

## Community, Covenant and

### *Selected Letters and Communications, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*

*The Rav was so complex a figure that different individuals perceived him in different ways. We therefore thought it appropriate to publish two reviews of the book on the Rav's letters so as to better capture the richness of his thought and personality. Ed.*

*Reviewed by Simcha Krauss*

It is common knowledge that the Brisker method of Talmud study is difficult and complex. The terms “two *dinim*,” “*gavra* and *chefiza*,” “*ma'ase* and *kinyan*,” all freely used by adherents of this school of thought, show that seemingly simple concepts of Jewish law can be examined and explained dialectically, that is, in multi-faceted and, at times, contradictory ways.

One of the prime expositors of the Brisker method in our time was *maran* Harav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, ז"ל. For close to half a century, he taught, inculcated and popularized the Torah of Brisk to thousands of students. The Rav, however, also broadened and applied this method of analysis far beyond the confines of “pure” halachah to the whole range of *aggadic* and philosophical texts. Although comprehensive study of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this article, the Rav's creative use of such now familiar terms as the “two Adams,” “the two sides of Elisha ben Abuya” and “the two covenants” illustrates the point.

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*Rabbi Krauss was the spiritual leader of Youth Israel of Hillcrest, in New York, and the immediate past president of the Religious Zionists of America. The author expresses his appreciation to his wife, Esther, and Rabbi Zalman Alpert, reference librarian at Yeshiva University's Mendel Gottesman Library of Hebraica/Judaica, for their help in preparation of this article. Rabbi Krauss and his wife recently made aliyah and live in Yerusha-layim.*

Yet even as the Rav's influence grew, as he gained recognition as Orthodoxy's dominant Torah and intellectual figure, and as studies of the Rav's teachings multiplied, his role as communal leader was questioned. Amidst the accolades heaped on the Rav—such as that “people will be reading him in a thousand years”<sup>1</sup>—some wondered whether he was really a *posek*, an authoritative decision maker, for

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Orthodoxy. The argument went that he had difficulty making decisions, that he was too conflicted, and therefore not really a leader. For example, Hillel Goldberg accepts the following description of the Rav:

*In its very broad outlines, [Rabbi Soloveitchik's] philosophy ... finds great resonance among the modern Orthodox.... But when Rabbi Soloveitchik attempts to apply this philosophy of life to reality, his position is often indecisive, vacillating, and quite contrary to expectations. It is the Orthodox who made of Rabbi Soloveitchik a charismatic leader; he disdains this role for himself.<sup>2</sup>*

In fact, this sort of criticism is not new to the history of Brisk. Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin reports that when Rav Chaim Soloveitchik, the Rav's grandfather, was confronted by a difficult *she'eilah* (question of Jewish law), he would turn to Rav Yitzchak Elchanan Spector, the great

rabbi of Kovno, with a request that he be sent a telegram with a yes or no response, without the theoretical pilpul on which the decision was based. The implication was that either Rav Chaim was afraid of deciding, or that, as Rav Zevin suggests, he was always able to see another possibility of argumentation.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the perception of Brisk's inability to decide and its consequent inability to lead.

*Community, Covenant and Commitment* offers a radically different understanding of the Rav. The volume contains over seventy letters, responsa and memoranda written by the Rav, dealing with issues of halachah, *minhag* and public policy, as well as *chiddushei Torah*. These writings reflect the gamut of issues that touched the lives of American Jews in the 1950s and '60s and ended up on the Rav's desk. In his responses, the Rav characteristically cites all sources, analyzes all possibilities and presents a whole array of possible options for resolving the problems. The mastery of text and theory displayed is awesome. But these questions demanded answers, and the Rav provides the latter with confidence and certitude. The responses are precise, authoritative, definitive and often courageous.

The following illustrates the Rav's brilliance as a decision maker: In 1950, a supporter of Cornell University left a bequest for the building of an interfaith chapel. Part of the design was for stained glass windows depicting human figures, albeit without any Christological motifs. When some Jewish faculty members

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objected, the university responded that it would respect their wishes if a rabbinic authority backed them up. They turned to the Rav, limiting their question to the permissibility of depicting human figures.

