

A Haredi Attack on Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik: A Battle over the Brisker Legacy from 1984

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RABBI JOSEPH BER SOLOVEITCHIK (1903–93) is widely considered to be among the most important Orthodox rabbis in America in the twentieth century. Scion of a distinguished Eastern European rabbinic family, R. Soloveitchik was at once a first-class talmudist, whose lectures expounding the complex casuistry and dialectics of talmudic learning were of the highest order, and an original and prolific contributor to the field of religious philosophy. Soloveitchik's brilliance in combining these two domains made him one of the most respected authorities, legal or otherwise, in the Orthodox world. Indeed, to his legions of followers, he was known simply as "The Rav" (The Rabbi). By contrast, we present a document here (housed in the Pini Dunner Collection in Los Angeles) that reveals a cohort of implacable and contemptuous opponents of Soloveitchik, calling to mind the unbridgeable and often unnoticed boundary lines within Orthodoxy itself.

During his lifetime, Soloveitchik was predominantly recognized beyond his own immediate circle of colleagues and students for his originality of thought in the field of Jewish philosophy. A number of his essays became the basis for his most famous published works, including *Ish ha-halakhah* (*The Halakbic Man*, 1944), *Kol dodi dofeq* (*Listen, My Beloved Knocks*, 1956), and *The Lonely Man of Faith* (1965). His writings reveal a deeply erudite religious existentialist, at home in the modern world of science and philosophy, who also struggled mightily to preserve the primacy of Jewish faith and observance. At the same time, they became the textual basis for the synthesis of *Torah u-mada'* (Torah and secular knowledge) that stands at the heart of Soloveitchik's distinctive path in Modern Orthodoxy, a term he did not coin but whose essence he came to represent.

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Those commitments were born of his unusual educational path. Soloveitchik was the descendant of a long line of eminent rabbis, including R. Hayim of Volozhin (1749–1821, the primary disciple of the Gaon of Vilna and founder of the most renowned Eastern European yeshivah); the Netziv (1816–93, a descendant by marriage of Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin, and his great rabbinic successor at the Volozhin yeshiva); R. Hayim Soloveitchik (1852–1918, credited with inventing the “Brisker method” of Talmud study); and on his mother’s side, R. Elyahu Feinstein (1843–1929). Living up to this illustrious lineage was, no doubt, a daunting task. But already as a youngster, Soloveitchik, a native of Pruzhany, Russia, was regarded as an uncommonly gifted student, who required and received private tutors to educate him. His ceaselessly curious mind pushed him, as a young man, beyond the world of Torah to the secular university, first in Poland and then in Germany. For this act, some purist members of his family and their supporters, whom we might identify as “haredi” (Ultra-Orthodox), never forgave him—as we can see from the text that follows.

Undeterred by the expectations and taboos of his stringently observant native milieu, Soloveitchik made his way, along with thousands of other Eastern European Jews, to Germany in the 1920s. Among his fellow Jewish university students from Eastern Europe were Abraham Joshua Heschel, Yitshak Hutner, Simon Rawidowicz, and Menachem Mendel Scheersohn, the last of whom would later gain fame as the Lubavitcher Rebbe. For his part, Soloveitchik pursued graduate studies at the University of Berlin, where he completed a dissertation in 1932 on the Jewish Neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918).

Rather than remain in Europe in a time of growing danger, Soloveitchik moved to the United States in 1932, following in the footsteps of his father, R. Moshe Soloveitchik (1879–1941), a remarkable rabbinic scholar in his own right who had already immigrated to New York, where he had taken up the position as head of the talmudic seminary at Yeshiva University in New York known as RIETS (the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary). The younger Soloveitchik did not move to New York, however, but rather to Boston, where he became the leader of that city’s Orthodox community. In 1941, he succeeded his father as the *rosh yeshiva* of RIETS but continued to live in Boston, where he established the Maimonides School, a pioneering educational endeavor in which Orthodox boys and girls studied together.

For all his renown as a thinker, R. Soloveitchik was also a great institution builder. He was the dominant intellectual presence at Yeshiva University, where he trained thousands of students. Both through his students and his leadership of Maimonides and the Yeshiva University

Seminary, Soloveitchik profoundly shaped the face of American Orthodoxy, particularly its more modern strain.

