

In commemoration of the Rav's one-hundredth birthday and tenth yahrtzeit, Jewish Action will feature articles on the Rav throughout the year.



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By Hershel Reichman

“When I pray, I talk to God; when I learn Torah, God talks to me” (The Rogotchaver Gaon)

If, with all his knowledge in so many areas, the Rav defined himself as a melamed, then surely it is appropriate to focus on his role as one. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto writes that learning Torah is the most precious influence God bestows on man (Derech Hashem 4:2). It provides the most intense connection with Him. Though the Rav studied and knew many things, learning Torah was his primary preoccupation and greatest love. In the ongoing Torah dialogue, man is paradoxically both recipient and contributor. Nothing is more exciting than this Man-God interaction, and, as the melamed par excellence, the Rav became a critical link in the mesorah, the transmission of Torah from one generation to the next. Ed.

The Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, has been characterized as a *lamdan* (scholar), *posek* (halachic decisor),

Rabbi Reichman is a rosh yeshivah at Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan. He was a student of the Rav from 1962 until the mid '80s as well as his personal assistant for a number of years. He is the author of four volumes of collections of the Rav's lectures. The volumes, *Rishimot Shiurim*, are available in bookstores or by calling 718-377-0047.

philosopher, scholar, communal leader and symbol of Orthodoxy. However, whenever asked about himself, the Rav always said, “I’m a *posheter melamed*,” a simple Torah teacher. While he was certainly deserving of the various titles bestowed upon him, if we are to truly understand the Rav, we must see him primarily as he saw himself.

Being a *melamed* was not just the Rav's vocation; it was his love. For years he had a rigorous teaching

schedule; from Tuesday to Thursday he would teach in New York at Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan, and from Friday to Monday he would teach in Boston at Maimonides School and other institutions. Whereas a typical *rosh yeshivah shiur* lasts for about forty-five minutes, the Rav's would extend for at least two or three hours. Moreover, when delivering a *yahrtzeit shiur*, the Rav's lecture would last practically the whole day, up to seven or eight hours.

Experiencing and Loving God

For the Rav, teaching Torah was a profound religious experience. Often he would quote the daily blessing “*Baruch Atah Hashem hamelamed Torah leamo Yisrael*, Blessed are You God Who teaches Torah to His people Israel,” and point out that while God gave the Torah to the Jews at Sinai thousands of years ago, the blessing is in the present tense, “Who teaches Torah.” That’s because God continues to teach Torah to Jews today,¹ he would explain. When one studies Torah it is as if he is receiving it directly from the Giver of Torah Himself.

On innumerable occasions, the Rav would tell us students, “I feel God whispering to me as I sit and prepare my *shiur*. He asks me, ‘Berel, what do you think Rambam is really saying?’ And when I humbly suggest my interpretation to Him, I hear him whisper back to me, ‘How beautiful, you are right.’” For the Rav, to study Torah was to experience God.

Maimonides teaches that studying *Torah lishmah*—Torah for its own sake—is the ultimate expression of love for God. “It is clear that love of God cannot be bound into the human soul unless one occupies himself with it always, and abandons everything in the world except this, as it is written, ‘Love your God with all your heart and soul.’ One cannot love God except through knowledge and study. Therefore a person must dedicate himself single-mindedly to pursue, to the best of his ability, the knowledge and understanding which will enable him to know his Maker.”² Torah was the Rav's great love, but the essence of this love was his passion for God Himself.

Ish Mesorah

The Rav had a particular enthusiasm for *Torah Shebe'al Peh* (the Oral Law). Often, he would say, “We study *Torah Shebichtav* (the Written Law) as well as *Torah Shebe'al Peh*. But there's a difference. *Torah Shebichtav* is written in ink on the parchment of holy scrolls. But *Torah Shebe'al Peh* is engraved in the heart and mind of the *talmid chacham*

(Torah scholar). In the study of *Torah Shebe'al Peh*, a *talmid chacham* becomes one entity with the Torah he studies. It becomes a part of his very soul. This is the meaning of the holy light that shone from Moshe Rabbeinu's face. It was the light of *Torah Shebe'al Peh* radiating from his inner soul.”

When the Rav was well on in years and suffering from Parkinson's disease, I could not talk to him about anything except the Oral Law. I remember visiting him once and attempting to discuss various things going on in the Jewish world, but the Rav's eyes started to droop and he appeared to be falling asleep. At one point I mentioned a Rambam, whereupon the Rav opened his eyes and began discussing it with me.

