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REFLECTIONS ON THE INFLUENCE OF THE ROV ON THE AMERICAN JEWISH RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION

I have been invited to write this essay, I assume, as a daughter of Rav Soloveitchik. I am a social worker by profession, not a sociologist, philosopher or halakhic scholar. I do not presume, therefore, to be objective or scientific; my retrospective reflections are filtered through the prism of closeness and distance, of identification and differentiation that constitute the fabric of parent-child relationships. And yet, I hope that my understanding of the Rov’s influence on the community in which he lived will ring true to those who knew him and who wish to appraise his contributions to the American Jewish religious community.

My focus is not the influence of the Rov in the areas of philosophy and lamdanut (each topic, in itself, deserving of an essay) but rather his impact upon the religious community, its commitment to Halakha, its public stance in relation to the general society, and its self-image. While I leave it to the sociologists among us to portray the state of the Jewish community in the United States in the 1930’s and 1940’s, I will describe, in broad strokes, the nature of that community as I understand it.

Sometimes, I entertain myself by playing “What if” games. What would have happened had my father been elected as the Chief Rabbi of...
Tel Aviv in 1935? As is widely known, he was a candidate for that post, but was not chosen. Had he been selected, and had he appeared on the Israeli stage immediately after Rav Kook’s passing, what, I often wonder, would the Religious Zionist community be like today? And, I continue the game – what would the non-haredi Orthodox community in America be like today, if the Rov had left the United States in 1935?

The answer to my first question is that the Religious Zionist community would unquestionably have developed differently. But what the nature of this development would have been and how the Rov’s influence would have melded with that of Rav Kook is perhaps a question for seers, and, being cognizant of the qualities attributed to seers in post-prophetic times, I prefer to move on to the second “What if.” The answer to the second question is clear. The Rov, I contend, had a critical influence on the Orthodox community in America. Without him, the overwhelming majority of this community might have disappeared, absorbed into the Conservative movement.

The Orthodox community in the 1940s and 1950s was under threat from the religious left, which demanded reforms. The changes it sought were both practical and philosophical, relating to the nature of the Halakha and shemirat mitsvot in general and Shabbat and tefilla in particular. These changes, it was claimed, were necessitated by the need to fine-tune Yahadut to fit a new era in a new land. The belief that the halakha is an ever-constant corpus of law, divinely ordained, belonged to the Old World. The New World was founded on change and progress and Yahadut, too, needed to change in order to accommodate itself to the times and the mood of the country. The religious right, despite its being less isolationist than it is now, did not address these issues, nor were pulpit rabbis successful in challenging these positions. The erosion of traditional adherence to Torah and Mitsvot was widespread and anti-Halakhic changes in Battei Tefilah and in shemirat Shabbat were the order of the day. In a word, the Orthodox Jew, the shul yid, was floundering. The religious community except for the “hard core” of the faithful was assimilating.ii The current existence of a thriving and dynamic community of Torah scholars, of ba’alei battim involved in the general culture and deeply committed to Talmud Torah and shemirat mitsvot, may be attributed, in no small measure, to the influence of the Rov.

ii For a description of the state of Orthodoxy in the 1940’s and 1950’s, see Chaim I. Waxman, “From Institutional Decay to Primary Day: American Orthodox Jewry since World War II”, in American Jewish History, 91:3-4 (2003), 405-421, esp. pp. 405-409.
For well over a generation, the Rov formulated positions that were opposed to the prevailing mood of the Orthodox street in America. He set standards, for both lamdanut and mitsvah observance, while at the same time emphasizing that involvement in this world was not only in adherence with the tradition, but was viewed positively by it. He invested great effort in teaching Gemara on the highest level and in formulating and disseminating a Jewish philosophy whose tenets and message were at variance with the American pragmatic ethos. It was clear that these positions were rooted in the tradition, and they were proudly and forcefully presented. The Rov’s dedication to tradition and his honest and forthright presentation of it influenced the Orthodox community and, I contend, gave direction, if not to the floundering shul yid, then to his children and grandchildren.

