can R. Soloveitchik’s teachings offer meaningful content to fill those lacunae?

Complexity

In a world in which ideas, and their communication over various platforms, are increasingly simplified and polarized, opening students’ minds to the value of complexity is of tremendous benefit.

It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of complexity in R. Soloveitchik’s thought. On the most basic level, the challenge of understanding that body of work demands of students the willingness to contend with depth, nuance, distinctions, and multilayered analysis. Exposure to this type of complexity expands the students’ intellectual and conceptual horizons. It opens them up to the possibility of a richer understanding of reality, of the world around them, and of individual and collective experiences.

I once had a very sincere and committed student ask me, without a hint of irony, why the Rav insisted on using such incomprehensible vocabulary (“such big words”), if he wanted his writings to be understandable. I explained that the Rav chose his language with exacting care in order to express his ideas in the most precise way. The richness of his vocabulary is a direct reflection of the depth of his thought. The process of contending with the level of depth expressed by the Rav expands the students’ ability to think in deeper ways and gives them an appreciation for profound approaches to the issues he deals with. In addition, it spurs them to understand that nuance and complexity will likely also apply to

Insights (Microsoft, 2015), available at: www.sergiogridelli.it/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/AttentionSpans_report.pdf.

4 See for example Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties,” *American Psychologist* (May 2000), 469–480.

5 C.S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” in *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans, 1970), 92.

the serious issues they encounter both in their personal lives and in the realm of public discourse.

The Rav actively and repeatedly extols the virtue of complexity. He emphasizes the importance of dialectic, arguing that it is a quality purposefully implanted into humanity by God, and that conflict and dialectical tension are the key to human creativity. "Majesty and Humility" opens with this claim:

Man is a dialectical being; an inner schism runs through his personality at every level. This schism is not due to man's revolt against his Maker, as Christian theology has preached since the days of Augustine. Unlike this view, according to which it was man who, by his sinful rebellion against his Maker, precipitated the split in human nature, the Judaic view posits that the schism is willed by God as the source of man's greatness and his election as a singular charismatic being. Man is a great and creative being because he is torn by conflict and is always in a state of ontological tenseness and perplexity.⁶

Complexity demonstrates the depth and greatness of an idea. Regarding the religious experience, he writes: "Where you find its complexity, there you find its greatness."⁷ He also frequently rails against the misconception of religion as a soothing, simple answer to life's difficulties, and argues the opposite. Religion adds to the complexity of life, and this experience is precisely what deepens and enriches the human experience. For example, the famed and extensive endnote #4 in *Halakhic Man* that explicates the centrality of complexity, dialectic, and conflict in the religious experience concludes as follows:

The pangs of searching and groping, the tortures of spiritual crises and exhausting treks of the soul purify and sanctify man, cleanse his thoughts, and purge them of the dross of superficiality and the dross of vulgarity. Out of these torments there emerges a new understanding of the world, a powerful spiritual enthusiasm that shakes the very foundations of man's existence. He arises from the agonies, purged and refined, possessed of a pure heart and a new spirit.⁸

Dialectical typologies famously run through the Rav's thought. Adam I and Adam II; cognitive man and *homo religiosus*; majesty and humility; cosmic man vs. origin conscious man; and so on: the tensions that run

6 "Majesty and Humility," *TRADITION* 17:2 (1978), 25.

7 *Halakhic Man* (Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 141.

8 *Ibid.*, 143.

through the individual's personality and experience are the lens through which he analyzes the human condition. According to the Rav, learning to recognize the totality of the human experience, understanding the value inherent in each side of a dialectic, and maintaining awareness and holding appreciation of that paradox, leads the individual to maturity and character development, and helps them avoid, in his words, the "complacency that nearly always spells superficiality and shallow-mindedness."⁹ This provides a valuable template for our students as they move toward self-development and maturity.

Self-Creation and Grounding in Torah Values

Grappling with and learning to hold complexity is ultimately the way in which one engages in the greatest act of creativity of all—creation of the self, another major theme in the Rav's philosophy. Charging young people with the mission of creating themselves is a crucially important message for today. Our world frequently feels like it is drowning in a morass of relativism, dystopianism, and perhaps even nihilism. Individual agency is often overshadowed in light of more collectivist or deterministic perspectives. Calling upon our students to explore and self-actualize in light of our eternal values is a compelling and invigorating message for them.

