The Life and Impact of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik z”l

David Jacobowitz
Congregation Torah Ohr
Boca Raton, Florida

January 13, 2020

“Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was not only one of the outstanding Talmudists of the twentieth century but also one of its most creative and seminal Jewish thinkers. His stature was such that he was widely known simply as “the Rav” – The Rabbi par excellence. Drawing from a vast reservoir of Jewish and general knowledge, Rabbi Soloveitchik brought Jewish thought and law to bear on the interpretation and assessment of the modern experience. On the one hand, he built bridges between Judaism and the modern world; yet, at the same time, he vigorously upheld the integrity and autonomy of the Jew’s faith commitment.”

Dr. David Shatz, Professor of Philosophy, Yeshiva University, Introduction to Lonely Man of Faith
THE EARLY YEARS

The Rav was born in 1903, in Pruzhan (then Russia, now Belarus).

He came from a Rabbinic dynasty dating back over 200 years: His father was Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, later to become the head of Yeshivat Rav Yitzchak Elchonon (RIETS) at Yeshiva University. His paternal grandfather was Rav Chaim Soloveitchik (author of Nefesh Hachaim and creator of the Brisker method of learning), and his great-grandfather and namesake was Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, the Beis HaLevi. His great-great-grandfather was Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (The Netziv), and his great-great-great-grandfather was Rav Chaim Volozhin, the primary student of the great Gaon of Vilna.

On his maternal line, his mother, Rabbanit Pesia Feinstein, was the daughter of Rav Eliyahu Feinstein of Pruzan and his wife Rabbanit Guta Feinstein. The
Feinsteins descended from Rav Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, the Tosafot Yom Tov, Shelah, Maharshal, and Rashi. The great Posek of American Jewry, Rav Moshe Feinstein, was his mother’s first cousin. Another cousin was Rabbi Shaul Liberman, who for many years was Professor of Talmud at JTS and quite close to the Rav.
In 1913, the Rav’s father, Rav Moshe, became the Rabbi of Chaslavitch in White Russia, where the youthful Rav spent his formative years. He was sent to learn in the cheder of Reb Baruch Reisberg, a Lubavitcher hasid. When it became apparent to Rabbanit Pesia, the Rav’s mother, that he was being taught mostly Habad hasidic literature (Tania) rather than Talmud, she complained to her husband, and when that elicited a tepid response, she brought the matter to her father-in-law, Rav Chaim, who recommended to the Rav’s father, Rav Moshe, that he take personal charge of the Rav’s education. So it happened that the Rav’s only and prime teacher of Talmud was his own father, a privilege that he benefited from and spoke about his entire life.

The “Brisker Method” employed by Rav Moshe while learning with his young son focused heavily on the explanations of the Rambam (Rav Moshe ben Maimon), the outstanding medieval physician and towering giant of Torah. Rav Moshe spent hours studying and explicating the Rambam’s masterful formulations of Halacha. Here is a memory recorded by the Rav about learning with his father while still a youngster:
defended his friend, Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon. The Rambam was comforted and smiled. I too was delighted and joined in the feeling of joy in the room. I would jump from my bed and run to my mother and cry out the good news: “Mother, mother, the Rambam won; he beat the Rabad. Father helped him. Look how wonderful my father is!”

But once in a great while my father did not succeed, and despite all his efforts the enemies of the Rambam defeated him. Their questions were as strong as iron. Although my father mustered all his strength, he could not save the Rambam from his detractors. Salvation did not come for the Rambam. Deep in thought, my father would lean his head on the palms of his hands on the table. The students and I, and even the Rambam, waited in great tension for my father’s words. But my father would raise his head and sadly state: “There is no answer. The words of the Rambam are difficult. No one is capable of resolving these questions.” The shiur ended with no explanation. The students were sad, and even my father was depressed. A sense of despair descended upon all of us. I cried. Even the eyes of the Rambam glistened with tears.

