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**RABBI JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK AND THE
ISRAELI CHIEF RABBINATE
Biographical Notes (1959-60)**

In 1959-60 (following the death of Rabbi Yitzhak Herzog), it was widely speculated that Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik would be a candidate for the position of Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel. This opened a unique period both of very personal as well as public events in Rabbi Soloveitchik's life, which form a fascinating chapter in his biography. The story includes an encounter with cancer that would shape his thoughts on suffering and the human condition; in reaction to the events of this period, he composed two of his most important essays. Rabbi Soloveitchik did not, as we know, become Israel's Chief Rabbi, but understanding the episode provides important biographical insights, helps us contextualize his quarter-century of activity following this period, enables us to speculate on what "might have been" for American and Israeli Jewry had he moved to Jerusalem in the 1960s, as well as understand some of the challenges that still face religious society and education in Israel and the Diaspora today.

When the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, R. Yitzhak Herzog, died on 25 July 1959, it was widely speculated in Israel and throughout the Diaspora that Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik would be a candidate for the position. This opened a unique period both of very personal as well as public events in Rabbi Soloveitchik's life, which form a fascinating chapter in his biography. The events are centered in Jerusalem, Boston, and New York. The story includes an encounter with cancer that would shape his thoughts on suffering and the human condition, and involve his only extended absence from his classroom at Yeshiva University during his

* After this essay was completed, we were fortunate to note the publication of: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications*, edited by Nathaniel Helfgot (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2005). Many of the archival sources cited herein have been translated to English and published in full in this important volume. The reader will find pp. 173-194 of particular relevance to the present study. JS

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forty-four years of active teaching. The composition of two of his most important essays occurred during this time, and in reaction to the events of this period. Machinations of Israeli political parties, the influence of leading rabbinic figures in Israel, and a “cast of characters” including David Ben-Gurion and Elie Wiesel are part of the tale. As we know, Rabbi Soloveitchik did not become Israel’s Chief Rabbi, but understanding the episode provides important biographical insights, helps us contextualize his quarter-century of activity following this period, enables us to speculate on what “might have been” for American and Israeli Jewry had he moved to Jerusalem in the 1960s, as well as understand some of the challenges that still face religious society and education in Israel and the Diaspora today.¹

While many names were bandied about as possible successors to R. Herzog, the Rav (as Rabbi Soloveitchik was universally known), R. Shlomo Goren (then Chief Rabbi of the IDF), and R. Isser Yehudah Unterman (Tel Aviv’s Chief Rabbi) were the leading contenders.² In the end, the position would remain vacant for almost five years, as elections were delayed time and again over the absence of a consensus-forming candidate, and (more significantly) bitter debates raged within the rabbinate and the Israeli government as to the electoral process.³

By this time in his life, Rabbi Soloveitchik was identified as a leading figure in Religious Zionism. From 1952 he had served as the honorary president of the Mizrahi, and had associated himself with that movement since the early 1940s.⁴

- 1 While it is not necessary to accept all of Shlomo Pick’s critiques of current Rav scholarship, it is hoped that this study answers his call for fleshing out chapters in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s biography, and correlating them to the more important matter of his thought. See Shlomo H. Pick, “The Rav: A Pressing Need for a Comprehensive Biography,” *B.D.D.* 10 (Winter 2000), pp. 37-57.
- 2 Among other names mentioned periodically in the Israeli press were R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, R. Yosef Kahaneman (Rosh Yeshiva of Ponovitz), R. Pinchas M. Teitz (of Elizabeth, NJ), and R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin (editor of the *Encyclopedia Talmudit*). The Israeli dailies all dedicated coverage to the issue following R. Herzog’s death. However, Pinhas Peli, who would later go on to prepare various volumes of the Rav’s lectures and *shiurim* for publication, dedicated almost weekly articles to it in the magazine he edited in those years, *Panim el Panim*. Peli, foregoing journalistic objectivity, clearly favored the Rav.
- 3 The position of the *Rishon leTzion*, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi, also remained in limbo throughout much of this period, as the first term of R. Yitzhak Nissim expired in 1961, and his re-election was similarly delayed until 1964 (when elections finally took place), although the Knesset had passed a measure by which, in the event of a delay, the incumbent would retain authority *pro tem* until elections took place.
- 4 For the chronology (and documentation) of the Rav’s association with Mizrahi, see Pick, “A Pressing Need,” p. 42, and his “The Rav: Biography and Bibliography,” *B.D.D.* 6 (Winter 1998), p. 41 n. 17.

On *Yom HaAtzmaut* 1956, just three years prior to talk of his candidacy, the Rav had delivered his stirring speech “*Kol Dodi Dofek*,” which remains one of the most influential works to be penned by a religious Zionist thinker.⁵ His Zionist credentials (*sine qua non* for his potential candidacy) were well established – yet, as is known, and as he mentioned publicly on various occasions, this was not in line with his “family tradition”:

I was not born into a Zionist household. My parents’ ancestors, my father’s house, my teachers and colleagues were far from the Mizrahi religious Zionists. They too held “why meddle in the secrets of the Merciful one?”.... If I now identify with the Mizrahi, against my family tradition, it is only because, as previously clarified, I feel that Divine Providence ruled like “Joseph” and against his brothers [i.e. anti-Zionists]; that He employs secular Jews as instruments to bring to fruition His great plans regarding the land of Israel. I also believe that there would be no place for Torah in Israel today were it not for the Mizrahi. I built an altar upon which I sacrificed sleepless nights, doubts and reservations. Regardless, the years of the Hitlerian holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the accomplishments of the Mizrahi in the land of Israel, convinced me of the correctness of our movement’s path.⁶

That family tradition of anti-Zionism, rejected by the Rav, was perhaps best represented by his paternal uncle, R. Yitzhak Zev (Velvel) Soloveitchik, the Brisker Rav of Jerusalem. It may possibly have been out of a desire to maintain good relations with that branch of the family that the Rav did not visit Israel in all the years after his failed bid for the rabbinate of Tel Aviv in Summer 1935 (the only time in his life that he did visit *Eretz Yisrael*). While purely speculative, we may

5 Originally published in Hebrew in *Torah u-Melukhah*, ed. Shimon Federbush (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1961), reprinted in *Ish HaEmunah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1971), pp. 65-106, *BeSod HaYahid ve-HaYahad* (Jerusalem: Orot, 1976), and in *Divrei Hagut ve-Ha’arakhah* (Jerusalem: WZO, 1982), pp. 9-55; recently appeared in translation as *Fate and Destiny: From Holocaust to the State of Israel* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 2000). Good analyses of the Rav’s Zionism can be found in Dov Schwartz, *Emunah al Parshat Derakhim* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), and in Walter S. Wurzbarger, “*HaYesodot HaFilosofi’im be-Mishnato HaTzionit HaDatit shel HaRav Soloveitchik*” in *Emunah BeZemanim Mishtanim*, ed. A. Sagi (Jerusalem: Elinor, 1996), pp. 111-122.

6 *The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses* (Jerusalem: Tal Orot, 1983 [reprinted: New York, 2002]), pp. 35, 36. These words were probably delivered sometime in the early 1960s.