According to R. Soloveitchik, self-creation involves the realization of our individual uniqueness, and the obligation incumbent upon each of us to find and actualize our exclusive individual potential.

God wills man to be creator – his first job is to create himself as a complete being. Man, the mute being, must search for speech and find it, all by himself. Man comes into our world as a hyllic, amorphous being. He is created in the image of God, but this image is a challenge to be met, not a gratuitous gift. It is up to man to objectify himself, to impress form upon a latent formless personality and to move from the hyllic, silent periphery toward the center of objective reality.¹⁰

In fact, the loneliness of which the Rav speaks, one of the central dilemmas experienced by the man of faith, is often tied to the experience of separateness and isolation from others that is felt by individuals once they discover their exclusive and unique inner selves.¹¹ It is this deep, inner self work that elevates a person and gives value to his or her individual existence. The centrality of this idea of self-actualization runs through

9 "Sacred and Profane" in *Shiurei HaRav*, ed. Joseph Epstein (Ktav, 1994), and see also, again, *Halakhic Man*, 143.

10 "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *TRADITION* 17:2 (1978), 64.

11 *Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday, 1992), 4.

the Rav's thought; one well-known example is his conceptualization of ideal *teshuvah* as self-creation or self-recreation. This involves contemplation of our past choices, serious thinking about what one wants one's future to look like, and a commitment to using these two nexuses of past and future to inform one's present choices in order to live in alignment with one's ideal intentions and with God.¹² Indeed, the entire second section of *Halakhic Man* describes how an individual elevates himself through self-creation, which he then employs in his mission to work toward creating an ideal world.¹³ This message of the crucial importance of developing one's unique inner self and of the process of self-definition can be extremely empowering for our students.

A central component of creating one's personality is developing a clear sense of one's core values. The Rav stresses that the individual should ground themselves in transcendent values, and create a spiritual and ethical worldview to which to commit oneself, which directs one's choices and behavior, becoming, as it were, a "spiritual settler" as opposed to a "spiritual nomad." He describes the person who samples many values and perspectives, but does not commit himself to any one worldview, neither in philosophical identification nor in active behavior, as a "spiritual parasite." Instead, he insists that one should not only acquire knowledge, but value and appreciate ideas and ideals, and deeply integrate them into one's sense of self.¹⁴ The mission of exploring one's inner and outer world and attaching oneself to principles and values that gives life worth, purpose, and goals, creates a sense of hope and meaning for which many of our students thirst.

Significance of Torah Values

To go one step further, the Rav asserts that transcendent values are fundamentally rooted in God, in Torah, and the halakhic system. Our spiritual and ethical legacy and heritage are available to us, and it is incumbent on us to explore them, understand them, and incorporate them into our lives. In the Rav's terminology, they are the spiritual *makom*, the place, in

12 *Halakhic Man*, 110–117.

13 See, for example, *Halakhic Man*, 127–128: "[T]here is another man, [who] exists not by virtue of the species, but solely on account of his own individual worth. His life is replete with creation and renewal, cognition, and profound understanding. . . . He is not passive but active. . . . He does not simply abandon himself to the rule of the species but blazes his own individual trail. Moreover, he, as an individual, influences the many. . . . He is dynamic, not static, does not remain at rest but moves forward in an ever-ascending climb. . . . This is the man of God." See also Yitzchak Blau, "Creative Repentance: On Rabbi Soloveitchik's Concept of Teshuva," *TRADITION* 28:2 (1994), 11–18.

14 See the explication of this idea and these terms in "Sacred and Profane," 10–14.

which we can find our ultimate conceptual home.¹⁵ This absolute commitment to Torah values, viewing them as a primary source of eternal truth in which to root ourselves, provides much needed stable ethical and theological ground under the feet of our students.