With a broken heart, I would walk slowly to my mother and cry out to her: “Mother, father cannot answer the Rambam. What will we do? He did not succeed today.” And my mother would tell me: “Don’t worry. Father will find an answer to the Rambam. If he does not succeed, then when you grow up perhaps you will find an answer to the Rambam. Always remember, my son, the important thing about Torah is to study it in happiness and enthusiasm.”

It is true that this story is part of my youth. It is not, however, the fantasy of a young child or the creation of mystical feelings. This story is an historic and psychological reality that guides me at all times. When I sit down to learn, the giants of the mesorah are with me. Our relationship is personal. The Rambam sits to my right, Rabbenu Tam to my left. Rashi sits at the head and explains, Rabbenu Tam asks, the Rambam decides the halakhah, and the Rabad objects. All of them are with me in my small room, sitting around the table. They look at me with fondness. They work the text out with me, and like a father, they encourage and strengthen me. Learning Torah is not just a didactic, formal, and technical experience whose purpose is the creation and exchange of ideas. Learning Torah is the intense experience of unifying many generations together, the joining of spirit to spirit, and the connecting of soul to soul. Those who transmit the Torah and those who receive the Torah are invited to meet one another at the same historic juncture.
The Rav learned 24 masechtot with his father. He became so proficient that the Rav of Kovno, Rav Avraham Dov Ber Kahana Shapiro gave him semicha and wrote of him:

“The spirit of his illustrious grandfather, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik, rests upon Rav Yosef Dov. Just like his grandfather, he is a master of the entire Talmud. Happy is the country that will be privileged to be his home. The Halakhah shall always be in accordance with his rulings.”

The Rav’s mother, Rabbanit Pesia, was given a broad education by her parents. She was very pious and careful about the observance of halacha, including relatively esoteric laws like chadash. She was widely read in world literature and was insulted once when a grandson dared to ask her if she was familiar with a particular book by Tolstoy. Because of her, the Rav acquired a lifelong taste for literature. She exposed him to Alexander Pushkin, Henrik Ibsen and Chaim Nachman Bialik. By his late teens, although he did not attend any formal secular courses, the Rav had acquired a gymnasium (high school) equivalency certificate from Dubno as a result of studying with a series of tutors.

Along with broadening his interests in literature, the Rav credited his mother with giving him a “Jewish soul”:

I admit that I am not able to define precisely the masoretic role if the Jewish mother. Only by circumscription I hope to be able to explain it. Permit me to draw on my own experiences. I used to have ling conversations with my mother. In fact, it was a monologue rather than a dialogue. She talked and I “happened” to overhear. What did she talk about? I must use a halachik term in order to answer this question: she talked me’inyana de’yoma. I used to watch her arranging the house in honor of a Holiday. I used to see her recite prayers; I used to watch her recite the sidra every Friday night and I still remember the nostalgic tune. I learned from her very much.

Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance of the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to mitzvot. I learned from her the most important thing in life – to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His Hand resting upon my frail shoulders. Without her teachings, which quite often were transmitted to me in silence, I would have grown up a soulless being, dry and insensitive.

The laws of Shabbat, for instance, were passed on to me by my father; they are a part of mussar avicha. The Shabbat as a living entity, as a queen, was revealed to me by my mother; it is a part of Torat Imecha. The fathers knew much about the Shabbat; the mothers lived the Shabbat, experienced her presence, and perceived her beauty and splendor. The fathers taught generations how to observe the Shabbat; mothers taught generations how to greet the Shabbat and how to enjoy her twenty four hour presence.
In the aftermath of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soloveitchik family relocated to Warsaw, Poland. Rav Moshe became head of Talmud at the Tachkemoni Rabbinical Seminary, which stressed both Talmudic and secular education. This event testifies to the transformative power of Mrs. Soloveitchik on her household.

In Warsaw, while continuing his intensive Torah learning, the Rav studied political science for three terms at the Free Polish University. In 1926, he left for Berlin to study philosophy at the University of Berlin. Why? 1. He was fascinated by philosophy and 2. He wished to avoid being drafted into the Polish army.

He received his PhD in 1932 after submitting his dissertation on the German philosopher, Hermann Cohen, who stressed the supremacy of mathematical and scientific rational thought.

