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MY LONG LONELY JOURNEY TO THE RAV

To write it, it took three months; to conceive it three minutes; to collect the data in it all my life. – F. Scott Fitzgerald

I became Torah observant at age twenty-five. While I started with great enthusiasm, I became somewhat disenchanted as I moved from the “honeymoon phase” to a more informed contemplation of my new life. I was generally successful in my formal Talmudic studies, but I was less successful in working through parts of the Torah (and problematic ideas purported to be Torah) that seemed to conflict with my values, my sense of logic, or one another. Challenging topics included rabbinic authority (who, when, and how to follow, particularly when authorities disagree), the value of secular studies (could it really *all* be utter foolishness?), *parnasa* (does the Mishnah not say “where there’s no flour there’s no Torah” [Avot 3:21]?), the place of gentiles within the Jewish religious framework, various abstruse events in *Tanakh* such as Moshe’s support of the nation after the *het ha-egol* and his exasperation with it after the *kivrot ha-ta’ava*, and constructive handling of broad imperatives such as *limmud Torah* and *yirat Shamayim*, particularly when portrayed in extremist fashion.

When I first learned of Orthodox Judaism, I instinctively moved to fulfill the declaration “we will do (*na’aseh*)” made by the Jews at Mount Sinai on the promise that it would be followed by the latter part of our declaration “we will hear (*nishma*),” that is to say, study and understand. However, some of the people that I encountered permitted this formula only along very narrow channels that appeared synthetic and inadequate before the complexity of life.

During my time in yeshiva a quarter of a century ago, I came across two Jewish thinkers whose writings particularly resonated with me. One was R. Samson Raphael Hirsch and the other was R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik. However, I received mixed reactions when I brought up their names to

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people in my community. While everyone respected R. Hirsch for his scholarship and piety, some viewed his program of *Torah Im Derekh Erets* – Torah combined with worldly activities – as being intended only for 19th century Germany. Not everybody felt that way, but enough did to deter me from orienting myself around it. R. Soloveitchik seemed to produce even greater discomfort. I recall excitedly relating some of his ideas and getting cold responses. A few individuals were boldly dismissive of him. I felt in my heart the error in this behavior and noted that many great Torah scholars had their critics.¹ However, even though I was in my mid-twenties, I had been instructed to look to others for direction. Thus, I put R. Soloveitchik out of my mind.

A *ba'al teshuva* (newcomer to Orthodox Judaism) can experience something of a second childhood when first encountering the Torah and *frum* society (at least I did; my description here is by definition personal and subjective). A child lacks the tools to navigate the adult world and is forced to trust the people around him. Something similar happens to many “BT”s. One day you are walking along the roads of Western secularity, and, for reasons which are slightly different for each person, the mind takes hold of a notion that there is a God who gave a book of teachings and rules. In a heartbeat, everything changes. Before, you were going to live your life according to your personal visions and then disappear into the earth. Now, you are responsible for your actions for all of eternity, to be judged by an imposed, external standard that touches every area of your life. Your guidebook is written in an unfamiliar language with unfamiliar diction and rules of exegesis. It contains ideas and imperatives that often speak to your heart but sometimes contradict a lifetime of conditioning. In the midst of such a whirlwind, you may become diffident and even

¹ I was intrigued to learn of controversies involving numerous seminal figures in Jewish history. The Rambam faced such intense opposition to his writings that he was put in *berem*. R. Yona publicly condemned him, only later to publicly recant. The Ramhal endured similar opposition. The great R. Yaakov Emden publicly condemned him, only later to express his remorse for this. Rabbanim in Frankfurt excommunicated R. Noson Adler, the rebbe of the Hatam Sofer. In more recent times, R. Meir Shapiro endured vitriolic opposition to his Daf Yomi campaign. All endured personal attacks along with attacks of their ideas and projects, ideas that are now normative in the Jewish world and projects that have grown into institutions. See R. Berel Wein, *Herald of Destiny* (Brooklyn: Shaar Press, 1993), R. Berel Wein, *Triumph of Survival* (Brooklyn: Shaar Press, 1993), and R. Berel Wein, *Yeshivas of Eastern Europe*, Audio, (Monsey, NY: The Destiny Foundation). We should note that R. Yaakov Emden, like the *rabbanim* in Frankfurt who opposed R. Noson Adler, was responding to the episode of Shabbatai Tsevi, whose use of kabbalah to promote his messianism had ravaged Jewry 100 years before.

childlike, especially if encouraged to be so. You are at the mercy of the people around you.