At the same time, it is crucial to avoid the dangers and hubris of shallow, simplistic readings and understandings of religious texts and teachings. The Rav masterfully holds the tension between being unapologetically committed to the idea that the Torah and the halakha are the repositories of wisdom to which we should look to shape our ethics and worldview, while at the same time cautioning us against simplistic interpretations of Torah and self-righteous justifications of behavior in the name of God and religion. In “Catharsis,” with regard to the first point, he writes:

[T]he moral law can never be legislated in ultimate terms by the human mind. Any attempt ... to replace the moral law engraved by the Divine hand on the two stone tablets of Sinai with man-made rules of behavior, is illegitimate. Adam tried to legislate the moral norm; he was driven from Paradise. In our day, modern man is engaged in a similar undertaking, which demonstrates pride and arrogance, and is doomed to failure.

And then, a few sentences later, with regard to the second point:

There is an unredeemed moral and religious experience, as there is an unredeemed body and an unredeemed logos. Let us be candid: if one has not redeemed his religious life he may become self-righteous, insensitive, or even destructive. The story of the Crusades, the Inquisition and other outbursts of religious fanaticism bear out this thesis.¹⁶

The Rav affirms an unqualified commitment to Torah values, highlighting their central place at the heart of the religious person’s experience, while maintaining the realization that figuring out exactly what those values are is not all that simple or easy. This is a crucial lesson, not only for our students, but for us all.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is another theme that lies at the heart of R. Soloveitchik’s philosophy. The Rav repeatedly refers to the dialectic that exists between moving forward and stepping back in retreat or self-defeat, which is involved

15 Ibid., 12–13. Indeed, for the Rav, our spiritual home is no less than *Ha-Makom*, God Himself.

16 “Catharsis,” *TRADITION* 17:2 (1978), 52.

in all aspects of life.¹⁷ The ability to sacrifice lies at the heart of the experience of the man of faith. “[R]edemption is achieved when humble man makes a movement of recoil, and lets himself be confronted and defeated by a Higher and Truer Being.”¹⁸ “Catharsis” may be his fullest extended treatment of this theme. R. Soloveitchik enjoins us to engage in the world with the intent of achieving success, and, at the same time, to be willing to step back when a movement of retreat is required. This movement of recoil is necessary to validate, or redeem, the subsequent movement forward. The willingness to fall back, or sacrifice, relates to all areas of life: our physical desires and pursuit of their satisfaction, our emotional life, our intellectual world, and our religious experiences, affecting our relationship to ourselves, our interactions with others, and our personal relationship with God.¹⁹ According to the Rav, this willingness to sacrifice is what legitimizes (in his word, “redeems”) the endeavors and initiatives of our lives.

In religious life, this involves the recognition that to serve God must ultimately include the willingness to submit to His will. If this awareness is not present, and one is not willing to subjugate himself or herself in the service of God, then ostensible God worship easily degenerates into self-worship.

In our interpersonal experiences, the willingness to curb one’s ego in order to recognize the uniqueness of another person, and to limit oneself in the face of someone else’s needs, comprise the building blocks of healthy relationships. According to the Rav, when we do this, we are doing nothing less than imitating God Himself.²⁰ “If *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* willed a world to rise from nihility in order to bestow His love upon this world, then lonely man should affirm the existence of somebody else in

17 Both “Majesty and Humility” and “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah” end on this note, even though it is not the main theme of either essay. In “Majesty and Humility,” he writes “Man must not always be victor. From time to time triumph should turn into defeat. Man, in Judaism, was created for both victory and for defeat—he is both king and saint. He must know how to fight for victory and also how to suffer defeat. Modern man is frustrated and perplexed because he cannot take defeat” (36), and ends with the line, “Abraham found victory in retreat.” Similarly, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah” ends with: “A new equation emerges: prayer equals sacrifice. Initially, prayer helps man discover himself, through understanding and affirmation of his need-awareness. Once the task of self-discovery is fulfilled, man is summoned to ascend the altar and return everything he has just acquired to God. Man who was told to create himself, objectify himself, and gain independence and freedom for himself, must return everything he considers his own to God” (71–72).

18 *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 35.

