



Rav Ahron Soloveichik, זצ"ל (1917-2001)

The Indomitable Spirit of RABBI AHRON SOLOVEICHIK

By Shmuel Marcus

The *ba'alei musar* tell us that perfection requires that one possess a combination of *chesed* (kindness) and *gevurah* (strength) which is tempered by *emet* (truth). My grandfather, Rav Ahron Soloveichik, exemplified this blend.

My grandfather was born in Russia on May 1, 1917, to Rav Moshe and Pesha Soloveichik. In 1930, not long after his Bar Mitzvah, the family immigrated to New York where Rav Moshe had been offered the position of *rosh yeshivah* at Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological

Rabbi Marcus received a B.A. from Yeshiva College, an M.S. from Azrieli Graduate School, and semichah from RIETS. He is a member of the Bella and Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon at RIETS and resides in Manhattan with his wife and two children.

Seminary (RIETS). My grandfather attended Yeshiva University High School and then Yeshiva College, where he received a Bachelor of Arts in mathematics. He later received a law degree from New York University. During his years at RIETS, he learned in his father's *shiur* and then, following his father's passing, in the *shiur* of his older brother, Rav Yosef Dov, the Rav.

My grandfather's distinguished family heritage (he was the grandson of Rav Chaim Brisker and a great grandson of the Beit Halevi) certainly provided him with pristine Torah ideals and many illustrious role models. Nevertheless, his ultimate greatness in Torah was due to his tremendous self-motivation, his firm resolve to excel in learning and his iron willpower which propelled him forward in his never-ending quest for Torah knowledge.

Throughout his life, he learned with incredible diligence. In the late 1940s and '50s, when he taught a *shiur* in Yeshivat Rabbi Chaim Berlin in East New York, he would take a briefcase of

sefarim with him so that he would not waste any time during the two-hour subway trip from Washington Heights. Occasionally, he would become so engrossed in his learning, he would miss his stop and arrive late for *shiur*.

He would sit in the *beit midrash* with his head bent over a *sefer* the entire day, concentrating intently, oblivious to whatever was going on around him. It was as if his immersion in the Gemara had transported him to a metaphysical world.

This *hasmadah* (diligence) remained with him throughout his life. One year on Shavuot morning, one of my uncles, a teenager at the time, came home from yeshivah after learning all night and, like everyone else, went to sleep. He awoke a short time later and was surprised to hear the sound of energetic learning emanating from the porch, where my grandfather was sitting. "Abba, aren't you tired?" my uncle asked. "I didn't stay up all night just to sleep all day," my grandfather replied.

One year, when the Rav was sick, my grandfather assumed the responsibility of teaching his brother's Gemara and *Yoreh Deah shiurim* at Yeshiva University (YU) while teaching a daily Gemara *shiur* in a different *mesechta* at Yeshivat Rabbi Chaim Berlin. In addition, he delivered two weekly *shiurim*. This is but one example of how *hasmadah* and *amelut baTorah*—diligence and exerting oneself to learn and teach Torah—were integral parts of my grandfather's life.

My grandfather's Thursday *Parashat Hashavuah hashkafah shiur*, which he taught at YU in the 1960s, was a popular attraction in the Yeshiva. Students would crowd into the *shiur* and stand in the aisles to hear contemporary, sometimes controversial, issues discussed from a Torah perspective.

In addition to his learning, my grandfather was a *ba'al chesed* par excellence. One early morning, already having moved to Chicago, he was walking to Yeshivas Brisk and noticed a mentally disabled child who had wandered out of his house while his parents were still sleeping. Despite the fact that he was a *rosh yeshivah* in his 60s, my grandfather walked the child home and played with him until his parents awoke. My grandfather could have easily delegated the job to one of his *talmidim*, yet he eagerly seized the opportunity to do *chesed* himself.