After leaving yeshiva, I continued to pursue material to address my questions. I found some in the works of Rambam, Rabbeinu Bahya, and other classic commentators. However, I could not assemble the pieces into a coherent picture. My conception of the Almighty and His Torah consisted largely of disjointed clichés, many of which contradicted each other.

And then I decided to consider R. Soloveitchik again. One *Shabbat* day, I was sitting in my apartment with my mind engaged in its usual theological gyrations. Suddenly, I recollected a chapter from the book *Reflections of the Rav*, a book in which R. Abraham Besdin redacts numerous public lectures of the Rav.² I reread the chapter, and, enjoying it, read another. The Rav's elegant delivery and impeccable scholarship impressed me tremendously and caused me to recall the excitement and comfort of my earlier brief encounter with him. I decided that I would set aside the Rav's detractors and continue to study his teachings.

The book was like a bowl of rich soup set before a starving man. The Torah the Rav presented was noble and fascinating. I found him thorough in his analyses and faithful to the classic texts that he constantly referenced. The sense of pure scholarship leapt off the page. Moreover, I responded not only to his brilliance but also to his wisdom, his sense of perspective and balance about Torah living. I wanted more. I bought books and tapes; I sought out his students; I hunted around town for classes.

Over several years of study, the teachings of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik changed my life. When I read the Rav, I feel as though he is talking privately to me, so relevant are his words to my concerns and interests. The Talmud [*Avoda Zara* 55a] says that an oath is imposed upon health afflictions, stipulating that they not depart from an afflicted person except through the medium of a particular doctor. I believe that the Rav is my spiritual doctor. Through him, many of the most challenging aspects of Torah became sensible to me. Nobody else had the cure. I needed the Rav.

There are numerous reasons for this. Primary among them is that, rather than indoctrinate, the Rav illuminates and does so masterfully. Let me cite a few examples of issues that the Rav resolved for me in this manner. I mentioned earlier that rabbinic authority had been a topic of my

² R. Abraham Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 1993).

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investigation. “Question authority” was a popular phrase during the time my young mind was forming in the 1960s. Strong people, good people did not follow leaders blindly into wars and other follies. Yet, instantly I found myself under the authority of men I had never met and never had the opportunity to vet for credibility.

This was a problematic notion for me. The ‘60s movement, for all its vast flaws, many of which were fundamental to its ideology, issued to its constituents a crucial device that many *ba’alei teshuva* of my generation later utilized in the search to find God, and that device was a license to challenge the status quo. The act of questioning society and authority was a major component of what led us to Torah observance in the first place.

Enter R. Soloveitchik and a lecture entitled “Who Is Fit to Lead the Jewish People” from *Reflections of the Rav*.³ The Rav outlines Torah conceptions of human authority, including that of kings, judges, and scholars. (Note that the Rav is not addressing the authority of Halakhah or of institutions such as the Sanhedrin but of individual people.) The article’s opening sentence reads: “The Torah is fearful of giving any individual absolute power to rule over his fellow man.”⁴ The Rav proceeds to outline a bevy of reasons for this fear, such as the tendency of absolute power to corrupt. He points out that “the noblest, best-intentioned ruler is affected by the glory, tribute, and power of his office.” Additionally, a ruler can “develop an insatiable craving for mass acclaim and may shape his policies to curry favor with the masses...”⁵ Exemplifying this danger is King Saul, who rationalized his transgression against God’s command to wipe out Amalek by saying that he was trying to satisfy the people’s lust for spoils. [I Samuel 15:15] The Rav points out the conundrum of choosing a leader. What criteria would one use? Do we go with the aggressive personality or the humble one? What about the dangers of demagoguery? “Accidents of birth and circumstance may elevate one person to a more privileged class, endowing him with a regal bearing and an extroverted personality which evoke popular acclaim. Have not many incompetent leaders wreaked havoc throughout history despite their charismatic personalities?”⁶

This is good stuff, but the Rav is not finished yet. He presents a theological argument against human rulership, saying “Rulership is, after

³ *Reflections of the Rav*, Chapter XII, 127-138.