CONFIDENCE IN THE TRUTH OF TORAH

The Rov reached the United States in the early 1930’s. He was a new archetype of rabbi on the American scene – a talmid hakham, steeped in Brisker lamdanut, with a Ph.D. in general philosophy from a prestigious German university. The American Jew had been familiar with two types of rabbis: one was the European rabbi who barely spoke English, a talmid hakham uninvolved in, and, at times, unaware of the general cultural discourse who had little success in transmitting traditional values in a strange new world; the other was the American-born or educated rabbi, familiar with the cultural discourse, who tried to present tradition in terms that were convenient, pleasant and familiar to the American ear. My father, the Rov, differed from both prototypes. He was involved in the cultural discourse, yet he presented traditional Judaism in its own context, without attempting to accommodate it to the general culture.

The Rov’s student R. Shalom Carmy describes the way in which the Rov presented tradition to his students:

More than any other Jewish thinker, the Rav’s memorable and sometimes brutal honesty taught us what both conventional piety and fashionable liberalism seemed intent to conceal: that religion is no escape from

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conflict, but the ultimate encounter with reality. Facing reality, for the Rav, meant striving to penetrate the meaning of Torah and the challenges of human existence, not distancing oneself from these tasks by cultivating doubts about the reality. The Rav radiated a quiet, unyielding, persistent confidence in the truth of Torah. He emancipated us from the burden and the temptation of becoming intellectual Marranos, anxious to curry favor with the regnant academic, cultural and social powers that be. iv

This confidence, expressed by one whose experience was not limited to the four cubits of Torah, was the critical element in his presentation of Torah to his students. The Torah, a complete and independent corpus given at Sinai, needs no external proof of its certitude. The Masorah need not conform to any external system—be it philosophical or scientific. David Shatz has noted,

Almost consistently in his [the Rov] writings, the great cognitive conflicts of our day—evolution and creation, history and Bible, history and Halkhah, philosophy and religion—are dismissed entirely.v

This position was clearly articulated by the Rov himself, in the early pages of The Lonely Man of Faith,

I have never been seriously troubled by the problem of the Biblical doctrine of creation vis-a-vis the scientific story of evolution nor have I been perturbed by the confrontation of the mechanistic interpretation of the human mind with the Biblical spiritual concept of man. I have not been perplexed by the impossibility of fitting the mystery of revelation into the framework of historical empiricism. Moreover, I have not even been troubled by the theories of Biblical criticism.vi

This position was the keystone of the Rov’s presentation to his students. The effort that had been invested in achieving harmony with philosophy and science was now turned to pursuing other goals, primarily that of “learning.” Weekly shiurim, massekhta after massekhta, year after year, became the focus. Moreover, not only were energies directed towards Torah learning, but his pride in the certitude of Torah also contributed to

v David Shatz, “The Rav’s Philosophical Legacy,” in Memories of a Giant, 313.
a change in the traditional community’s self-image. No one could accuse the Rov of holding views springing from ignorance or fear of confronting what R. Carmy describes as “the regnant academic, cultural and social powers that be.” The Rov had been to Berlin, studied philosophy and remained steadfast in his belief, and was, in his words, not perplexed, troubled, or perturbed by the conflicts that appeared to endanger tradition. This confidence became the basis for his dialogue with his students and the community, almost unknowingly, began to take pride in its heritage.vii

The proud presentation of Jewish tradition was not limited to the Yeshiva and to its students; it found expression in the public sphere, as well. The communal leadership turned to him for direction, and his voice was heard clearly and strongly. While there are those who point out the contradictions in the Rov’s philosophical creed, a perusal of his public views shows a different picture. His public policy stance was clear and consistent – proudly presenting the uniqueness of Judaism to the general American society, asserting yahadut’s religious independence while demanding the respect befitting it, and maintaining the holiness of the synagogue by rejecting nontraditional modifications. His voice was not that of the Jewish communal leadership but was clearly that of a rosh yeshiva, who challenged that leadership to be proudly Jewish and traditional.viii

This stance was new to the American scene. Despite the avowed policy of separation of church and state, the American public arena was and still is clearly and self-consciously Christian. Jews were unaccustomed to stressing the religious differences between them and other Americans. American Jews adopted and adapted A.D. Gordon’s well known maxim, and were Americans on the street and Jews at home and in the synagogue. The Rov presented Jewish communal leadership with a clearly articulated view of public policy, based on halakhic considerations that took pride in Jewish tradition and was able to present this tradition forcefully and clearly. The tradition was valuable and worthy of respect. If this respect was not forthcoming, it was to be demanded not only from those who believed in it, but from all who came into contact with it. The Rov took upon himself a dual role: establishing the halakhic yardstick as the standard for public policy positions while, at the same time, challenging


lay and rabbinic leadership to stand with pride, lonely yet unintimidated, while presenting an authentic *Halakhic* position to Jew and non-Jew alike.