The Rav's response traces the halachah and history of the second of the Ten Commandments, and concludes that any representation of the human form in the context of worship, no matter how universal its character, is halachically objectionable. But the Rav does not stop there. Acknowledging that he fully understood the implications "in terms of public relations," he forcefully attacks the very notion of sharing an interfaith chapel:

*The idea of a common house of prayer is absolutely irreconcilable with the Jewish philosophy of worship ... the worship of God is not a social or collective gesture but is a genuinely individual, most personal, intimate ... relationship which cannot be shared....*<sup>4</sup>

When this question arose, the Jewish community in America was weak, and the Orthodox community weaker still. For American Jews, the priority was to belong, to homogenize into the larger society, not to stand apart. In some quarters, identification with Israel was interpreted as dual loyalty. Jewish day school was widely considered "parochial" and "ghettoizing." Sociologists echoed many ordinary Americans in suggesting that all religions share a common message, so there was no need to identify with a particular creed. In the Jewish community, Orthodox rabbis were up against interfaith services, brotherhood Sabbaths and Sundays and joint Thanksgiving services; opposition smacked of un-Americanism.

In such a cultural environment, it took considerable courage for the Rav to write a *pesak*—that would be read by the president of Cornell University—about the centrality of Jewish holiness, separation and uniqueness, and that boldly proclaimed that the sanctity of a place of worship requires "respect for privacy and exclusiveness." Unafraid of such cultural heresies, the Rav, in his *pesak*, calls a place of worship "dedicated to a plurality of cultic modes" a "paradox."

In a similar instance, the president

of the Rabbinical Council of America turns to the Rav about an invitation the RCA received to cooperate with a group of non-Orthodox and secular Jewish scholars in the preparation of a new English translation of the Bible. The Rav rejects the idea, explaining:

*I am afraid that the purpose of this undertaking is not to infuse the spirit of Torah she-be-al peh into the new English version but ... to satisfy the so-called modern "scientific" demands for a more exact rendition ... in full accord with, or at least influenced by, higher Biblical criticism, and I cannot see how we, representatives of Torah she-be-al peh, can lend our name to such an undertaking.*<sup>5</sup>

The Rav realized that his *pesak* would be interpreted as a sign of Orthodoxy isolating itself from the rest of the Jewish community. In fact, he anticipated this critique:

*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*

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*fear is responsible for many commissions and omissions, compromises and fallacies on our part which have contributed greatly 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.*

Despite the "loneliness" of such a position, the Rav decided, and the Rav led.

This steadfastness is apparent on other issues as well, for example, his relentless struggle for the sanctity of the synagogue. On the issue of *mechitzah*, the Rav stated: "In my opinion, Orthodoxy must mobilize all its resources ... against the Christianization ... of the synagogue." And thus this *pesak*:

*With full cognizance of the implications of such a halakhic decision, I would still advise every Orthodox Jew to forego tefilah be-tzibbur even on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur rather than enter a synagogue with mixed pews.*<sup>6</sup>

This was, of course, strong medicine. But the Rav believed that only such a self-confident Orthodoxy would survive. He felt he had to inculcate Orthodox circles with dignity—*kevod HaTorah*. When shown a responsum by a non-Orthodox scholar, he reacted as follows:

*... I have not read the responsum you sent me on the question of grafting human bone tissue. I tore it up immediately. I refuse to deal with any halakhic essay, regardless of its scholastic merits or fallacies, prepared by a representative of a group whose philosophy is diametrically opposed to Torah and tradition and which does not accept the authority of Halakhab as a Divine and transcendental guide for the individual and the community. I am shocked at the nonsensical attitude of our representatives in tolerating such a pitiful state of affairs and surrendering the most sacred prerogative of the traditional rabbinic, hora'ah [halakhic decision making], to an apostle of a non-halakhic brand of Judaism.*<sup>7</sup>

The Rav would not brook ideological or theological syncretism. But he was not only a naysayer; the Rav opposed the idea that the survival of Orthodoxy depended on isolation and exclusivity. He had a positive agenda to bring Torah *lirchovah shel ir* (to the broad plaza of the city) by teaching Torah that was broad, deep, all-inclusive and all encompassing.

