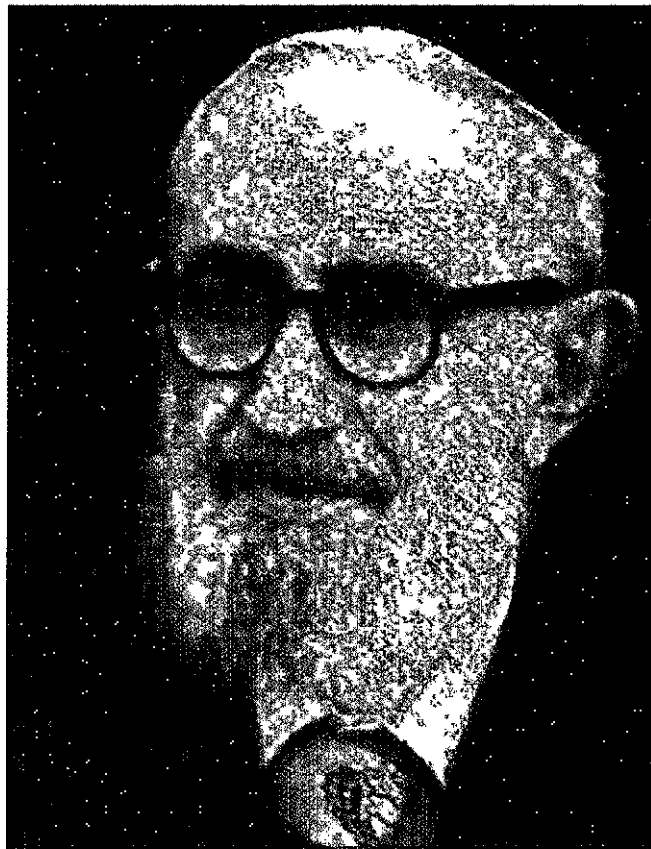


In commemoration of the Rav's one hundredth birthday and tenth yahrtzeit.

Reflections on a Life



Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, z"l, (1903-1993). Photo courtesy of Department of Communications and Public Affairs, Yeshiva University

By Jacob J. Schacter

I will never forget the first time I met the Rav, *zt"l*. I was six years old and lived half a block from Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, where my parents and I often visited patients. One evening, as my father and I entered the hospital, we noticed a tall man, surrounded by a large group of people. Recognizing the man, my father whispered to me with great excitement, "That's the Rav. That's Rabbi Soloveitchik." (My father has the distinction of being the first rabbi to receive *semichah* from the Rav at Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary

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[RIETS].) After greeting the Rav, my father introduced me to him. The Rav bent over and caressed my cheek, at which point, one of the rabbis accompanying him said to me, "Don't wash your face for a week."

I was astounded because every day my mother would say, "Yankef Yosef'l, did you wash your face today?" And here was an adult—a rabbi—telling me not to wash my face for an entire week!

Ten years have elapsed since the Rav's passing, and the "shriek of despair"¹ that immediately follows death is absent. But the need to discuss the Rav's life, reflect upon his achievements and describe the values that he represented is more pressing than ever.² Our sense of loss has grown with the passage of time as new issues arise, and there is no one to guide us as clearly and as definitively as the Rav did. How important it is

and how much more important it will become, with the passage of time, to convey what he was to a generation "*asher lo yada et Yosef*" (Exodus 1:8), a generation that did not have the *zechut* to experience firsthand the Rav's extraordinary qualities—his vibrancy and dynamism, his brilliance and lack of pretension, his radical intellectual honesty and demanding search for truth, his extraordinary power of self-revelation and deep-seated sense of privacy, his unwavering commitment to the *mesorah* and intimate knowledge of and appreciation for the philosophical contributions of Western culture.

But the task is daunting and the responsibility enormous. The Rav had very high standards. A sentence or a thought had to be formulated with clarity and precision. Only Rabbi Soloveitchik could appropriately memorialize Rabbi Soloveitchik.

The Rav was born in Pruzhin, Poland, on February 27, 1903, into one of the most learned and renowned rabbinic families in Europe at that time. The most telling and powerful description of his childhood is from an article the Rav wrote in the mid-1940s (although it was not published until over thirty years later). This description is not only about his childhood; it is about a set of values that shaped his entire life.

Rambam, the Rav recalled, was the only friend he had during his childhood. Reb Moshe Soloveitchik, the Rav's father, would carefully analyze Rambam in the *shiurim* he delivered to his *talmidim* in Pruzhin. "The Rambam was a constant guest in our home," wrote the Rav.