**SUPREMACY OF THE HALAKHA**

In a responsum which the Rov wrote in 1950 to the American Jewish Congress about the latter’s request to the City of New York that foundlings be “allocated” to Jewish adoption agencies in addition to the traditional “allocation” to Catholic and Protestant ones, the Rov clearly presented his thesis:

… The Jewish religion has never monopolized the media of salvation nor has it identified itself with the intolerant doctrine of religious catholicity. In other words, it never maintained that our faith is destined to become universal in order to save mankind from damnation. Our prophets and scholars have taught all men who live in accordance with Divine moral standards will share in transcendental *sumnum bonum*, which was promised to God-fearing and God-loving people – *hasidei umot ha-olam yesh lahem helek le-olam ha-ba*.

However, this tolerant philosophy of transcendental universalism does not exclude the specific awareness of the Jews of the supremacy of their faith over all others… The *homo religiosus* is convinced that his unique relationship with God is the noblest and finest, and he is ready to bring the supreme sacrifice for the preservation of his religious identity… Tolerance has never demanded of the personage to eliminate the sense of axiological centrality from his feelings. This is exactly the standpoint of the *Halakhah* which maintains that, while it is forbidden to impose our faith upon others by force, it is our sacred duty to defend our convictions against any onslaught, even at the expense of our lives.

To yield to the demands of a certain non-Jewish group that all doubtful cases be placed in non-Jewish homes is tantamount not only to self-abasement as humans but also to a cardinal violation of the fundamentals of *Halakhah* and tradition. We never tried to proselytize non-Jews, but at the same time we have never renounced our rights to lay legitimate claim to children whose identity is doubtful and the probability of their Jewish origin is not excluded. Such a renunciation would be an admission of a feeling of inferiority and skepticism concerning the worth of our great and ancient faith.\(^{ix}\)

\(^{ix}\) *Community, Covenant, and Commitment*, 21-22.
The identity of the non-Jewish group in question is not specified in the letter. Yet, one can assume from the context of the responsum that it was either the Protestant or Catholic Church, (or, perhaps, both). The Rov was fully aware of both the power, political and economic, of the Church, and the longstanding conflictual relationships between it and the Jewish people. And yet, he chided and challenged a secular Jewish group to be proudly Jewish in their encounter with the Church. The basis for this was an exposition of the role of tolerance in religious life that starkly contrasted with the conventional understanding of the concept. Tolerance would allow the Jew to be respectful of a Christian society and to participate in its institutions, yet, at the same time, to remain distant and different.

**PRIDE IN THE TRADITION**

Communal leaders were not anxious to emphasize their differentness and the Rov addressed this issue in a letter, written three years later, to the president of the Rabbinical Council of America:

I noticed in your letter that you are a bit disturbed about the probability of being left out. Let me tell you that this attitude of fear is responsible for many commissions and omissions, compromises and fallacies on our part which have contributed to the prevailing confusion within the Jewish community and to the loss of our self esteem, our experience of ourselves as independent entities committed to a unique philosophy and way of life. Of course, sociability is a basic virtue and we all hate loneliness and dread the experience of being left alone. Yet at times there is no alternative and we must courageously face the test. Maimonides of old was aware of such bitter experience (vide Code, *Hilkhot De’ot* 6:1).x

**PARTICIPATION IN GENERAL CULTURE**

The Rov clearly formulated his views on participation in American society. He wrote in 1950:

We identify ourselves with our Gentile neighbors in all matters of collective endeavor – social, political and cultural activities. There should be no retreat on the part of the Jew from the full participation in all phases of national life and we are committed to all American institutions.xxxi

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x Ibid., 111
xxx Ibd., 8-9.
He championed the obligation of the Jew to fully participate in general society. This obligation was not motivated by necessity or pragmatism but was rooted in our tradition. He stressed that:

We must note that our decision is not primarily an expression of a pragmatic-utilitarian approach but reflects a halakhic-historic tradition which has always wanted to see the Jew committed to all social and national institutions of the land of his birth or choice which affords to him all the privileges and prerogatives of citizenship.\textsuperscript{xi}