7 For more on Rabbi Soloveitchik’s visit to Palestine and his defeat in the Tel Aviv election, see Shaul Farber, *Community, Schooling, and Leadership: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik’s*

imagine that had he visited the Holy Land, he might have felt compelled to make a courtesy call at the Chief Rabbinate, thus alienating his uncle – an ardent opponent of that institution. However, Reb Velvel died on the evening of Yom Kippur, 11 October 1959, and it is possible that this helped alleviate the Rav’s reluctance to consider a bid for the Chief Rabbinate.⁸

In fact, the Rav addressed the issue of his uncle’s anti-Zionism in the eulogy that he delivered on 12 December 1959 (later published as “*Mah Dodekh mi-Dod*”).⁹

They said of him [Reb Velvel] that he was opposed to the State of Israel. This is not correct. Opposition to a State emanates from adopting a position regarding a political body, which is itself a political act. My uncle was completely removed from all socio-political thought or response. What may be said of him is that the State found no place within his halakhic thought

Maimonides School and the Development of Boston’s Orthodox Community (Ph.D. Diss., Hebrew University, March 2000), pp. 81-85. In 1946, the position was apparently offered to him again (following the death of R. Moshe Avigdor Amiel), and the Rav replied that he would accept it on the condition that he be appointed without an election, a demand the council refused. If this is true, it presages the Rav’s distaste for politics, and suggests the degree to which his 1935 defeat had scarred him. This episode was first brought to light by Shlomo Pick, “The Rav: A Pressing Need,” p. 52, esp. at note 30. It is also obvious that the 1941 Boston “*kashrut* controversy” added to his distaste for politics; for background see Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1999), Vol. 1, pp. 30-32, and Farber, pp. 132-142.

- 8 This speculation was put forth by Pinhas Peli, *Panim el Panim* (7 August 1959), p. 5.
- 9 The eulogy was delivered to an overflow audience in Yeshiva University’s Lamport Auditorium. It was not delivered during the *sheloshim*, as I had erroneously written in my “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Brisker Method,” *Tradition* 33:2 (Winter 1999), n. 1. Delivered in Yiddish, it was published in Hebrew in *HaDoar* 42:39 (27 September 1963), pp. 752-759, and later reprinted (with a few additional footnotes) in *BeSod HaYahid ve-haYahad*, pp. 189-254, as well as in *Divrei Hagut ve-Ha’arakhah*, pp. 57-97. What is particularly interesting in the eulogy, and what lends it great importance as a written essay, is the Rav’s treatment and analysis of the characteristics of the Brisker method, and more specifically the exemplar of the method – the Halakhic Man. In this way, the eulogy serves as a parallel text to the Rav’s monumental essay, *Ish HaHalakhah*. The highly personal nature of the eulogy, however, lends insight into the Rav’s conception of this typological personality—in the eulogy the Rav is explicitly describing his uncle, father, and grandfather as paradigmatic halakhic men. Furthermore, “*Mah Dodekh mi-Dod*” was published almost two decades after the first appearance of *Ish HaHalakhah* (in 1944) – and may be the product of a more mature perspective. In any event, the material in the eulogy is an important supplement to our understanding of what is arguably the Rav’s most significant work. (There are, of course, also significant differences between the *Ish HaHalakhah* of 1944 and the material presented in this *hesped*, which I hope to be able to address elsewhere.)

system nor on his halakhic value scale. He was unable to “translate” the idea of a sovereign, secular State to halakhic properties and values.¹⁰

It is not that Reb Velvel was an anti-Zionist, *per se*, but that, as a Halakhic Man and “Man of Pure Halakhic Truth,” the secular State of Israel did not register on his radar screen. Upon reaching the disappointing conclusion that there was no way to co-opt the State to the *a priori* ideals of the Halakhah, Reb Velvel was forced to retreat to the realm of the ideal Halakhah and ignore (not oppose) the State. At this point in his presentation, we must pay close attention to the Rav’s words as he wrote them:

This disappointment led to my uncle separating himself from *the most important event* in modern Jewish history [i.e. the establishment of the State].¹¹

This interpretation of Reb Velvel’s attitude (what some might see as an attempt at apologetics) is significant because the Rav is not merely explaining the family tradition of anti-Zionism, but explaining the mechanics of the Brisker worldview (i.e. the *weltanschauung* of the *Ish Halakhah*), which, while not inherently opposed to the idea of a State,¹² leaves no room for the particular State established in 1948. When he admits, therefore, that after many sleepless nights he has broken with that tradition – it means that he himself may not completely share the worldview that he has idealized in *Halakhic Man* (and again in “*Mah Dodekh miDod*”).

Furthermore, the Rav was compelled to explain – in light of the family tradition – how he was capable of assigning significance to a secular state. The Rav vehemently insisted that there is nothing to which the halakhic system is neutral. In a moving passage describing the scope and range of halakhic thought, he insists that the strength of Halakhah to adapt the idea of the State to it, and not vice versa, is assured by the tradition, as stated by Rambam in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* (7:5) that

10 “*Mah Dodekh miDod*,” *Divrei Hagut*, p. 89. Compare this section to the Rav’s later comments at a Mizrahi convention, discussing his grandfather’s brand of Zionism, in *Five Addresses*, pp. 34-36.

11 *Divrei Hagut*, p. 90 (emphasis added).

12 Apologetics or not, the Jerusalem branch of the Brisk dynasty – the descendents and followers of Reb Velvel – clearly do embody full-throated anti-Zionism. See Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), esp. chap. 4. See pp. 155-156, for an amusing account of Reb Velvel’s “complete value neutrality toward the meaning of the Jewish return into political history” (but see also the quote on p. 160).

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“ultimately Israel will repent”; Providence will not abandon the soul of the nation.”¹³ The Rav presented an alternate view of the State, but one from within the Halakhah, enabling him to appreciate and relate to “*the most important event* in modern Jewish history.” His uncle, on the other hand, was unable to view the State in this way, or unwilling to do so, because “he feared that the perpetual conflict with the secular State would necessitate compromise and accommodation of the ideal [halakhic] order to that of reality.”

In any event, there can be little doubt that the Rav’s remarks contained some element of critique of the tradition he claims to have broken with. No one would suggest that the Rav used the platform of his uncle’s eulogy to make a statement of his Zionist bona fides; it was, however, a presentation that allowed insight into the mindset of someone who was, at that moment, entertaining a candidacy for the Israeli Chief Rabbinate.



Since the Rav’s name was being publicly mentioned as a candidate, and the Israeli press was giving coverage to the elections, a young reporter for *Yediot Aharonot* named Eliezer Wiesel (later to become known as Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel) was dispatched to interview him and write a profile, which appeared in the Friday magazine supplement on 13 November 1959.¹⁴ Wiesel met with the Rav at his apartment in the Yeshiva University dormitories. Generally flattering, although by necessity superficial, the profile reveals that following the Rav’s annual *Teshuvah Derashah* that year (delivered during *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* – the first week in October), the Israeli Consul General in New York had cabled Jerusalem: “Here is the best candidate to replace Rabbi Herzog.”