⁴ *Reflections of the Rav*, 127.

⁵ *Reflections of the Rav*, 128.

⁶ *Reflections of the Rav*, 129.

all, a Divine attribute; only God can exercise it equitably, without abuse. In our prayers we say: “Kingship and rulership belong exclusively to the Almighty,” and “Yours, O Lord is the kingdom and the supremacy as head over all” (I Chron. 29:11).⁷ He says that “craving for excessive power... precipitated the first sin of Adam and Eve” as the serpent tempted them with the possibility of acquiring godlike powers of knowledge.⁸

The Rav outlines *Hazal’s* debate over the permissibility of kingship and presents the view of R. Nehorai [*Sanhedrin* 20b] that God allows kingship over the Jewish people as a concession to human weakness. That is to say, the people want a king in part to “be like all the nations that are around me.” [Deut. 17:14]

Additionally, God often permits kings out of “practical necessity, to safeguard the community from dangers both internal and external.”⁹ But the king must fulfill a specific assignment, such as that of Saul to repel attacks by the Philistines, David to unify the tribes and to complete the conquest of the land, and Solomon to build the temple. The king is constricted by rules meant only for him, such as limiting the size of his royal household and his collection of gold and silver. He must write his own *sefer* Torah to remind him that his rule is bound by the Torah’s rules. He is ordered not to “act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the instruction (of the Torah) to the right or to the left.”¹⁰

But still we are not finished. The Rav tells us that “a Jewish king can only be appointed upon the request of the people. He is not foisted upon them, nor may he seize the throne through a coup d’état, even when external and internal dangers threaten. The people must clearly ask for a king; this is a strikingly democratic safeguard.”¹¹ And, of course, he shows us where to find this in the text: “You shall say, I will set a king over me ... be sure to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the Lord your God.” [Deut. 17:14]

Each time I reread this talk, a delightful feeling pulses through me and the feeling says this: the Torah shares my concerns. Becoming *frum* is not essentially an exercise in sacrificing my hard-won personal values. Rather, it is largely a coming home. Certainly, many parts of the Torah are strange and new. And the Rav is a master of explaining the sense and purpose of highly challenging and logic-defying decrees

⁷ *Reflections of the Rav*, 129.

⁸ *Reflections of the Rav*, 129-30.

⁹ *Reflections of the Rav*, 130.

¹⁰ *Reflections of the Rav*, 127.

¹¹ *Reflections of the Rav*, 131.

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of Jewish law as well.¹² Whatever the issue, the Rav helps me to feel that the Almighty not only does not reject my questions but values them.

So does this article free us of authority figures in Jewish life? Am I back to the '60s? Of course not. The Rav continues:

There is one power authority that the Torah not only sanctions but encourages in Jewish society, that of the teacher-student relationship. Our leader is not the king, nor the warrior, but the Torah scholar whose authority is that of a *Rebbe* over his *talmidim*...

... (However,) the authority of the teacher is not imposed; no coercion or political instrument is employed. A Torah teacher is freely accepted and joyfully embraced. His authority emerges from his personality; his learning and selflessness are acknowledged. Not fear but affection and respect motivate one's submission. A teacher is a master, like a king. At times, he inspires emulation of his way of thinking and his general deportment, but this does not result in the enslavement of his disciples. The students are not cramped and circumscribed; their souls are not shriveled through fear and conformity. On the contrary, there is an enlargement and growth of the total personality.¹³

The last sentences uncannily addressed the essence of my concern beyond even my own ability to articulate it. R. Soloveitchik gracefully escorted me through a tricky topic, employing language that I could appreciate and values that I could share. He not only eradicated my unease, but he converted it into veneration of a Torah point of view.

