

PORTRAYING THE RAV

From time to time, articles and symposia appear in *Jewish Action* and other periodicals about the value of higher secular knowledge and its consonance with Torah. Oft, Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik is cited as the rabbinic imprimatur of the importance of advanced academic education—nay, as a categorical imperative. *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Nathaniel Helfgot, ed. [New Jersey, 2005]), reviewed in the fall 2005 issue of *Jewish Action*, contains letters written by the Rav and a number of his statements on the subject.

Indeed, the Rav admired and even touted a good higher general education, approving of Torah Jews who fully contend with the outer world.

That was then, but would that be his position today? The Rav's opinions articulated in his letters relate to Jewish life in the fifties and sixties. They are invaluable as a historical source, but are they determinative of the view he would now espouse, regarding college and university education?

Western Civilization requirements have been diluted with all manner of politically correct left-wing studies. Literature, history, political science and even some of the health sciences have become the handmaidens of the new agendas with teacher-proselytizers. Gone are, for the most part, objectivity and the genuine quest for knowledge, replaced by the vulgar and the ersatz. Nonetheless, with judicious choosing and intelligent parental involvement, one can still imbibe general knowledge that can complement Torah learning. But caveat emptor.

Most problematic, though, is the placing of our young people, at eighteen or nineteen, in schools with on-campus residence requirements, given academe's wholesale abandonment of traditional morality and embrace of hedonism. At colleges of yesteryear, admittedly there were also difficulties, but they were in the realm of the practical, e.g., keeping kosher and having exams scheduled on Shabbat. There was little in the campus environment violative of Torah mores and morals. Schools, by and large, were single sex and, where co-ed, had separate dorms, with strict parietal rules. Today, colleges and universities boast co-ed dorms, unisex bathrooms, orientation sessions about the most personal matters and administration-disseminated birth control advice and devices.

How strange and paradoxical—we work to educate our young people for twelve years in Jewish schools, and then a year or two in Eretz Yisrael, only to lose many to today's *Molech* (idol worship). True, there are those who emerge from the experience and remain whole. At what cost, though, do we foster this Darwinian-like survival of the religious fittest?

To be sure, there are situations even on residential campuses

that are relatively benign. But they are few and far between. At the very least, parents considering sending a son or daughter to an out-of-town college or university should conduct an extensive visit, including an inspection of the housing facilities while students are about.

Encouraging young people today to attend these schools, in the Rav's name, is less than honest. Withdrawing “into a secluded corner” and, perforce, relinquishing certain intellectual dimensions and growth, may in 2006, unfortunately, be a necessary choice for a Torah Jew. It is submitted that the Rav would agree.

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Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was one of the most outstanding Talmudists and pedagogues in centuries. This signal achievement should be sufficient as a definition of premier leadership in the Orthodox community.

Oddly, however, many feel the need to attribute to the Rav certain leadership roles that he neither played nor claimed to play, as if, somehow, he were the lesser for not having done so. The attempt to portray a truly great figure as larger than he was does not enhance him; it diminishes him. It also hampers our attempt to grapple with the current historical moment (more on this later).

In his review of *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, Rabbi Simcha Krauss writes:

Amidst the accolades heaped on the Rav . . . some wondered whether he was really a posek, an authoritative decision maker, for 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 [in my book, Between Berlin and Slobodka: Jewish Transition Figures from Eastern Europe (New Jersey, 1989)] accepts the following description [by the late Professor Charles Liebman] 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.

As evidence against this claim, Rabbi Krauss cites the contents of the book under review. My strictures here do not pertain to the book, ably edited by Nathaniel Helfgot. The writings of the Rav therein are important and sometimes breathtaking. (I would particularly call attention to the Rav's articulation of the halachic concept of *rov* in relation to foundlings.) The problem with Rabbi Krauss's use of the book is twofold: methodological and programmatic.

Methodology. My purpose here is not to “heap accolades” on the Rav, nor the opposite, but to bring historical perspective to these writings of the Rav.

To Rabbi Krauss, the book's collection of “over seventy letters, responsa and memoranda written by of the Rav” demonstrates that he was a *posek*, “an authoritative decision maker, for Orthodoxy”—that he was “definitive and often courageous.”