Wiesel asked Rabbi Soloveitchik if he would accept the position; the Rav responded that it had not yet been offered to him!

[However,] one doesn’t refuse an offer which comes from *Eretz Yisrael*...
When I receive [an offer] – if it is sent at all – I will consider it with all seriousness: I will ask myself if I am fit for this exalted position.

Wiesel then asked the Rav about the rumors that Reb Velvel, who had passed away only a month earlier, had instructed Rabbi Soloveitchik in his last will not to accept the position. The Rav responded: “It’s hard to believe such rumors, since we have

13 *Divrei Hagut*, p. 91. On other occasions the Rav made it clear that the halakhic prism that allowed him to encompass a secular state within his worldview was the simpler vehicle of *pikuah nefesh* – it saved Jewish lives.

14 Eliezer Wiesel, “*Aliyat Noar Yehudi meArtzot haBrit Hi beBehinat Halom Yafeh...*,” *Yediot Aharonot: 7 Yamim-Mossaf leShabbat* (Friday, 13 November 1959), p. 7.

a family tradition not to compose last wills (*tzavaot*)...perhaps because we are afraid of death.”¹⁵

This concluded the section of the interview that touched upon the Rav’s candidacy. The conversation then turned to other matters, and, in passing, the Rav remarked with pride on the religious renaissance among young Orthodox Jews that he was witnessing in America: “Young men who study electrical engineering, higher mathematics, or nuclear physics, dedicate time to learn *Shas* and *poskim*. Increasingly there is a generation here that we will all be proud of.”¹⁶ At this point, Wiesel asked, “And what about *aliyah* to Israel for these youths?,” to which the Rav was reported to have responded, “It’s a dream” (*zeh halom*).

A nice dream, but I doubt if it will ever happen. The youth, and Jews in general, are no longer drawn towards Israel, as they once were. They take interest in it, and would do anything on its behalf, but they will not settle there. Why? In the past few years there has been a change in the attitude of the American Jew toward Israel. For example: I recall that when I was a young boy, the land of Israel was for me a deep, inner experience, and not a mere geographic-political or even religious concept. When I would hear the name “*Eretz Yisrael*” every bone in my body would tremble.... Today, “*Israel*” has become a concept which does not draw on the depths of the soul or the longings of all generations. Today the term “*Israel*” has lost the messianism in it (*meshihyut she-batokho*).¹⁷

When Wiesel asked him who was responsible for this state of affairs, the Rav would not answer, but stated that it was unfortunate that David Ben-Gurion, then Prime Minister, didn’t appreciate the potential of Judaism-as-religion to draw young Jews to Israel, and encourage self-sacrifice on its behalf. This despite the fact that the Rav saw in Ben-Gurion someone with a “religious connection,” albeit one that was generally not properly articulated. “In my eyes,” said the Rav, “he is a religious Jew – even though he doesn’t know it himself.”¹⁸

15 Cf. *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1983), pp. 31-32, 35, 73, and 154 n. 86.

16 Cf. *Five Addresses*, pp. 37-43, on the role of the American Day School movement in helping bring this about.

17 This last sentence was printed in bold in the original. The editors also emphasized this point of the interview by choosing the Rav’s remarks about *aliyah* as the headline for the article – “*Aliyah* of Jewish Youth from the United States is Merely a Nice Dream...: Says Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Mentioned as a Candidate for Chief Rabbi of Israel.”

18 Just days earlier, Ben-Gurion had been re-elected with a greatly increased plurality in the 4th Knesset elections (3 November 1959). On 17 December he would form his new government with the National Religious Party as his main coalition partner.

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The Rav would later say that Wiesel misquoted him, but no matter – he was quickly criticized for his remarks in the interview. In the 4 December 1959 issue of *HaDoar*, an “open letter” appeared to the Rav, penned by Moshe Meisels.¹⁹ Each reader can judge for himself the degree to which Meisels’ presentation of the Rav’s argument (as printed in his name) matches what was written in the *Yediot* interview, but he summarized the Rav’s purported point as: The State of Israel has supplanted *Eretz Yisrael*, eliminating the enchantment that the Diaspora Jew, and the Jewish child in particular, always had with the Holy Land.

Meisels rejects this proposition as “utterly foreign” and illogical. Furthermore, for millions of contemporary Jews, the opposite is true: *Eretz Yisrael* has been revealed to them only because of the State. Meisels critiqued the pointing of blame at the lack of religious influence on shaping Israel (the Rav’s line about Ben-Gurion), rhetorically asking, “Would things be any different if the State were headed by religious leaders instituting religious law?... Would that draw the young men who study electrical engineering, higher mathematics, or nuclear physics, who dedicate time to learn *Shas* and *poskim*” to come on *aliyah*?

Meisels then chides the Rav on what could possibly be the reason that “‘Israel’ has lost the messianism in it”? Again, Meisels presumes that the Rav blames the State for the de-messianification of *Eretz Yisrael*. After all, for centuries the Jews had sat in *Galut*, lovers of Zion, longing for the Holy Land – until *Eretz Yisrael* underwent a change, becoming host to a secular Jewish state. As this is the only transition that the land underwent, surely Rabbi Soloveitchik must be assigning the blame to 5 Iyyar 1948.

Meisels then asks his readers to imagine if there had been no Holocaust, and if millions of Jews were now living in Eastern Europe under communist regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, etc. – how would they respond to a Jewish State in *Eretz Yisrael*? “Would any Jew, let alone one oppressed and depressed in Eastern Europe, imagine that ‘Israel has lost its messianism’?” Moving one step further, Meisels asks if messianic belief itself hasn’t “lost the messianism in it?”

How many of those youths who study electrical engineering, etc., and dedicate time to learn *Shas* and *poskim*, who even wear *kippot* on the American university campuses – how many of them await the redemption,

19 M. Meisels, “*Medinat Yisrael ve-Eretz Yisrael*,” *HaDoar* 39:5 (4 Dec. 1959), p. 71. Meisels had recently retired as editor-in-chief of *HaDoar*, where he had worked for 28 years. See the *festschrift* issue of 14 August 1959 (38:34) for more on him. Published weekly by the *Histadrut HaIvrit beAmerika*, *HaDoar* was then a leading American Hebrew periodical, in which the Rav occasionally published the transcripts of lectures, etc.

and the arrival of the Messiah?... Jews who do not await the redemption are not Jews, even if they keep the *Shulhan Arukh*; it is possible that they are members of the Mosaic faith, even children of the World to Come – but they are not Jews.

The attack in *HaDoar* appeared just days prior to the eulogy for Reb Velvel, and the Rav surely wanted to respond in defense. However, the very night of the eulogy (9 December), he informed his family that he had been diagnosed with colon cancer, and would be returning to Boston the next day for surgery. His daughter Tovah and her fiancé R. Aharon Lichtenstein postponed their wedding (which had been set to take place in the coming days) until a few weeks later, so that the Rav could participate. At the time of his illness, Rabbi Soloveitchik was 57 years old, and he admitted that “I suddenly ceased to be immortal; I became a mortal being.”

