

# [The Genius and Limitations of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l](#)

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Thoughts to Ponder 529

## **The Genius and Limitations of Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik z"l \***

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*Based on an introduction to a discussion between Professor William Kolbrener and Professor Elliott Malamet (1)*

*Honoring the publication of Professor William Kolbrener's new book*

*"The Last Rabbi" (2)*

*Yad Harav Nissim, Jerusalem, on Feb. 1, 2017*

Dear Friends,

I never had the privilege of meeting Rav Soloveitchik z"l or learning under him. But I believe I have read all of his books on Jewish philosophy and Halacha, and even some of his Talmudic novellae and halachic decisions. I have also spoken with many of his students.

Here are my impressions.

No doubt Rav Soloveitchik was a *Gadol Ha-dor* (a great sage of his generation). He was a supreme Talmudist and certainly one of the greatest religious thinkers of our time.

His literary output is incredible.

Still, I believe that he was not a *mechadesh* – a man whose novel ideas really moved the Jewish tradition forward, especially regarding Halacha. He did not solve major halachic problems.

This may sound strange, because almost no one has written as many novel ideas about Halacha as Rav Soloveitchik (3). His masterpiece, *Halakhic Man*, is perhaps the prime example.

Before Rav Soloveitchik appeared on the scene, nobody – surely not in mainstream Orthodoxy – had seriously dealt with the ideology and philosophy of Halacha (4).

In fact, the reverse is true. While many were writing about Jewish philosophy, the Bible, the prophets, and universalism, no one touched the topic of Halacha and its *weltanschauung*.

Halacha was ignored as an ideology, and the impression is that most Orthodox scholars were embarrassed by the strange and incomprehensible world of halachic thought and argument, and chose to disregard it. Its highly unusual way of thinking, its emphasis on the most subtle details – often comprised of farfetched arguments, hairsplitting dialectics and casuistry – made it something that no one wanted to approach and it was consequently a non-starter.

I once argued that Halacha is the art of making a problem out of every solution. Its obsessive need to create obstacles where no difficulties exist is well known to all Talmudists. Its constant fixation with creating life-and-death situations out of the grossest trivialities is typical.

Rav Soloveitchik, however, saw the need to deal with this problem head-on and undertook the extremely difficult task. For him, Halacha was the supreme will of God, and behind its strange disposition lay a fascinating and highly original world that needed to be revealed in a society that increasingly tried to undo it. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing to be embarrassed about. In fact, there was no greater and more sophisticated ideology than the world of Halacha.

Single-handedly, he turned the tide and made Halacha the center of philosophical discussion. Not even Rambam, the greatest of all halachists, had done anything like that.

His classic work, *Halakhic Man*, is highly sophisticated and full of deep insights using general philosophy, psychology and epistemology, which place the philosophy and theology of Halacha not only on the map but at the center of all

discussion concerning Judaism. No doubt it took time before this essay had any impact. It was first published in Hebrew in 1944, as *Ish ha-Halakhah*, in the journal *Talpiot* (5). When it appeared in English in 1983, as Lawrence Kaplan's translation *Halakhic Man* (6), it slowly became the object of serious debate and contemplation.

It may be argued that *Halakhic Man* forced the Conservative, Reform, and even Reconstructionist movements to give much more attention to Halacha, which grew to be the norm to the extent that general Jewish philosophy almost became of secondary importance. For Rav Soloveitchik, Jewish theology had to be an outgrowth and expression of the normative halachic system. A great example of this would be his *teshuva drashot* (sermons) where the laws of *teshuva* and the *lamdanut* (Talmudic analytic learning) of *tzvei dinim* become the basis of two *dinim* and concepts in Jewish philosophy (7).

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And here is where we encounter one of the greatest and most tragic paradoxes in Rav Soloveitchik's legacy.

In complete contradiction to his philosophy of Halacha, Rav Soloveitchik did not move Halacha forward in areas that most urgently needed it. He did not innovate a new, practical halachic approach to major problems confronting the larger Jewish community. While brilliantly explaining what Halacha essentially is, he made no practical breakthroughs (8).

This is true about issues such as the status of women in Jewish law (with the exception of women learning Talmud) (9); the *aguna*; the *mamzer* problem; the application of Halacha in the State of Israel; and similar crucial halachic issues.

In that sense he was not at all a *mechadesh* but rather a conservative halachist.