The Rav himself was the *marbitz Torah* par excellence, as attested to by the sheer volume of his *shiurim*. He labored mightily to improve standards of learning at his home base, Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. In a memorandum to Dr. Samuel Belkin, included in this volume, the Rav suggests a total overhaul of the rabbinic curriculum. His ideas for the courses to be taken by *semichah* students, as well as his recommendation for extending the time required for *semichah* studies, resulted in a transformation of

that program.<sup>8</sup>

But his concerns extended far beyond his own institution. When asked about how to properly observe and celebrate the tercentenary of Jewish life in America in 1954, the Rav urged that the occasion he marked, mainly, by Torah study, and he virtually outlined what should be studied.

The Rav championed inclusivity in Torah study. He felt it “regrettable” to have separate curricula for boys and girls. He wrote:

*The policy of discrimination between the sexes as to subject matter and method of instruction which is still advocated by certain groups within our Orthodox community has contributed greatly to the deterioration and downfall of traditional Judaism.*<sup>9</sup>

The Rav led fearlessly even when he saw dangers or risks in taking particular positions. When asked about the establishment of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine at Yeshiva University (YU), he answered “from a perspective of *upachad verachav levavech*,” (exhibiting initial hesitation).<sup>10</sup> The experiment might not succeed; the school might not live up to Jewish values. On the other hand, a medical school associated with a yeshivah could radically alter the prevalent perception of Orthodoxy. Ultimately, argued the Rav, offering advanced academic and professional education under the umbrella of YU would be a victory for Torah because “we must spread Torah in its widest definition” to the total Jewish community. Furthermore, a medical school will demonstrate to the world that the Torah Jew need not cower in a corner and gaze with sadness and resignation as life and the world pass him by. The Orthodox Jew must demonstrate that he navigates with pride the currents of the modern world and participates in a life that is racing ever more rapidly towards new horizons and great accomplishments in the domains of science and technology. We must show the world that not only does the Halakhah not restrain the intellectual and emotional capacities and worldly knowledge of the Jews, but, on the contrary, it deepens and

broadens them greatly.<sup>11</sup>

The idea that Orthodox Jews need “not cower in a corner” and that halachah does not isolate the individual from the world are staples of the Rav’s teachings. And these were the principles that were at the root of his open, unapologetic and proud association with the Religious Zionist movement.

In a letter to Reb Shlomo Zalman Shragai, a former mayor of Yerushalayim, the Rav noted that his association with Religious Zionism had cost him dearly. Although, he writes, his life would have been easier had he identified with the “zealots,” he was convinced that *our worldview and approach are the only ones that have the capacity to heal the breach of our people who are loyal to tradition and to bring back the hearts of children and parents to their Father in Heaven.*<sup>12</sup>

The Rav spelled out, in brief, this worldview in a letter to Dr. Yosef Burg, former interior minister and leader of the World Mizrachi Organization. Believing that Mizrachi was an all-embracing ideological movement with its own distinctive philosophy, not just a political party, the Rav wrote:

*We have not removed ourselves from such a world, nor have we withdrawn into a secluded corner.... We will not build a Noah’s Ark.... It is our desire to purify and sanctify the modern world.... It is our belief that Judaism has the means to give meaning and significance, value and refinement, to the multi-faceted existence of modern life. We do not fear progress in any area of life, since it is our firm conviction that we have the ability to cope with and redeem it. I personally subscribe to this outlook with every fiber of my being.*<sup>13</sup>

He amplified this idea in another letter, to Dr. Moshe Unna, a leading Mizrachi ideologue, in which he described Mizrachi as ... *a large movement committed to a specific ideology and worldview whose impact is significant both in Israel and in the Diaspora.... I cannot join up to any group or association that has emblazoned on its banner [the call]:*

*“Separate from the vast world [and go] into dark caves and set yourselves apart from the world and the rest of the Jewish people.” This retreat from the battle is the beginning*

*of defeat and reflects a lack of faith in the eternity of Judaism and its ability to dominate the new world with its powerful currents and changing forms.*<sup>14</sup>

On March 1, 2005, the Orthodox community celebrated the completion of the *Daf Yomi* cycle. The number of Jews brought together that night in large meeting halls, all hooked up by technological marvels, was said to be over 100,000 men and women, young and old.

I was struck that night by a sociological oddity: Most of the participants, had they been asked whether they were “card-carrying” Religious Zionists or whether they identified with the Modern Orthodox community, would have responded in the negative. Yet many, very many, of the celebrants are people who went through the college experience. They hold responsible positions in the larger society. They are professionals and business people in all walks of life.