Relatives of the Rav have told me that often when his illness so debilitated him that he could barely talk, a family member would place his ears near the Rav's lips and hear him whispering *perushim* (explanations) of the Rambam.

With Thunder and a Whisper

Torah was given twice at Sinai, the first time amidst *kolot uberakim* (thunder and lightning), the second time, *bekol demamah dakah* (in a whisper). Likewise there are two types of teachers of Torah: the first teaches with *kolot uberakim*, the second, *bekol demamah dakah*. The Rav was the former type. His classes were full of excitement and drama. His voice was loud and his emotions visible. I remember, as a young boy, staring in fright as the veins in his head bulged to double their regular size. I used to worry that, God forbid, his head might burst. Many times his face would turn red from the enormous energy he mustered to engage in the *milchamah shel Torah*, the intellectual wars between the Rambam and the Raavad, between Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam, between the Rav's beloved grandfather Rav Chaim Brisker and other Acharonim.

I will always remember my first *zeman* in the Rav's *shiur*; and twenty-five years later, my last. In the former, I saw the fire, thunder and lightning and in the latter, a tired and sick man,

barely able to whisper but nevertheless still defending the Rambam and Rav Chaim. His lectures were now delivered *bekol demamah dakah*, in a soft whisper.

For the Rav, to study Torah was to experience God.

The Living Torah

In the Rav's *shiur*, the *ba'alei mesorah* were living participants. On the first *mishnah* of *Nedarim*, the Rav questions an opinion of Rabbeinu Tam and writes:

“I am perplexed with him, how can a holy mouth say such a thing!” When the Rav taught us this, he exclaimed, “If I were writing this, I would have written it in the second rather than in the third person, so that it would read as follows: ‘I am perplexed at you, how can a holy mouth say such a thing!’” For the Rav, Rabbeinu Tam was alive in the room, arguing his halachic position.

The Brisker Method

In his never-ending study of Torah, the Rav relied heavily on the Brisker method—an analytical method of Talmud study which focuses on discerning the underlying principles of halachic logic. The Rav once described this approach as one in which the student doesn't just read the lines, he reads what is between the lines. This methodology can be traced back to Rabbeinu Tam (12th century, Germany) and the Ramban (13th century, Spain). At the turn of the twentieth century, Rav Chaim (late 19th-early 20th century, Lithuania) revolutionized Torah learning by applying this analytical approach universally and most significantly to the study of Rambam.

In the Rav's view it was this classical analytical approach that saved Torah learning. Thus, despite his great admiration for Rambam, the Rav once said, “Whereas as an individual, the Rambam was perhaps the greatest

scholar among the Rishonim, he did not make the greatest contribution to *mesorat haTorah* (the transmission of the Torah). This was done by Rabbeinu Tam

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who developed and taught the analytical method studied by the Ba’alei Tosafot. Without this method, we are simply incapable of understanding Torah and

halachah properly. Without Rambam, the Torah would have survived. But without Rabbeinu Tam, Torah scholarship would, God forbid, have been lost.”

The Universal Melamed

There is an old controversy³ among Torah scholars regarding whether the highest levels of Torah learning should be open to all students or restricted to the very best. The Rav would say, “The Vilna Gaon felt that he should teach Torah only to the very best, as did my uncle Reb Velvel of Brisk. However, today’s times demand that we teach everyone in this advanced, analytical way. Only by showing the masses the depth, rigor and beauty of *halachah*, can we hope to stem the tide of assimilation and inspire our people to keep the halachic way of life.” He would further say, “Our method of analysis is the finest in the world. Let our people experience it and they will flock to it.”

And so he taught everyone—young and old, committed and not-yet-committed. Today, the Brisker method, as popularized by the Rav and others, has become the norm in most yeshivot.

Rav Moshe Tzvi Neriya, *zt”l*, the founder and dean of the Israeli network of Bnei Akiva yeshivot, once speculated, “Why didn’t the Rav come to live in Israel? I believe that this was because it was the Almighty’s desire that the Rav remain in *Galut* (the Diaspora). He was needed to stem the tide of Western assimilation. Untold numbers of Jews would have been lost to American universities and culture, were it not for the Rav who showed them that Torah study was intellectually superior. Israel’s loss was world Jewry’s gain for many generations.”