He *did*, however, stand out as a highly gifted exponent of the ideology of Judaism and Halacha. He had no equal – perhaps with the exception of the renowned Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. In his work *God in Search of Man*, Rabbi Heschel laid out a theology of Judaism and Halacha, which, while dramatically different from Rav Soloveitchik's, was also a tour de force explaining what Halacha is really all about (10).

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When it came to Talmudic learning, Rav Soloveitchik was an old-fashioned Rosh Yeshiva (in Yeshiva University), whose brilliance was not different from that of my own Roshei Yeshiva in Gateshead, England, and later in Yerushalayim's Mirrer Yeshiva. He was the proponent of the Brisker method of Talmudic learning, which is widespread in many of today's yeshivot, and from which I personally have greatly benefited, although I doubt its real value.

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Rabbi David Hartman, in his book *The God who Hates Lies*, rightly criticizes Rav Soloveitchik for his refusal to find a way to allow a *kohein* to marry a *giyoret* (convert) (11). While Rabbi Hartman uses purely ethical reasons to oppose the negative response of Rav Soloveitchik, it was Rabbi Moshe Feinstein z"l, the most important halachic authority in America in those days, who often found halachically permissible ways to allow these people to marry (12). This no doubt must have been known to Rav Soloveitchik, and I am utterly astonished that he did not discuss it with or take advice from Rabbi Feinstein. It's even more mind-boggling when one takes into account that Rav Soloveitchik did not see himself as a *posek* (halachic authority and decisor) but only as a *melamed* (teacher).

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Rav Soloveitchik's famous argument with Rabbi Emanuel Rackman – renowned Talmudic scholar and thinker, later to become Dean of Bar-Ilan University – is another example of the former's sometimes extreme halachic conservatism. In several places, the Talmud introduces a rule that states: *Tav Lemeitav tan du mi-lemeitav armelu* – *It is better to live as two than to live alone* (13), which refers to the fact that a woman would prefer to marry almost any man rather than remain alone.

Rav Soloveitchik sees this as a “permanent ontological principle,” which is beyond historical conditions, and that even in our day needs to be applied and cannot be changed. This principle operates under the assumption that even today's women prefer to stay in a marriage, no matter how unfortunate the circumstances may be. To be alone is worse. This means that a woman cannot claim that had she known what kind of person her husband is, she never would have married him. If she *could* make this claim, her marriage would be a “mistaken marriage,” which would not even require a *get* (bill of divorce), since the marriage took place on a false premise and the woman would never have agreed to it had she known. In that case, she was never considered lawfully married and could leave her partner without receiving a *get*. Since this obviously has enormous repercussions for

today's society, it could help thousands of women (14). Rav Soloveitchik was not prepared to take that approach and thus blocked the possibility for many of them to leave their partners without a *get*.

Rabbi Rackman (15), who had the greatest respect for Rav Soloveitchik, strongly disagreed and claimed that a Talmudic presumption such as this depends on historical circumstances, as in the days of the Talmud when women had no option to live a normal life if they were not married. They were often abused and would suffer extreme poverty and other misfortunes. Understandably, women in those days would prefer to remain married; but none of this is true in modern times when women have great freedom and are able to take care of themselves, both financially and physically. If so, there would be good reason for a woman to claim that had she known her husband's true nature, she would never have married him and she would be able to leave her husband without the need for a *get*.

There is little doubt that Rabbi Rackman was right in this matter. Interestingly, he noted that Rav Soloveitchik told him: "Rackman, you may be right and I may be wrong. You view the Halacha historically and I like to view it meta-historically" (16) I have heard statements from other students that Rav Soloveitchik admitted this. Even stranger is the fact that, like all his predecessors, Rav Soloveitchik considered Rambam the ultimate halachic authority and defended him whenever possible. Professor Menachem Kellner points out that Rambam viewed Halacha in a historical context and clearly not in an ontological one (17)! So one wonders why Rav Soloveitchik didn't follow in Rambam's footsteps and agree ab initio with Rabbi Rackman; unless one argues that Rav Soloveitchik didn't follow Rambam's *philosophical* approach to Halacha.

This observation is astonishing. If Rav Soloveitchik was not even sure himself, and all evidence was against him, he could have singlehandedly liberated many women. No doubt he must have been worried that such a ruling might be misused. But this is an extremely weak justification for his conservatism, considering the immense suffering of so many women whose husbands refused to grant them a *get*. He could have made a major contribution in this field had he accepted Rabbi Rackman's compelling argument (18).