This is but one issue. The place of gentiles within the Jewish outlook is another. This is a frequent concern amongst *ba'alei teshuva*, and for an obvious reason: many of us have fond memories of individual gentiles (to go along with the not-so-fond memories, of course). Gentile teachers taught me to read and write; gentile friends served as my companions

¹² See the chapter entitled "May We Interpret Hukim?," Abraham Besdin, *Man of Faith in the Modern World* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989). Elsewhere, the Rav said, "We surrender to the will of the Almighty. On the other hand, to say that the halakhah is not sensitive to problems and is not responsive to the needs of people is an outright falsehood. The halakhah is responsive to the needs of both the community and the individual. However, the halakhah has its own orbit, moves at a certain definitive speed, has its own pattern of responding to a challenge, and possesses its own criteria and principles." Cited in R. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav, Volume Two* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1999), "Surrender to Halakhah," 35-6.

¹³ *Reflections of the Rav*, 133-5.

through some of the toughest times of my youth; a Polish-American woman taught me to tie my shoes.

So there I was, years later, encountering what seemed like indifference and indulgent hostility towards “the rest of the human race.” This outlook seemed mean-spirited and selfish. How could that be healthy? R. Meshulam Dovid Soloveitchik tells the story of how one of the vagabonds who frequented R. Chaim Soloveitchik’s house rudely demanded a pen from a young member of the household who was writing down Torah *hiddushim*. “You can have it in a minute,” he assured the man. Rav Chaim, upon hearing the story, was disappointed in the response. In his view, simply “not to give” was unhealthy, even for an unreasonable request.¹⁴ Similarly, I argued, training oneself in gratuitous hostility was harmful to proper character development.

For me, it seemed ungrateful as well. God forbade Moshe from initiating a plague on the dust of Egypt because he had used the dust to conceal the Egyptian that he had killed for beating a Hebrew.¹⁵ The lesson is gratitude, even to an inanimate object. As I explained, gentiles taught me to read. Cultivation of a sweeping, indiscriminate hostility would amount to a gross demonstration of ingratitude.

Again, we return to *Reflections of the Rav*. There, the Rav utilizes the verse “I am a stranger and a resident among you” [Gen. 23:4] to show how Abraham operated with a dual status in Canaan.

He was a resident, like other inhabitants of Canaan, sharing with them a concern for the welfare of society, digging wells, and contributing to the progress of the country in loyalty to its government and institutions. Here, Abraham was clearly a fellow citizen, a patriot among compatriots, joining others in advancing the common welfare. However, there was another aspect, the spiritual, in which Abraham regarded himself as a stranger. His identification and solidarity with his fellow citizens in the secular realm did not imply his readiness to relinquish any aspects of his religious uniqueness. His was a different faith and he was governed by perceptions, truths, and observances which set him apart from the larger faith community. In this regard, Abraham and his descendants would always remain “strangers.”¹⁶

¹⁴ R. Shimon Yosef Meller, *The Brisker Rav* (Feldheim Publishers: Nanuet, NY, 2007), 60.

¹⁵ Rashi to Exod. 8:12.

¹⁶ *Reflections of the Rav*, 169.

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This explanation worked for me. The writer F. Scott Fitzgerald once said “The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”¹⁷ The Rav, in 128 words, expressed a dichotomy that not only left me able to function but inspired. I was not required to fabricate a hostility that would be particularly difficult to maintain in the working world. I could work productively with gentiles, except in the religious realms where I belonged to a nation apart. This is a beautiful idea and an idea that I can embrace. 128 words – problem solved.

