

GREAT JEWISH BOOKS COURSE

RABBI YOSEF DOV SOLOVEICHIK

RABBI YECHESKEL FREUNDLICH

“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

Biographical sketch

- A. Royal Torah Heritage
 - a. born 1903, in Pruzhany (then Russia, next Poland, now Belarus).
 - b. He came from a Rabbinic dynasty dating back some 200 years: His paternal grandfather was Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, and his great-grandfather and namesake was Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, the *Beis HaLevi*. His great-great-grandfather was Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (*The Netziv*), and his great-great-great-grandfather was Rabbi Chaim Volozhin. On his maternal line, he was a grandson of Rabbi Eliyahu Feinstein and his wife Guta Feinstein, née Davidovitch, who, in turn, was a descendant of a long line of Kapulyan rabbis, and of the Tosafot Yom Tov, the Shelah, the Maharshal, and Rashi.
 - c. His father, Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik preceded him as head of the RIETS rabbinical school at Yeshiva University.
- B. Traditional Talmud Torah, recognized as a genius, his father was his primary Rebbe until early 20s. Recognized by all as a scion of the Soloveichik Talmudic dynasty
 - a. But he credited his mother for giving him his religious “soul” (see addendum)
 - b. Also received an extensive secular education:
 - i. Free Polish University (Warsaw 1924); Friedrich Wilhelm University (Berlin, 1926): philosophy, economics, political science and Hebrew subjects
 - c. During his time in Berlin, he became acquainted with both R’ Menachem Mendel Schneerson and Y’ Yitzchak Hutner
- C. Left for the US in 1932, recently married and with a young baby. (Tight immigration Laws, sponsored by Agudath HaRabbonim, but both Chicago and YU couldn’t offer positions due to Depression) and he eventually accepted position to become Chief Rabbi in Boston (conglomerate of 11 shuls)
- D. In 1935 is a finalist for Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, but loses election to R’ Avigdor Amiel and will never return to Israel (though he was courted to succeed R’ Herzog in 1959, he declined to apply)

- E. Opens Maimonides Elementary school in 1937, high school a few years later, and included various innovations, most prominently, co-education

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 instruction which is still advocated by certain group 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*.

Letter to Rabbi Leonard Rosenfeld, May 1953

- a. Also gave the first Talmud class to woman in Stern College
- F. R' Moshe died in 1941, and the Rav succeeded him at Yeshiva University, where he taught until 1986, recognized as the foremost Rosh Yeshiva, though that was never an official position
 - a. Commuted every week – never giving up his residence in Boston
 - b. Ordained over 2000 rabbis, thereby placing an undeniable stamp on the Modern Orthodox Torah world
 - i. Wide range of the student is highly instructive as to the complexity and genius of the Rebbe

Learning and Torah Scholarship

- A. The Rav was a powerhouse in shiur, forceful and frightening. Working with analytics to clarify the page and the text, as a teacher, he kept his students in awe of his wisdom and in fear of his rebuke (“You should live so long you understand pshat in Tosfos!”).
 - a. He told his rabbinic students that the only way for Orthodoxy to capture the American Jewish community was through the intellect and through ethical propriety.
 - b. Rav Schechter: Passion for truth in understanding, and often upend everything he had previously said, based on story of his grandfather

“The shiurim were the most captivating shiurim I was privileged to hear in my life. The excitement and heightened expectations that he engendered, together with his scintillating analysis, left one riveted and transfixed. In the course of his shiurim, we were catapulted to rhapsodic heights of kedusha. I felt as if I were soaring on the wings of eagles, having been wafted on a magic carpet of sorts.”