Six methodological flaws undermine this claim. Any single one might not be decisive. Together, they demonstrate overwhelmingly that the Rav was not a “*posek* for Orthodoxy.”

1. *Scope.* The Rav had little impact on, and in fact was opposed by, significant segments of Orthodoxy. On the highest level, he had the respect of such leaders as Rav Aharon Kotler, but in no sense was he accepted as a *posek* by large segments of Orthodoxy. Even within the segment of Orthodoxy where he was pivotal, it was not as a *posek*, as the following five criteria show.

2. *Quantity.* For a “*posek* for Orthodoxy,” seventy items are a pittance. The late Rav Moshe Feinstein, an undisputed *posek*, published many volumes and thousands of responsa. One contemporary *posek* in Brooklyn answers more than seventy *she'eilot* each week. The papers of active communal leaders run to the thousands. To claim that Rav Soloveitchik acted as a *posek* for an entire community over the course of many decades on the basis of seventy items is astigmatic, simply trying to make the Rav into something that he wasn't.

A few items in the book show the Rav acting as a *posek* not within Orthodoxy but on its behalf, before the government. Although the quality of the Rav's work is impressive, the quantity of his work is dwarfed by others who did this kind of work as a matter of course.

Rabbi Krauss himself unwittingly concedes this when he writes that the Rav “was the *marbitz Torah* par excellence, as attested to by the sheer volume of his *shiurim*.” Sheer volume makes a difference! The volume of the Rav's *shiurim*—Talmudic analysis rarely responsive to practical questions of *halachah* and communal policy—gives evidence of his fertile influence as a pedagogue and theoretician. The marked paucity of his responsa precludes his role as a *posek* for Orthodoxy.

3. *Anonymity.* Concerning an item that Rabbi Krauss presents as evidence of the Rav's leadership as a *posek*—a *teshuvah* on an interfaith chapel—the Rav specifically requested that it be virtually hidden.

This does not mean that we cannot now learn from this masterful *teshuvah*, nor that we cannot appreciate the constraints under which it was written (which Rabbi Krauss summarizes well); but when all is said and done, a *teshuvah* written with the Rav's express instruction that it not be shown “to anyone except those persons who are directly concerned with this matter” does not constitute evidence of public leadership as a *posek*.

4. *Posthumous publication.* Many of the items in the book saw the light of day decades after they were written (the interfaith chapel *teshuvah*, for example, fifty-five years after it was written). Posthumous publication of *teshuvot* and other papers, some of which were tightly restricted during the Rav's lifetime, cannot constitute evidence of decisive public leadership during his lifetime. To argue that an illuminating *teshuvah*, disclosed only now, constitutes evidence of a *posek* for Orthodoxy then, is to fall prey to the anachronistic fallacy.

5. *History.* There is no question that from time to time the Rav publicly enunciated controversial and important positions, perhaps most notably his 1954 prohibition against *davening* in a Conservative synagogue even on Rosh Hashanah. A historical perspective will ask whether there was change and development over the course of the Rav's career as a *posek*. It is clear that in the thirties in Boston, for example, the Rav was far more active on questions of practical *pesak* than he was from the mid-forties to the mid-eighties. To highlight a given incident or a short period in the Rav's lengthy career in which he did demonstrate leadership as a *posek* cannot credibly speak for the whole.

Rabbi Moshe Meiselman (in an accompanying review of the

same book) sets forth a more textured view of the Rav when he writes that the Rav was “very often flexible to the point of frustration,” but “inflexible and totally dogmatic” when he perceived that a specific issue created a danger.

To my knowledge, when Professor Liebman published his analysis in 1965 of the Rav as indecisive and vacillating in applying his philosophy to reality, no one who studied under or worked with the Rav at the time objected. Forty years later, history is revised.

6. *Context.* Is it likely that the Rav in his temperament as a *posek* would diverge consistently from his temperament generally? I think not. Rabbi Krauss uses words like “confidence” and “certitude” to describe the Rav as a *posek*. Taking the Rav's role as a *posek* over the course of his entire career, I find these words strikingly at odds with so much else of what we know of the Rav's personal status as a lonely and enigmatic man, his professional preference for pedagogy (the Rav did not spend hours every day answering *she'eilot*, he spent hours every day preparing and delivering *shiurim*), his intellectual status as a person of cross-cultural sensibility and his Brisker status as a dialectician of theoretical over practical Talmudic analysis. Such traits do not lend themselves to sustained, consistent certitude and leadership as a *posek*.