When, in the days preceding one Rosh Hashanah, a student of his from Chicago had to be hospitalized in Rochester, Minnesota, my grandfather traveled there to bring the young man some food for the Yom Tov. Upon arriving, however, my grandfather became concerned that he might inadvertently transmit a cold he had to his student. To avoid this, he stood by the door as he conversed with his *talmid* for the entire duration of his visit.

My uncle remembers walking with my grandfather on New York's Lower East Side and seeing a drunk man collapse in the street. My grandfather helped the man to his feet, and then walked with him from house to house

until they found his home. My grandfather would often tell me "*verachamav al kol ma'asav*"—"His compassion is upon all His creations" (Psalms 145)—applies to both Jews and non-Jews; this story is but one example of how he lived by that verse.

His *gevurah*—not his physical strength, but his inner fortitude, determination and perseverance—amazed those who knew him. In 1983, he suffered a debilitating stroke that left him partially paralyzed on his left side. His left arm was rendered virtually useless, and sometimes shook uncontrollably. Even after intense therapy he was only able to walk with a cane, often enduring tremendous pain.

...his ultimate greatness in Torah was due to his tremendous self-motivation, his firm resolve to excel in learning and his iron willpower...

Despite these handicaps, not only did he resume teaching his *shiur* in Yeshivas Brisk, he even assumed new responsibilities, commuting weekly between Chicago and New York to teach at YU as he had done in the 1960s, prior to his move to Chicago. For 15 years, despite his handicap and advanced age, my grandfather would rise Tuesday mornings about 4:30 AM so that he could arrive at the airport in time for his two-hour flight out of Chicago. For a young, healthy person such a schedule would be difficult; for a partially paralyzed stroke victim it should have been unthinkable. But Torah was my grandfather's lifeline; he lived to learn, he lived to teach. Rather than tire him out, the trips to New

York invigorated him and gave him strength to go on. In recent years, when my grandfather was already in his 80s and quite frail, he was frequently hospitalized. His first concern, however, was that he be released as soon as possible because he had to fly to New York on Tuesday.

His courage and perseverance inspired not only his *talmidim* but even the non-Jewish employees of United Airlines in Newark and Chicago, who developed a deep respect, admiration, even love for "the rabbi" as they fondly referred to him.

Moshe Presworsky, who devoted himself to caring for my grandfather's every need in the years before his death, related to me that he once accompanied my grandfather to Newark airport and they arrived too late for the flight. As they entered the airport, the gateway was already being pulled from the plane. But as soon as the ticket agent saw "the rabbi," he radioed the gate, "Hold the plane for the rabbi!" They held the plane.

One remarkable story told at the *shivah* house in Chicago also demonstrates the extent to which my grandfather inspired even non-Jews. Soon after my grandfather's passing, a Jewish man, who lives in Chicago, attended a Chicago Bears' football game. Sitting next to him was a non-Jew. They struck up a friendly conversation, and eventually exchanged business cards. Noticing the man's name on the card, the non-Jewish fellow asked, "Are you Jewish?" Upon receiving an affirmative response he said, "I know one Jewish rabbi, by the name of Soloveichik." Surprised, the Jewish man mentioned that Rabbi Soloveichik had just died. The non-Jew was so distressed he literally dropped his beer, and immediately called his wife on his cell phone. When she found out, she hung up in

anguish. It turned out that the man's wife worked for United Airlines at Chicago O' Hare, and for years she arranged for my grandfather to have the seat on the plane closest to the door so that he wouldn't have to walk more than necessary; she even gave my grandparents her home phone number in case they needed some last minute help at the airport. It was clear that over the years she and her family had developed an intense respect and admiration for my grandfather, and God wanted them to be told of this great loss.

In addition to commuting to New York, my grandfather fought the effects of the stroke in every way possible. Up until the last two years or so, he adamantly refused to sit in a wheelchair and insisted on walking through the halls only with the aid of his cane, despite the inordinate amount of time and difficulty involved.