19 See “Catharsis.”

20 “The Community,” *TRADITION* 17:2 (1978), 15, and also *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 18.

order to have the opportunity of giving love. Again the same equation prevails: recognition *means* sacrificial action; the individual withdraws in order to make room for the thou.”²¹

Sacrifice lies at the heart of the ability to build relationships both with God and with other people. This message is crucial, as the ability to build lasting, meaningful relationships is a central key to a fulfilled life.²²

It is no secret that narcissism and self-absorption appear to be on the rise in our culture.²³ This trend tears at the ethical fabric of society, as willingness to sacrifice lies at the heart of virtues such as duty, respect, service, and humility. In addition, this tendency also does not seem to lead to a greater sense of fulfillment, but instead seems to leave people feeling ultimately empty and dissatisfied.²⁴ The Rav’s emphasis on the importance of sacrifice, his assertion that it is the ingredient that legitimizes and balances out healthy self-actualization, and that enables us to have satisfying and real relationships with both God and with others, is critical today more than ever.

Halakha

I would like to add a few brief words about the Rav’s conceptualization of halakha and its ongoing relevance. In a world that struggles with the relevance of halakha, and with questions about how modern ethical beliefs fit with an ancient halakhic system, the Rav’s formulation of the nature of halakha is both significant and useful. Firstly, because, for the Rav, the halakhic norm and the ethico-moral code are one and the same.²⁵ Halakha at its core is meant to ensure that we behave with the highest ethical standards, and our essential mission is to build a world on the basis of these moral principles. “Halakhic man’s most fervent desire is the perfection of the world under the dominion of righteousness and loving-kindness—the realization of the *a priori*, ideal creation, whose name is Torah (or *Halakhah*) in the realm of concrete life.”²⁶ He conceptualizes halakha as God’s blueprint for the world, which turns the principles of ethics into a living

21 “The Community,” 16.

22 See, for example, Robert Waldinger’s work on the Harvard Study of Adult Development, and his conclusion that healthy relationships are the most important factor in long-term wellbeing.

23 Numerous articles and books discuss this trend, e.g., J.M. Twenge and W.K. Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (Free Press, 2009).

24 See for example Michael Dambrun, “Self-Centeredness and Selflessness: Happiness Correlates and Mediating Psychological Processes,” *PeerJ* 5 (May 11, 2017).

25 See, for example, *Halakhic Man*, 58–61.

26 *Ibid.*, 94.

reality.²⁷ Notwithstanding the challenges and the questions this raises, which certainly must be grappled with and addressed with our students, this orientation to the halakhic system can inform how we attempt to contend with the ethical challenges of our day. The Rav's view of halakha as a vibrant, holistic, all-encompassing map through which to elevate one's life into one of holiness and righteousness, re-centers halakha at the heart of the religious experience. It also gives lie to the perception of halakha as a list of "do's" and "don'ts", replacing that perspective with one that asserts that objective halakhic actions are in fact the repositories and the expression of profound spiritual and ethical truths.

UNTIL NOW I HAVE SPOKEN about ideas in R. Solovieitchik's thought involving concepts that are conceivably underemphasized in the contemporary world. It is also important to note that there are aspects of the Rav's work that speak to today's students not because they are countercultural, but because they still resonate in our own cultural milieu.

For example, the Rav often conveys his ideas by speaking from his own experience and extrapolating from that to universal human experiences that may resonate with the reader.²⁸ He often shares his own personal thoughts and experiences in order to convey the emotional, religious, or spiritual experience he is describing.²⁹ He speaks directly to the reader's personal existential experience. He touches on their individual inner world, and on their relationships—with their own selves, with God, and with other people. I have found through my teaching that this

27 Ibid., 89–95, see also *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 62–64 and 78–80.

28 See, for example, the opening of *The Lonely Man of Faith*: "It is not the plan of this paper to discuss the millennium-old problem of faith and reason. Theory is not my concern at the moment. I want instead to focus attention on a human life situation in which the man of faith as an individual concrete being, with his cares and hopes, concerns and needs, joys and sad moments, is entangled. Therefore, whatever I am going to say here has been derived not from philosophical dialectics, abstract speculation, or detached impersonal reflections, but from actual situations and experiences with which I have been confronted. Indeed, the term lecture is, in this context, a misnomer. It is rather a tale of a personal dilemma. Instead of talking theology, in the didactic sense, eloquently and in balanced sentences, I would like, hesitantly and haltingly, to confide in you, and to share with you some concerns which weigh heavily on my mind" (1–2). Also see: "Whatever I am about to say is to be seen only as a modest attempt on the part of a man of faith to interpret his spiritual perceptions and emotions in modern theologico-philosophical categories. . . . If my audience will feel that these interpretations are also relevant to their perceptions and emotions, I shall feel amply rewarded. However, I shall not feel hurt if my thoughts will find no response in the hearts of my listeners" (9).