Here is an interesting anecdote about the Rav from Warner Silberstein’s book “My Way from Berlin to Jerusalem”
While in Berlin, the Rav became friendly with Rav Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, destined to become the Rebbe of Lubavitch, and Rav Yitzchak Hutner, who became Roshe Yeshiva of Yeshivas Chaim Berlin. He also audited classes at the Hildesheimer Seminary, an innovative German seminary that stressed “Torah and Civilization - Torah Im Derech Eretz.

Another interesting excerpt from Silberstein describing his impressions of the young Rav in Berlin:
The Rav met his wife, **Tonya Lewit**, who had grown up in Vilna and received a PhD in education from the University of Jena (Germany). They married in 1931, and in 1932 they emigrated to the US. The Rav’s parents had preceded them and his father was Rosh Yeshiva of RIETS. The Rav was sponsored by the Hebrew Theological College in Chicago but it ran out of funds to pay him. Subsequently,
he was invited to serve as Chief Rabbi of Boston and was installed on December 11, 1932 by Rav Eliezer Silver, President of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis.

The Boston Years

In 1935, the Rav traveled from Boston to Palestine, where he was a candidate for the position of Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. While there, he delivered shiurim at Yeshivat Mercaz Harav and met with Rav Kook, the Chief Rabbi of Palestine.

Rav Moshe Tzvi Neriah, known as the founder of the “knitted kippah” Bnei Akiva generation, described the Rav’s shiur this way:

“We felt that we were hearing Rav Chaim lecture that day…. The lecturer held the audience spellbound for over an hour and a half. In truth, the “House of Levi (Bet Ha-Levi)” did not disappoint our greatest expectations that memorable day.”

Some considered the Rav too young (at 32) for the post of Chief Rabbi. His father, Rav Moshe, interceded on his behalf, writing

“In the previous generations, those possessing outstanding abilities were already appointed to the most illustrious and influential rabbinical positions at such an age and they soon became the leading Rabbis of their times.”

Despite this support, the Rav lost the election to Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel, a
prominent Mizrachi ideologist. In retrospect, it is believed this happened because the Rav was viewed as an Agudist, since his lineage stemmed from his extreme anti-Zionist grandfather, Rav Chaim. It is interesting to note that even the Rav’s uncle, Rav Meir Bar Ilan (Berlin), urged his Mizrah followers to vote for Rav Amiel rather than for his own nephew.

Following his return from Palestine, the Rav soon found himself enmeshed in the
center of a storm swirling around kashrut supervision in the Boston area. His attempts to upgrade kashrut standards and create humane working conditions for shochtim were met with extreme opposition from meat and poultry industry owners. The Rav insisted on the use of kosher bands ("plombes") on poultry processed by organized shochtim under his supervision. Their cost was to be borne by the producers and not the consumers.

In 1941, accusations were leveled at the Rav that he was personally gaining from this system at the expense of the community. He was also accused of tax evasion. After an extensive 14-month investigation of the entire Boston poultry industry, Judge Abraham Cohen cleared the Rav. He declared, with deep indignation, that the charges were untrue and were "sheer fabrications that were spread with malice and the Rabbi was dreadfully abused and baselessly accused."

His crowning achievement in Boston was founding the Maimonides School in 1937, the first Jewish day school in New England. He and his wife, Tonya, fought tenaciously to collect funds for the school. They insisted that it be coeducational, so that boys and girls alike would be educated to the highest standards in both secular and Torah knowledge. In a letter to Rabbi Leonard Rosenfeld (May 1953), the Rav explained:

“As to your question with regard to a curriculum in a coeducational school, I expressed my opinion to you long ago that it would be a very regrettable oversight on our part if we were to arrange separate Hebrew courses for girls. Not only is the teaching of Torah Sh’baal Peh to girls permissible, but it is nowadays an absolute imperative. This policy of discrimination between the sexes as to subject matter and method of instructions which is still advocated by certain groups within our Orthodox community has contributed greatly to the deterioration and downfall of traditional Judaism. Boys and girls alike should be introduced into the inner halls of Torah Sh’baal Peh."