The night preceding my operation I prayed to God and beseeched Him to spare me. I did not ask too much. All I wanted was that He should make it possible for me to attend my daughter’s wedding, which was postponed on account of my illness – a very modest wish in comparison with my insane claims to life prior to my sickness.... However, this “fall” from the heights of an illusory immortality into the valley of finitude was the greatest achievement of the long hours of anxiety and uncertainty.... When one’s perspective is shifted from the illusion of eternity to the reality of temporality, one finds peace of mind and relief from other worries.... When one frees himself from this obsession, his perspective becomes coherent and his suffering bearable. He learns to take defeat courageously.²⁰

The Rav recuperated in Boston for three months, and on a few occasions met with various people from Israel, and others who knew the scene, deliberating his interest in the position of Chief Rabbi.²¹ Sometime during his convalescence, but no later than mid-February, the Rav decided that he would not stand as candidate

20 R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*, ed. D. Shatz, J. Wolowelsky, & R. Ziegler (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2003), pp. 131-132; see also continuation in following pages. The Rav made these remarks in April-June 1960, shortly after his recovery. Towards the end of this essay (pp. 148-150), the Rav discussed how the encounter with death sensitizes one to the passage of time and spurs one to seek to identify and fulfill one’s individual mission on earth. See the editors’ remarks on p. xxxliii about the impact of the Rav’s bout with cancer on his outlook, and on the presentation in this particular essay.

21 As reported by Peli, *Panim el Panim* (4 March 1960), p. 5.

for the Chief Rabbinate.²² The elections were nowhere in sight, and debate continued to rage over how the electoral body would be composed (numbers of rabbis vs. “public representatives” made up of Members of Knesset, government ministers, local religious council heads, mayors, etc.).

It also became apparent that although he enjoyed the crucial support of the National Religious Party head and Interior Minister, Haim Moshe Shapira, he could not count on the support of the whole party (who generally favored the candidacy of Rabbi Unterman).²³ Political machinations were in the works that would have limited the Chief Rabbinate candidacy to those holding Israeli citizenship (thus eliminating the Rav), or candidates under the age of 70 (eliminating R. Unterman, in favor of R. Goren) – but both efforts failed.²⁴

These moves were taken with Ben-Gurion’s knowledge, and likely with his assent. The failed measures, widely viewed as attempts to rig the election, were presented by Minister of Religious Affairs, R. Yaakov Moshe Toledano. When the National Religious Party (NRP) had pulled out of the government over the “Who is a Jew?” controversy of 1958, they had surrendered the Religious Affairs portfolio, which Ben-Gurion had awarded to Toledano, who was Tel Aviv’s Sephardic Chief Rabbi (but not a Member of Knesset). Toledano had lost the previous election for Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel (*Rishon leTzion*) in 1955 to R. Yitzhak Nissim, and blamed his loss on the NRP, for their lack of support. Following the November 1959 Knesset elections, when the NRP re-joined Ben-Gurion’s government, the Prime Minister refused to restore to them the Ministry of Religious Affairs (which the party had held since the founding of the State), leaving the portfolio in Toledano’s hands. Ben-Gurion openly favored R. Goren’s candidacy, and Toledano’s efforts to block the election of the Rav or R. Unterman must be understood against this

22 I conclude this dating based on his 15 February 1960 letter to MK Shapira.

23 Among the party members who did support the Rav’s candidacy was Yitzhak Raphael. See his memoirs, *Lo Zikhiti Ba-Or min haHefker* (Jerusalem: Yediot Aharonot, 1981), pp. 344-354. Even after the Rav had withdrawn, Raphael called on him to reconsider, declaring at the November 1963 Mizrahi convention in New York:

Morenu ve-rabbeinu, Rabbi Soloveitchik, *shlita*: the seat of spiritual leadership is empty and awaiting you. Take one thousand of your finest students, and come to stand at the head of the [religious] system. The great camp, tens of thousands of our movement’s members in Israel await your teachings.

Unlike most of his NRP colleagues, Raphael ultimately supported R. Goren over R. Unterman. See his account of the party infighting and his fall-out with Shapira (pp. 443-446).

24 Details on the background to the election, and its many procedural delays, can be found in: *HaRabbanut HaRashit LeYisrael: 70 Shanah leYisudah*, ed. I. Warhaftig (Jerusalem: Heikhal Shlomo, 2002), Vol. 3, pp. 1113-1117.

background.²⁵ Toledano was viewed as an instrument of Ben-Gurion, who was attempting to use him to drive a wedge against the NRP, and the influence the party tried to exert in passing “religious” legislation.

In a cover story in his weekly magazine, *Panim el Panim*, Pinhas Peli criticized the “party figures” (in the NRP) who made known, in Israel and America, their purported support and enthusiasm for the Rav, yet “never officially put his name forward as a candidate and never committed in any way to support him and fight for his election...because insignificant political calculations mandated another candidate (or candidates) – [those] more gentle or more obedient.”²⁶ The Rav’s vocal critiques against the politicization of the Israeli rabbinate and of Heikhal Shlomo had apparently ruffled feathers. Peli blamed NRP Knesset members for scuttling the Rav’s election, claiming that they feared his reputation for independence: “he wouldn’t be a puppet in the hands of the party, malleable to its will.”

In a letter to Shapira (who had been a childhood acquaintance), the Rav stated that he would not stand for election:

By nature I am a teacher (*moreh u-melamed*). I know nothing of administering offices; I flee from ceremony, presentations and the press, and especially from politics. I had initially hoped to separate the spiritual ideals of this position and its technical and political needs... I had hoped that I could dedicate my time and energy to spreading Torah and knowledge of God – and I was ready to answer the call [for such a position].... However, developments in the situation and political complications in the recent past about the electoral process [convinced me otherwise].... Under such circumstances I do not see myself as a fit and proper candidate to be appointed to such a great position – neither from my physical state nor my mental preparation.²⁷

25 See accounts as reported in the *New York Times* (Sunday, 24 January 1960), p. A4, and (Monday, 22 February 1960), p. A8.

26 Peli (4 March 1960), p. 5. Peli specifically pointed a finger at Zerah Warhaftig and Binyamin Shahor (both powerful NRP Knesset members), but I have been unable to find any independent confirmation of the charges. Warhaftig’s son, R. Itamar Warhaftig, told me that he thinks it very unlikely, owing to the high regard his father had for the Rav.

27 Printed in *HaDoar* 39:13 (11 March 1960), p. 330. The original letter is dated 17 Shvat 5720 (=15 February 1960), although the date does not appear in *HaDoar*. The Rav had submitted an excerpt of these letters for publication. Throughout the rest of his life the Rav held Shapira in high regard; see, e.g., *HaSar Haim Moshe Shapira: Diyukno shel Medinai Dati*, ed. S. Daniel (Tel Aviv: Yad Shapira, 1980), pp. 246-247.

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The Rav similarly wrote to one of his main supporters, R. Reuven Katz, Chief Rabbi of Petah Tikvah, and an influential member of the Council of the Chief Rabbinate:²⁸

When he [R. Katz: out of respect the Rav wrote in third-person] wanted to stand by my right side, and put his faith in me – the youngest of Beit Levi – I decided to obey his honor and accept the great responsibility of the Rabbinate.

