

U.S. Judaism's Man of Paradox

The dominant force in Orthodoxy is a revered Boston rabbi

Although Joseph B. Soloveitchik is U.S. Orthodox Judaism's most illustrious philosopher, only a small scattering of his thousands of lectures have ever been published. He is a leading Zionist who has baffled his closest followers by never once visiting the state of Israel. In the U.S., he created the progressive, or "Modern," wing of Orthodoxy by synthesizing tradition and contemporary culture; but paradoxically for Soloveitchik, now that Orthodoxy is well established in the U.S.,* it tends increasingly to reject his outlook and retreat behind sectarian walls.

Soloveitchik, 81, is known to his devotees as "the Rav," a Hebrew term of honor that means he is "the Rabbi." (Less reverential Jews on the right wing of Orthodoxy use just his initials "J.B.") As professor of Talmud since 1941 at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in New York City, Soloveitchik has prepared nearly 1,500 men for ordination. By some estimates, this is the largest number of rabbis trained by any sage of the past millennium. The group makes up the majority of the North American Orthodox rabbis now serving in synagogues. Neither the Conservative nor the Reform branches of U.S. Judaism can boast an equivalently pre-eminent scholar.

Soloveitchik has rarely granted interviews and, as a perfectionist who is constantly rethinking his ideas, has always hesitated to commit his formulations to print. But now two new publications have made this master of Halakha (traditional law) accessible to a broad U.S. audience. The first: *Halakhic Man* (Jewish Publication Society; 164 pages; \$12.95), a translation of a major manifesto published in Hebrew in 1944. The second, just issued for the High Holy Days, is *Soloveitchik on Repentance* (Paulist Press; 320 pages; \$11.95). Compiled by an Israeli disciple of Soloveitchik's, Pinchas Peli, *Repentance* is based on transcriptions of Yom Kippur discourses that the Rav delivered in New York City over twelve years. Reviewing the earlier Hebrew edition of *Repentance*, Chicago's Reform rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf declared that Soloveitchik is "more and more obviously the teacher of the time. If I am not mistaken, people will still be reading him in a thousand years."

Halakhic Man, a sweeping defense of the validity and excitement of pursuing the religiously observant life in the modern world, makes much of humanity's God-given creativity. According to Soloveitchik, "God left an area of evil and

chaos in the world so that man might make it good," purposely flawing the perfection of his own material creation to leave room for the improvements that could be made by his obedient creature.

In the Yom Kippur discourses, Soloveitchik explores the nature of humanity's less exalted side: sinfulness. As the Rav sees it, the intellect plays hardly any role in the soul's move from sin toward repentance, nor is the "ethical sense" very powerful. Rather, says Soloveitchik, contrition is an "aesthetic experience" of revulsion against sin's corruption.



Philosopher-Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik
"God left an area of evil and chaos."

The *Repentance* book comes not from a Jewish house but a Roman Catholic one, evidence of the Rav's universality. Says Father Lawrence Boadt, an editor for Paulist Press: "We thought this would be a very effective book for Christians. Soloveitchik is one of the greatest mystical thinkers in the United States." Catholic enthusiasm for the book is also significant because in 1964, during the Second Vatican Council, Soloveitchik announced his opposition to theological discussions between Jews and Christians. Interfaith talks, he wrote in one of his rare essays, must be limited to secular topics. Though his policy encourages some contact with Christians, it still limits theological dialogues.

A similar dispute involves demands by right-wing Orthodoxy to end cooperation with Conservative and Reform Jews in such organizations as the Synagogue Council of America and the New York

Board of Rabbis. The Rabbinical Council of America, which represents the Modern Orthodox movement, years ago referred the matter to its reigning authority, Soloveitchik. He never ruled that such cooperation was permissible, but he did not condemn it either. As a result, concourse still takes place. Says Orthodox Rabbi Walter Wurzbarger, former Synagogue Council president: "I dread to think of the future of Orthodoxy without him."

In his life as well as his thought, Soloveitchik bridges the ancient ghettos and modern urban culture. The scion of an eminent line of East European rabbis, he was trained at home in Russia by his father and received no formal schooling until he entered the University of Berlin. There he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy, becoming as conversant with Kant as with Moses. In 1932 he moved to Boston as chief Orthodox rabbi and founder of a pioneering day school. He later began commuting to teach in New York. A widower, he has two daughters and one son, who is a scholar of Jewish history.

When Soloveitchik arrived on the American scene, the Orthodox Jews were isolated from mainstream society and seemed doomed to extinction in the U.S. Soloveitchik helped foster the growth of the movement by insisting that a Jew could remain both an observer of tradition and a full participant in Western culture. For him it has never been a pragmatic calculation but a belief that this was the very will of God.

His philosophy, reflected in the two newly published books, took on a more complex aspect in a different work, the powerful 1965 essay "The Lonely Man of Faith." The essay contrasts the first Adam of the Creation, depicted in *Genesis 1*, and the second Adam, depicted in *Genesis 2*. The first Adam boldly subdues the earth, while the second Adam humbly quests for God. Both Adams exist within each person and are mandated by God, Soloveitchik holds, but in modern times the first Adam threatens to overwhelm the second, and has even become "demonic." When the second Adam begins to speak the language of faith, writes the Rav, he "finds himself lonely, forsaken, misunderstood, at times even ridiculed by Adam the first, by himself."

The essay, existential in tone, is one of the most personal expressions ever voiced by a modern Talmudic authority on the elemental power of religious faith and the ways in which the joy of life often comes mixed with longing, torment and despair. It also says much about Soloveitchik's own demons: for all of his confidence in the intellectual and psychological validity of his tradition, there seems little doubt that he worries about, and perhaps even fears, the cultural forces that relentlessly threaten to subvert it.

—By Richard N. Ostling.

Reported by Marlin Levin/Jerusalem

*Affiliated U.S. Jews belong to three principal branches. By one estimate, the membership is: liberal Reform, 1,100,000, the Orthodox on the right, 416,000, the in-between Conservative, 1,700,000.