The Rav functioned as a traditional shul Rabbi in Boston. Hundreds of men and women flocked to his weekly Motzei Shabbat lectures on Parshat Hashavua. Many Bostonians sought him out for halachic and personal advice and his time was freely given. Before Pesach, he visited kindergartens and distributed matzot to the children while explaining the holiday. He visited each grade at Maimonides School regularly to discuss Torah with the students.
The Yeshiva University Years

In 1940-41, the Rav became caught up in the situation caused by the deaths of Rav Bernard Revel (President of YU) and his own father, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik (Rosh Yeshiva). Supporters of the Rav entered his name as a candidate to succeed Rav Revel. However, opponents of his candidacy claimed that his leadership in the Agudas Harabanim meant he would advocate its viewpoint, which was inconsistent with YU’s vision as a center for Torah Umada. The controversy dragged on until 1943, when it was resolved with the appointment of Rav Samuel Belkin as YU’s President. Meanwhile, the Rav was appointed to succeed his father as Rosh Yeshiva, delivering his first lecture in May 1941.

In the early decades of his teaching, the Rav was very demanding in his classroom and was extremely critical of students who didn’t prepare appropriately. Over time, he gradually mellowed and became more tolerant of his students. In the words of one of the Rav’s students:

To have heard his talmudic lectures for three years in a class of some twenty rabbinical students is to have seen a gaon at work. His discourses ran to about three hours without pause. No one fidgeted or budged. He was absolutely riveting. To follow his argument was to be caught up in an intellectual adventure that accelerated one’s pulse beat. One’s attention could
By the late 1960’s, there were over 100 students in his class. His students felt that the Rav was one of the last living links with the spiritual world of Volozhin and Brisk. The Rav ordained over 2,000 Rabbanim, thereby placing an undeniable stamp on the Modern Orthodox world. The wide range of his students are illustrative of his complexity and genius. He successfully translated the Brisker terminology into the English idiom.

The Rav also taught Jewish philosophy in the Bernard Revel Graduate School at
Although his activities in New York became more and more time consuming, he continued to reside in Boston and commuted to New York each week. Here is an amusing memory from one of his students:
he responded: “I’ll tell you what the Rav thinks; the Rav thinks you should keep both of your eyes on the road.”

Perhaps more revealing of his human side was something which happened at a shiur almost 40 years ago. Mr. Joseph Ellenberg opened the door in the middle of the Rav’s shiur and popped his head in. The Rav turned in the direction of the door and Mr. Ellenberg said: “There is no reservation for you (it was his responsibility to check on the Rav’s plane reservations back to Boston). The Rav asked “What name did you ask for?” Mr. Ellenberg responded “I asked for Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.” The Rav laughed and said “I never make reservations in that name. Nobody knows how to spell it. Just ask them if there is a reservation for Joe Solo!” Whereupon the class erupted in laughter, with the Rav leading the way and we all saw a human side to this extraordinarily great man and scholar.

Another aspect of the Rav’s humanity was his compassion and chesed. He was a ba’a tzedakah, personally generous to a variety of causes and individuals. He was generous with his time to people who needed him giving advice in times of crisis and comfort in times of tragedy. He gave himself fully to the sustenance and enhancement of the
His position at Yeshiva University projected the Rav into prominence upon the Jewish scene. He became the spiritual mentor of most American trained Orthodox pulpit Rabbis. The Rav gradually became active in the Rabbinical Council of America and served as the Chair of its Halakhah Commission.

Among his memorable achievements:

1. His unequivocal opposition to **mixed seating** in synagogues. He went so far as to prohibit even listening to the shofar in such synagogues.

2. Although he vigorously opposed innovations, he did not advocate a total break with the Conservative and Reform movements. He did not agree with the ruling in 1956 by eleven leading roshei yeshiva prohibiting membership in the **Synagogue Council of America**.