While the Rav eased the extremism I had encountered, he did not let me off the hook from the hard duties of Judaism. Quite the opposite is the case. Consider the following passage from his essay “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah”:

Prayer means sacrifice, unrestricted offering of the whole self, the returning to God of body and soul, everything one possesses and cherishes. There is an altar in heaven upon which the archangel Michael offers the souls of the righteous. Thrice daily we petition God to accept our prayers, as well as the fires – the self-sacrifices of Israel - on that altar (“*ve-ishei Yisrael u-tefillatam be-ahava tekabbel be-ratzon*”). Prayer is rooted in the idea that man belongs, not to himself, but that God claims man, and that His claim to man is not partial but total. God the Almighty sometimes wills man to place himself, like Isaac of old, on the altar, to light the fire and to be consumed as a burnt offering.¹⁸

Some call the Rav the leader of Modern Orthodoxy, even though it was a term he did not use.¹⁹ Whatever you label him, his words here constitute a call for comprehensive religious service and anything but an easy path of life. However, offered along with insights about the legitimacy of human dignity in “The Lonely Man of Faith,”²⁰ personal creativity in

¹⁷ F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crackup,” *Esquire Magazine* (February 1936).

¹⁸ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” *Tradition* 17:2 (1978), 70-71.

¹⁹ Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein, “Reflections on the Influence of the Rav on the American Jewish Community,” *Tradition* 44:4 (2011).

²⁰ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1965). “The brute’s existence is an undignified one because it is a helpless existence. Human existence is a dignified one because it is a glorious, majestic, powerful existence. Hence, dignity is unobtainable as long as man has not reclaimed himself from coexistence with nature and has not risen from a non-reflective, degradingly helpless instinctive life to an intelligent, planned, and majestic one.” (16)

Halakhic Man,²¹ and human fragility in *Out of the Whirlwind*,²² these words of the Rav do not overwhelm; they do not destabilize. Rather, they inspire.

Beyond even the recognition of human needs, the Rav showed how divine service is generally not antagonistic to nature. In *From There You Shall Seek*, the Rav writes:

Halakhah aims to sanctify man's body, refine the bestial aspects of human life with all their lusts and drives, and raise them to the level of divine service. But this refining process does not take place in a crucible of denial and deprivation; [it occurs by] stamping the natural aspects of human existence with direction and purposefulness. Combining the beast in man with his divine image purifies and sanctifies the body. This union is accomplished by imposing the yoke of the halakhic commandments on the body. The purpose of the halakhic imperative is not to label man's sensual body as impure and thus reject it, but to purify it and draw it closer to God.²³

To me, the depiction of God's total "claim" over man and "the natural aspects of human existence" are not contradictory. We give ourselves to divine service. However, this service generally does not preclude normal life and the joys of natural existence. Actually, much of divine service takes place with normal life as its setting and Halakhah as its boundary. An ascetic approach to Torah can overwhelm even an idealistic person, rendering him unable to attain basic observance of the full spectrum of

²¹ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983), Part II - His Creative Capacity. "Halakhic man is a man who longs to create, to bring into being something new, something original. The study of Torah, by definition, means gleaned new, creative insights from Torah." (99)

²² R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind* (Jersey City, NJ: MeOtzar HaRav, Ktav, 2003) "Prayer is warranted and meaningful only when one realizes that all hope is gone, that there is no other friend besides God from whom one may expect assistance and comfort, when the soul feels its bleak despair, loneliness, and helplessness." (161)

²³ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *From There You Shall Seek*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Jersey City, NJ: MeOtzar HaRav, Ktav, 2008), 111-2. The Rav offers a proof from the Gemara: R. Elazar ha-Kappar says, [When the Torah says], "And he [the Nazirite] shall make expiation on his behalf for his sin against the spirit" (Num. 6:11), what spirit has he [the Nazirite] sinned against? It is because he caused himself suffering by refraining from wine. And we can make a deduction here from the lesser to the greater [evil]: If a person who has caused himself suffering only by refraining from wine is called a sinner, then one who causes himself suffering by refraining from everything is all the more so (*Nedarim* 10a).