29 Examples of this self-revelation can be found for example in "Majesty and Humility," "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *On Repentance*, and *U-Vikkashtem mi-Sham*, and in many other places in the Rav's corpus.

awakens in them a profound personal response to his teachings, which they are then moved to integrate into their worldview and lives.

In addition, many of the problems that the Rav identified in the modern world (of the 1940s through the 1970s) remain relevant today. Challenges such as how to inspire passion in one's spiritual life, or the task of how to create individuals and communities that are engaged with the world and are at the same time, in the Rav's words, "unqualifiedly committed,"³⁰ are still pertinent today. Our students often find these issues extremely relevant to their lives.

I would close with supporting, if anecdotal, evidence of the Rav's enduring, compelling meaning for today's students. I posed the central question of this essay to my students: are the Rav's teachings relevant today, and if so, how? This is a synopsis of what they said:³¹

1. As heirs to the Rav's legacy, and as members of the American Modern Orthodox community of which he played such a foundational role, it is incumbent on us to understand his philosophy so that we can live according to his worldview with integrity. The Rav talks about the value of *masora*—learning his works connects us to our *masora*. His legacy is our legacy. In addition, fully understanding the Rav's teachings helps us realize where our communities fall short so that we can rededicate ourselves to actualizing his true ideals.
2. The Rav's commitment to complexity and dialectic is more necessary than ever in our world, which is so polarized politically, and in many other ways. He helps us understand the humility that we must have in order to learn how to see what is valuable and then take the best from the multiple worlds around us, both to the left and to the right. This ability to hold firm to our core values while being able to accept and discern the positive in other approaches requires the ability we gain through our study of his teachings: how to sacrifice, limit our own egos, and make room for others.
3. The dilemmas that the Rav faced when he wrote *The Lonely Man of Faith* are still relevant today. We still live in communities, that, like Adam I, sometimes want the external trapping of religion, without the willingness to make the full sacrificial commitment to faith that is required by Adam II. In addition, we still live in a world in which, as part of a community that embraces the modern

30 *Lonely Man of Faith*, 40.

31 With thanks and gratitude to members of Michlelet Mevaseret Yerushalayim's "Philosophy of Rav Soloveitchik" class of 5783 (2022–2023).

world, we accept and integrate many modern values. Because of this, we often find ourselves in situations where the values of the secular world clash with our religious values, and we are called upon to wrestle with these questions, and sometimes to sacrifice because of our values. Furthermore, the relativism prevalent today and the lack of the principles that once united society leaves us in a position where it is hard to hold coherent and balanced values and ideals. The Rav's perspective is more necessary than ever, as he mapped out for us how to grapple with the issues of such a world.

4. Often, when we attempt to live according to the ideals that the Rav lays out for us, we feel alone. This can lead to feelings of either defensiveness or insecurity. His validation of the experience of loneliness that seems to be intrinsic to the faith commitment is comforting.

Rabbi Soloveitchik fundamentally viewed himself as a teacher, and he viewed the mission of the educator as telling a story that will continue to inspire generations of students across the ages.³² Among the responsibilities of our community's educators is to transmit the Rav's teachings in ways that will speak to and inspire our students. The educator should identify themes and ideas that are relevant to his or her students, and craft ways that draw the line of relevance between these ideas and the students' current challenges and experiences, so that the students can use them to build their own personally and religiously meaningful lives. I believe that for educators, in the Rav's words, "it is a privilege and a pleasure to belong to such a prayerful, charitable, teaching community, which feels the breath of eternity."³³

32 "The Community," 23–24.

33 *Ibid.*, 24.