The Rav then restated his initial hopes to separate the spiritual components of the position from the technical-political, and goes on to add with candor:

Opposition – both personal and party – has cast a new light on the situation, and I doubt that I will be able to engage in Torah in peace, and suspect that I would be drawn into political machinations – something against my nature and desires.... I am a simple teacher, and have nothing but the four *amot* of *halakhah*, from which I would not depart were they to give me a whole kingdom.

On Tuesday, 8 March 1960, the day before he was due to return to his *shiur* in New York for the first time since his surgery, he had a 45-minute meeting with David Ben-Gurion, who was visiting Boston to receive an honorary doctorate from Brandeis University. The two met behind closed doors at the Sheraton Hotel. They reportedly discussed “Jewish education in the U.S. and the immigration of young Americans to Israel. They found their views more or less identical.”²⁹ It was reported that they did not discuss the Chief Rabbinate, but the Rav told a reporter that he would reconsider his withdrawal if the Chief Rabbinate were to be “‘completely reorganized’ so that the Chief Rabbi could deal only with spiritual and not administrative matters. He thought there was little chance of such a reorganization taking place and therefore ‘for the time being’ he did not consider himself a candidate.” However, in all of his subsequent statements on the matter, he added similar caveats (“...at this time”; “... until the air is cleared”; etc.), which led some

28 See Aaron Rakeffët-Rothkoff, “Rabbi Reuven Katz: Spiritual Leader on Three Continents,” *Tradition* 35:3 (Fall 2001), pp. 24-33. The Rav’s letter to R. Katz also appears in *HaDoar*, *ibid*.

29 “Soloveitchik, B-G Discuss Education,” *Jerusalem Post* (10 March 1960), p. 1. Ironic, considering the Rav’s comments to Wiesel! The article goes on to report: “This was his first meeting with Mr. Ben-Gurion and he said he was highly impressed by the Prime Minister’s ‘simplicity and naturalness...I had an entirely wrong image of him.’”

to believe that there was still a chance he would reconsider, and, under improved circumstances, stand for election.

On 9 March, the day after his meeting with Ben-Gurion, the Rav returned to Yeshiva University, where he was greeted at a reception in the Klein Hall. He reiterated that “just as politics were shed from his thoughts while he was in the hospital, so now too, he would not be a candidate in the election of a Chief Rabbi of Israel.”³⁰ Then the Rav proceeded to his classroom, and resumed the learning of *Yoreh De'ah*.³¹ The chapter seems to have closed that day. He consistently maintained that it was “politics” that caused him to refuse the position, and he made a few parting shots at the “small people” who “cast a tiny shadow” at the *Rabbanut*, and stated that he really wasn’t at all interested in who would be elected.³²

In an interview for the Yiddish *Der Tag-Morgen Journal*,³³ he emphasized again that he was at heart a *melamed*, and that to be a rabbi meant to be a teacher. The Chief Rabbi, as a symbol for an institution, with ceremonies and politics, would not allow him to fulfill the role of teacher and disseminator of Torah as he would like. In fact, he went on, he had a deep dislike of formalities – a family tradition he *did* subscribe to. His grandfather, R. Hayyim Brisker, was once entering the Beit Medrash in Brisk, where he saw a small boy crying because he was chosen to be the horse in a game of “horse and wagon” (apparently the other boys would then “ride” on him). Reb Hayyim said, “How can a *yingel* be a horse? A child is too small to be a *grosser* horse,” at which point he got down and the children “hitched” him up, and climbed on top of as he played with them in the courtyard. The Rav maintained that this childlike quality was the greatness of Reb Hayyim – and that this was the true role of a rabbi: the more accessible and open he is, the greater he

30 “Rabbi Soloveitchik Returns to Yeshiva,” *The Commentator: Undergraduate Newspaper of Yeshiva College* 51:4 (31 March 1960), p. 1.

31 In the Rav’s absence, his younger brother, R. Ahron Soloveichik, delivered the *shiurim*, staying on as a member of the Yeshiva faculty after the Rav returned.

32 Peli, *Panim el Panim* (1 April 1960), p. 11. On the meaning of the Rav’s reasons for refusing the position, and their implications for others, see Shalom Carmy, “Who Speaks for Torah – And How?” in *Religious Zionism: After 40 Years of Statehood*, ed. S. Spero and Y. Pessin (Jerusalem: WZO, 1989), pp. 157-159.

33 Menasheh Unger, *Der Tag-Morgen Journal* (11 March 1960), p. 5; thanks to Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter for bringing this article to my attention. This article appeared in Israel (in Hebrew) in *HaZofeh* (18 March 1960), pp. 3-4, and prompted an exchange of letters, recently unearthed by Dov Schwartz, between MK Moshe Unna of the NRP and the Rav (Unna hoped to encourage the Rav to reconsider the withdrawal of his candidacy). See *Meah Shnot Zionut Datit: Vol. 2 – Hebetim Histori'im*, ed. A. Sagi & D. Schwartz (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003), pp. 385-392.

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is. A rabbi's influence is in inverse proportion to his adopting officialdom and ceremony – for his part, Rabbi Soloveitchik said, he chose to remain a “simple teacher.”

The interviewer asked a fair question: It's no secret that the Chief Rabbinate is what it is – why did you entertain the idea for so many months, given that it seems so diametrically opposed to your nature and desires? The Rav responded that three factors led to his considering the job nevertheless:

First, I thought that I could avoid the institutionalization, and remain myself, I would be me and not the chief of rabbis....

Second, in my great naiveté, I dreamed of being able to democratize the rabbinate in Israel [by freeing it from politics and the Ministry of Religions]....

Third, and this was the main attraction, was the potential for teaching and disseminating Torah. I dreamed that as Chief Rabbi I would be able to transform the rabbinate into a font of Torah and knowledge. I thought that I would be able to deliver *shiurim* like I do in New York....The Chief Rabbi must be the leading teacher of Torah, otherwise in what way is he “chief”?

But in the end he realized that these dreams were unattainable. This was brought about by a growing awareness of the insurmountable politicization. The Rav seems to have been particularly stung by the aforementioned attempt to exclude him as a candidate by mandating that only Israeli citizens could be elected.

That proposal was directed against me personally.... The very fact that such a proposal can reach the public agenda shows that the Chief Rabbinate is ensnared in the political net.... It proves that this holy institution is nothing more than a ball for the political parties to play with.³⁴

He was also displeased with the organization of the electoral body, preferring that the Chief Rabbi be elected by other rabbis, and not by a group that also included politicians, religious council heads, lay leaders, etc. In addition, he was deeply troubled by the fact that the rabbinate was completely uninvolved in religious education in Israel – “A rabbinate which only deals in halakhic rulings and organizational and administrative work is against my ideals.”