In other words, they are people who “do not cower in a corner.” They are people who are involved in the “multi-faceted existence of modern life.” They are, whether they sport black hats or not, whether they acknowledge it or not, the kind of Jews that the Rav predicted could emerge “even in America,” if Torah was given a chance. The Rav labored mightily for that chance.

The letters in this volume help us understand the Rav’s leading role in the Orthodox resurgence. He had no hesitation, when the occasion called for it, in appearing harsh, blunt and inflexible. And he expected the same from his disciples. “We have not yet lost the battle, for we have not yet begun to fight,” he told Orthodox rabbis when he urged them to stake everything—positions, prestige, livelihood—in order to save the traditional synagogue.

And the Rav was an optimist, believing with all his soul that the struggle to transform the Jewish community would succeed. This was more than just belief and faith. As he said in one of his memorable *teshuvah shiurim*, there is a difference between “believing” that God exists and “knowing” that He exists.<sup>15</sup> The Rav knew, without ifs or buts, without any doubt or hesitation, that *Netzach*

*Yisrael lo yeshaker* (The Eternal One of Israel does not lie). This clarity and certitude, so strongly reflected in these letters, affected thousands of his pupils. We, generations later, and our descendants even “a thousand years” from now, are the beneficiaries of this confidence and certitude. **JA**

#### Notes

1. Arnold Wolf, *Shma*, 19 September 1975: 295.
2. *Between Berlin and Slobodka: Jewish Transition Figures From Eastern Europe* (New Jersey, 1985), 197.
3. *Ishim Veshitot* (Tel Aviv, 1966), 64.
4. 1, pp. 3-10.
5. 12, pp. 110-113.
6. 20, p. 140. In another letter (18, pp. 133-136), the Rav writes, “It would be better not to hear the shofar than to enter a synagogue whose sanctity has been profaned.”
7. 14, p. 119.
8. 11, pp. 93-105.
9. 9, p. 83.
10. 10, p. 91. This verse from Isaiah 60:5 was also used by Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook in his speech at the opening ceremony of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1924.
11. 10, p. 91.
12. 38, p. 206.
13. 37, pp. 203-204.
14. 36, p. 202.

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### *Moshe Meiselman*

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The few letters in the volume regarding the issue of the Synagogue Council are but a tip of the iceberg of one of the major issues in Orthodox Jewish life of the fifties. Unfortunately, the time has not yet come when the background and details of this controversy can all come to the fore. In 1956, a letter was signed by eleven of the leading *roshei yeshivah* of the United States forbidding participation in rabbinic or synagogue groups together with members of the Conservative and Reform movements. This would have meant that members of the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) could no longer be members of the Board of Rabbis—a mixed group—and that the Orthodox Union would no longer be able to continue its longstanding affiliation with the Synagogue Council of America. The letters of the Rav in this volume reflect that the publication of the *issur* (prohibition) of the eleven *roshei yeshivah* came as a surprise to the Rav. In the time immediately preceding the publication of the *issur* there was an intense dialogue between the Rav and Rav Aharon Kotler on reaching a compromise text, to which the Rav could be a signatory. Both of these *gedolim* were interested in avoiding the divisions within the Orthodox com-

munity that would result from the lack of a compromise. There were two other individuals whose political interests were served by a lack of compromise. These individuals published the earlier text, thereby aborting the dialogue about a compromise text. The Rav never forgave these two individuals for creating the unfortunate tensions and acrimony that resulted from the lack of a compromise text. One can debate whether the Orthodox community gained anything from the participation of the RCA in the Synagogue Council. However, the isolation of the Rav from the rest of the yeshivah world as a result of this controversy was certainly a tragedy that greatly limited his participation in, and impact on, the general yeshivah world.

This review is certainly not the venue for a total discussion of the Rav's position on Zionism. However, whereas one quarter of the book revolves around this, one must draw some conclusions from a few of the letters. The Rav was firmly opposed to all changes in the *sid-dur*. The letters discuss this both in response to the Holocaust and to the State of Israel. There were two reasons for this opposition. First, as he points out (p. 120) prayer is speaking to God, and much of the current liturgical