

The greatest rabbi in the West

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In the latest edition of the Brooklyn Jewish journal *Hakirah*, there is a fascinating article on Rav Joseph Ber Soloveitchik (1903 -1993) by David. P. Goldman entitled *The Rav's Uncompleted Grand Design*. Goldman himself is a Renaissance man. An economist, a musicologist, an expert on China, a columnist as *Spengler*, a scholar. But this blog is not about him. It is about JB, as Rav Soloveitchik was affectionately known. There were two great men who had a profound impact on American Jewry during the past century, the Lubavitcher Rebbe and Rav Soloveitchik. They represented the different major streams of Orthodoxy in our times.

Rav Joseph Ber Soloveitchik was born on February 27, 1903, in Eastern Europe. He came from one of its greatest rabbinical dynasties, known as Brisk. After an intensive Talmudic education, he went on to graduate from Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin with a Ph.D. in epistemology and metaphysics. In 1932 he emigrated to the USA. He settled in Boston and took up a rabbinical position. In 1941 he began to teach the main Talmud class at Yeshiva University. He ordained some 2,000 rabbis in his career and his lectures attracted thousands of devotees. He was held in enormous respect by everyone. He died in 1993.

His two most widely read publications are *The Lonely Man of Faith* and *Halakhic Man*. Arguably the most significant philosophical analyses of Jewish religious ideology in our times. His unique approach was a combination of European phenomenological philosophy with mysticism and religious experience. His profound rational analysis overlaid a deep commitment to study and religious practice in the context of individual commitment. Unusually, amongst the Eastern European rabbis who came to America, he was a passionate Zionist and a strong advocate of women's education at the highest level. He was a proponent of Torah UMadda, Torah study, and secular wisdom. Intellectually and academically, he stood head and shoulders above the rest.

My contact with him was only through his writing. Although I have long admired and revered his brilliant son Haym Soloveitchik, whom I first encountered in Jerusalem in 1961. So, it came as a surprise to read in Goldman's essay, this quote attributed to the great man. In lamenting the state of much of rabbinic leadership and the lack of passion for religious life, he said

"And therefore, I affirm that I can identify one of those responsible for the present situation and that is none other than myself. I have not fulfilled my obligation as a guide in Israel. I seem to have lacked the ability-the personal power-required of a teacher and Rav or perhaps I lacked some of the desire to fulfill the role completely and I did not devote myself completely to the task...my students have received much Torah learning from me and their intellectual standing has strengthened-but I have not seen much growth on the experiential plane...I have fallen short as one who spreads the Torah of the heart."

I was stunned by his humility and honesty. He was no more a failure than Moses, who also was very strong and yet humble, a modest man who struggled throughout his life with his mission. Anyone involved in teaching, advocating, and fighting for a cause, must feel a profound sense of failure sometimes for not living up to one's own expectations. Similarly, anyone with any sense of introspection must inevitably think that he or she could have done more to inspire and to achieve. But what did he mean by "the present situation"?

In every society, there is a huge gap between the intellectual thinkers and the masses who are not. Most people anywhere are superstitious and credulous. They have little time for grand ideas but simply struggle to cope with life and making the best of it

It was to these people that Hassidism spoke when it emerged in the seventeenth century. Then too there was a huge divide between those like the brilliant Vilna Gaon, the academic Lithuanian intellectual who was a Talmudist, mathematician, and mystic, and the early Hassidic masters who spoke to the simple uneducated people who needed a Rebbe for guidance and to speak to God on their behalf.

These are two very distinct models of leadership, the popular and the elite. This is the dichotomy that the two great rabbis of the previous generation represent. Lubavitch Hassidism brings Judaism to the masses. Their emissaries cater for and speak to the ordinary person or for those who are lost and searching. Their fundamentalism is a comfortable safety zone that helps them deal with the practical preoccupations of every Jew.

On the other side, you have the Lithuanian, Yeshivish rigorous standards of the academy with more of an emphasis on individuality. JB on the other hand expected all his pupils to rise to the heights. He was addressing those already committed who wanted more. What is depressing is the current Lithuanian rejection of the scientific. Perhaps that is where Rav

Soloveitchik felt his elitism was being overwhelmed by conformity as anti-intellectualism has taken a firm grip on large parts of the Orthodox world.

Different times call for different responses. Perhaps we have needed the conformist, social Judaism, while we rebuild Jewish life after the Holocaust. But it has come at a price of producing a leadership dominated by a gerontocracy of cloistered men of incredible learning yet out of touch with reality so that herds of religious delinquents ignore civil authority as well as religion. Our leaders seem like rabbits blinded by the headlamps of a car, unable to see that their policies and fundamentalism are not equipping millions to cope with the challenges of modernity. But if, on the other hand, you encourage intellectual thought and individualism as Rav Soloveitchik did, you cannot expect to create a movement of blind loyalty and obedience willing to march at one person's command.

There is much to criticize in the Orthodox world today. Yet is our situation that bad? There are more Jews than ever before studying Torah, committed to religious life by choice, rather than circumstances. More religious academics producing quality work on philosophy, history, and the whole gamut of intellectual activity. Compared to the paucity I knew as a young man, the pool of talent in Jewish religious life has swelled beyond imagination. I cannot be pessimistic.

Rav Soloveitchik was committed to Torah in all its majesty, which transcends human social manipulation and anodyne placebos. He has continued to inspire both through his late great son-in-law Rav Aaron Lichtenstein and the Yeshivah Har Etzion in Israel where his grandson reigns. It might not be a legacy of Facebook friends and clicks, but it is all the more profound and long-lasting for that.

Rav Soloveitchik was fearless. He could stand up to the hard right and the zealots. Unlike most rabbis nowadays, he was not frightened of offending. He would never compromise his beliefs. He was not interested in power or fame. He set an amazing example, in the words of the prophet Micah of "walking humbly with God." They don't make them like that anymore. And there is no "completed design" when it comes to Torah.

There is a lovely story told about Rav Soloveitchik that one day someone asked him for a blessing. Now Hassidic Rebbes and Kabbalists are constantly being asked to give blessings, to heal, to find a wife, to succeed in business and they expect the blessing to work because someone has a hotline to God. Rav Soloveitchik was a rationalist, a mystic, and a halachist. He did not believe in giving meaningless blessings. When he was asked for one he

replied “ A blessing, why? Why? Are you an apple?”