

Haym Soloveitchik in Jewish Review of Books

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have to go back 50 years to when I first met Haym Soloveitchik, the brilliant son of the magisterial and phenomenal late Rabbi JB Soloveitchik. We were young men in Jerusalem in the early sixties and both made very welcome on Friday evenings at the home of Dr. Yaacov Herzog and his wife, Dr. Pnina Herzog.

Yaacov Herzog, if I may digress for a moment, was the second son of the first Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, Yitzhak Herzog. Born in Ireland, and still speaking with an Irish brogue, he had been Israel's ambassador to Canada, where he gained worldwide fame for a brilliant public debate with the English historian Arnold Toynbee, who had notoriously described the Jews as a fossil with no place in history and compared Israel to the Nazis. Intellectual anti-Semitism has a long record. He returned to Israel to head the Office of the Prime Minister until his premature death in 1972. Such was the range of his knowledge that he was actually appointed Chief Rabbi of the UK in 1966 to succeed Israel Brodie. Sadly for Anglo Jewry, but fortunate for him, he resigned before taking up the job. Isaiah Berlin described him as "one of the best and wisest, most attractive and morally most impressive human beings I have ever known."

Haym was one of a circle of brilliant minds that gathered round the Herzogs (I was only admitted through my late father's connection with the Herzog family). He was beginning a career in academic life and I was drawn to him not just for his intellect, but also his strong sense of honesty, morality and indeed his eccentricity, for want of a better word. This incidentally is a quality much valued in British intellectual circles and one I find sadly lacking in too many nowadays. He was one of the reasons I decided against an academic career, because I realized I just did not have his qualities of memory, analysis, perseverance, appreciation of detail and, frankly, intellectual fearlessness. I was not cut out for the ivory tower. I have followed his career over the years and occasionally bumped into him in Jerusalem when our visits coincided, but alas I was drawn too deeply into my more pastoral, interpersonal activities to have had as much contact as I would have loved.

This winter edition of the Jewish Review of Books reminded me of what a brilliant and forthright man he is. He wrote [one of the most scathing reviews of another academic's work I have ever come across](#). And believe me the academic world is a hotbed of rivalry, vicious infighting, and cruel nastiness. Still, this review is all the more remarkable because most reviewers pull their punches, offer sycophantic plaudits, and at most damn with faint praise, usually with a view to being asked to contribute again. Publishers and their running dogs do not take kindly to having their stars demolished.

The object of Haym's scorn is a book written by Talya Fishman, professor of Religious Studies and Modern Intellectual History at the University of Pennsylvania. It is entitled [*Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures*](#)^x. Her thesis is that, unlike conventional wisdom, neither the text nor the authority of the Talmud we have today were fixed until the Tosaphists, the generations succeeding Rashi (R. Shlomo Yitzchaki 1040 – 1105) who wrote analytical and legal commentaries to supplement Rashi's more textual work. They benefitted from the change in European intellectual life from an oral to a written authority around the 12th century. The work is contentious from both sides.

Haym builds his rebuttal on Fishman's own confession that she is neither a medievalist nor a Talmud scholar and relies almost entirely on secondary scholarship. Had she been able to study the primary texts, she could have avoided the catalogue of basic errors she made that completely undermine her theory. The texts themselves refute her assertions. You have to read the article to get a sense of how comprehensively he demolishes her position.

He also reveals that, having seen an early draft of a crucial chapter, he wrote to Dr. Fishman urging her not to publish the work as it would simply mislead English speaking readers about the historical and textual facts. He goes on to express his amazement that the book won the Nahum M. Sarna Memorial National Jewish Book Award for Scholarship. He concludes that the panel of judges simply could not have read the work, or if they had then they themselves were so ignorant of Jewish texts that they lacked the wit or expertise to judge its merit.

The review reflects the genius and the courage of the man, his detailed knowledge of the vast subject of rabbinic scholarship, his penetrating analysis of the subject, his withering rebuttal, and his refusal to water down or compromise his firmly held position. I have not enjoyed such an honest piece of writing in a very long time and it made me appreciate once again what a remarkable man he is.

We are swamped nowadays with exaggerations, overloaded with excessive praise of people for being "brilliant scholars, philosophers, experts and writers" when they are rarely, in reality, anything of the sort. Compliments and praise can be bought or you can pay a public relations person or website to do it for you. It is therefore all the more refreshing to read someone who is unafraid to tell the truth and willing to point out that the emperor has no clothes. Long may he continue to live, write, and represent the most noble of qualities. If only Judaism had more like him.