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It is even more perplexing when we compare Rav Soloveitchik's highly conservative stand with other great halachists of his day, such as Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, the most famous student of Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, author of the responsa *Seridei Eish* and one of the greatest halachic luminaries of the post-

Holocaust era. Rabbi Berkovits was of the opinion that with the establishment of the State of Israel, and the radical changes that had taken place among modern-day Jewry, there was a need to liberate Halacha from its exile status. According to Rabbi Berkovits, the unfortunate conditions under which the Jews had lived for nearly 2,000 years created a “defensive halacha,” which now had to be liberated. It had been in waiting mode and now had to return to its natural habitat. In his important work *HaHalacha: Kochah VeTafkidah*, Rabbi Berkovitz shows how we can solve many serious problems related to the status of women, *agunot*, *mamzerim*, conversion, and even the *shemitta* year with its enormous burden on modern Israeli society and its often inconsistent and paradoxical application (19).

In many ways he reminds us of Rabbi Chaim Hirschensohn (1857-1935) who, as a first-class halachist, also realized these new conditions and, in his responsa *Malki BaKodesh* (20), suggested new approaches that would solve many problems.

It was especially in the Sephardic world that two outstanding halachic luminaries – Chacham Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel (1880-1953), Sefardic Chief Rabbi of Mandatory Palestine from 1939-1948, and of Israel from 1948-1953; and Rabbi Yosef Mashash (1892-1974), rabbi of the city of Tlemcen in Algeria and, later, Chief Rabbi of Haifa – demonstrated ways to overcome halachic problems. Their courage is mind-boggling and proves what can be done when one has an approach to Orthodox Halacha that in so many ways is completely at odds with that of Rav Soloveitchik and other traditional Ashkenazic halachists (21).

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Most remarkable are the observations of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel when he was asked to give his opinion about Rav Soloveitchik’s book *Halakhic Man*. According to his students, he said the following:

“*Ish Ha-Halakha* [Halakhic Man]? *Lo hayah velo nivra ela mashal hayah* [There never was such a Jew]! Soloveitchik’s study, though brilliant, is based on the false notion that Judaism is a cold, logical affair with no room for piety. After all, the Torah *does* say, ‘Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and might.’ No, there never was such a typology in Judaism as the halakhic man. There was—and is—an *Ish Torah* [a Torah man], who combines Halakhah and Aggadah, but that is another matter altogether” (22).

While I wonder if these are the exact words of Rabbi Heschel – since there are, after all, some emotional and not only logical dimensions to *Halakhic Man* – it

cannot be denied that this work depicts an image of an ideal halachic human being who in many ways lives a mathematical and almost stony life, although various parts of the book paint different if not contradictory images. The book is definitely poetic.

It is interesting to note Rav Soloveitchik's observations concerning Heschel's famous book *The Sabbath* (23). After praising it, he said: "What does he [Heschel] call Shabbat? - A sanctuary in time. This is an idea of a poet. It's a lovely idea. But what is Shabbat? Shabbat is *lamed tet melachot*, it is the thirty-nine categories of work and their *toladot*, and it is out of that Halacha and not of poetry that you have to construct a theory of Shabbat" (24). These are remarkable words, because Rav Soloveitchik was constantly trying to lift the "harsh" Halacha out of its own confines and give it a poetic, perhaps even romantic dimension.

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The earlier-mentioned *poskim* thought out of the box when it came to Halacha, and introduced creative and new halachic approaches to major problems. With few exceptions, we see little of that in Rav Soloveitchik's methodology.

It seems that he did not realize, or did not want to accept, that Halacha had become defensive and was waiting to be liberated from its exile and confinement.

In many ways, this is an extraordinary tragedy. With his exceptional standing in the Modern Orthodox halachic community, Rav Soloveitchik could have made breakthroughs that would have given Orthodoxy - especially Modern Orthodoxy - much more exposure and influence in the Jewish world and would probably have been a major force against the growth of Reform and Conservative Judaism, of which he was so afraid. In many ways, Modern Orthodoxy was unable to develop naturally, because it had become too dependent on Rav Soloveitchik's conservative halachic approach.

Exactly where Rav Soloveitchik put Halacha on the map, in all its grandeur (without denying its possible shortcomings), and transformed it into the most dominant topic of discussion on Judaism, *there* is where he seems to have been afraid of his own thoughts and withdrew behind its conventional walls. Had he taken the road of Rabbis Berkovits, Hirschensohn, Uziel, Mashash and others, Orthodoxy would have become a driving force in contemporary Judaism, able to show the way and lead all other denominations.