He did admit that the whole episode had left at least one positive impact on him: A desire to redouble his efforts in America in disseminating Torah. In order to do this he was going to resign from all side commitments except teaching and publishing his halakhic and philosophical works (despite yet another family

34 *HaZofeh* (18 March 1960), p. 4.

tradition: not to publish writings).³⁵ Elsewhere, he also pledged to contribute something concrete to repair the flaws of religious life and education in Israel, and that he was hoping to be able to spend two months a year (the summers?) in Israel as a “private citizen” teaching Torah.³⁶

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There remained only one unfinished piece of business: Rabbi Soloveitchik felt a need to respond to the Meisels critique that had appeared on the eve of his hospitalization.³⁷ It is not clear when he penned it, but an essay entitled “*Al Ahavat HaTorah ve-Geulat Nefesh HaDor*” (“On the Love of Torah and Redemption of the Soul of Our Generation”), appeared in *HaDoar* on 27 May 1960.³⁸ This essay, perhaps Rabbi Soloveitchik’s most personal piece of published writing, is a sorely overlooked source in understanding the Rav’s philosophy – especially as it pertains to the two crucial topics of Jewish education and *Eretz Yisrael*.³⁹

He begins by dismissing the Meisels critiques on technical grounds: Wiesel had both misquoted him, and quoted him out of context. The purported problematic

35 Of course, the Rav did not actually manage to free himself from communal responsibilities. Nor did he succeed in writing and publishing anything at this time. In the interview with Unger he said that he already had “one philosophical-religious work already in preparation for the printers.” What could he have been referring to? It is likely that he was referring to the manuscripts of his 1958-59 lectures to the National Institute of Mental Health Project at Yeshiva University, ultimately published in 1965 as “The Lonely Man of Faith.” Possibly he was also referring to the manuscript ultimately published as “*Ish HaElokim: U-Vikkashtem miSham*,” in *HaDarom* 47 (1979), pp. 1-83 [reprinted in: *Ish HaHalakhah – Galui veNistar* (Jerusalem: WZO, 1979)], but apparently written in the 1940s, and originally announced for publication in the mid-1960s.

36 *Panim el Panim* (1 April 1960). Of course, the Rav never did visit Israel again. See his 1967 letter on this topic to Mrs. Miriam Shiloh, printed in R. Zvi Schachter, *MiPinei HaRav* (Jerusalem: Flatbush Beth Hamedrosh, 2001), p. 199.

37 *HaDoar* had printed a lengthy response to the Meisels essay by R. Eliezar (Louis) Bernstein, which appeared on 8 January 1960, pp. 160-161. The editors prefaced it with a note that they were “inclined to agree with [R. Bernstein’s] opinion, that Rabbi Dr. Soloveitchik did not intend to cast doubt on the State of Israel, but to mourn the decline of Religious Zionism in America.”

38 *HaDoar* 39:27 (27 May 1960), pp. 519-523. Later reprinted in: *BeSod HaYahid ve-HaYahad* (Jerusalem: Orot, 1976), pp. 403-432, and abridged in *Divrei Hashkafah* (Jerusalem: WZO, 1993), pp. 240-258.

39 Rabbi Lichtenstein has said that it is “the single best introduction to the Rav’s thought.” See R. Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2003), p. 202. It is perhaps overlooked because the full version, printed in *BeSod HaYahid ve-HaYahad*, has been out of print, and the abridged version, which is widely available, cut much of the material that was context-specific to the exchange with Meisels, and in the process some of the more personal and insightful material.

assertion – “‘Israel’ has lost the messianism in it” – could not have been uttered by him. He has never used the term “messianism,” preferring the proper noun Messiah. Talk of “messianism” in the abstract de-emphasizes the personal, human nature of the promised redemption.⁴⁰ The offensive passages were misquotes on the part of the reporter.⁴¹

That being said, he emphatically went on record, declaring: “If the [trampling] Roman soldiers’ boots were unable to uproot the honor and splendor of Zion, and despite the fact that their legions occupied it for ages, and the land was possessed by idolaters, its sanctity withstood – could the wonder of the establishment of the State remove the crown of holiness from upon its head?”⁴² This does not mean that he agrees with everything that takes place in Israel, and we must be vigilant to differentiate between the State (“the possession of the entire nation; a gift of God in his abundant kindness”), and the elected government (*memshelah*), which does not bear the “crown of holiness,” but is a mere “secular political body.... Governments come and go, political parties rise and fall, but the State, we pray to God, will endure forever.”⁴³ It is the entity of a State that enables the *mitzvah* of possessing and dwelling in the Land.

In fact, explained the Rav, the interview with Wiesel centered not on Israel, but on American Orthodoxy in general, and yeshivah education in particular. In light of the successes of religious education in America, Wiesel asked him if he was satisfied. “No, not completely,” answered the Rav.

I am troubled by three negative phenomena which prevent full realization of the dream. First, the percentage of youths learning in *yeshivot* is very small. Even though it’s increasing every year, it is not yet sufficient to calm our worries. Second, we have not yet succeeded [in America] to produce true *Gedolei Torah* of whom we may be proud.... On the third point, of which I spoke at length, only a fraction was reported.... I inadvertently touched upon a serious educational-philosophical problem, which has long

40 On this matter, see the comment of the Rav’s grandson, R. Mayer Twersky: “Although it is impossible in the present context to fully assess whether contemporary religious Zionism is faithful to the Rav’s vision, nevertheless we must underscore the following. The Rav’s religious Zionism was not infected or even tinged by messianism.... His support for Mizrahi and *Medinat Yisrael* was not fueled by messianic activism.” *Tradition* 30:4 (Summer 1996), p. 103.

41 Additionally, for reasons he preferred not to explain, the Rav wrote that he never uses the phrase *Yisrael* to refer to the State of Israel, but prefers *Eretz Yisrael*.

42 *BeSod HaYahid*, p. 423.

43 *BeSod HaYahid*, p. 425.

troubled me. Orthodox youth have discovered the Torah through scholastic forms of thought, intellectual contact, and cold logic. However, they have not merited to discover her [the Torah] through a living, heart-pounding, invigorating sense of perception. They know the Torah as an idea, but do not directly encounter her as a “reality,” perceptible to “taste, sight and touch.” Because many of them lack this “Torah-perception,” their worldview (*hashkafah*) of Judaism becomes distorted.... In one word, they are confounded on the pathways of Judaism, and this perplexity is the result of unsophisticated perspectives and experiences. *Halakhah* is two-sided...the first is intellectual, but ultimately it is experiential.⁴⁴

This fact, the spiritual and experiential deficiencies of American Orthodoxy, was a source of considerable frustration to the Rav – one that he described on a number of occasions. Rabbi Lichtenstein has noted that

[t]he frustration centered, primarily, on the sense that the full thrust of his total [effort] was often not sufficiently apprehended or appreciated; that by some, parts of his Torah were being digested and disseminated, but other essential ingredients were being relatively disregarded, if not distorted... [He often felt] that even among *talmidim*, some of his primary spiritual concerns were not so much rejected as ignored; indeed, that spirituality itself was being neglected.... [T]he tension between the subjective and the objective, between action, thought, and experience, was a major lifelong concern. The sense that he was only partially successful in imparting this concern gnawed at him....⁴⁵

It was in the context of this larger point, explained the Rav, that the conversation turned to the lamentable lack of connection between Orthodox American youth and *Eretz Yisrael* – a symptom of the larger spiritual shortcomings of the generation. For this reason, *aliyah* was “merely a nice dream.”

