In Tribute

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

Reflections on a Life

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.) 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 unswerving 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 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.”

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 moshok.

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.

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 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.”

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 Pesach. In this connection I should like to relate an unforgettable episode. During a visit, a few days before Pesach, 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?”
At the University of Berlin, the Rav took his studies very seriously. 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.

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. 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, the Rav's father went to work to find his son a position. In December, the family moved to Boston where the Rav was installed as head of that city's eleven united Orthodox congregations. 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. 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. 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.

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.
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, Klat Yisrael misses him greatly—his dazzling intellect, charismatic personality, spellbinding oratorical skills, charming sense of humor and overwhelming facility to the mesub 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 pristene 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 yahrzeit 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 Rebbitzen of Tâlna," Tradition 17:2 (spring 1978): 73.
6. Werner Silberstein, My Way from Berlin to Jerusalem (1994), 24-26. My thanks to Mr. Michael Bieman for bringing this work to my attention.
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.
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 talmid of Reb Moshe's father, Reb Chaim, and was known as the Iluy of Pruzhin, the town where 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.
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.
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, "Repudiation, 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.
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About the Cover

The New Year Sermon from a series of lithographs by Ferenc Flamm entitled “The Legends of the Baal Shem Tov.” The fifteen lithographs in “The Legends” are based on stories the Baal Shem Tov told of simple peasants, learned rabbis, shepards and angels. They provide the dramatic 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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