

SUMMER SERMON SERIES 2016
The Movements of Judaism and their Founders
III. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik
IV.

Shabbat shalom!

In recent years I've been offering a Summer Sermon Series. This year we are exploring different movements and expressions of Judaism, and the leaders who moved Judaism in new directions. So far we've talked about the Karaites who couldn't accept the norms of rabbinic Judaism, and about the development of Lurianic Kabbalah and the beginning of Hassidic Judaism; tonight we'll take a look at one of the 20th century's greatest rabbis, Joseph Soloveitchik.

If there is one underlying theme, it is that the very diversity of Judaism is one of its greatest strengths. We are the big tent that can accommodate even radically different ideas, and it is this very tension in Jewish life that keeps us from stagnating or worse.

A secondary theme is that, when all is said is done, all of our different religious expressions strive for the same thing – for those who are spiritually attuned, that is to experience God's presence in a way that can fill our lives with joy, awe and love. Our faith, in all its diversity, offers access to God's power and grace; guidance and forgiveness, and a transcendence that gives us meaning and hope.

One side comment before I begin: Particularly at a time when our society becomes ever more polarized, especially in the name of religion – both in America and, after yet another horrific act of terror in France, in the world at large where the forces of hatred and xenophobia and despair are on levels that we thought were only matters of history – recognizing the difference between what religion *gives* us and what it does *to* us if misused and applied – it is of crucial importance to explore our different faiths and appreciate what they can teach us.

And so we turn to one of the great Orthodox rabbis of our time, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik.

Rabbi Soloveitchik was born in 1903, scion of a long rabbinic dynasty in Lithuania.

As a student he was immersed deeply in the Orthodox world of the European yeshivas of Eastern Europe, but his higher education was in the world of modern scholarship: He graduated from a liberal arts high school in Dubno, studied political science at the Free Polish University in Warsaw, and graduated from the University of Berlin with honors in

Philosophy, Economics and Hebrew – all while simultaneously maintaining a rigorous schedule of intensive Talmudic studies. He continued his studies through the doctoral level, writing his PhD thesis on the epistemology and metaphysics of the German philosopher Hermann Cohen, a neo-Kantian who ironically had been the greatest philosopher of early German Reform Judaism. He was 15 at the time (no, just kidding about that part!).

Arriving in Boston in the early 1930's, Soloveitchik founded a Jewish day school where he based the curriculum around the Talmud – but insisted that boys and girls study together; later, as head of Yeshiva University in New York, he introduced Torah and Talmud studies to Stern College, Yeshiva's program for women. Many thousands of Orthodox religious leaders – men and women – were influenced by his enlightened outlook, and now serve Orthodox communities throughout the world. That outlook can be described in a single word: “synthesis” – combining the best of religious Torah scholarship with the best secular scholarship in Western civilization.

Soloveitchik was head of the rabbinic seminary at Yeshiva University for nearly 50 years until his death in 1993, at age 90. He ordained close to 2,000 rabbis. Tens of thousands of Orthodox Jews looked to him as their religious leader.

Soloveitchik, in other words, not only built a unique bridge between the Orthodox world and modernity, he shaped that bridge more than any other single individual.

Let's talk about bridging for a couple of minutes. Throughout the 1950's and 1960's, ultra-Orthodox leaders sought to ban interfaith dialogue. Responsa were written to the effect that participating in interfaith forums was contrary to Jewish law. Soloveitchik refused to sign on to such bans, and felt passionately that dialogue was always superior to throwing up walls and boundaries.

Another example: America's foremost forum for interfaith *and* intrafaith dialogue was the Synagogue Council of America – the organization that brought together all three rabbinic and congregational bodies, thereby representing almost all of America's religious Jewry. Rabbi Soloveitchik was a staunch defender of the SCA, which for decades was the central address for national and international church bodies, including the Vatican and the National Council of Churches, in terms of contact with American Jewry; the year after Soloveitchik died, internal dissension within the Orthodox community led to the dissolution of the SCA, an irreparable loss reflecting the increasing trend toward extremism.

Here is his comment on interfaith dialogue:

“The relationship between two communities must be outer-directed and related to the secular orders with which men of faith come face to face. In the secular sphere, we may discuss positions to be taken, ideas to be evolved, and plans to be formulated. In these matters, religious communities may together recommend action to be developed and may seize the initiative to be implemented later by general society.”

Thus while never giving up his personal Orthodox Jewish practice, he was a counter-force against extremism, even during the Holocaust.

Though he was a lifelong critic of Reform and Conservative Judaism, he recognized their leadership in Jewish communal institutions, and concluded that participation with non-Orthodox Jews for political or welfare purposes is not only permissible, but obligatory.

He was also the pre-eminent Zionist leader of Orthodox Judaism. David Ben Gurion even offered him the position of Chief Rabbi in Israel, though he turned it down, preferring not to give up his teaching.

Speaking on mankind’s primary duty, Soloveitchik said, *“The realization of the ideal of justice constitutes the fulfillment of the duty of creation that was placed on man.”* In other words, empty ritual or ritual for its own sake was not for Soloveitchik the measure of the Orthodox Jew. He used to relate the following tale about his grandfather, who was once asked, *“What is the function of a Rabbi?”* He replied: *“To redress the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone; to protect the dignity of the poor and to save the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor.”* These words could have come directly out of the social action platforms of Reform Judaism.

He hated Jewish mysticism and what he considered non-rational spirituality; in this, too, he echoed the Reform Judaism of his time.

One result of this approach is that the synagogue for Soloveitchik is not the center of the Jewish religion. He wrote: *“The true temple is the sphere of our daily, mundane activities and existence, for it is there that the Halakhah is realized. We may therefore say that the observer of the commandments does not meet God by turning away from the world but, rather, encounters His presence by turning to and acting in the world.”*

Soloveitchik refused to write off the non-observant. *“It is our firm conviction,”* he once wrote, *“that no greater harm could be done to our cause than the severance of these Jews and synagogues from our main body.”* Where other leading Orthodox rabbis called Reformers apostates or worse, Soloveitchik referred to Reform and Conservative Jews not

in denominational terms at all; he called them, simply, “Jews.” And he acted on his teaching: When ultra-Orthodox rabbis tried to ban Reform and Conservative Jews from using a mikvah [ritual immersion], he pushed hard to enable non-observant Jews equal access.

He often told the story of the Vilna Gaon, one of the greatest sages of the late pre-modern era, who had stopped at an inn for dinner. Seated at another table was a Jew who was obviously completely non-observant. Yet the Gaon invited the other Jew to join him at his table. The reply was in a tone of scoffing ridicule: *“Don’t you see that I am a disbeliever? I have nothing to do with mitzvot and blessings.”* To which the Gaon answered, *“That doesn’t change the fact that you are a Jew.”*

Soloveitchik loved to quote the Mishnah: “All Israelites have a share in the world to come,” and the Talmudic commentary that followed, “The righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come.” To Soloveitchik, the larger community was everything, more than the sum of its parts.

Extrapolate from such teachings to the world at large, a world where the “Other” seems ever more demonized. We have a lot to learn from this rabbi who was uncompromising in his personal practices, yet who loved and respected even those whose views were very different from his own.