Consistent with that strain, Soloveitchik was for much of his life a committed Zionist associated with the Mizrahi movement, and he considered moving to Erets Yisrael on a number of occasions to assume the position of Ashkenazic chief rabbi. The first time came in 1935, when he was not selected for the post. Reportedly on two other occasions, in 1946 and 1959, he was offered the job but did not accept it.¹

Both his commitment to Zionism and his embrace of the modern world of secular studies were anathema to members of his own family who considered themselves the true heirs of the Soloveitchik dynasty. Led by his uncle, R. Yitzhak Zev (Velvel) Soloveitchik, the “Brisker Rav,” the followers of this tradition had settled in Jerusalem, despite their fierce opposition to Zionism and to any form of cooperation with Zionist (or later Israeli) officials. Indeed, they belonged to those circles of strictly Orthodox Jews whose anti-Zionism not only did not prevent their settlement in Jerusalem; it mandated that they move there to assure a pious presence in the midst of what they regarded as the Zionist heresy. This was the one of the foundational pillars of the *Edab Haredis*, the community of anti-Zionist haredim founded in Jerusalem in 1919 to which the Jerusalem Soloveitchiks belong. Incidentally, the anti-Zionist worldview espoused by Soloveitchik’s uncle was based on sentiments similar to those expressed by his grandfather, R. Hayim, who was known as a mild-mannered and affable rabbi but at the same time vigorously opposed recognition of Zionism in any of its forms or cooperation with any branch of the Zionist movement.²

Such was the antipathy toward Zionism and secular studies among many within the ultra-Orthodox world, and such was the esteem with which R. Velvel Soloveitchik and his progeny were held by those in the haredi world, that the existence of an alternative Soloveitchik lineage, whose leading member was an unrepentant advocate of secular study as

1. Jeffrey Sacks, “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and the Israeli Chief Rabbinate: Biographical Notes (1959–60),” *BD.D* 17 (September 2006): 45–67.

2. In the book *Or la-yesbarim* (Warsaw, 1900), an early anti-Zionist work containing a collection of letters criticizing Zionism written by contemporary rabbinic leaders, R. Hayim Soloveitchik wrote about the leaders of Zionism that they were “known in their places [of origin] as bad [people] who have let it be widely known that their purpose [with Zionism] is to uproot the fundamentals of religion.” He continued: “It is almost impossible to believe that after they have already revealed their malicious intent, there are still decent people to be found who are willing to join them” (Landau, *Or la-yesbarim*, 55).

well as of Zionism, was simply too jarring to accept. It should be noted that the Soloveitchik family itself was determined not to criticize other members of the clan publicly, a rule that both sides of the family tended to uphold.

However, within the haredi world, there were those who sought to protect and defend the honor of the “authentic” Brisk, a tradition that they believed ran from the Beis Ha-Levi—Soloveitchik’s great grandfather and namesake—to R. Velvel, having sidestepped Soloveitchik’s father and R. Velvel’s older brother, R. Moshe. For these diehards, it was necessary to demonstrate beyond any doubt that R. Joseph Ber Soloveitchik had no part in the legacy of Brisk. Complicating their task, however, was the decades-long cooperation between senior traditionalist Orthodox rabbis in America (such as R. Aharon Kotler, R. Moshe Feinstein, R. Yitshak Hutner, and even some on the faculty at RIETS, such as R. Dovid Lifshitz) and R. Joseph Soloveitchik. The Jerusalem Briskers regarded this relationship, and the recognition it implied, as a grave danger that could only confuse the adepts of true Orthodoxy.

The year 1984 was a tipping point in their anger and alarm. In that year, a Festschrift titled *Sefer kevod ha-Rav* was published in honor of his R. Joseph’s eightieth birthday by the student organization of RIETS.⁵ The volume included articles written by R. Moshe Feinstein, R. Yaakov Yitshak Ruderman, and R. Mordekhai Gifter, all of whom headed significant traditionalist yeshivot in America, and sat on the *Moetzes Gedole Ha-Torah* (Council of Torah Sages) of Agudat Israel, the non-Zionist political organization founded in 1912 to represent the interests of traditionalist Orthodox Jews the world over. On the face of it, their membership in the Aguda, as it was known, meant that they were ideologically opposed to everything represented by Joseph Soloveitchik and the institution he headed. But by according him the honor of writing an article for this Festschrift, they were not only showing reverence to a colleague and friend. They were, it could be argued, blurring the lines of ideological difference and possibly even endorsing the worldview of the honoree. The most senior of the three, R. Feinstein, who was, it turns out, R. Soloveitchik’s blood relative, wrote in his letter that he hoped R. Soloveitchik would “continue to disseminate Torah in public, and to be involved in communal affairs, in honor of God and his Torah, and for the glory of our family.” Such a reference to Soloveitchik’s public activities being in