Having dismissed Meisels’ published critique, the Rav preempted a follow-up attack by accepting a share of the blame in the educational crisis he described:

44 *BeSod HaYahid*, pp. 407-408.

45 R. Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith*, p. 201. The Rav expressed a similar sentiment in *Al HaTeshuvah*, pp. 200-201 (= *On Repentance*, pp. 149-150), as it relates to deficiencies in *tefillah*. On the limitations – indeed, impossibility – of communicating the subjective, intimate experience of prayer, see the Rav’s prefatory remarks in *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2003), pp. 1-2.

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And therefore I affirm that I can identify one of those responsible for the present situation, and that is none other than myself. I have not fulfilled my obligation as a guide in Israel. I seem to have lacked the ability – the personal power – required of a teacher and rav, or perhaps I lacked some of the desire to fulfill the role completely, and I did not devote myself completely to the task. To a greater or lesser degree, as an educator and teacher on the plane of *gadlut ha-mohin*, mental greatness, my students have received much Torah learning from me, and their intellectual standing has strengthened and increased during the years they have spent with me – but I have not seen much growth on the experiential plane. I have not succeeded in living in common with them, cleaving to them and bestowing some of my personal warmth on them. My words, it would seem, have not kindled a divine spark in sensitive hearts. I have fallen short [in my role] as one who spreads the “Torah of the heart” – [a Torah] that is transmitted by the power of [the teacher’s deliberate] diminishing [of his own towering] stature, to the point of *katnut ha-mohin* [child like simplicity]. And the failing lies with me.⁴⁶

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Having decided not to stand for election, and having composed “*Al Ahavat HaTorah ve-Geulat Nefesh HaDor*,” it seems that the Rav never looked back with regret. It would be another four years before a Chief Rabbi was elected, and during that time attempts were made to “draft” Rabbi Soloveitchik: yet he would neither run, nor serve. One attempt, in October 1960, took the form of a petition signed by various public figures, calling upon Rabbi Soloveitchik to run. This effort was initiated by Profs. E.E. Urbach and Ernst Simon, of the Hebrew University, who wrote:

We the undersigned, fearful for the fate, honor and independence of the Chief Rabbinate...see in your Honor the greatest person unto whose hand

46 *BeSod HaYahid*, p. 420 (translation of this paragraph from *Leaves of Faith*, p. 202). For more on *katnut ha-mohin*, see *BeSod HaYahid*, pp. 412-413, and *Leaves of Faith*, pp. 224-225. Rabbi Lichtenstein has noted the poignancy of what the Rav stated, and has remarked (*Leaves of Faith*, p. 203):

That, too is part of the Rav’s legacy... the candid recognition of failure – failure transcended by its very acknowledgement. In his own personal vein, so aristocratic and yet so democratic, he has imbued us with a sense of both the frailty of majesty and the majesty of frailty.

See also the section “Religious Sensitivity,” in Rakeffet, *The Rav*, Vol. 2, pp. 164-185.

may be placed the banner of Torah, and who can infuse the light of [Torah] to the masses of people.⁴⁷

In the cover letter to potential signatories, they admitted that although they indeed saw the Rav as the ideal candidate, their efforts were an attempt to delay the elections (scheduled for 4 December 1960). Interestingly, on 7 November, Yeshayahu Leibowitz (in his stereotypical acerbic style) responded:

I completely reject your efforts regarding the Chief Rabbinate and your appeal to R. Soloveitchik. I view the very institution of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel – religious leadership established by an atheistic government for reasons of political gain, religious leadership functioning with the authority of such government and entwined in its bureaucracy – as a prostitution of religion, destruction of the Torah, and desecration of God. Regarding R. Soloveitchik: [by inviting him] you are, in my opinion, violating “place not a stumbling block before the blind” [Lev. 19:14]. I wish to further point out that I’ve heard from friends in the United States that R. Soloveitchik himself has privately expressed his complete agreement with what I have written...regarding separation of religion and state.⁴⁸

The Rav did receive this petition, and in January 1961 responded that he “was very proud” of the list of distinguished signatories “who think me fitting and proper to serve in this holy [office].”

Regarding the matter itself [i.e., reconsidering his withdrawal], we need first to clear the air of all political wranglings – and this will not occur except through far-reaching changes in the electoral process and in the authority [of the office]. Only then could we discuss the matter itself.⁴⁹

47 The petition was sent to Rabbi Soloveitchik by MK Unna (see note 33, above) and was signed by many academics, including Yitzhak Baer, H.H. Ben-Sasson, Yosef Heinemann. Among the *Roshei Yeshivah* who signed were R. Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht and R. Moshe Tzvi Neriah. See Schwartz, *Meah Shnot Zionut Datit*, pp. 391-392, note 12.

48 *I Wanted to Ask You, Prof. Leibowitz: Letters To and From Yeshayahu Leibowitz* (Hebrew), ed. Mira Ofra, Avi Katzman, et al. (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1999), p. 364. One of the articles to which Leibowitz is referring has been translated, and appears as “A Call for the Separation of Religion and State,” in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1992), pp. 174-184 (on the implications for the Rav’s supposed objection to interference of religion and state, see Carmy, *Religious Zionism*, op. cit., p. 158). See my “Review Essay: Letters on Religion without Theology,” *Tradition* 34:3 (Fall 2000), pp. 88-94, esp. note 6, on the relationship between the Rav and Leibowitz.

49 Letter of 24 January 1961 to MK Unna in Schwartz, *Meah Shnot Zionut Datit*, p. 391.

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After numerous further delays, on 15 March 1964 R. Unterman was ultimately selected (in a close election) to be Chief Rabbi. He received 60 votes, thereby defeating R. Goren (who had 57, and would be elected to his own term as Chief Rabbi in 1972). Upon hearing of the elections, Rabbi Soloveitchik was reported to have said with a smile, “Now I can go to Israel for a visit without arousing suspicions that I am looking for a job!”

One of the reasons why I did not accept the post of Chief Rabbi of Israel – and the offer was made to me several times – was that I was afraid to be an officer of the State. A rabbinate linked up with the state cannot be completely free.... I admire the rabbis in Israel for their courage in standing up for the problems there and displaying almost superhuman heroism. However, the mere fact that from time to time Halachic problems are discussed as political issues at Cabinet meetings is an infringement of the sovereignty of the rabbinate.... A State based on agnosticism and secularism cannot fit into the outlook of redemption. If this singularity is obliterated in Israel, then what right is there to apply the adjective “Jewish” to that State?⁵⁰

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After the Rav’s return to Yeshiva University, and his declaration that he would not stand for election, Dr. Samuel Belkin, President of Yeshiva remarked that the Rav “and Yeshiva were as two sons born at the same hour, being very dear to each other.”⁵¹ It is very difficult to imagine what the impact would have been on Yeshiva in particular, and American Orthodoxy by extension, if Rabbi Soloveitchik had moved to Israel in 1960. For over twenty years the Rav remained the animating force and defining figure of Modern Orthodox Judaism in the United States; it is no exaggeration to assign to him a significant share of the credit for the renaissance of Orthodoxy during those decades. As a *moreh hora’ah*, a shaper of public policy, a creative philosopher, and – most significantly – as a “*simple melamed*” (in his words), he left a deep impression on generations of rabbis and teachers as well as

50 Richard Yaffe, “Under Current Conditions: Rabbi Soloveitchik for Separation of Synagogue and State in Israel,” *Boston Jewish Advocate* (2 April 1964), pp. 1, 5. Abridged citation in Rakeffet, *The Rav*, Vol. 1, p. 56. It is clear that the Rav’s thinking seems to have evolved on this topic over time. A few years later, he tempered his critique of the relationship between religion and politics – even admitting that he had made a mistake. See the fifth of the *Five Addresses*, “Of the Dew of the Heavens and of the Fat Places of the Earth,” esp. pp.173-183; in addition see the Rav’s letter on the contributions of the NRP to religious life in Israel, in *HaZofeh* (16 May 1977), p. 1. See also R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “Religion and State: The Case for Interaction,” *Judaism* 15 (1966), pp. 387-411.