I still recall watching him stand every morning during *Shacharit* to recite *Mizmor Letodah*. During the time it took him to rise from his seat, he could have said this short paragraph many times over. Besides, standing for *Mizmor Letodah* is a custom and not *halachah*. And yet he refused to compromise one iota.

There was also the way in which he was *mekabel yisurin*—lovingly accepting of the Divine decree. He never complained. He accepted everything *b'ahavah*—with love. Often when he walked and the pain was most intense, he would burst into song. This was somewhat uncharacteristic, for my grandfather was not one to sing very often; he was fond of quoting Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who said there are three types of melodies: a melody with words, a melody without words and a melody without a melody, which refers to the sweet sounds of Torah. My grandfa-

ther's favorite song was the third type, the one without a tune, just words of Torah. And yet, when he walked, he would sing. He wouldn't sing mournful songs but joyous songs of praise for God.

One memory, seared into my mind as a young child, remains vivid to this day. A summer or two after the stroke, my family was visiting Chicago. I was upstairs when I heard my grandfather singing in the dining room downstairs. As I descended the stairs, I saw him seated while undergoing an intensely painful procedure as part of his therapy. Despite the obvious pain, he was singing "*Odeh LaKel*"—"I Will Give Thanks to God." On other occasions when he was in pain, I would hear him sing two other songs: "*Baruch Hu Elokeinu*"—"Blessed Is Our God," and "*Ashreinu Mah Tov Chelkeinu*"—"How

For a young, healthy person such a schedule would be difficult; for a partially paralyzed stroke victim it should have been unthinkable.

Fortunate We Are; How Wonderful Is Our Lot." My grandfather was acutely aware of the Divine involvement in every aspect of his life. No matter how poor his health, no matter how difficult the pain, he realized this was his Divinely ordained challenge in life, his personal *avodat Hashem*, and he treasured the opportunity to serve God however possible. If this is what God had decided, he was happy; and he therefore was able to sing *Odeh LaKel* and *Ashreinu Mah Tov Chelkeinu*. That was his *gevurah*, his inner strength.

Perhaps one of the hallmarks of my grandfather's personality was, as Rav

A

R

av Ahron HaLevi Soloveichik was an extraordinary link between the Torah of Brisk and Lita and the contemporary complexity of American and Israeli life. He defied easy descriptions and simplistic stereotyping. He was nurtured in his grandfather Reb Chaim's *derech* by his father and *rebbe muvhak*, Rav Moshe, and was an honors' graduate of New York University School of Law; he was tutored in Talmud as a boy by Rav Yitzchak Hutner, and was taught English Literature as a new immigrant to the United States by Rav Avigdor Miller.

For almost half a century, Rav Ahron's clarity of vision inspired the Torah world with an emphasis that was uniquely his. From marching for civil rights and opposing apartheid, to calling for aid for Biafra and opposing American military involvement in Vietnam; from unstinting opposition to the death penalty to outspoken views on the peace process and religious pluralism, he was rarely reticent and rarely equivocal. Blessed with an exceptional

Dr. Luchins is chairman of the Political Science Department of Touro College and senior advisor to NY State Comptroller H. Carl McCall. He has served as a vice president of the OU since 1976. He and his wife Vivian were charter members of NCSY's Ben Zakkai Honor Society in 1965, and have long served as chairmen of the annual Ben Zakkai dinner.

Talmid Remembers

By David Luchins

mind and a compassionate heart, he had an unmatched gift for addressing contemporary issues through the timeless prism of Torah *hashkafah*.

I first met Rav Ahron at the 1965 Orthodox Union dinner. Several months later, I entered his *shiur* at Yeshiva University and was privileged to be one of the thousands of *talmidim* that he shaped during his decades of teaching.

To walk into a *shiur* of Rav Ahron was to be propelled into a unique world where Blackstone and Bismarck might be summoned to help make a point. But proof—all proof—always came from the sources of our tradition. Even after a debilitating stroke robbed him of physical vigor, his mental capacity and analytical skills were still a wonder to behold.

