Book Review


Reviewed by
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The author of the Mishna was Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, who was so great that his title remains simply “Rebbe.” Since he was the teacher par excellence, no further title was necessary. So too in our generation, for tens of thousands of students—many of whom today serve as rabbis, teachers, and leaders within the Jewish community—is Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. For them he is “the Rav”; no further description is necessary.

As a teacher, the Rav is simply sui generis, in a category all to himself. Possessed of an encyclopedic breadth of knowledge which encompasses both the provinces of legal Mishneh Torah as well as philosophic Moreh Nevukhim, he is doubly blessed by the ability to communicate with an unusual eloquence and charisma. No pen has yet done justice to the scene which repeated itself annually on the occasion of his yahrzeit shi’urim. In the main auditorium of Yeshiva University, he would begin a discourse, first in Halakha, then in Aggada. With the realization suddenly dawning that several hours had passed, he might smilingly suggest that the talk be brought to a close, but a murmur of protest from the captivated audience would be sufficient prod to continue.

In these lectures, minds were opened to those broad overviews of religious thought which bring in their wake personal revelations, re-evaluations and serious commitment. The Rav had the ability to educate and to energize, to inform and to inspire, to transmit as well as to transform the listener.

Although a goodly number of his lectures have been published, it is an open secret that R. Soloveitchik has been very prudent in what he permits to be published—perhaps because the perfectionism of his Brisk heritage has never allowed him to feel sufficiently content with his words, or the recognition by a master preacher that the printed text lacks the passion afforded by the total experience of personal contact. Indeed, there is no doubt that eina doma re’iya lishmi’a, nothing can take the place of having been present at any one of these remarkable discourses. Unable to recreate the impossible, we are indebted to Rabbi Abraham Besdin for again making available to us, in this sequel to his previous volume, Reflections of the Rav, what he calls “thematic reconstruction” of lectures and shi’urim given over the course of several decades.

Besdin is quick to emphasize that, not having used literal transcripts, any imprecision of the text must be attributed to him; it is only the content which he prays he has competently conveyed in a manner allowing the reader to grasp what it is that so captivated all those originally present. The versions presented here are clearly diluted and popularized—“reconstructions” in fact. Some of the material has been published by the Rav himself in English and in Hebrew in more complete form. Nonetheless, Besdin succeeds in giving the reader a satisfying taste of R. Soloveitchik’s power and breadth.
The title, *Man of Faith in the Modern World*, indicates the scope of the contents. For some, the two clauses are antithetical: faith and the world are viewed as unbridgeable antagonists. It is the genius of the Rav to have upheld the creative nature of the tension between the two. The Jew remains apart, yet is a part of the drama of divine destiny. As the Rav illustrates in his analysis of the Haftara of Jonah on Yom Kippur, the thematic kinship of Jonah and the Yom Kippur Minha Torah reading—concerning forbidden sexual relationships practices by the Canaanites and Egyptians—rests precisely on this balance. Separate yourself from their ways, but do not become so insular that you forget God’s concern even for a Nineveh as well as the wider non-Jewish world. That is, says the Rav, precisely the same balance expressed by the Haggada. In every generation, tyrants seek to destroy us. Pour forth Thy wrath upon the nations that know Thee not; but *nishmat kol hai*, the breath of every living being shall bless Thy name.

It is a theme the Rav explores in the chapter on “The Universal and the Covenantal.” The generation of the flood pursued pleasure; the generation of the Tower of Babel sought not pleasure but power; its paradigm is communism rather than hedonism. “Pleasure and power are man-centered and do not respond to a higher authority; *kedusha* is God-centered and it acknowledges divine rulership.” Universal man was given the seven laws of Noah; covenantal man, descendant of the Patriarchs, was to extend the seven into a more stringent and demanding discipline capable of improving the world to Messianic perfection. How fascinating for this relationship to be reminded that in the burial cave of Kiryat Arba rest four couples: not solely the patriarchs and matriarchs of Jewish past, but also the universal progenitors Adam and Eve. This is because

Human dignity, exemplified by Adam and Eve, who were created in God’s image and covenantal sanctity, which was introduced by the patriarchs, are not mutually exclusive. Man—all humankind—possesses worthiness because he reflects in human measure such Divine attributes as intellect, free will, and a moral sense.

The Rav does not renounce the world, because he has hope for it. His view of history is shaped not by causality—the secular approach which is concerned by what preceded—but by destiny, the teleological concept which projects what will be because of what God long ago decreed for eschatological redemption. It is the voice of the prophets who foresee a time when “The Lord shall be king over all the earth.” It is a recognition of the promise to the first patriarch that “all the families of the earth shall bless themselves through you.”

What sets R. Soloveitchik apart in these lectures is the broad sweep of his theological brush which allows him to combine so many different disciplines under the rubric of his Torah perspective. He explores the deeper meaning of *hukkim*, laws whose rationale is not given and whose interpretation, for some, may seem theologically off-limits; he interprets the therapeutic dimension of *shiv’a* and halakhic ways of dealing with death; he offers magnificent insights into the ideal marriage. His views on faith in a technological society are extremely valuable; the chapter on Sarah is mandatory reading for feminists who lack a context for understanding Orthodox Jewry’s views on women. And finally, in a masterpiece of self-revelation, the opening section on the “The First Jewish Grandfather,” with its analysis of the secret for uniting generations, strikes the reader with the essential humanity of this towering intellectual figure.
To read through this volume—not at one sitting—is to be indebted to the Rav’s Torah shebe’al peh. One can only imagine the trepidation Besdin must have felt when he contemplated the magnitude of his task. How dare one try to speak in the name of the Rav? Yet, as he obviously concluded, how much more intolerable is it to allow the voice of genius to go unrecorded.

The only hesitation one feels about the volume is the reconstruction of essays carefully crafted and previously published by the Rav. Besdin’s editing may make the essays more accessible to the public, but the trade-off is a blunting of some of the brilliance of the Rav. One is nevertheless grateful that this volume makes it possible for those who never heard the Rav speak to understand, at least partially, why he had such a profound impact on so many of his disciples.