I would strain my ears to catch my father's every word. In my young and impressionable mind, there developed a dual impression: First, that the Rambam was being attacked by enemies who wanted to hurt him, and second, that the Rambam's only defender was my father. I felt strongly that without my father, who knows what would happen to the Rambam? It was as if the Rambam himself were with us in the room, listening to my father's words. The Rambam sat next to me on my bed. What did he look like? I don't know exactly. He seemed to look like an exceedingly handsome and good father. His name was also Moshe just like my father.

(When Reb Moshe defended the Rambam) 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 teardrops.

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."³

As a child, the Rav was deeply influenced by a number of people: his two grandfathers, Reb Chaim Brisker and Reb Elya Pruzhiner, both highly respected *talmidei chachamim* and *manhigei Yisrael*; his uncle, Reb Velvel Brisker, "the Griz"; his Chabad *melamed* in Khaslavitch; his mother and, above all, his father. It is impossible to overstate the extent of his father's influence. The Rav never learned in a yeshivah, and his father was his *rebbe muvhak*.

The Rav lived in Pruzhin until 1910; he spent the next ten years in two small towns in White Russia (Raseyn and Khaslavitch) where his father served as rabbi. Around 1920, the family moved to Warsaw.

We know little about the Rav's life over the next six years in Warsaw; we do know, however, that it was here where he studied political science at Warsaw's Free Polish University and where he was first exposed to advanced secular studies in a systematic fashion.⁴

In the fall of 1926, at the age of

twenty-three, the Rav left Warsaw to study philosophy at the University of Berlin. Moving from the Torah-centered culture of his childhood and his

As new issues arise, there is no one to guide us as clearly and as definitively as the Rav did.

family tradition to the secular metropolis of Berlin was a significant step for the Rav. "You have no idea how enormously difficult it was for me to move from the world of R. Hayyim to that of Berlin University," the Rav once told a *talmid*. "Even my children cannot appreciate it because they already found a paved road."⁵

One can only imagine how difficult it must have been for him on those long, lonely winter nights in a foreign country. Again, we do not know much about the Rav's life in Berlin, but some information is forthcoming from a little-known source. In 1994, a book of memoirs by Werner Silberstein, a German Jew who had known the Rav in Berlin, was privately published by his family. Silberstein writes:

In the twenties I became acquainted with Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, a young man who had just arrived in Berlin from Warsaw. . . . It did not take long for us to become well-acquainted and then good friends. He often came to our house in Berlin, one of the few where he was able to eat without hesitation, even on Pessach. In this connection I should like to relate an unforgettable episode. During a visit, a few days before Pessach, he replied to my wife Raya's invitation that he be our guest on Seder night: "Great, but could I ask to be present when you kasher the cooking stove?"

"With pleasure," said Raya, "but with the request that you tell me quite honestly, if something is not done correctly, I shall do it the way I learnt it from my Bobbe." Joseph Dov came at the appointed time for koshering the stove. After a while he disappeared suddenly. "Oi," said Raya, "I've obviously failed the test." But lo and behold, a little later a magnificent bunch of flowers arrived, in acceptance of our invitation to participate in our Seder.⁶

At the University of Berlin, the Rav took his studies very seriously.⁷ But notwithstanding his emphasis on secular studies, the study of Torah ("vehagita bo yomam valaylah") remained central to his life, and there is no doubt that he was fully engaged in the study of Torah throughout his years in Berlin. The Rav's son, Dr. Haym Soloveitchik, recently published a *sefer* that includes a number of *chiddushei Torah* on many difficult *sugyot* in *Shas* that the Rav sent to his father during that time.⁸

In the fall of 1930, while completing his studies at the university, the Rav moved to Vilna presumably to court his future wife, Tonya Lewit, who lived there. They were married the following June and moved back to Berlin in the fall. The Rav finished his doctoral dissertation and was awarded his diploma at the end of the following year.

In August 1932, the Rav and his wife came with their newly born daughter to the United States.⁹ They were supposed to go to the Hebrew Theological College in Chicago, but when the institution could not afford to pay the Rav's salary,¹⁰ the Rav's father went to work to find his son a position.¹¹ In December, the family moved to Boston where the Rav was installed as head of that city's eleven united Orthodox congregations.¹² For the next nine years, he immersed himself in raising the standards of Jewish education and *kashrut* in that city. He founded two schools: Heichal Rabbeinu Chaim Halevi, a *yeshivah gedolah* modeled after the classical

Eastern European yeshivot, and Maimonides School, a day school. Today, Maimonides School continues to flourish, but the Heichal was closed when the Rav succeeded his father as *rosh yeshivah* of RIETS in 1941.¹³