This view was spelled out more fully in \textit{Confrontation}:

“First, as we have mentioned previously, we, created in the image of God, are charged with responsibility for the great confrontation of man and the cosmos. We stand with civilized society shoulder to shoulder over against an order which defies us all. Second, as a charismatic faith community, we have to meet the challenge of confronting the general non-Jewish faith community. We are called upon to tell this community not only the story it already knows—that we are human beings committed to the general welfare and progress of mankind, that we are interested in combating disease, in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man’s rights, in helping the needy, \textit{et cetera}—but also what is still unknown to it, namely, our otherness as a metaphysical covenantal community.”\textsuperscript{xiii}

This call for the Jew’s full participation in the society where he lived, Christian or secular, while remaining steadfastly rooted in the Halakha, was the keystone of the Rov’s public creed. This proclamation that participation in communal life was in consonance with tradition differed from the view of the Haredi community, which, while politically active (less so, perhaps, than today) was not willing to expand its activities to social and cultural ones, or to view these activities as being sanctioned by the tradition. Necessity was the keystone of the Haredi view.\textsuperscript{xiv}

The Conservative movement, in contrast, in endorsing full participation in all aspects of American life, did not see traditional Halakhic positions as the standard by which public policy was to be measured and, at times, it radically reinterpreted Halakha to enable that full

\textsuperscript{xi} Ibid., 57.


participation.” Change and accommodation was its keystone. And, thus, a third option was opened for the religious community, more complex and demanding, – willing participation, in full accord with the Halakha. One needed to be constantly on the alert that Halakhic norms were not compromised. The Rov was perhaps among the few that understood the implications of the principles he had spelled out and how to apply them. Semikha students at RIETS were encouraged to enlist as chaplains in the U.S. Army, yet participation in religious commemorative services celebrating the American tercentenary was negated and ridiculed by the Rov. Jews were well aware of the dangers that plagued religious young men in the army of their countries of residence, but what dangers lurked in a seemingly harmless liturgical service? And yet the Rov encouraged the former and shied away from the latter. The former, Halakhically permissible in the Rov’s opinion, was necessary in order to limit the influence of the Reform rabbinate, safeguard, to some extent, Jewish divorce and marriage, and ensure the prestige of Orthodoxy. His reluctance to participate in the latter stemmed from a strong conviction that “… we cannot commit ourselves to any plans... which entail a religious moment. As to that, we shall act independently after our own fashion and manner and in full accord with the Halakhah.”

TRANSLATING THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE INTO PHILOSOPHICAL CATEGORIES

In addition to clearly spelling out the parameters of public policy, the Rov also elucidated, orally and in writing, divrei makhshava. The Rov considered “the translation of our inner experience into a universal philosophical language” as being an essential task. He lamented that, …”slowly and painfully we have learned that the want of a philosophy, defined in discursive terms, might be very annoying in times of crisis and historical transition… Yahadut has always suffered from a sense of shyness and reluctance to disclose its wisdom to the outside world, and this lack of metaphysical boldness and resoluteness has revenged itself upon us

 xv While the Conservative movement considered their positions as adhering to the Halakha, their public policy decisions were a far cry from being Halakhically sanctioned. For example, their position on the permissibility of driving a car on Shabbat in order to go to a prayer services, or their position on homosexuality demonstrates this tendency. 

xvi Community, Covenant, and Commitment, 115-116, and 111 – 114.

xvii Ibid., 112.

xviii Ibid., 100.
more than once. Thank God that a few of our greats, like Maimonides and others, realized the need for philosophical self-revelation and self-expression and resorted to metaphysics and philosophy to meet the challenge of difficult and unfriendly times. If the perplexed cry out for a guide, we must satisfy their needs and offer them philosophical counsel and leadership. We must engage in the heroic struggle for traditional Yahadut on all fronts, the philosophical one included.\textsuperscript{xix}

In his presentations, both oral and written, the Rov particularly emphasized and elucidated three major themes:

\textbf{a. Sacrifice}

The Rov’s words, in oral and written form, regardless of the subject—faith, repentance, family life, prayer, traditional community, charity, mourning—emphasize not only the power of human creation but also the constant demand for sacrifice. He was aware, of course, that this approach was “unAmerican.”

