

Obituaries

Joseph Soloveitchik, Orthodox sage

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, 90, the spiritual mentor of Modern Orthodoxy who led Yeshiva University's rabbinic school for more than 40 years, was mourned around the world after his death during Passover. The officiating rabbi at the ordination of more than 1,000 students, he became the most cited Orthodox sage in matters of Jewish law.

His legal legacy includes sanctioning Christian-Jewish dialogue about non-theological issues and ruling that the modern state of Israel has religious significance and legitimacy. He also authorized Orthodox participation in inter-denominational groups such as the New York Board of Rabbis and the Synagogue Council of America.

It is a measure of Soloveitchik's influence that these rulings achieved such widespread Orthodox acceptance although Soloveitchik was the only Orthodox sage in the United States to so rule.

After years of illness and seclusion, he died of heart failure on April 8 at his home in Brookline, Mass. He was buried April 11 at Brookline's Maimonides School, a day school he founded in 1937, and the first yeshiva day school in New England. Soloveitchik was also the chief rabbi of Boston's Orthodox community, a post he held for 60 years after emigrating from Germany in 1932. Although he taught at Yeshiva's New York campus, and lectured to thousands at weekly classes at Manhattan's Moriah Congregation, he never moved from his Boston home, commuting as often as several times a week by plane, train and car.

The scion of a prominent Eastern European rabbinic dynasty, Soloveitchik was born in Pruzhan, Poland. The family soon moved to Khoslavitch, a White Russian town, where Soloveitchik was educated by tutors.

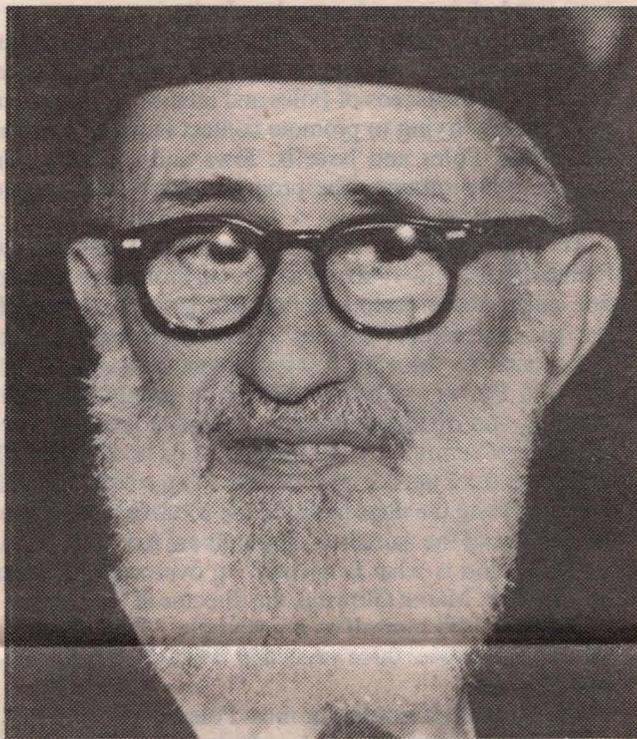
Soloveitchik's father instilled in him the family's tradition that emphasized the intellectual rather than the pastoral function of a rabbi.

However, in remarkable contrast to the education of virtually all Orthodox rabbis of that era, his mother provided him with an extensive secular education, introducing her son to the writings of Ibsen, Pushkin and Bialik.

In 1931 he earned his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin, where he was a classmate of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who was later to become the Lubavitcher rebbe.

In 1941 Soloveitchik succeeded his father as a professor of Talmud at Yeshiva's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. He also taught philosophy at Yeshiva's Bernard Revel Graduate School.

On several occasions, Soloveitchik declined a plea from his followers that he become chief rabbi of Israel. Although Soloveitchik was a religious Zionist — he was the only American Orthodox sage who authorized the Sabbath read-



Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

ing of the Prayer for the State as composed by Israel's chief rabbi — he nevertheless stated that "I was afraid to be an officer of the state. A rabbinate linked up with the state cannot be completely free."

Although Soloveitchik was the dominant Orthodox rabbi of his era, future generations may have trouble citing Soloveitchik as precedent. A Y.U. statement on Soloveitchik's legacy pointed out that "the problem for many of his students [was that Soloveitchik] insisted on keeping his lectures within the confines of the Oral Tradition." He published fewer than a dozen major articles.

Soloveitchik was reluctant for anyone to use him as an authority and preferred to encourage each of his students in their individual path. "I have many pupils, I have many disciples, but I never impose my views on anyone," he insisted. He allowed his students to issue highly divergent rabbinic rulings, with both camps able to claim Soloveitchik as their legal source and mentor.

Soloveitchik's wife, Tonya, died in 1967. He is survived by three children, Atarah Twersky of Brookline; Tova Lichtenstein of Jerusalem; Haym Soloveitchik of the Bronx, a professor of Jewish history at Revel; two sisters, Shulamith Meiselman and Anne Gerber of Brookline; and Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik of Chicago, who since 1985 has been flying weekly to New York to continue the family tradition of teaching at Yeshiva's seminary.