

Rabbi's Rabbi Keeps The Law Up to Date

By EDWARD B. FISKE

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FALLSBURG, N. Y., June 22—Among Orthodox Jews he is known simply as "the Rav"—the rabbi's rabbi.

He holds no elective office and occupies no pulpit, yet the breadth of his learning and the depth of his piety is such that his authority on matters of Jewish law is unchallenged. Some say that only half a dozen scholars have shown such brilliance since Maimonides in the 13th century.

His name is Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and this week his disciples had another chance to sit at his feet in search of learning and inspiration.

As he does every year, the 69-year-old scholar addressed his fellow rabbis at the annual meeting of the Rabbinical Council of America, the largest of the country's Orthodox rabbinical organizations.

He sat with his feet crossed in front of a table bearing an open volume of the Talmud, a few bulky reference works and a glass of milk.

He spoke in a relaxed, rather informal manner, waving his right hand in the air occasionally to emphasize points and asking frequent questions of members of his audience, many of whom had tape recorders at their side.

"I'll take it home and play

it for colleagues who weren't able to get here," said Rabbi James Gordon of Oak Park, Mich. "We'll go over and over it, maybe three or four times."

A genial man of average height with gray hair and a squared-off beard that falls about three inches below his chin, Rabbi Soloveitchik comes from a long line of distinguished Talmudic scholars on both sides of his family.

His grandfather, Haim Soloveitchik, was rabbi of Brest-Litovsk and brought about a revolution in the methods of Torah scholarship. His father, Moshe, was a great scholar at Yeshiva University in New York.

Born in Russia

Joseph Soloveitchik, who was named for a great-grandfather, was born in Russia with Yiddish as his mother tongue. He moved to Poland and then to Germany, where he earned his doctorate in philosophy, and immigrated to the United States in 1933 at the age of 29.

He now lives in Brookline, Mass., but spends three days a week at Yeshiva, where he is professor of Talmud.

Despite his accomplishments, "the Rav" is largely unknown outside Orthodox Jewish circles, and even with-

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in them he remains a somewhat cryptic figure. The main reason for this is his reluctance to publish during his lifetime, a practice that is something of a family tradition. His published bibliography consists of less than half a dozen substantive articles.

Rabbi Soloveitchik lectures weekly, however, in Brookline and at the Moriah Synagogue in Manhattan and gives three major scholarly lectures a year, one in honor of his father and the other in honor of his late wife.

These talks, which last anywhere from two to five hours, draw overflow crowds and have been described as an American version of the classical rabbinic legal lesson by the master of an academy. While students respect his desire not to have tapes of them transcribed, they form the basis of an oral record of his views.

Freedom and Vision

Earlier this week, Rabbi Soloveitchik received a visitor in his study in Brookline and in the living room of his daughter's home nearby and gave some of his views of present-day Judaism.

He described himself as a shy person and denied that he was an "authority" in the usual sense of the word. "I have many pupils, I have many disciples, but I never impose my views on anyone," he said.

"Judaism," he continued, "is a society of free and independent men and women bound by a single commitment and vision."

Why has he not published? "I am a funny animal," he replied. "I'm a perfectionist. I am never sure something is the best I can do."

He got up and led his guest

to a closet in his study. On the right was a four-drawer filing cabinet crammed with yellow folders, each with a handwritten manuscript in English or Hebrew.

On the left was a shelf stacked with scores of tapes. In another room was another storage closet, and under a piece of fabric and a pair of sneakers was a cardboard carton also filled with manuscripts.

"I don't know how many manuscripts there are," he remarked. "I've never counted them. But there must be 200 and at least that many tapes." For safety's sake, he said, he has made photo copies of each one and placed them at different locations.

Rabbi Soloveitchik said he wrote on philosophy in English and on law in Hebrew, always in long hand. "When I hold the pen in my hand it makes me think and my vocabulary expands," he explained.

The unique status of Joseph Soloveitchik is due principally to the fact that he is a master not only of Talmudic law but also of philosophy and is capable of extracting a modern value system out of the halacha, or Jewish legal system.