3. He negotiated with Rabbi Shaul Lieberman in a failed attempt to create a joint Orthodox and Conservative Bet Din.

4. He adopted a highly principled position regarding Orthodox participation in the dialogue initiated by the Vatican with Jewish leaders. He opposed many aspects of this discussion, holding that there could be no discussion concerning the uniqueness of the respective religious communities. However, he did encourage dialogue related to social justice.

5. The Rav served as a spokesman for Orthodoxy to the outside world. In 1958-59 he lectured on Jewish social philosophy to New York social workers. He was the principal Jewish representative in YU’s Institute of Mental Health Project, in conjunction with Harvard and Loyola (this served as the basis for *The Lonely Man of Faith*. He represented the RCA on the US Dept. of Agriculture’s humane slaughter committee. From 1964 until his death, he served as the honorary president of the Religious Zionists of America.

6. The Rav personally delivered the first Talmud shiur for women at Stern College on October 11, 1977. He insisted on doing it himself so that any criticism could be directed at him, not the faculty of the College.
The Rav was an effective and inspiring speaker in English, Hebrew and Yiddish. He delivered an annual teshuvah lecture to thousands of attendees each year. He gave a class every Tuesday evening for thirty years at Congregation Moriya on the West Side to hundreds of Rabbis and others. The annual discourse which he delivered at YU on the anniversary of his father’s death attracted thousands. These Yahrzeit drashot lasted from four to five consecutive hours.

A YU student who attended a yahrzeit drasha wrote:

“The auditorium (Lamport) was packed and overflowing. Suddenly, as if an electric current has run through the room, the entire audience, as one, rises: the Rav has arrived! The Rav, walking briskly, steps onto the stage and sits down to begin the shiur. The Rav ticks off one question after another that reflect difficulties in the halakah. Then, he goes on to develop a concept that enables him to dispose of each of the questions. He then turns to the agaddic portion of the shiur. We sit there entranced, swallowing every word. We are overwhelmed, not only by the ideas being presented, but also by the beauty of the language, the sheer poetry of the presentation, the masterful delivery and the absolute brilliance of the speaker. We sit entranced; the shiur is entering the fifth hour. Finally, it is over. It was an unforgettable experience. We will relate this special privilege we lived through to our children and grandchildren”
In 1967, the Rav suffered the loss of his mother, his brother Dr. Samuel Soloveitchik and, most grievously, his dear wife, Tonya. The Rav was inconsolable about his wife and insisted on reciting Kaddish in her memory for several years. Here is a poignant passage:

**Excerpt from a Teshuva Drasha**

“On the seventh day of Pesach, 5727 (1967), I awoke from a fitful sleep. A thunderstorm was raging outside, and the wind and rain blew angrily through the window of my room. Half-awake, I quickly jumped to my feet and closed the window. I then thought to myself that my wife was sleeping downstairs in the sun room next to the parlor, and I remembered that the window was left open there as well. She could catch pneumonia, which, in her weakened state, would be devastating. I ran downstairs, rushed into her room, and slammed the window shut. I then turned around to see whether she had awoken from the storm or was still sleeping. I found the room empty, the couch where she slept neatly covered. In reality she had passed away the previous month... The most tragic and frightening experience was the shock that I encountered in that half-second when I turned from the window to find the room empty. I was certain that a few hours earlier I had been speaking with her, and that at about 10 O’clock she had said good night and 2 retired to her room. I could not understand why the room was empty. I thought to myself, “I just spoke with her. I just said good night to her. Where is she?”

**Halachik Man - (summary)**

The Rav and his wife were blessed with three children. The oldest, Dr. Atarah Twersky, served as chairperson of the school committee of Maimonides School. Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein resides in Alon Shvut and was married to Rav Aaron Lichtenstein, z”l. Rabbi Dr. Hayim Soloveitchik is Prof. of Jewish History in Israel.

The final years of the Rav’s life were spent at his daughter, Atara’s, home in Brookline, Mass, as ill health precluded his participation in public activities. Death came on Hol Hamoed Pesach, 18 Nisan (April 8) 1993. He was deeply mourned by his students and devotees throughout the Jewish world.