3. *Sefer kevod ha-Rav: Kovets meyuḥad le-ḥidushe Torah ve-‘inyene halakhab be-ḥibtatfut gedole ha-Torah veba-hora’ah shelita li-kbevod morenu ve-rabenu ha-ga’on Maran Rabi Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik*, ed. M. Sherman (New York, 1984).

any way a commendable continuation of his family's legacy, and for such a reference to be made by one of ultra-Orthodoxy's most respected rabbis, must have caused apoplexy among the Jerusalem Briskers. R. Gifter, the American born *rosh yeshiva* of the Telz yeshiva in Cleveland, went even further. He wished Soloveitchik strength in his efforts to propagate Torah, adding that he hoped the rabbi from Boston would continue to inspire greatness in Torah among his students so that he could rightfully take his place "among those who perpetuate the House of Brisk!"

That was what so unsettled the Jerusalem Briskers. In the document we reprint here, they issued a public protest against those who "call themselves 'great sages' and 'heads of yeshivas' in America," unmistakable references to rabbis Feinstein, Gifter, and Ruderman. And with a hyperbolic rhetorical indignation characteristic of the *Edab Haredis*, they homed in on their main target: R. Joseph Soloveitchik, described here not as "the Rav" but by a variety of harsh terms of opprobrium including "uprooter of Israel" (*okher Yisra'el*), "poisoner of the hearts of the Children of Israel," and "Boston Sadducee." They regarded with particular disdain his years in university in Germany, declaring him a "product of the cursed Berlin Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment)."

Sensing that the "House of Brisk" was under assault, the Jerusalem Briskers trained their sights not only on Joseph Soloveitchik but also on one of his American colleagues, R. Hayim Karlinsky (1906–89). Karlinsky had published in the same year a five-hundred-page biography of the Beis Ha-Levi, R. Yosef Duber Ha-Levi Soloveitchik, under the title *The First in the Brisk Dynasty (Ha-rishon le-shosbelet Brisk)*.⁴ Karlinsky was hardly an unabashed defender of "Torah u-mada'," as was Soloveitchik. Rather, he was a defender of traditionalist Orthodoxy who served as vice president of the *haredi*-oriented Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada (*Agudas ha-Rabonim*). He was also a deep admirer of the depth and reach of "the Brisker School of Torah," whose origins he traced to the town of Volozhin, home of the legendary yeshivah where the Beis

4. Hayim Karlinsky, *Ha-rishon le-shosbelet Brisk: Toldot hayav ufe'alav shel baga'on Rabi Yosef-Duber ha-Levi Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem, 1984). This book was published in a second edition in 2004. Interestingly, Karlinsky makes no mention of Joseph Soloveitchik in his introduction, nor of his father Moshe, as the sources for stories in the book. The first person he thanks, and quite lavishly so, is R. Simha Soloveitchik (1879–1941), the youngest son of the Beis ha-Levi, from whom he heard many tales of the father and who was himself a forgotten scion of the Brisker dynasty who spent the last years of his life in Brooklyn. In addition, R. Karlinsky thanks a long list of other scholars, including R. Dovid Lifshitz of the RIETS faculty and R. Berish Mandelbaum of the RIETS library.

Ha-Levi served as assistant head before moving to Brisk to become the rabbi of that town.

The Jerusalem Briskers saw Karlinsky's book as an affront to the memory of the Beis Ha-Levi, accusing it of being filled "with falsified and forged facts and sayings" and "insult(ing) the honor of earlier sages." They also spewed venom against the Makhon Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Institute), the center of Torah scholarship established in Jerusalem in 1968, which published Karlinsky's book. The Institute, in their view, was little more than "a den in which all the Maskilim of our generation disseminate their false and blasphemous opinions against the foundations of our religion."

The document below exposes a world of militant Orthodoxy that not only regards non-Orthodox Judaism as beyond the bounds of legitimacy but treats with mocking contempt one of the most revered and prominent exponents of Orthodox Judaism in the United States in the twentieth century, and by implication the thousands of Orthodox Jews who subscribe to his ideological approach. It offers a glance into the motives, concerns, and sense of urgency of a haredi world struggling to beat back the advances of a modern world marked by secular learning and Zionism as it intrudes inexorably into their own world.

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BS"D

VOICE OF FIERY PROTEST

(1984)

With this we are publicly protesting against those who call themselves "great sages" and "heads of yeshivas" in the United States,⁵ who give obsequious praise to the known "uprooter of Israel,"⁶ the tyrant from Boston, product of the cursed Berlin Haskalah,⁷ and poisoner of the

5. The reference is to traditionalist rabbis and yeshiva heads who contributed letters of approval and articles to the Soloveitchik Festschrift, *Sefer kevod ha-Rav*, including Moshe Feinstein of the Mesivta Tiferet Yerushalayim, Yaakov Yitshak Ruderman of the Ner Yisroel yeshiva in Baltimore, and Mordekhai Gifter of the Telz (Telshe) yeshiva.