It is this ability to synthesize Jewish Orthodoxy with Western culture that invites comparison with figures such as Sampson Raphael Hirsch, the 19th-century founder of the neo-Orthodox movement, and Abraham Kook, the chief rabbi of Palestine from 1920 to 1935.

Rabbi Soloveitchik lists figures ranging from Hindu philosophers to Hegel and Pascal as his intellectual sources. He keeps informed on current trends in philosophy and social thought and a legal decision on something like the use of sophisticated new appliances on the Sabbath is

apt to hinge on his interpretation of a new theory about the nature of electricity.

The scholar is a vigorous opponent of the wing of Orthodoxy that would disengage Jews from modern culture. "We are committed to God and to observing His laws," he said, "but God also wills us to be committed to mankind in general and to the society in whose midst we live in particular. To find fulfillment, one must partake of the human endeavor."

Uniqueness of Judaism

Rabbi Soloveitchik said Judaism was unique in a number of ways. "For one thing, we are practical," he stated. "We are more interested in discovering what God wants man to do than we are in describing God's essence."

He said Judaism was also a basically noninstitutional religion. "You don't need a synagogue to pray. Any cubit of space can be converted into a temple or synagogue. You can pray on the seashore or in Times Square." He was asked to accept the chief rabbinate of Israel but said he declined because "I didn't like the idea of an institutionalized rabbinate."

Why does he go to rabbinical meetings? "Aristotle said that man is a social animal," he replied. "I belong to the R.C.A. because I need fellowship, people to talk with."

Rabbi Soloveitchik is often called upon by both individuals and Jewish organizations for opinions on legal matters and his views, though nonbinding, are usually definitive.

Perhaps his best-known decision concerned the question of whether Orthodox

Jews should participate in ecumenical dialogues with Christians. He took the position that such discussions were permissible as long as they were restricted to social and ethical issues and did not get into the realm of religious belief.

"The Jews' relation to God is an intimate one," he said in the interview. "It is like a romance, and there is a certain shyness when one speaks of romance."

"The Christian mystic will describe his communion with God in detailed and personal terms. With Jewish mystics, you don't find confessionals. When I feel the breath of eternity in my face I tell you only that it is possible for men to communicate with God. The Jew will translate his personal experience into a concept."

Rabbi Soloveitchik said he had profound respect for many Christian leaders. He has a detailed knowledge of the work of Karl Barth, the late Swiss theologian, whom he likes because "for him, faith is an act of surrender," and he described Jans Cardinal Willebranz, a high Vatican official who visited him in New York, as "a deeply spiritual person and a friend of the Jewish people."

He added, though, that Christians had generally misunderstood Jews.

Soul of the Jews

"They have never tried to penetrate the soul of the Jews," he declared. "They have read the Bible but neglected the oral tradition by which we interpret it. This makes a different Bible altogether."

"Halacha is essentially a method—a way of approach-

ing things and reacting to them. However, to equate Judaism with legalism or with legalistic Christian theology are prone to do is like equating mathematics with a compilation of mathematical equations.

"You know the saying about an eye for an eye," continued. "The Bible states that this is what a man serves when he has taken another man's sight. It is a full measure of justice. We also know that no man being can implement such strict justice. In practical terms, it means that we make the man pay compensation."

Rabbi Soloveitchik follows in the tradition of neo-Kantianism, which accepts a contradiction between the mathematical-scientific world of causality and the inner world of man characterized by freedom and self-consciousness. He expresses admiration for the existentialism of a Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, but tempers it with respect for the relative objectivity of Jewish law.

This is admittedly a philosophy of restlessness. "A teacher I never try to solve questions," he declared, "because most questions are unsolvable. Judaism is not afraid of contradictions. We adore man—we are afraid of men. We have never followed Aristotelian logic and the principle of the exclusion of the middle or that of contradiction."

In many cases, such as the "eye for an eye" situation, he said, there is a contradiction between the demands of love and justice.

"The medieval man goes to truth—or whatever he thought to be truth—precedence of loving kindness and so do Communists today," he said. "What is the difference between a de Torquemada and Mao Tse-tung? Judaism is basically very tolerant and usually comes down the side of loving kindness. But it acknowledges that full reconciliation of the two is possible only in God. He is the coincidence of opposites."

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