

Editor's Note

We Read the Rav to Know We Are Not Alone in Loneliness

Writing in April 1957 on the official letterhead of Congregation Kodimoh of Springfield, Massachusetts, 29-year-old Rabbi Norman Lamm informed his colleague Dr. Marvin Fox, then an instructor of philosophy at Ohio State University, "The Rav has given us official permission to start 'nudging' him for his own contribution after Pesach. I wrote a note to him on some other topic, and mentioned this 'derech agav'. A call from you (make it sound urgent and immediate) may be useful." Lamm and Fox had been conspiring to draft Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik as a contributor to the not-yet-named journal of Orthodox Jewish thought, which they had been struggling to launch for over a year. It would be another year and a half before *TRADITION*'s first issue arrived in Fall 1958, published by the Rabbinical Council of America.*

Although the Rav's "Confrontation" (on interfaith matters), his first major essay in English, appeared in our Spring-Summer 1964 issue, the promised contribution our editors had been discussing years earlier was in fact a different item. An editorial note in our Winter 1964–1965 issue informed subscribers: "The editors of *TRADITION* are pleased to announce that the next issue of *TRADITION* will feature an important article 'Man and His Faith vis a vis the Modern Society' by Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik." Chaim Brovender, then a rabbinical student at Yeshiva University (who would go on to a storied career in Torah education in Israel), served as associate managing editor of the journal during that preceding academic year. He reports that R. Walter S. Wurzbarger, who had inherited the editorship from Lamm in 1962 (remaining at the helm for 26 years), assigned him with the task of continuing the journal's "nudging" R. Soloveitchik. His efforts paid off one day as the Rav thrust a manila envelope at him from between the closing elevator doors in Furst Hall, saying, "Here, Brovender, now stop hocking me!" The envelope contained the manuscript published in Summer 1965, retitled "The Lonely Man of Faith," which would become one of the most significant works of Jewish thought penned in the twentieth century in any language.

Nearly a decade earlier, Lamm, Fox, and their team, in conceiving what *TRADITION* might become, considered it obvious that no serious initiative in contemporary Jewish thought could be undertaken without the Rav's contribution. This despite the challenge of his "family tradition" to publish little or nothing (their "nudging" was necessary and his procrastination might have been anticipated). They surely understood how potentially transformative the Rav's *mahshava*, if committed to writing, would be in the life of mid-century American Orthodoxy—the journal was in its initial planning stages just as sociologist Marshall Sklare proposed that American Orthodoxy be best viewed as "a case study of institutional decay." *TRADITION* became the first and most important platform to publish the Rav's English writing, and later featured the slow but eventually steady dissemination of analysis and interpretation of his philosophy and teachings by his students.

I have elsewhere described the impact of first encountering the Rav's *TRADITION* essays, at a time when it would have been quite impossible for me to imagine I would one day occupy the editor's office. Arriving at my own commitment to Jewish life and observance during those twilight years when he was no longer on the public stage yet omnipresent in American Modern Orthodoxy, much of who I became as a religious person was shaped by the Rav's Torah and thought as filtered through his students and his writing. If, as C.S. Lewis was purported to have said, "we read to know we are not alone," I read the Rav to know that I was not alone in my loneliness. Among the most important lessons that I took away from those years was, first, the idea that we have nothing to fear. Torah (or perhaps in the Rav's term, halakha, broadly defined) would be more than capable of grappling with whatever challenge may arise in my adolescent (and later more mature) mind; and even when the answers are not always readily apparent, I could take comfort in the idea that others before me had thought about the problem, continued to think about it, and, in the paraphrase of some Yiddish expression I could not then have known, it would not prove fatal. Second, and more significantly, the Rav's model created a permission structure for faith. It offered the promise that motivated by love and not fear, my decisions leading in one direction did not mean severing ties with the world, family, and a version of my own self. The Rav's message allowed me entrée to the covenantal community knowing that I could remain "at home," and even be called back to the majestic realm; it bound the two sides and selves together with the "connective ivy" of the halakha. It is my belief that the power and impact of the Rav's teachings, in these ways and other future directions that we may scarcely be able to imagine today, will continue to vivify Jewish life and learning for many, many generations to come.