Rav Ahron was far, far more than an accomplished *talmid chacham* and *darshan* par excellence. He was at the very cutting edge of those who helped elucidate how Orthodox Jews should deal with the last half century's two great gifts to *Klal Yisrael*: American democracy and *Medinat Yisrael*. On issue after issue, Rav Ahron was the defining voice of Torah reason in a world clamoring for answers to increasingly complex questions.

Not that Rav Ahron was predictable or easily pigeonholed. His Brisker background assured a complex and far-flung worldview.

His legendary brother Rav Yosef Dov, with whom he enjoyed a remarkable relationship, was wont to refer to Rav Ahron as "the conscience of our family."

The Rav's words certainly applied to the Orthodox Union family as well. For over 40 years Rav Ahron

was a beloved mentor and friend of the OU, keynoting four national conventions (one in each of four decades, he noted in 1992); reviewing and often rewriting virtually every national convention resolution since 1970, providing valued halachic and *hashkafic* guidance to generations of OU leaders. He even chose to publish his definitive 1966 piece on Torah Jews' obligations towards non-observant Jews and non-Jews in *Jewish Life*, the predecessor of *Jewish Action*.

Rav Ahron was a particular champion of our National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY) and its affiliated Ben Zakkai Honor Society, which he helped create in 1965 (addressing our founding meeting, reviewing our bylaws, and answering *she'eilot* about membership standards through the years).

For over a third of a century, Rav Ahron was a *rebbe, posek* and friend to the young people of NCSY. He addressed dozens of NCSY events, faithfully answering written and telephoned questions from innumerable teenagers, providing inspiration, solace, and timeless Torah wisdom.

Rav Ahron's first public appearance after his stroke was to keynote an NCSY national convention in Chicago, where his stubborn 15-minute progress with a walker across a ballroom with 400 cheering teenagers was the most dramatic event I have witnessed in my over 40 years in NCSY. When the Jewish world was reeling from the shock of Yitzchak Rabin's assassination, Rav Ahron asked to address the leadership of NCSY. He came, in his wheelchair, to the OU's national office to deliver a powerful message of collective respon-

sibility that subsequently made front-page headlines in newspapers around the world. He could have chosen any audience he wanted. He chose to speak to the NCSYers!

Even in the last years when his body was wracked with constant pain, he would devote entire afternoons during his summer trips to Eretz Yisrael to personal meetings with the participants of the NCSY summer programs, answering their questions on everything from *shalom bayit* to free will.

In the summer of 1975, Rav Ahron visited NCSY's Camp West in Big Bear, California. He talked for hours to the teenagers, several of whom spoke of their personal problems practicing *Yiddishkeit* in not fully observant homes. After the last boy with a particularly difficult struggle left the room, the *rosh yeshivah* began to cry. When I asked him what was wrong he said, "their courage, their strength—I don't know if I could be as brave as they are."

Looking back at Rav Ahron's life, our eyes fill with tears; we can only say the same about his courage, his strength, his bravery, his example. *Yehi zichro baruch*.

A postscript—I recounted the above story to Rav Ahron's youngest son, Chayim, during the *shivah* for the *rosh yeshivah*, and added that the young man mentioned had become fully observant (as had his entire family). Having made *aliyah*, he was now the head of a yeshivah in Israel. To our astonishment we realized that Chayim's oldest son—Rav Ahron's grandson—was a *talmid* in the yeshivah headed by the boy who once brought tears to Rav Ahron's eyes! **JA**

Aharon Lichtenstein wrote in an article in *Jewish Action* ("The Source of Faith Is Faith Itself," fall 1992), that he was "a pillar of radical integrity"—the *middah* of *emet*. His fidelity and commitment to truth was so deeply ingrained that if he felt something was required according to Torah law, he would not compromise, regardless of the consequences.