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duties. With the Rav's approach, based on the *gemara* [*Nedarim* 10a], a person can pledge his total commitment to Halakhah without hedging his bets against a sweeping self-denial that he feels he cannot maintain for long. Once again, the Rav resolved a conflict that lingered in my mind for years. Perhaps others tried to explain it to me, but the Rav had just the right touch.²⁴

The Rav's effect on me seems supernatural at times. Yet, while he answers my questions one after the next, he neither sugarcoats Judaism nor packages it like a secular self-help program or a magic potion. As he wrote in his essay "Sacred and Profane":

The error of modern representatives of religion is that they promise their congregants the solution to all the problems of life – an expectation which religion does not fulfill. Religion, on the contrary, deepens the problems but never intends to solve them... When a minister, rabbi, or priest attempts to solve the ancient question of Job's suffering through a sermon or lecture, he does not promote religious ends, but, on the contrary, does them a disservice. The beauty of religion with its grandiose vistas reveals itself to men, not in solutions but in problems, not in harmony but in the constant conflict of diversified forces and trends.²⁵

One implication of the Rav's statement here is that internal conflict is an expected part of religious life. The Rav presents a Torah that goes toe to toe with the complexity and challenges of life. This only affirms its authenticity.

While I never saw the Rav in person, I have met him mind-to-mind and soul-to-soul on hundreds of occasions. In 1974, at 71 years of age, the Rav gave a talk in which he described his own experience of such encounters while teaching Talmud:

Whenever I start a *shiur*, the door opens. Another old man walks in and sits down. He is older than I am. All the *talmidim* call me the Rav. He is older than the Rav. He is the grandfather of the Rav. His name is Reb Chaim Brisker. Without him, no *shiur* can be delivered nowadays. Then the door opens quietly again and another old man comes in. He is older than Reb Chaim. He lived in the seventeenth century. What is his name? Shabsai Kohen. He is the famous Shach who must be present when *dinei mamonos* are being discussed, and when we study *Baba Kamma*, *Baba*

²⁴ See Rambam's *Shemoneh Perakim*, chapter 4, for a similar perspective.

²⁵ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Sacred and Profane," *Gesher* 3:1, 7.

Metzia. And then more visitors show up. Some of the visitors lived in the eleventh century, some in the twelfth century, some in the thirteenth century. Some lived in antiquity. Rabbi Akiba, Rashi, Rabbeinu Tom, the Raa'vad, the Rashba. More and more come in, come in, come in.

Of course, what do I do? I introduce them to my pupils, and the dialogue commences. The Rambam says something. The Ra'avad disagrees sharply... A boy jumps up to defend the Rambam against the Ra'avad. And the boy is fresh. You know how young boys are fresh... So I correct him. And another boy jumps up with a new idea. The Rashba smiles gently. I try to analyze what this young boy meant. Another boy intervenes. We call upon the Rabbeinu Tam to express his opinion, and suddenly a symposium of generations comes into existence...

We all speak one language – “*vayhi kol ha'aretz safah ehat u-devarim ahadim*” (“The whole earth was of one language and of one purpose” [Genesis 11: 1]). We all chat. We all laugh. We all enjoy the company, and we all pursue one goal. We all are committed to a common vision, and we all operate with the same categories. There is *mesorah* collegiality, friendship, comradeship between old and young, between antiquity, middle-ages, and modern times, “*v'hu ha-keitz*.” This community of generations, this march of centuries, this conversation of generations, this dialogue between antiquity and present will finally bring the redemption of the Jew.²⁶

When I first heard the recording of the Rav speaking these words my eyes welled up with tears. Torah study had been overly intimidating to me. After hearing this breathtaking depiction of a *shiur*, everything changed. I saw myself as being involved in a historic drama. I was part of a community to which I could contribute. Can a person be part of a community if he or she is not contributing to it? Reb Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik, the *maggid*, made the *masora* come alive, and I came alive.

One tragic outcome of the public condemnation of the Rav by his critics is that it obstructed a unique avenue to the Torah.²⁷ As the Rav

²⁶ Given at a *pidyon ha-ben* in 1974; the recording is available on yutorah.org under the title “The Rav’s famous description (from 1974) of how he experienced the Mesorah as he gave *shiur* as an old man.”