Even though I have lived in America for many years, I have still not adopted the pragmatic view of religion. In my view, faith does not come to serve human needs, and the technological-utilitarian desire, which has its place in the scientific consciousness, is characteristic of the transcendental yearning of man. I have never tried to explain Torat Israel in categories of mental health, spiritual tranquility and the like, even though this approach is very common here among Jewish thinkers, both haredi and non-haredi alike.\textsuperscript{xx}

The Rov presented religion in categories foreign to the American ear:

Religious activity is, in essence, an experience of suffering. When a person encounters God, a personal sacrifice is demanded of him by God, which finds expression in a struggle with his primitive instincts, by breaking his will, by accepting a transcendental “burden”, by denying exaggerated desires of the flesh, by sometimes withdrawing from the pleasing and the pleasant, by addiction to the strange and bitter, by colliding with a secular authority, and by yearning for the paradoxical world (!) which is incomprehensible to others. Offer your sacrifice! This is the essential command given to the \textit{homo religiosus}. The chosen ones of our nation, from the

\textsuperscript{xix} Ibid., 100-101.

\textsuperscript{xx} Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, ”Al Abavat ha-Torah u-Geulat Nefesh ha-Dor” in Be-Sod ha-Yahid ve-haYahad: Mivhar Ketavim Ivriyyim, Pinhas Peli (ed.), Jerusalem 1976, 403-432, 427. All citations from this book were translated by the author.
time that they discovered God, occupied themselves constantly with sacrificial activities.\textsuperscript{xxi}

This message is the diametric opposite of the American ethos. The American Dream - the individual’s success in achieving his goals in spite of obstacles and difficulties - is deeply rooted in American culture.\textsuperscript{xxii} The Jewish community believed in this vision. The American Dream had come true for them. The community had flourished and established itself both economically and professionally. The Rov stressed that \textit{homo religiosus}, in his encounter with the Divine, is not to expect success but will be challenged to struggle with his desires, his primitive instincts, and will be expected to sacrifice as an integral part of his acceptance of the “transcendental burden.” And yet, despite its difference, this message was not rejected by his students. One can only conjecture that the American Jew, notwithstanding the material comfort in which he lived, his success in the \textit{goldene medineh}, and his personal security, needed to feel that he, too, was connected to Jewish history, with its fair share of pain, struggle and sacrifice. Or, perhaps, American Jews felt discomfort in their comfort, particularly in light of national and personal memories of the recent and the distant past, and sought validation that their struggle to remain Jewish, to educate their children religiously, and to keep Shabbat was a worthy sacrifice.

\textit{b. The creative aspect of Torah study}

For the Rov, Torah study is a creative activity, almost unlimited in its power.

The path of a Torah master starts with study. When a \textit{talmid hakham} is occupied with cognitive activity, his stature continually increases. Freedom of thought and will is the primary concept. The independent mind, not outside sources, is the basis of his life... He is the architect who determines the measurements of the building, its blueprint and its appearance... Objective, sharply critical intellect, the vision and the scope, are the most basic of fundamentals being involved in Torah study.\textsuperscript{xxiii}

\textsuperscript{xxi} Ibid., p. 427.
\textsuperscript{xxii} The American Dream is still part and parcel of the cultural discourse in the United States, as illustrated by the book written in 2006 by Barack Obama entitled \textit{The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream} (New York: Crown, 2006).
\textsuperscript{xxiii} Ibid., p. 409-410.
The hegemony of the intellect is democratic, and the student need not blindly rely on the teacher; it is incumbent, rather, upon him/her to employ cognitive powers and critically examine the teachings of the master. Reliance on the intellect negates hierarchical structure, almost a given in the haredi world, and gives the student license to critically assess and examine all that he is taught. Undoubtedly, this position has its limitations in matters of faith; yet, I would assume that the Rov was limiting his remarks to the study of Torah within the framework of tradition and the faith community. In this setting, logic and creativity allow the student, young or old, to be free of encumbrance and unfettered by respect for pronouncements of teachers, and they encourage the development of critical powers in pursuit of intellectual creativity.