It seems to me that the above-mentioned rabbis were *talmidei chachamim* no less than Rav Soloveitchik was. Their disadvantages were that they didn't occupy

a central role in Modern Orthodox and Yeshiva University circles, and above all they didn't belong to renowned Ashkenazic rabbinical families. Had they been called Soloveitchik, their Torah would have received far more attention and would probably have been much more effective.

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Finally, I am deeply disturbed by the almost unhealthy obsession with Rav Soloveitchik within Modern Orthodox circles. It borders on *avodah zarah* and has almost transformed into a cult, something he would not have liked. In all my years in the Chareidi Gateshead and Mirrer Yeshivot, I never saw such exaggerated admiration for our great Roshei Yeshiva.

There is, however, a very good reason for this. Modern Orthodoxy has always been insecure with its own philosophy and halachic approach. Over the years, it has looked over its shoulder to see what the Chareidi community had to say. As a result, it hid behind Rav Soloveitchik, the only figure who equaled the Chareidi Talmudists in their level of Talmudic learning; and only he could protect them against the onslaught of the Chareidi community.

What Modern Orthodoxy did not realize is that Rav Soloveitchik himself was a Chareidi, who combined that ideology with religious Zionism and tried very hard to give it a place in the world of philosophy and modernity. He therefore wavered and showed signs of a troubled man who was unable to overcome the enormous tension between these two worlds and turned into a "lonely man of faith," with no disciples but with many students, each one of whom claimed their own Rav Soloveitchik. The truth is that the real Rav Soloveitchik was more than the sum total of all of them – a man of supreme greatness who was a tragic figure. May his memory be a blessing.

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- With thanks to Yehuda DovBehr Zirkind and Channa Shapiro.

1. We hope to publicize a video of this event in the near future.
2. William Kolbrener, *The Last Rabbi: Joseph Soloveitchik and Talmudic Tradition* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016). While there have been many books and articles on Rav Soloveitchik's life and thought, Professor Kolbrener's book is groundbreaking and entirely novel. It offers a much richer, yet more complicated reading of his life and



thoughts. It can be purchased at <https://www.amazon.com/Last-Rabbi-Soloveitchik-Tradition-Philosophy/dp/025302224X>

3. See, however, notes 10 and 19.
4. See: David Singer and Moshe Sokol, "Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith," in *Modern Judaism* 2, 3 (1982) pp. 232-239. For an Introduction to *Halakhic Man*, See: David Shatz, "A Framework for Reading Ish ha-Halakhah," in *Turim: Studies in Jewish History and Literature: Presented to Dr. Bernard Lander*, ed. Michael A. Shmidman (New York: Touro College Press, 2008) vol. 2, pp. 171-231.
5. Vol. 1, nos. 3-4 (New York, 1944) pp. 651-735.
6. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983.
7. "Two dinim" is a term that is widespread in the lexicon of the yeshiva world. It refers to a method of Talmudic analysis whereby a Talmudic law or concept is divided into two constituent elements. One common example is the distinction between *gavra* and *cheftza* (subject and object). This method is the hallmark of the Brisker approach to Talmudic study, championed by Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk, Lithuania (1853-1918), the grandfather of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. For an analysis of the Brisker method, see: Norman Solomon, *The Analytic Movement: Hayyim Soloveitchik and His Circle* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993); Yosef Blau, ed., *Lomdus: The Conceptual Approach to Jewish Learning*, The Orthodox Forum Series (Newark, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2006).
8. For an evaluation (perhaps one-sided) of Rav Soloveitchik as a *posek*, see: Walter S. Wurzbarger, "Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post-Modern Orthodoxy," in *Tradition* vol. 29, no. 1 (Fall 1994) pp. 5-20. We see a similar phenomenon in the writings of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, where he suggests the most novel ideas about Halacha but refuses to use them in his responsa.
9. *Ibid.* – for a few more unusual decisions by Rabbi Soloveitchik.
10. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1955) chs. 22-33. The other person who proposed a philosophy of Halacha was Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits in *God, Man and History: A Jewish Interpretation* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1959) Part 2.
11. David Hartman (with Charlie Buckholtz), "Where Did Modern Orthodoxy Go Wrong? The Mistaken Halakhic Presumptions of Rabbi Soloveitchik" in *The God Who Hates Lies: Confronting & Rethinking Jewish Tradition*, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011) ch. 5, pp. 131-157.