²⁷ What were those criticisms? Dr. Walter Wurzburger, a student of the Rav, perhaps summarized it inadvertently when he said the following: “What differentiates the approach of Rav Soloveitchik from that of *Haredi* posekim and makes him the authority figure of so-called “Modern Orthodoxy” is his endorsement of secular studies, including philosophy, his espousal of Religious Zionism, and his pioneering of

once said in a *hesped* for his uncle the Brisker Rav, “The attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He, descend to the lower realm and are concretized in *gedolei Yisrael*, the Sages of the sacred tradition ... They serve as a dwelling-place for the *Shekhina*... A great man becomes the instrument through which one of the divine attributes is actualized [here on earth].”²⁸ Each Torah giant is blessed with special gifts that may be intended to aid a segment of the community.²⁹ It would seem that *ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* gave the Rav the abilities and training to be a conduit to Torah for millions of ‘captured children.’ While the Rav grew up in Poland and White Russia mostly prior to World War I, he could connect intimately with a modern American audience. He was to twentieth century Western Jewry what R. Hirsch was to nineteenth century Western Jewry. As the Rav wrote in *Halakhic Man*, “The Torah, whether in terms of study or practice, is the possession of the entire Jewish community.”³⁰ We need *scholars* who can present Torah concepts in a contemporary idiom, addressing contemporary concerns. Did the Rambam not do the same in his era? The Rav was such a scholar.

R. Avigdor Miller commented that, while one can hear much *divrei* Torah nowadays, he will not find many speakers that mention the Almighty with any great frequency. The Rav spoke constantly about God.³¹ He did it so frequently and movingly that I sometimes imagine that if I were to lift the words from his writings off the page, I’d find the Divine Presence underneath. Among his myriad riveting reflections, the Rav said that he learned from his mother the most important thing in life: “to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle

intensive Jewish education for women.” Cited in Walter Wurzburger, “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post-Modern Orthodoxy,” *Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. Marc Angel (Hoboken: Ktav, 1976), 5.

²⁸ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “*Ma Dodekh mi-Dod*,” as translated in Marvin Fox, “The Rav as Maspid,” *Tradition* 30:4 (1996), 168.

²⁹ Over the years, I have come to learn that many great *talmidei hakhamim* admired the Rav. I learned that R. Elchanan Wasserman said about him, “I was there in Boston and I never saw somebody eat, sleep and dream Torah as he did.” I learned that the Ponovitcher Rav called him “the greatest rosh yeshiva in the world.” I learned that R. Yaakov Kamenetsky asked the Rav to start a yeshiva with him. I heard a first-hand account of how the Satmar Rav sent some of his students all the way to Boston to study with the Rav. See *Mentor of Generations*, edited by Zev Eleff (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2008) and *Memories of a Giant*, edited by Michael Bierman (New York: Urim Publications, 2003).

³⁰ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 42.

³¹ See, for example, R. Aaron Rakeffet, *The Rav, Volume One* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1999), “Coronation Night,” 153-5.

pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders.”³² My long, lonely journey was ultimately a journey to God. The Rav taught me all about Him, His Torah, His commandments, and His love for *Kelal Yisrael* such that I can look back now and feel the gentle pressure of the Almighty’s hand resting upon my frail shoulders throughout all those days and nights.

The Rav taught that one implication of *Hashem’s* creation of people *be-tselem Elokim*, in His image, is that just as He is creative, people should be creative.³³ Moreover, there is no better creativity than *biddushei Torah*. The Rav also used to say that he was proud to be a *melammed*, a teacher,³⁴ for the Almighty Himself is a teacher, as we say in the blessing over Torah study, “*ha-Melammed Torah le-ammo Yisrael*,” who teaches Torah to His nation Israel. My personal *biddush* on this idea is that one way in which Hashem serves as master teacher is to place books in our hands, ideas in our heads, and teachers before our eyes. I am grateful to the Almighty for placing the Rav and his Torah before me.

I often say that I did not understand life until I became a student of Torah, and I did not understand Torah until I became a student of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Despite the obstacles, I found my place in the Almighty’s Torah and in *Kelal Yisrael*. For this, I thank *ha-Kodesh Baruch Hu* and I thank *ha-Gaon be-Hasid Rabban shel Yisrael ha-Rav Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik zt”l*.

³² R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “A Tribute to the Rebbetzen of Talne,” *Tradition* 17:2 (1978), 7.

³³ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, Part II, “His Creative Capacity.”

³⁴ Stated by his sister Anne Gerber in Ethan Isenberg, *Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Second Look Productions, 2006).