51 *The Commentator*, op. cit.

laypersons alike. As an articulate spokesman, he gave Orthodoxy moral credibility and intellectual respectability vis-à-vis other denominations and other faiths. His “pulpits” in Yeshiva, the Moriah Synagogue, the RCA, American Mizrahi, the Boston community, and his beloved Maimonides School, allowed him virtually unfettered influence on shaping a socio-religious movement.⁵²

Indeed, the Rav was keenly aware of his role in and responsibility to his community and the various institutions that depended on him, as well as his connection to his students and followers. He was also aware (as alluded to by him in “*Al Ahavat HaTorah ve-Geulat Nefesh HaDor*”) that despite the successes of Torah education in America, his work was not yet done; leaving the United States might have imperiled all that had been achieved until that point. No doubt, as he steadfastly maintained, it was “politics” that put the kibosh on the candidacy. It is equally true that in 1959-60 he was in a position that was deeply satisfying, albeit at times frustrating; a position that he would have found extremely difficult to abandon. This was clearly not the case in 1935, when he did stand for election in Tel Aviv. At that time, he was a young man in his early 30s, but a few years in America, and not yet fully established.

It is equally difficult to speculate on what his influence would have been on the State of Israel and religious life therein. At the time, there were no term limits for the Chief Rabbi, and the Rav could theoretically have served for over twenty years – a tenure in which we can assume he would have had a considerable and far-reaching impact. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the Chief Rabbinate and Israeli society faced many issues on which Rabbi Soloveitchik would have ruled, or decisions on which he would have been influential. These issues included: the ongoing question of “who is a Jew?,” conversion according to Halakhah and the Law of Return,⁵³ and the Jewish status of the Ethiopian immigrants. The Rav would have been Chief Rabbi during and after the Six-Day War. What would his opinion have been regarding the status and disposition of the Temple Mount?; in the disagreements about the design of the Kotel plaza and its designation as a prayer site?; about archeological digs in the recaptured holy places? Indeed, what would

52 Albeit a movement of which he was often critical, and perhaps never felt completely at home in; cf. R. Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith*, pp. 232-233.

53 On these issues see the letter the Rav sent with R. Chaim Heller to Ben-Gurion in February 1959, printed in B. Litwin and S. Hoenig, *Jewish Identity: Modern Responsa and Opinions on the Registration of Children of Mixed Marriages* (New York: Feldheim, 1965), pp. 116-117, 406-407. See also the telegram the Rav and R. Moshe Feinstein sent to the NRP regarding the crucial issue of *giur al-pi halakhah*, printed in *HaZofeh* (19 February 1970), p. 2. See also Rakeffet, *The Rav*, Vol. 2, pp. 121-125.

he have said about the status of the territories, and the ultimate questions of land-for-peace? These decades were a period in which the so-called “status quo” regarding religion and state became concretized – in ways that still impact Israeli life. What would the Rav have contributed to the ongoing debate and deliberation about the role of religion and Halakhah in the public sphere? To be sure, the Rav did speak out on many of these issues,⁵⁴ but from his “armchair” in New York; it’s not really fair to speculate on what he would have said had he been engaged in the thick of the debate in Jerusalem. Moreover, we can only wonder how he would have gone about advancing his positions given the realpolitik he would have been facing.

Most significantly, what would the presence of Rabbi Soloveitchik in Jerusalem have had on shaping the *Dati-Leumi* community? How would Rabbi Soloveitchik – who emphasized the autonomy of the individual – have countered the common Religious Zionist equation of religion with collectivism? Even more so, how would his sensitivity to the tragedy inherent in human triumph have moderated or conflicted with the dominant voice of Israeli Religious Zionism, especially after the Six-Day War?⁵⁵ Additionally, through which avenues and in what forms would his contributions to Torah study and ongoing teaching and learning have expressed themselves? What would have been the impact – both immediate and long term – on Jewish education in Israel?

54 For example, in 1964 the Rav spoke out strongly against Zim, Israel’s national shipping line, for their cruise ships with both kosher and non-kosher kitchens; see R. Zvi Schachter, *Nefesh HaRav* (Jerusalem: Reishit, 1994), p. 89. See also the interview the Rav gave to *Ma’ariv* on a variety of public issues on 28 October 1977 (pp. 25, 31), a small excerpt from which appeared in *HaPardes* 52:3 (December 1977), pp. 2-3. Also, in 1982 the Rav forcefully urged the NRP to vote in favor of an investigation into the massacres at Sabra and Shatila, threatening to resign as the president of Mizrahi if they didn’t. We can only imagine what he would have done from within Heikhal Shlomo.

55 A clear presentation of the Rav’s attitude in this matter can be found in “Catharsis,” *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), pp. 38-54, where he concluded that the task of man is “to move forward boldly, to triumph over and to subdue thy environment and to retreat humbly when victory is within thy grasp” (p. 54). He summarized Judaism’s attitude to heroism as “perhaps the central motif in our existential experience.”

The heroic person, according to our view, does not succumb to frenzy and excitement. Biblical heroism is not ecstatic but rather contemplative; not loud but hushed; not dramatic or spectacular but mute (p. 42).

The Rav’s emphasis on “retreat” and “withdrawal” as the hallmarks of what he termed “halakhic heroism” was misunderstood by some to be referring to the 1967 Six-Day War. In fact, although only published in 1978, the essay was prepared for a lecture delivered at MIT in November 1962. The Rav also discussed these themes at the November 1963 Mizrahi convention; see *Five Addresses*, pp. 102-106. See also an account of this talk in Raphael, *Lo Zikhiti Ba-Or*, pp. 344-354.

On the other hand: How would life and events in Israel have impacted on Rabbi Soloveitchik? What mark would have been left on his attitudes on matters theological, philosophical, and practical? How would the agenda of topics and issues he addressed in his writings have differed after *aliyah*?

Of course, we have no way of answering these questions. Yet, speculation about them – and on this entire chapter in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s biography – may help us appreciate his yeoman contribution to American Judaism throughout much of the twentieth century, particularly in his final two decades of activity following these events. We can also gain insight into the ways a giant of the Jewish people navigated the vicissitudes of politics and illness, triumphed over adversity, and incorporated those experiences into his vision for himself as a leader and as a teacher.

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