The Rav’s *shiurim* have spread throughout the globe and are studied by tens of thousands of Jews. Thus, he, like Moshe Rabbeinu, Rabbi Akiva, Rambam, Rashi, Rabbeinu Tam and Rav Chaim, is still very much alive. He lives on as a “*poshetei melamed* of Torah” to the Jewish people. *Yehei zichro baruch.* ❊

Notes

1. *Pirkei Avot*, chap., 3.
2. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah*, 10: 2-3,6.
3. *Berachot* 27.

A Mission Fulfilled



by Haskel Lookstein

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The Talmud says that a moment before birth, an angel administers the following oath to every fetus: “Be righteous and do not be

wicked. And even if the whole world tells you that you are righteous, you should consider yourself wicked in your own eyes” (*Niddah* 30b).

In an essay entitled “*Shelichut*,”¹ our revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, explains that this oath necessitates the

following: first, that we be righteous and not wicked, and second, that we never feel that we are righteous. The Rav further states that this oath renders all of us *shelichim*—agents of God. Just as Moshe Rabbeinu was given a mission—to take the Jews out of Egypt—each of us has our own mission to fulfill in this world.

What was the *shelichut* assigned to the Rav? Perhaps no one knows better than the Rav himself: “You ask me what I am?” he used to say. “*Ich bin a melamed*—I am a *melamed*, a teacher.”

The Rav taught us rigor and organization. His mind was as organized as it was breathtakingly deep and broad. He used to end every *shiur* with the question: “*Vos haben mir gelerent*, What have we learned today?” He would then cite the major principles of the two-hour *shiur*: “We have learned one, two and three.” His students, having been overwhelmed by his erudition and having copied down every word in the hope of being able to understand it fully later, would then realize that only three or four major points were made. Suddenly, the mass of information was clear to even the average student.

The Rav believed that everyone—regardless of gender—is entitled to the best education. In 1937, he established Maimonides School as a coeducational institution with the highest academic standards in all spheres, which it remains to this day.

He expected his students at Yeshiva University to be steeped in Torah and yet aware of existentialist thought. He wanted them to be familiar with Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* and at home with the concept of *kedushah* in Nachmanides; to be cognizant of Immanuel Kant’s categorical

Rabbi Lookstein is the rabbi of Congregation Kehillat Jeshurun and the principal of the Ramaz School in Manhattan. He attended Rav Soloveitchik’s shiur at Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan from 1954 to 1958. This article was adapted from an essay that appeared in the Kehillat Jeshurun Bulletin in spring 1993.

imperative but learned in the principle of *mitzvah* as defined by Maimonides, to be acquainted with *E-I Mistater* and with *Deus Absconditus, E-I Nigleh* and *Deus Revelatus*.

The Rav was an intellectual, with an abiding respect for all knowledge and a commitment to the principle set forth by Maimonides in his commentary on the Mishnah: *kabeil et haemet mimi sheamrah*—accept the truth from whomever it comes. He was even known to be an avid reader of the most worthwhile books on *The New York Times* best-seller list, perusing them while commuting between New York and Boston.

Then there was his absolute integrity in the presentation of knowledge. Once during *shiur*, while explaining a particular topic in the Talmud, the Rav built up a magnificent analytic structure. Toward the end of the *shiur*, a student noticed a discrepancy between what the Rav was teaching and what we had learned with him several months earlier. He gently asked: “*Rebbe*, how does this fit with the analysis that we developed some months ago?” The Rav’s eyes opened widely and he said to the embarrassed student: “You are right, I am wrong. Do you hear students? He is correct; I am incorrect. I’ll have to go home and relearn the entire subject and present it again tomorrow.” It would have been easy for this Talmudic master to shout down an inexperienced student. It would have been easy, but it wouldn’t have been Rav Soloveitchik.

Most of the Rav’s students did not quite appreciate the warm and loveable human being he was. He was not easy to get close to, but that was not his doing; it was ours. He appeared to be so brilliant and learned that he was intimidating; but if one made the first move, the Rav was there—gentle, concerned, accessible and, in a way, loving. He was shy and therefore happy to be approached.

He used to write Rosh Hashanah notes to everybody by hand—never using a printed card—until he wasn’t able to hold a pen anymore. He was extraordinarily attached to, and made



Photo courtesy of Maimonides School

time for, his family, including nieces and nephews as well as their children.

He gave his students signals of his humanity during more playful moments. Not too many years ago, when a former student of his was driving him home from a wedding, he began asking the Rav all kinds of questions (as we all used to do when we were in a car with the Rav). The Rav listened patiently to a series of questions beginning with “What does the Rav think about...?” and finally turned to the student and said good-humoredly, “I’ll tell you what the Rav thinks; he thinks you should keep both of your eyes on the road.”