The Rav was deeply involved in *kashrut* supervision in Boston and in the entire New England area. At one point, he took to the streets to publicly picket non-kosher butcher stores that had opened in Jewish neighborhoods.¹⁴ The Rav became embroiled in bitter controversies against rabbis and *kashrut* organizations that did not meet his standards. He ruffled many feathers, and an entire campaign was orchestrated against him by Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews alike. The situation became so bad that in 1941 the Rav was brought up on charges of racketeering, fraud, corruption and tax evasion. The complaint was brought before the Massachusetts state attorney general, and an independent investigator was appointed to determine whether the allegations were true. Two years later, the Rav was exonerated from all of the charges.¹⁵ It was also during this period of his life, in 1935, that the Rav applied for the position of the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Tel Aviv. After spending the summer in Israel seeking support for his candidacy, the Rav lost the vote to Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel of Antwerp.

On January 31, 1941 (3 Shevat 5701), Reb Moshe Soloveitchik died unexpectedly. Since 1929, he had been the *rosh yeshivah* of RIETS. A few months after Reb Moshe's passing (and after a complicated struggle), the Rav was invited to succeed his father. He delivered his first *shiur* at RIETS on May 13, 1941.¹⁶

The Rav already had some national exposure, but now he had an opportunity to turn his attention to the broader canvas of the American Orthodox community. He began to write important articles. ("Ish HaHalakhah," "The Halakhic Mind" and "UVikkashtem MiSham"

were all written in the mid-1940s although the latter two were not published until many years later.)¹⁷ Over the years, the Rav also published a number of other long articles, but he clearly made his greatest and most long-lasting impact through his *Torah Shebeal Peh*.

It was also in the mid-1940s that the Rav moved from the Agudas Harabonim to the Rabbinical Council of America and from Agudas Yisrael to Mizrahi; over the next forty years, he had a powerful impact on both of these organizations.

As the Rav's reputation grew, and as his *talmidim* began to take positions at the forefront of the Orthodox and general American Jewish community, his influence began to spread throughout the country and beyond. He spent the following decades actively involved in teaching Torah and leading a community that constantly sought his advice. He began to slow his pace in the mid-1980s and was *niftar* a little over ten years ago, on Chol HaMoed Pesach 5753.

The Rav's shtender. Photo courtesy of the Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik Institute




Das reine Denken
und die Seinskonstituierung
bei Hermann Cohen

Inaugural-Dissertation
zur
Erlangung der Doktorwürde
genehmigt von der
Philosophischen Fakultät
der
Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin.

Von
Josef Solowiejczyk
Pruzana (Polen).

Tag der mündlichen Prüfung: 34. Juli 1930.
Tag der Promotion: 10. Dezember 1932.

The title page from the Rav's doctoral dissertation from the University of Berlin.

When I was six years old the Rav caressed my cheek. I have continued to feel that caress ever since—on my cheek, my heart and my mind. The Rav was my life-long role model. Although it is ten years since his passing, *Klal Yisrael* misses him greatly—his dazzling intellect, charismatic personality, spellbinding oratorical skills, charming sense of humor and overwhelming fealty to the *mesorah* combined with an openness to the best in the world around him. We miss his courage—the courage to do what was right even when it was not easy, and often it was not easy. The Rav played a major role in the revival and growth of Orthodoxy in America through his ability to present tradition in its most pristine form in a way that resonated with the modern American mind. May his memory be for a blessing. 

This article is an edited transcript of a lecture delivered at a session in honor of the tenth yahrtzeit and one hundredth birthday of Rabbi Soloveitchik, held at the National Convention of the Orthodox Union in December 2002.

Notes

1. This is a quote from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne," *Tradition* 17:2 (spring 1978): 73.

2. For preliminary biographies of the Rav, see Aharon Lichtenstein, "R. Joseph Soloveitchik," in Simon Noveck, ed., *Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century* (Clinton, 1963), 281-97; Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, vol. 1 (Hoboken, NJ, 1999), 21-78; Michael A. Bierman, "Editor's Introduction," *Memories of a Giant: Eulogies in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik* zt"l (Jerusalem, 2003), 19-43. A comprehensive biography of the Rav is a major scholarly desideratum. See Shlomo Pick, "The Rav: Biography and Bibliography," *B.D.D.* 6 (winter 1998): 27-44; idem., "The Rav: A Pressing Need for a Comprehensive Biography," *B.D.D.* 10 (winter 2000): 37-57.

3. "UVikkashtem MiSham," in *Ish HaHalakhah—Galuy veNistar* (Jerusalem, 1979), 230-32. The English translation is from *The Rav*, vol. 1, pp. 247-250.

