

Rabbi J. Soloveitchik, 90, Dies; Shaped U.S. Orthodox Judaism

By ARI L. GOLDMAN

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, a major Jewish philosopher who shaped Orthodox Judaism in America through his writing and lectures and his ordination of more than 2,000 rabbis, died last night at his home in Brookline, Mass., at the age of 90.

Sam Hartstein, a spokesman for Yeshiva University, where Rabbi Soloveitchik taught for more than four decades, said that the rabbi died of heart failure.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, known popularly as "the Rav," an affectionate Hebrew name for teacher, was widely accepted as the unchallenged leader of mainstream Orthodoxy and was respected as well by the more traditionalist wings, who also regarded him as a great teacher and decider of Jewish law.

Orthodox rabbis around the world would call him with queries about how to apply Jewish law to modern problems. The rabbi's annual discourses, which he delivered on the anniversary of his father's death, attracted thousands of listeners and was regarded as the major annual academic event for American Orthodoxy.

Opposed Theological Dialogue

Although much of his work involved reconciling traditional Judaism with the modern world, Rabbi Soloveitchik was an opponent of Jewish-Christian dialogue on a theological level. He argued that such conversations should be restricted to issues of social policy like the needs of the poor and religious tolerance.

For years, Rabbi Soloveitchik would address his fellow rabbis at the annual meeting of the Rabbinical Council of America, the largest of the country's Orthodox rabbinical organizations.

Sometimes sitting with his feet crossed in front of a table bearing an open volume of the Talmud, a few bulky reference works and occasionally, a glass of milk, he would speak in a

relaxed, rather informal manner, waving his hand in the air to make a point and asking frequent questions of his audience.

A genial man with gray hair and a squared-off beard that fell about three inches below his chin, Rabbi Soloveitchik came from a long line of distinguished Talmudic scholars on both sides of his family. His grandfather, Haim, was a rabbi of Brest-Litovsk and brought about a revolution in the methods of Torah scholarship. His father, Moses, was also a great scholar at Yeshiva University in New York.

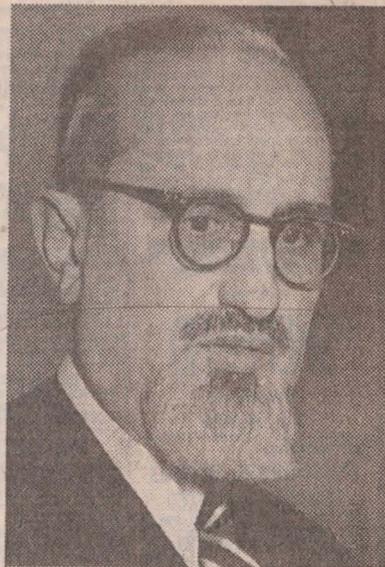
A Cryptic Figure

Despite his accomplishments, he was not well known outside Orthodox Jewish circles, and even within them, he remained a somewhat a cryptic figure. The main reason was his reluctance to publish during his lifetime, a practice that was something of a family tradition. In the 1970's, his published bibliography consisted of less than a half dozen substantive articles.

But for years he would give major lectures which lasted anywhere from two to five hours, draw overflow crowds and have been described as an American version of the classical rabbinic legal lesson taught by the master of an academy.

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," he said, "I have many disciples, but I never impose my views on anyone."

Rabbi Soloveitchik, the scion of a prominent rabbinical family, was born in Pruzhan, Poland, in 1903. He spent his early years in Belorus, where his father, Moses, served as rabbi. Until his early 20's, he devoted himself almost exclusively to the study of the Talmud, the library of Jewish law, lore and wisdom. At the age of 22, he entered the University of Berlin where he majored in philosophy and was attract-



Yeshiva University, 1964

Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik

ed to the neo-Kantian school.

In 1931, he received his doctorate for a dissertation on epistemology and metaphysics. The same year he married Tonya Lewitt. She died in 1967.

A year later the couple immigrated to the United States, where he became the rabbi of the Orthodox Jewish community of Boston and founded the Maimonides School, the first Jewish Day School in New England.

In 1941, he came to Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, where he remained the preeminent teacher in Talmud until he became ill in the mid-1980's. He held the title of Leib Merkin professor of talmud and Jewish philosophy.

He is survived by two sisters, Shulamith Meiselman and Anne Gerber, both of Brookline, Mass. and a brother, Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik of Chicago. Three children, Atarah Twersky of Brookline; Tova Lichtenstein of Jerusalem and Rabbi Haym Soloveitchik of Riverdale. Several grandchildren and great grandchildren.

A funeral is scheduled for 10:30 A.M. Sunday at the Maimonides School in Brookline.