6. The phrase *'okher Yisra'el* (עוכר ישראל), is the same one that King Ahab cast upon the prophet Elijah to connote "trouble of Israel" (1 Kgs 18.17).

7. "Haskalah" is the well-known Hebrew term for the Jewish Enlightenment movement, which took rise in Berlin in the late eighteenth century under the leadership of the German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86). In the context of this broadside, the term refers to the culture of university study in Berlin in the twentieth century in which many Eastern European Jews partook, including J. B. Soloveitchik.

hearts of the Children of Israel through his venomous and ugly opinions, as is well known. That the aforementioned (sages) issued their letters of mischief on the occasion of the eightieth birthday of the Boston Sadducee borne on the pages of the “sledgehammer” that carries the title “honorable Rabbi.”⁸ The force of cheap sycophancy even prompted them to designate this contemptuous person as the continuator of the lineage of the House of Brisk.

May the Heavens protect us from this disgrace that has come upon us, that those who pretend to be flag-bearers of Torah would have this kind of audacity to say to this evil man “You are a righteous one.” Woe unto those criminal shepherds who replace light with darkness and purity with impurity, Heaven forbid.

The time has come for the naive ones to open their eyes to see down which slope these criminal shepherds are leading them, a slope that will lead to a grave of iniquity, Heaven forbid. It is very well-known, and that which is well-known needs no proof, that the sages and righteous of the House of Brisk constantly fought with great sacrifice against any and all changes or deviations from the tradition of our fathers and teachers, pillars of the earth⁹—and against all innovation and against any opening of the slightest crack in our religion and the wall of the Holy Torah. And especially their relentless battle against the cursed Haskalah, as is known. It is only because we have sunk to such a lowly level that we are guided by such base leaders, Heaven forbid. As our sages said, the leader befits the generation.¹⁰

Therefore, it is not surprising that wicked and evil H. K.¹¹ exhibited extraordinary insolence in his new work entitled “Ha-rishon le-shoshelet Brisk,” in which the aforementioned fool dared to describe, as it were, the personality of the holy sage, the Bais Ha-Levi of blessed memory, and in addition to this, falsified and forged facts and sayings in a terrible and frightening manner that calls out for help. But it is not because of the falsification of facts and sayings that our cries intensified, but rather the unbounded and horrible brazenness of the aforementioned “uprooter of Israel” to cut down saplings, Heaven forbid, and to insult the honor of earlier sages (who are likened to angels), Heaven forbid. Who knows if those same “sages” and “heads of yeshiva” will not be called to judgment,

8. The “sledgehammer” referred to here is *Sefer kevod ha-Rav*.

9. See 1 Sam 2:8: “For the pillars of the Earth are the Lord’s, and he has set the world upon them.”

10. This is based on a statement in bRH 25b that observes that “the leadership of a generation is a measure of that generation.”

11. H.K. = Hayim Karlinsky.

for it was they and only they that placed their hand on his axe to cut down the cedar trees, May G-d have mercy.

Upon this malicious hand of implementation we will pour out our bitterness—by which we mean the members and leaders of the notorious “Jerusalem Institute,” who gave him [H. Karlinsky] the opportunity to execute his evil plot. For it is known that this institute is a den in which all the Maskilim of our generation disseminate their false and blasphemous opinions against the foundations of our religion, Heaven forbid. All of their members are to be considered akin to one who is lowered and is not raised up. May G-d have mercy.¹²

And thus our call is issued with words that go out from the heart, for anyone who has the fear of God within him will insist that his family, friends, and acquaintances distance themselves from this publication and expel it from the borders of Israel.

And we are certain that the House of Israel will not allow iniquity to dwell in their tents, and will maintain a distance from them as an arrow shot from a bow, and all who bring this evil composition into their homes will be judged for taking part in the degradation of the honor of sages and righteous ones, angelic leaders, and will be included, Heaven forbid, among those who dishonor great scholars, God forbid, and their punishment is known. And those who heed our words will dwell in certain tranquility and receive a wonderful blessing.

Signed in pain and suffering for the denigration of our holy Torah and those who uphold it,

Students of the Brisk Yeshiva in the holy city of Jerusalem

12. The Hebrew phrase is *moridim velo-ma'alim*, that is, they are left to die and are not saved. See bSan 26b. The Talmud there discusses the treatment of informers and renegades—people who are considered to have undermined the integrity and stability of Jewish society.