In sum, a very small quantity of responsa and papers, influential only within a segment of the Orthodox community, and, even within that, sometimes available only to a few people and often published posthumously, do not constitute evidence of a *posek* for Orthodoxy, especially given the contrary constellation of the Rav's temperament and untrammelled theoretical interests. His rare intervention on a governmental or interfaith matter does not alter the fundamental trajectory.

My second, programmatic critique of Rabbi Krauss's attempt to make of the Rav what he wasn't relates to the current moment.

It is not only historically inaccurate, but also damaging to the contemporary Orthodox agenda to exaggerate the dimensions of the Rav. If the Rav was everything—both philosopher and halachist, both theoretical Talmudist and practical *posek*, both academic and activist—the emergence of new leadership in an important segment of the Orthodox community is, at worst, thwarted, at best, bumpy. It becomes disheartening to attempt to replace perfection!

Jewish Action has highlighted the problem of leadership in the Orthodox community (“In Search of Leaders” by Reuven Spolter, spring 2004). I submit that one of the causes is this tendency to inflate the Rav. If, after the fact, the role of the Rav as a *posek* is distorted into something larger than it was, one result is despair, the sense by a segment of the Orthodox community that it can never again enjoy a true leader.

The Rav was unique, but that is radically different from feeling that no one now can perform certain critical functions in the Orthodox community that he did—and did not—perform. It is difficult enough for a community to recover from the loss of a great leader; it should not be made more difficult by retroactively recasting him so as to make his role too daunting to sustain. Quasi-hagiography does not serve us well.

A historically accurate view of the Rav as a *posek* is important both for its own sake and for the contemporary Orthodox agenda. Neither consideration detracts from the protean mind and elevated character of Rabbi Josef B. Soloveitchik. Quite the contrary, historical truth is its own redemption and only heightens the resplendence of the Rav.

I have a personal rule when reviewing books: Review the book the author wrote, not the book you wish he had written. The

book of the Rav's life was significant enough; we need not, and should not, embellish it with a book of life that he himself did not write.

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Rabbi Krauss responds

Rabbi Greer's description of the contemporary scene on American college campuses is partially accurate. Living on a college campus in today's atmosphere can be corrosive to the soul. However, Rabbi Greer's admonition that observant Jews should, therefore, forego "certain intellectual dimensions and growth" is not a simple proposition.

Rabbi Greer finds two evils on campus: first, the immoral atmosphere in the dormitories and second, the fact that contemporary curricula and faculties are not the same as those of a half-century ago. Gone are the objectivity and the genuine quest for knowledge of yesteryear, he argues. Today's curricula and professors offer an education that is "vulgar" and "ersatz." He further argues that the teaching is done by "teacher-proselytizers," who impart to their students only politically correct positions.

While I share Rabbi Greer's first concern, I totally disagree with the second. I don't believe that in the "good old days" all students read only Shakespeare and "healthy" literature. Nor do I think that nowadays poetry, literature and political science are exclusively issue-oriented and driven by particular political and social agendas.

More importantly, Orthodoxy, whether contemporary or old, has to make choices—to choose between isolation or integration. Isolation means relative comfort and safety; integration carries with it a measure of risk. The challenge of Orthodox education is to make certain that no matter which choice our students make, the Jewish community will emerge richer.

As to Rabbi Goldberg's letter, in my review of *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, I wrote that the Rav was a *posek* for Orthodoxy. I based this statement on the fact that in the course of the Rav's career, one that spanned over a half-century on American soil, he answered thousands of questions to his students, to rabbis, to communal leaders, to anyone who asked. While these answers were not published, still, in addition to the book under review, the record of many of these decisions can be found in Rabbi Hershel Schachter's *Nefesh HaRav* (Jerusalem, 1994), Rabbi Aharon Ziegler's *Halakhic Positions of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (New Jersey, 1998) and the late Rabbi Louis Bernstein's *Challenge and Mission* (New York, 1982), among other works.