In 1957, when my grandfather became the *kashrut* supervisor of Streit's Matzo, he was surprised to discover, while visiting the flourmill, that contrary to popular belief, not all the flour in the US was *yashan* (made from grain that took root in the ground *before* the second day of the most recent Pesach holiday). The *Shulchan Aruch* rules that one should be careful to eat *yashan*, that is products that are not made from newly harvested grains (which took root *after* the second day of the most recent Pesach). Only after the 17th day of Nisan may one eat grain products harvested during the previous few months. However, due to the difficulty involved in obtaining grain from the previous year's harvest, the accepted practice of most Jews has been to rely on leniencies with regard to this *halachah*. Nowadays, the observance of *yashan* has seen a revival and its popularity is rapidly spreading throughout the United States and Canada. But 45 years ago, most people had never even heard of *yashan*, let alone observed it. And yet my grandfather passionately insisted on strict allegiance to this *halachah*. And so my grandmother bought an extra freezer and they stocked up on bread. When they ran out of bread, they ate Streit's *matzah*, which is always *yashan*. The family sometimes went for weeks eating *matzah*—and no bread—since that was the only *yashan* product they could find.

As a result of my grandfather's efforts to impress upon others the importance of *yashan*, the first *yashan* bakery in North America was established in Chicago under his guidance, despite much opposition from others

who thought this was an unnecessary innovation. Today, my grandfather's sacrifice and dedication has been rewarded and every major North American Jewish community boasts at least one if not numerous *yashan* bakeries.

In monetary issues as well, he was extremely vigilant about upholding the truth. While he was serving as a pulpit rabbi, the *shul* board fired the *chazzan*.

My Glimpse at Eternity

.... The stroke that afflicted me wrought a spiritual metamorphosis in my whole Weltanschauung... when a person becomes afflicted by a stroke... a minute looseness takes effect in the well-integrated pattern and harmonious blend of soul and body. Consequently, the afflicted person is able to perceive the biological sensation of being sustained and carried by the soul within him....

Reprinted from an article by Rav Ahron Soloveichik that appeared in the fall 1984 issue of Tradition.

My grandfather felt that according to *halachah* the board had no right to do so; for months, he refused to take a salary from the *shul* and returned the money in protest until a settlement was reached with the *chazzan*.

Even if *emet* meant giving up his main source of income, my grandfather did just that. After leaving YU in the 1960s, he was appointed *rosh yeshivah* of another Torah institution before he founded Yeshivas Brisk. He required that his *musmachim* sign an agreement not to accept a rabbinic position in a *shul* without a proper *mechitzah*, a practice that was quite prevalent before his arrival. His insistence on this issue caused a great deal of friction within the administration.

Similarly, when an Orthodox *shul* was sold to a Japanese cult to be used as a shrine in flagrant violation of *halachah*, my grandfather organized public protests against the sale even though influential members of the yeshivah administration were in favor of the transaction. One morning, while my grandfather was delivering a *Yoreh Deah shiur*, an administrator walked in and handed him a note threatening that he would lose his job if he didn't back down from his public opposition to the sale. My grandfather turned to his *talmidim* and said, "I don't care what they say, I am going to protest!" He did, and he lost his job.

But he went on and he founded his own yeshivah. And when his yeshivah building was destroyed in a fire, he moved to another building. No matter how much he endured, he kept going.

The Gemara in *Ketubot* (103) states that when Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi (Rebbi) was about to die he called his colleagues and instructed them to start learning immediately after 30 days of eulogies. The Gemara explains that Rebbi held that it is prohibited to eulogize someone for more than 30 days. If so, we may ask, why didn't Rebbi simply tell them to stop the eulogies after 30 days? Perhaps the message of the Gemara is that the true measure of an effective eulogy is whether it is immediately followed by learning and renewed inspiration in one's *avodat Hashem*. It is my *tefillah* that the memories of my grandfather will serve as a source of elevation in our own *avodat Hashem*. 