Once a young administrator at YU interrupted *shiur* to tell the Rav that there was no reservation for him on the flight to Boston. (It was his responsibility to arrange the Rav’s



(l-r) Rabbi Levi Horowitz (the Bostoner rebbe), Rav Soloveitchik, Morris Borkum and Samuel Feuerstein, president of Maimonides School. Circa 1960.

flights.) “What name did you ask for?” the Rav questioned. “I asked for Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,” the administrator responded. The Rav laughed and said, “I never make reservations in that name. Nobody knows how to spell it. Ask if there is a reservation for Joe Solo!”—whereupon the class, along with the Rav, erupted in laughter.

The Rav was a *ba'al tzedakah*, generous to a variety of causes and individuals. He gave of his time to people who needed him, granting advice in times of crisis and comfort in times of tragedy. In the early years of Maimonides School, one of the seniors was accepted to Radcliffe. The student came from a home of modest means, and it was expected that upon her high school graduation she would work to help support the family. When the Rav heard of this, he called her parents into his office and told them, kindly but firmly, that she must go to

Radcliffe, and that he would make sure that it was possible. And it was.

His approach to *pesak*—decision-making in matters of Jewish law—further demonstrated his compassion. When studying *Yoreh Deah* with us, the Rav said that when presented with a question in *kashrut*, it was not the rabbi’s job to say *treif*, throw out the dishes. Rather, it was his job to search for opinions that would help spare people losses and hardship.

The Rav was a centrist; he was opposed to extremism in religion and politics. He was tolerant of those with whom he did not agree and had friends in other movements of Judaism. One such friend was Rabbi Joseph Shubo, a Conservative rabbi in Boston, about whom the Rav spoke and to whom he dedicated a *shiur* upon the friend’s passing.

He was passionate about the State of Israel but extremely con-

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cerned about the tendency to make political decisions on the basis of messianic expectations. He saw the State of Israel as a historic opportunity, and believed it should be appreciated as a manifestation of Divine providence as he wrote most eloquently in his essay “*Kol Dodi Dofek*.” Many of

us, however, recall the *teshuvah shiur* he gave in September of 1967 at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan where he cautioned us about the euphoria following the Six Day War, and the tendency of *rabbanim* to render it halachically forbidden to give land to the Arabs. The Rav assured the thousands who packed the auditorium that he knew very well what *kedushat Eretz Yisrael* was and that he understood clearly the difference between the *kedushah* that the land intrinsically possessed from the time of Abraham and the *kedushah* gained during the periods of Joshua and subsequently, Ezra. He said, however, that there is a *kedushah* that is greater than that of the Land of Israel and that is the *kedushah* of the people of Israel. The Rav strongly recommended that the decision to give land to the Arabs should be based on whatever Israel’s military leaders determined would better

safeguard the lives of the 2.5 million Jews who were living in Israel at that time.

These are among the most profound lessons that the Rav, as a messenger of God, taught to his family, his students and to the generations blessed by his presence. He taught powerfully by words, but with equal magnificence by example. He was a majestic *melamed*—riveting, mesmerizing, almost hypnotic in his presentations. One could listen to him for hours and barely realize the passage of time. To have the privilege of watching him in informal moments or to sit with him at a dinner table was to absorb lessons in humanity, compassion, integrity and nobility, which are beyond description.

In the same essay mentioned above, the Rav writes that *shelichut* from God is endless, in the sense that one has never completely fulfilled his mission. While the *shaliach* would like to go on and continue his life’s work indefinitely, this is not possible for a human being. The

Rav writes that Moshe Rabbeinu pleaded with God to be allowed to continue his task and God answered him:

I tell you... Generations will accept your mission upon themselves and they will fulfill the tradition until the end of time. Now, Moshe, your request: “May I cross (the Jordan) and see the Land” has no significance whatsoever. You see full well that a human being can never completely fulfill his mission in this world and, therefore, it is incumbent upon you to give up your soul immediately.²

“And Moshe died there, the servant of God...by the mouth of God” (Deuteronomy 34:5).

Our *rebbe’s* life ended ten years ago, on the fourth night of Pesach. It is our task to take upon ourselves his *shelichut* and fulfill his tradition until the *yom acharon*, the end of time. **JA**

Notes

1. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron*, translated by Moshe Krone (Jerusalem, 1986).
2. Ibid.