12. Rabbi Feinstein was of the opinion that if a family of *kohanim* was no longer observant and was assimilated, their claim to be *kohanim* could not be relied upon. I received this information by personal correspondence from one of his students. See his *Igrot Moshe*, Even Ha'ezer, vol. 4, nos. 12, 39. See also: Rabbi Mordechai Tendler (grandson of Rabbi Feinstein), *Masoret Moshe: Hanhagot HaGaon Harav Moshe Feinstein* (Jerusalem 5773) p. 396.
13. See, for example: Talmud Bavli: *Ketubot* 75a; *Yevamot* 118b; *Kiddushin* 7a and 41a; *Bava Kama* 111a.
14. For Rav Soloveitchik's view on this matter, see the transcript of his talk delivered at the RCA convention in 1975, published as "Surrendering to the Almighty," in *Light*, no. 116 (17 Kislev 5736) pp. 13-14. A full transcript of this lecture, "Talmud Torah and Kabbalas Ol Malchus Shamayim" is accessible online at: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/03/rabbi-soloveitchik-talmud-torah-and.html>. Remarkable is the fact that some assumptions of the Talmud were definitely lifted in later days. See for example the assumption that a woman would not be so bold as to declare in front of her husband that he had divorced her unless it was in fact true. But Rabbi Moshe Isserles, quoting others, states that nowadays this is no longer true and most of the time can't be relied on!! (Rema, *Even HaEzer* 17:2) See, Rabbi Dr. Nathan Slifkin, *The Rav and the Immutability of Halacha in, Rationalist Judaism*, 11.7.2011.

For a comprehensive analysis of this complicated issue, see: Aliza Bazak, "The 'Tav Lemeitav' Presumption in Modern Halakhic Discourse," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2012; Moshe Be'eri, "Is the Presumption of 'Tav Lemeitav Tan Du' Subject to Change?" [Hebrew] in *Techumin* vol. 28 (2008) pp. 63-68; Aviad Hacoen, *The Tears of the Oppressed - An Examination of the Agunah Problem: Background and Halakhic Sources* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2004) chs. 6-8; Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, "'Tav Lemeitav Tan Du Mi-Lemeitav Armalu': An Analysis of the Presumption," in *The Edah Journal* 4:1, 2004, Iyar 5764, 1-24; Susan Aranoff, "Two Views of Marriage—Two Views of Women: Reconsidering 'Tav Lemetav Tan du Milemetav Armelu,'" in *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues*, no. 3, Spring/Summer 5760/2000, pp. 199-227; J.D. Bleich, "'Kiddushei Ta'ut': Annulment as a Solution to the Agunah Problem," *Tradition—A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 33 (1), 1998, pp. 102-108. Many more articles in Hebrew have been written on this topic.

15. Emanuel Rackman, *Modern Halakhah for Our Time* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1995) pp. 71-73; Rackman, "From Status to Contract to Status: Historical and Meta-Historical Approaches" [Hebrew], in *Marriage*,

*Liberty and Equality: Shall the Three Walk Together*, Tova Cohen, ed. (Bar-Ilan University, 2000) pp. 97-100; Rackman, "The Problems of the Jewish Woman in this Generation and the Ways to Solve Them" [Hebrew], in *HaPeninah – Sefer Zikaron le-Peninah Refel* (Jerusalem: Bnei Chemed, 1989) pp. 187-188. For a comprehensive treatment of Rabbi Rackman's disagreement with Rabbi Soloveitchik, see: David Singer, "Emanuel Rackman: Gadfly of Modern Orthodoxy," in *Modern Judaism*, vol. 28, no. 2 (May 2008) pp. 134-148; Lawrence Kaplan, "From Cooperation to Conflict: Rabbi Professor Emanuel Rackman, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and the Evolution of American Modern Orthodoxy," in *Modern Judaism*, vol. 30, no. 1, (February 2010) pp. 46-48.