4. See Jacob J. Schacter, "Facing the Truths of History," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 8 (1998-1999): 222 and n. 97.

5. Walter Würzburger, "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post-Modern Orthodoxy," *Tradition* 29:1 (fall 1994): 9; repr. in Marc D. Angel, *Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Hoboken, NJ, 1997), 8.

6. Werner Silberstein, *My Way from Berlin to Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 1994), 24-26. My thanks to Mr. Michael Bierman for bringing this work to my attention.

7. A. Lichtenstein, "R. Joseph Soloveitchik," 283-84; J. Schacter, "Facing the Truths of History," 218-222.

8. See, for example, *Iggerot haGrid Halevi* (Jerusalem, 2001), 8, 90, 130, 141, 161, 211, 219, 222, 223, 231, 273.

9. For copies of the Rav and his wife's "Declaration of Intent," (the documents needed to become citizens of the United States), including photographs of both of them and the dates and places of their birth and marriage, see Shaul Shimon Deutsch, *Larger Than Life: The Life and Times of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (New York, 1997), 280-81.

10. Oscar Z. Fasman, "After Fifty Years, an Optimist," *American Jewish History* 69:2 (December 1979): 160.

11. See Reb Moshe's letter to Rabbi Yehuda Leib Forer of Holyoke, Massachusetts, in Mayer S. Abramowitz, *Chachmei Yisrael of New England* (Worcester, Ma., 1991), 98. Rabbi Forer was a *tabmid* of Reb Moshe's father, Reb Chaim, and was known as the "*Iluy* of Pruzhin," the town where Reb Moshe spent the first ten years of his marriage. Rabbi Forer was a close friend of Reb Moshe's; when the Boston community held a memorial meeting for Reb Moshe shortly after he passed away in January, 1941, Rabbi Forer was one of the speakers. See *Hapardes* 15:1 (April 1941): 6.

12. *Jewish Advocate*, 16 December 1932, 1.

13. For all the Rav's efforts in this field during the 1930s and early 1940s, see Seth Farber, *An American Orthodox Dreamer: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Boston's Maimonides School* (University Press of New England; forthcoming), chap. 2-3.

14. See, for example, *Hapardes* 12:1 (April 1938): 26

15. See the article by Rabbi Joseph Shubow in *Hapardes* 17:10 (January 1944): 23-27. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only time *Hapardes* published an article in English and one by a Conservative rabbi. For more on the close relationship between the Rav and Rabbi Shubow, see *The Rav*, vol. II, 32-33; Seth Farber, "Reproach, Recognition and Respect: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Orthodoxy's Mid-Century Attitude Toward Non-Orthodox Denominations," *American Jewish History* 89:2 (June 2001): 193-214.

16. A report about the first *shiur* delivered by the Rav at RIETS can be found in *Hapardes* (June 1941): 11. Immediately following the story—in the same column of that publication—is a report of a *kabbalat panim* tendered in honor of Reb Aharon Kotler, who arrived in New York in search of affidavits for his *talmidim* caught in Hitler's inferno. That these two events—the Rav's beginning to say *shiur* and Reb Aharon's arrival in America—were reported on the same page in the same publication at the same time is no coincidence; together they represented the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Torah learning in America.

17. "Ish HaHalakhah," *Talpiyot* 1:3-4 (1944): 651-735; *The Halakhic Mind* (New York, 1986); "UVikkashtem MiSham," *Hadarom* 47 (5739): 1-83.

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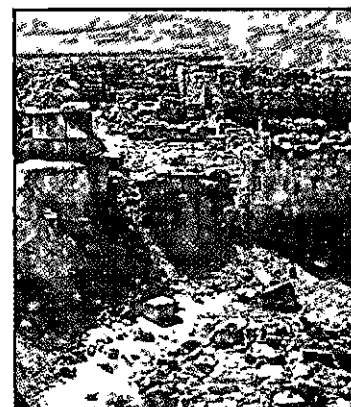
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About the Cover

The New Year Sermon from a series of lithographs by Ferenc Flamm entitled "The Legends of the Ba'al Shem Tov." The fifteen lithographs in "The Legends" are based on stories the Ba'al Shem Tov told of simple peasants, learned rabbis, shepards and angels. They provide the dramatis personae for Flamm's images, recreated as semi-abstracted fluid shapes in dream-like poses.

Born in Budapest to parents who had been saved from the Holocaust by Raoul Wallenberg, Flamm studied at the Art College and the Hungarian Academy of Applied Art in Hungary.



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