The point of my review was to argue that this book calls into question the often-cited description of the Rav as indecisive. From these seventy letters, there emerges a picture of the Rav as a leader who decides important and often controversial issues with "confidence" and "certitude."

Rabbi Goldberg argues that one cannot be considered a *posek* based on seventy letters. These letters, however, were not written to private individuals, nor were they responses to simple issues of *basar bechalav* (meat in milk) or the recitation of Ya'aleh Veyavo. They were written to rabbis, communal leaders, leaders of institutions and educators on issues of widespread concern. Hence, a responsum to the Rabbinical Council of America must be considered a response

to 600 rabbis. Furthermore, if thousands of Orthodox families adopted a *kulah* (leniency) or *chumrah* (stringency) or *minhag* (custom) based on the Rav's *pesak*, one cannot argue that the Rav was not a *posek* for Orthodoxy.

I think that Rabbi Goldberg misreads and misunderstands one of the most public *teshuvot* of the Rav, one that impacted on the future of Orthodoxy in the United States. Rabbi Goldberg concedes that the Rav's *pesak* about not *davening* in a Conservative synagogue was "important," but he overlooks the fact that this *pesak* changed the course of Orthodox history in the United States. It stemmed the erosion of *kedushat beit hakeneset* (the sanctity of shul) by energizing a small and weak Orthodox leadership to assert itself. Orthodox *ba'alei batim*, led by their rabbis, staked their all on this *pesak*. They began to realize that they could build synagogues and gain members by being authentically and genuinely Jewish. This *pesak* contributed immensely to Orthodox renaissance and growth. Furthermore, the physical *kedushah* of the *beit hakeneset* impacted the general elevation of standards: more Torah, more *tefillah* and more *mitzvot*. That is *pesak!*

In his argument about "anonymity," Rabbi Goldberg contends that when a *rav* expressly instructs one not to publish the reason for the *pesak*, it diminishes his stature as a *posek*. In fact, in the history of *pesak* one finds situations where the *posek* required withholding of such information. The fact that the Noda B'Yehudah (Rav Yechezkel Landau) did not publicize the reasons for his permission to shave on Chol HaMoed is well known. Would Rav Goldberg exclude Rabbi Landau from the community of *posekim*? And, to use Rabbi Goldberg's logic, from just one such *teshuvah*?

Rabbi Goldberg further argues that the Rav's "temperament" did not fit that of a *posek*. The Rav was "lonely," "enigmatic" and "indecisive," thus he was lacking in "confidence" and "certitude" as befits a proper *posek*. Let me respond by making an analogy to the *Sanhedrin*; when its members pronounced a verdict of guilt in a capital offense, based on halachic guidelines, they were confident and certain. However, when they personally executed the verdict, as they were required to do, they did so with anguish and pain. When the Rav *paskened* that his student should not take a particular position because the shul lacked a *mechitzah*, the Rav was certain, confident and resolute. But it testifies to the Rav's greatness that he felt the young student's anguish and empathized with his disappointment at having to give up his hopes and aspirations.

Finally, in his programmatic critique of the review, Rabbi Goldberg raises the issue of "exaggerat[ing] the dimensions of the Rav." He argues that putting the Rav on a pedestal results in "despair" and thus "thwarts" the emergence of new young leaders.

I would like to state for the record that my review was not intended to praise the Rav. I am too cognizant of the *Yerushalmi* that states: "It is not customary among us for the small to speak in praise of those who are greater." The Rav was so large a figure, so towering and overpowering that, even if we wanted to, we could not put him on a pedestal. That does not mean, however, that the Rav cannot be a model we would like to emulate. Once we would like to see in Rambam what he saw. Once we would like to be *mechadesh* (to offer an original interpretation) and understand a *sugya* (Talmudic topic) as he did. Once we would like to give a *derashah* as he did. That ambition, that yearning should not thwart anyone. It should lead to constant study and constant growth. Indeed, if Jewish leadership emerges worthy of its name, not stuck in pettiness and mediocrity, it will do so exactly because figures such as the Rav serve as models. **JA**