Perhaps this paean to intellectual creativity was attractive to the American university student who grew up in a technologically developed culture. The emphasis on the unlimited opportunity for creativity in the realm of halakha, the view that the student was the architect of intellectual buildings, unlimited by external factors, opened new vistas for Yeshiva University students that were challenging, and demanding. Creativity and knowledge-building were no longer the exclusive domain of academia but were weekly occurrences in the daily shiur in the yeshiva and the student was a full partner in this process. For generations of students, the classroom was filled with tension and challenges that resulted from an encounter with a charismatic personality who was the super-architect of the Torah structure. The students were expected to actively and adequately prepare and participate. All were equal – master and disciples – all were expected to understand, explain, and defend their positions. One former student noted that, before he arrived in my father’s shiur, he would measure his shiurim in the yeshiva based on the university’s yardstick; after he studied with the Rov, his standard was reversed and it was the university lectures which had to prove they were on par with the shiur.

c. The religious experience

For the Rov, the religious experience is the culmination of intellectual toil.

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xxv Ibid.,123-124
When a person delves into the Torah and uncovers its luminance and magnificence, when he enters into the inner realms of the Halakhic thinking, into all its offshoots, from the roots until the branches, and experiences the pleasure of creativity and originality, he is rewarded by communion with He Who gave the Torah. The vision of cleaving, dveikut, is realized by the mating of the intellect with the Divine idea, which is embodied in laws, practices and oral traditions... Yet, the Halakhic awareness is not confined to the rational realm. It forges a way to the existential consciousness and interlocks with it....Tens of thousands of black letters, into whom mounds and mounds of laws, explanations, questions, problems, concepts and measures have been compressed, descend from the complacent and cool brain, which peacefully encompasses its abstractions and orderly systems, to the quivering heart, trembling and shaking, and find themselves engulfed in the flames of a magnificent experience that sweeps the person towards The Creator.xxvi

The intellectual experience, as important as it may be, is not the final goal of the Torah scholar, but it forges his path to the religious experience. The latter is an emotional experience, all-encompassing and very personal.

[One] may hope that by formulating his own experiences in clear language, others may benefit from this self-revelation and enrich their own religious life. However the latter, being the most subjective and intimate of all modes of existence, is many a time inseparable from the individual personality – its character, temper, moods, and susceptibilities. Any attempt at standardization or generalization is based upon the assumption that what satisfies me is likely to please others as well. Yet, at times, my feelings and convictions are exclusively my own and I have no way to pass them on to others...

I am lecturing on prayer as understood, experienced and enjoyed by an individual. Of course, I try to corroborate my own convictions and feelings by coordinating them with the great disciplines of Halakhah and Aggadah. However, to say that my feeling of certitude carries universal significance would be sheer ignorance. Hence, in all humility I warn you not to ascribe to my remarks more veracity than an individual may claim for his subjective experiences.xxvii

xxvi “Al Ahavat ha-Torah u-Geulat Nefesh Ha-Dor,” 411.
This forceful expression of individualism is central to the Rov’s thought. There is no recommended or accepted form for the religious experience; it is an expression of the believer’s own personality. The individual, his temperament, his past, and his inclinations are important components of the experience. Of course, the believer examines and verifies the unique experience in accordance with Halakha and Aggada. Nevertheless, the individual’s experience remains singular. This approach is alien both to Haredi standardization and to the individualism of the Conservative movement. The latter would see no need to coordinate the individual’s feelings “with the great disciplines of Halakhah and Aggadah,” while the former would shy away from the freedom that is given to the individual in his encounter with the Divine.

These components of the Rov’s thought – (1) confidence in the truth of Torah, (2) pride in our tradition, (3) emphasis on the Divine demand for sacrifice from those close to Him, (4) Torah study as a creative act, almost unlimited in scope, (5) the uniqueness of the religious experience, which is the result of Torah study (6) participation in the general society as an integral part of our tradition – merged together and gave direction and pride to the American Jewish religious community. This approach was more subtle and complex than the existing ethos of the religious right or left, demanding knowledge, self examination, involvement, and retreat. Yet, these positions enabled the community to proudly find its way within the tradition while being actively engaged in the general scene. The Orthodox person was urged to be an American and a Jew both at home and on the street. Thus, the non-haredi religious community forged its identity as unique and different from those to its right and its left.

LONG TERM INFLUENCE

What is the long-term influence of my father, the Rov, almost two decades after his passing and two and a half decades after his voice was last heard in public? I believe there is increasing interest in Israel and a decline in his influence in the United States.