R' Avishai David

- B. Shiurim for laymen and annual yahrtzeit shiur for his father and teshuva drasha lasted hours and drew thousands.
 - a. Tisha B'av kinnot
- C. Had a deep personal relationship with the Torah

- a. Had an amazing combination of strong mesorah: on how to learn, how to pasken and hashkafa (once complained in an essay that he didn't feel he succeeded in conveying the right attitudes about Torah as well as he did the Torah itself that he taught); yet combined that with *chidushim* (novel thoughts and insights) on everything he learned
 - i. Would probably be proud to have been eulogized by one student: "I forgot many of his classes, but having had the privilege of spending the Passover seder at his home, I will never forget how he recited Hallel."
- b. Goal was always clarity and simplicity: Shiurim built a palace, starting from the ground up, and concluding with the most complicated topics with such clarity that students left thinking, of course, this is so obvious...

Philosopher and Father of Modern Orthodoxy

- A. Torah Umaada
 - a. Torah and Secular wisdom - a "synthesis" he deepened while at YU whereby the best of religious Torah scholarship would be combined with the best secular scholarship in Western civilization
- B. Lonely Man of Faith (1965)

The nature of the dilemma can be started in a three word sentence: I am lonely. Let me emphasize, however, that by stating "I am lonely" I do not intend to convey the impression that I am alone...

- C. Halachik Man
- D. Tension between modernity and Orthodoxy manifested itself in every area of Soloveitchik's public life. He staunchly defended the authority of the rabbinate, fought against unwarranted halakhic change (led campaign against mixed seating in shul), and opposed theological dialogue with Reform and Conservative rabbis and the Church. Yet he pioneered Talmudic education for girls, abandoned the Brisker family tradition by supporting Zionism, and advocated cooperation with the non-Orthodox – and even with Christians – in the pursuit of social justice and security for the Jewish people.
- E. Zionism
 - a. Originally member of the Agudah, he left to join Mizrachi and the RCA
 - i. Kol Dodi Dofek (Fate and Destiny), 1956
 - 1. On the Holocaust, suffering and the birth of the State of Israel
 - ii. According to an article published in the Boston Jewish Advocate (1935), Rabbi Soloveitchik said, "The future of Palestine is with Orthodoxy, just as the future of Orthodoxy lies in Palestine. I make this statement not as a rabbi, but as an objective observer."

"The Rav was not a *lamdan* [a learned Jew] who happened to have and use a smattering of general culture, and he was certainly not a philosopher who happened to be a *talmid hakham*. We must accept him on his terms as a highly complicated, profound, and broadminded personality." (R' Norman Lamm, 1993, on the question if to define his legacy as a traditionist rabbi or a modern philosopher)

Addendum

The Lonely Man of Faith, 1965

The nature of the dilemma can be started in a three word sentence: I am lonely. Let me emphasize, however, that by stating "I am lonely" I do not intend to convey the impression that I am alone...

Let me spell out this passional experience of contemporary man faith. He looks upon himself as a stranger in modern society, which is technically minded, self-centered, and self loving, almost in sickly narcissistic fashion, scoring honor upon honor, piling up victory upon victory, reaching for the distant galaxies, and seeing in the here and now sensible world the only manifestation of being. What can a man of a faith like myself, living by a doctrine which has no technical potential, by a law which cannot be tested in a laboratory, steadfast in his loyalty to an eschatological vision whose fulfillment cannot be predicted with any degree of probability, let alone certainty, even by the most complex, advanced mathematical calculations – what can such a man say to functional utilitarian society which is saeculum-oriented and whose practical reasons of the mind have long ago supplanted the sensitive reason of the heart?

This incongruity [in the text and accounts of Creation] lies not in an alleged dual tradition [as Bible critics contended] but in dual man, not in an imaginary contradiction between two versions, but in a real contradiction in the nature of man. The two accounts deal with two Adams, two men, two fathers of mankind, two types, two representatives of humanity, and it is no wonder that they are not identical.

[The first Adam seeks to "fill the earth and subdue it" that is, to conquer, to create, to dominate and to control. He seeks "majesty" and "dignity." The goal is to harness and dominate the elemental natural forces and to put them at his disposal. He seeks to vanquish disease, conquer space, forge political structures, create things of beauty and legislate norms.