16. Emanuel Rackman, "Soloveitchik: On Differing with My Rebbe," in *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, 15/289, (March 1985), p. 65.
17. Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, (Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007) Afterword: "Contemporary Resistance to the Maimonidean Reform," pp. 286-296.
18. See also: Emanuel Rackman, *One Man's Judaism* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2000) and *Modern Halakhah for Our Time* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1995).
19. Eliezer Berkovits, *HaHalacha: Kochah VeTafkidah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1981) A shortened version in English – *Not in Heaven: The Nature and Function of Halakha* (New York: Ktav Pub., 1983).
20. Chaim Hirschensohn, *Malki BaKodesh*, new edition of first two volumes (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University / Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2006, 2012). See also: David Zohar, "Rabbi Hayyim Hirschensohn – The Forgotten Sage Who Was Rediscovered," in *Conversations: The Journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals*, 1 (2008/5768), pp. 56-62; Ari Ackerman, "Judging the Sinner Favorably: R. Hayyim Hirschensohn on the Need for Leniency in Halakhic Decision-Making," in *Modern Judaism* vol. 22, no. 3 (2002), pp. 261-280; Marc B. Shapiro's review of *Jewish Commitment in a Modern World: Rabbi Hayyim Hirschensohn and His Attitude to Modernity*, by David Zohar, in *The Edah Journal* 5:1 (2005).
21. On Chacham Ben-Zion Uziel, see: Marc D. Angel, *Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999); On Rav Joseph Mashash, see: Marc B. Shapiro, "Rabbi Joseph Messas," in *Conversations: The Journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals*, 7 (Spring 2010/5770), pp. 95-102.
22. For all of Rabbi Heschel's observations, see: Samuel H. Dresner, ed., *Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002)

pp. 102-104.

23. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).
24. See: Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks, "A Hespel in Honor of Rav Yosef Soloveitchik," in *Memories of a Giant: Eulogies in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt"l*, ed. by Michael A. Bierman (Jerusalem/New York: Urim Publications, 2003) pp. 286-287. It is interesting to note, however, that in a very illuminating and telling statement, Rav Soloveitchik admitted that during his youth he experienced feelings of discontent toward the dry and rigid halacha-ism of his father and grandfather. "The rebellious son asks: Is it always necessary to live in accordance with Halacha, which appears to him to be dry and lacking emotion? Is it not possible for Judaism to contain more kindness and mercy, delicacy and beauty? Is it necessary for Shabbat to be expressed only through [the laws contained in the chapters of Tractate Shabbat] *Ba-meh Madlikin* and *Klal Gadol*?" (Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron* [Jerusalem: Elinor Library, 1986] p. 104).

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### **Questions to Ponder from the David Cardozo Think Tank:**

(We suggest printing out and discussing at your Shabbat table, if you like.)

1) Rav Cardozo mentions several rabbis who had the courage to make serious changes in Judaism (he has also written articles about contemporary rabbis' lack of courage <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/courage-rabbis-courage-the-need-for-mass-conversion>). These rabbis did not become as accepted by the mainstream as R. Soloveitchik did, and Rav Cardozo attributes this to their lack of a famous name or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But couldn't the opposite be true: having *too much* courage, and not picking their battles correctly, might have influenced their lack of acceptance by the larger community?

2) In general, what do you think causes certain rabbis to become *gedolei hador* over others . Is it knowledge, courage, politics, sheer luck or something bigger?

3) As Rav Cardozo mentions, R. Soloveitchik had many students, each of whom "claim their own Rabbi Soloveitchik". This is true also of other great thinkers and early founders of Modern Orthodoxy such as Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. Why do you think certain rabbis leave their students so

confused about their worldview? Is their unclear worldview on certain matters possibly deliberate in order to maintain support among diverse groups of followers (Haredim, Modern Orthodox etc.), or simply reflective of their way of thinking? From your experience of Rav Cardozo, does he too seem to appeal to a range of people, and put forward contradictory views? How clear or unclear do you think his worldview is?

4) When studying Jewish history, it is difficult to determine if a rabbi's halachic decision is a symptom of his greater vision or an outcome of that vision. For example, R. Soloveitchik strongly encouraged talmudic studies for women, but he did not push for female ordination. One can argue that (1) the outcome of R. Soloveitchik's worldview might have been a society where women did exactly that: study Talmud and not strive to become rabbis. Or alternatively that (2) the Rav's position on women and Talmudic studies was a symptom of his larger vision, in which women would eventually be able to become rabbis; it was only the circumstances of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish world that prevented this greater vision from manifesting.

5) When we look at piskei halacha, do we regard them as a binding outcome of a rabbi's worldview or rather as a symptom that opens the door to other possibilities in other circumstances? (Opposition to the latter view is generally made under the title of the "slippery slope" argument.)

6) R. Soloveitchik lived between worlds. This was not simply a philosophical position, but had practical outcomes too. For instance, together with Saul Lieberman (the then dean of the JTS Rabbinical school) he aimed to form an all-encompassing Orthodox Beth Din for both Orthodox and Conservative Jews. Though this initiative failed, it demonstrates that both rabbis aimed to keep the greater Jewish population/community together. Do you support such ventures, or should each camp contribute to the Jewish people separately? Are all such ventures doomed to fail, as this one did? If so, what might constitute the endemic reasons for the impossibility of such collaborations?

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