The era of socialist ideology and of the collective has ended in Israel, religious standardization is on the wane, and the Religious Zionist community, which invested its major efforts in Erets Yisrael, has suffered setbacks. Doubts about the messianic era are not uncommon. The rise of neo-Hasidism can be attributed to an attempt to give new meaning to Rav Kook’s mysticism and emphasis on Erets Yisrael. Rav Kook’s voice is no longer the only one heard in the Beit Midrash and in the schools and
homes; there are those who are seeking a different voice - halakhic, rational, individualistic and perhaps more attuned to the complex situation in which the Israeli finds himself, personally, culturally, and internationally. Four of the Rov’s books have been translated into Hebrew, including Family Redeemed, which has sold more copies in Israel than in the United States. His writings are quoted in high school textbooks, and courses are given in institutions of higher learning that deal with aspects of the Rov’s thought.xviii

In the United States, I believe that the influence of my father, the Rov, is on the decline, and part of the community which he taught and directed, is moving in other directions. There are those who are turning away from participation in the general culture as part of our tradition, and find their home exclusively in the four cubits of Torah, shying away from general culture and a commitment to Zionism.xix When the Rov appeared on the American scene, most of the community was inclining toward the left and the Conservative movement; today, the situation is more complex. The toil and effort which the Rov invested in raising a generation of Torah scholars has borne fruit and his students’ grandchildren, men and women, are involved in Torah study. And yet, there are former students, notable among them a number of faculty members or former faculty members at RIETS, who have not only turned their backs on the complex worldview the Rov espoused but are anxious to claim that the Rov himself turned his back on this view. It has even been claimed that “Whatever he (the Rov) did aside from learning Torah came to him coincidentally.”xx

It is, indeed, preposterous to think that his major philosophical essays, which interweave general philosophy and science, are “coincidental.”

And then there are those who are turning to the left, having lost their confidence in the truth of the Torah. When the Rov arrived in the United States, there were those who claimed that the Torah needs to accommodate itself to the New World. Today, that position seems primitive. The Torah in the 21st century needs to accommodate itself not to a specific place but to the times—not to the New World but to the New Age, with its demand for sexual freedom and egalitarianism. And, now as then,

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xviii A conference was held in Jerusalem in 2003 on the influence of the Rov on education, philosophy and culture and was published in 2010 as the book Rabbi in the New World (see the first note of this article).
xix The Rov’s relationship to Zionism is worthy of elaboration but his positive attitude to the State of Israel as being a manifestation of God’s role in history is beyond question, despite efforts of those to deny it.
xxx Bronspiegel, op.cit., 140.
there is hesitancy and difficulty in proclaiming the unaltering truth of the Torah.

There are many people, of the right and the left, who claim to speak in the name of my father, the Rov: they, and only they, remember what R. Soloveitchik said, they, and only they, know what he really meant, all of them were privy to private conversations in which R. Soloveitchik told them what he really thought, and, above all, they, and only they, know what he would say today. Yet, generally, these voices do not faithfully represent him. Each one presents a different facet of my father, and few represent his full complexity and depth. It is indeed painful for his family and his devoted and faithful disciples to witness this dismemberment. Those who identify with the religious right ignore my father’s commitment to participation in the general society as an integral part of our tradition and deny his call to shoulder “the responsibility for the great confrontation of man and the cosmos.”xxxi Those who identify with the religious left do not wish to recognize that the Rov was, first and foremost, a halakhic man – ish ba-halakha- who was dedicated to the Torah with every fiber of his being. It was this dedication that drove him to defend the Torah against change, to proudly present its positions, popular or otherwise, to Jew and non-Jew alike.

While many speak in his name, few disciples are able to integrate and implement his way. Perhaps his message is too complex and demanding. My father knew that his success was partial. In 1960, he wrote:

While I succeeded in a greater or lesser measure, as a teacher and instructor, on the plane of expanding the mind, as my students received from me a great deal of Torah, their intellectual stature growing and developing during the years they spent in my company – I did not see great success in my work on the experiential plane. I was not able to experience with them a shared existence, to join with them and to impart the warmth of my soul. Apparently, my words did not ignite the flame of God in sensitive hearts.xxxii

I do not know how he would write this paragraph today and how he would assess his impact on his students. Perhaps it is as difficult to impart the responsibility for the “great confrontation of man and the cosmos” while remaining true to the essence of Torah as it is to ignite the flame of God in one’s disciples.

xxxi Confrontation, 20
xxxii “Al Ahavat ha-Torah u-Geulat Nefesh ha-Dor,” 420.