But Adam the Second has different goals. He is not interested in how things work but in why the cosmos exists at all and what message it carries. In his inner life he experiences loneliness, an awareness of his uniqueness and differentness and inability to communicate his experience. He seeks not a functional utilitarian community of Adam the first, but a covenantal faith community involves deep and intimate relationships with other human beings – and with G-d. He thirsts for redemption – discipline, control over one's self – and even wishes to be overpowered by G-d.]

Fate and Destiny (p2)

Judaism has always distinguished between an existence of fate and an existence of destiny. What is the nature of the existence of fate? It is an existence of compulsion, an existence of the type described by the Mishnah, "Against your will do you live out your life (Avot 4:29), a pure factual existence, one link in a mechanical chain, devoid of meaning, direction, purpose, but subject to the forces of the environment unto which the individual has been cast by providence, without prior consultation. The "I" of fate has the image of an object. As an object, he appears as made and not as maker... ..What is the nature of the existence of destiny? It is an active mode of existence, one wherein man confronts the environment into which he was thrown, possessed of an understanding of his uniqueness, of his special worth of his freedom, and of his ability to struggle with his external circumstances without forfeiting either his

independence or his selfhood. The motto of the "I" of destiny is, "Against your will you are born and against your will you die, but you live of your own free will." Man is born like an object, dies like an object, but possesses the ability to live like a subject, like a creator, an innovator, who can impress his own individual seal upon his life and can extricate himself from a mechanical type of existence and enter into a creative, active mode of being.

The man of destiny is highly realistic and does not flinch from confronting evil face to face. His approach is an ethico-halachic one, devoid of the slightest speculative meta-physical coloration. When the man of destiny suffers, he says to himself: "Evil exists, and I will neither deny it nor camouflage it with vain intellectual gymnastics. I am concerned about evil from a halachic standpoint, like a person who wishes to know the deed which he shall do; I ask one simple question: What must the sufferer do so that he may live through his suffering?...the fundamental question is: What obligation does suffering pose upon man?...We do not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty, but, rather, about the path wherein man shall walk when suffering strikes.

The Six Knocks of the Beloved (p25):

(1) Political Arena, (2) the Battlefield, (3) theological disproof of a thousand years of Christianity, (4) In the hearts of perplexed and assimilated youths, (5) That Jewish blood is not free, (6) When the gates of our homeland were opened

A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Tolne [his mother], Tradition, 1978

I admit that I am not able to define precisely the masoretic role of 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 long 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.

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 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)

In *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik analyzes the ideal religious Jew (“Halakhic Man”) in comparison with two other human types: Cognitive Man and Religious Man. Cognitive Man’s approach to life is that of a scientist, in particular a theoretical physicist or mathematician, exploring reality by constructing ideal intellectual models and analyzing the imperfect, concrete world in their terms. Religious man on the other hand, seeks spiritual experience, transcending physical reality by experiencing G-d’s presence in the world.

Halachic Man comes to the world armed with the Torah, revealed by G-d at Mount Sinai. If scientists initially understand reality in mathematical terms, Halachic Man understands it in Jewish legal categories.

Halachic Man intuitively experiences the world in Jewish categories, as if he were wearing a pair of “halakha-tinted” glasses. As such, observing the *mitzvot* (plural of mitzvah) is no effort for him—an observant lifestyle is a natural outcome of his basic orientation to reality.

For Halachic Man, seeing the first light of dawn breaking over the horizon is not an aesthetic experience. Rather, his first thought is, “it’s time to recite the Shema .” Similarly, when encountering a natural spring of water, Halachic Man’s concern is whether the spring fits the legal requirements for various rituals of purification.

"Halakhic man", as a result of his study of Torah and his observance of the commandments, develops a set of coherent attitudes towards intellectual activity, asceticism, death, esotericism, mysticism, creativity, repentance, and providence.