And now, nearly six decades after his first appearance in these pages, four decades since his exit from public life, and 30 years since his passing,

what is the enduring legacy of the man who “was an intellectual Colossus astride the various continents of human intellectual achievement and all forms of Jewish thought” (in R. Aharon Lichtenstein’s formulation channeling the Bard)? That question runs as a thread, albeit occasionally hidden behind the weave, through most of the eleven contributions in this special issue, marking the 120th year of the Rav’s birth and his 30th *Yahrzeit*. It is a question we dare not ignore, for while his teaching is as eternal as the halakhic tradition, which he so nobly articulated and defended, it must be conveyed to more and more members of generations “who did not know Yosef Dov,” and who organize their inner religious lives around questions, realities, and experiences that would have been alarmingly unfamiliar to the Rav in his day.

Proud of our historic association with the Rav’s writings, *TRADITION* is particularly pleased to present these new studies by veteran scholars of his Torah alongside remarkable younger writers who offer some of the new insights and understandings that are gleaned in each and every generation. This issue is being published as part of a cluster of content generated during this season of marking these special “round anniversaries.” Among the other noteworthy offerings is a special digital book publication of lecture notes, transcribed by R. Yaakov Homnick, on a course R. Soloveitchik taught at the Bernard Revel Graduate School in 1946–1947. These lectures, “Concepts in Halakha as Elaborated Upon by the Aggada and Kabbala,” present a sustained argument for the preeminence of halakha within Jewish tradition, over and above the realms of Aggada and Kabbala. The Rav argues that the centrality of halakha served to shift the balance of Judaism away from other modes of expression: “The greatest contribution of the Halakha was its purging Judaism of all magical, mythical and ceremonial elements. . . . The *mitzvot* are all intellectualized, thereby severing them from all mystical rites.” As in science, “Halakha does away with essences and substances. It formalizes and abstracts them.” In this way the transcribed lectures serve as an important window into the mind of the author of *Halakhic Man*, first published in Hebrew just a year earlier. The volume, available for free download on our website, is co-published by *TRADITION* with the Bernard Revel Graduate School, and contains contributions by Daniel Rynhold, Shlomo Zuckier, and me.

Additionally, visit TraditionOnline.org’s Archive section to delve into all of the Rav’s writings published in *TRADITION*, alongside the many dozens of items exploring his thought. We are particularly pleased to announce that Eli Turkel’s bibliography of works by and about R. Soloveitchik is now housed at and will be maintained and updated on our website. Finally, on the Rav’s birthday, 12 Adar (March 5 this year), we convened an online conversation, hosted by WebYeshiva.org, which discussed many of the themes in this special issue and which can be viewed on *TRADITION*’s YouTube channel.

And yet, despite this flurry of Rav-related content and activity, I am mindful of a piece of typically apropos advice offered by Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein shortly after I was named editor of *TRADITION*: “It shouldn’t all be about my father!” When making my way through manuscripts and swimming through submissions I sometimes think there’s a caricature of a typical essay authors imagine when preparing an essay for our journal. No matter how remote the topic, some writers fear that unless they open with a quote from “The Lonely Man of Faith,” and include one reference to *Halakhic Man*’s footnote #4, we will reject the item out of hand. This is both frustrating and troubling because, perhaps above almost all other traits, the Rav placed creativity at the summit of religious values:

God wills man to be a creator—his first job is to create himself as a complete being. . . . [Man] is created in the image of God, but this image is a challenge to be met, not a gratuitous gift. It is up to man to objectify himself, to impress form upon a latent personality, and to move from the hylic, silent personality towards the center of objective reality. The highest norm in our moral code is: *to be*, in a total sense, to liberate oneself from the bondage of a shadowy *mé on* [non-being] (to use Platonic jargon) and to move toward the wide spaces of *ontos on*, real true being, full of song and joy.[§]

As we continue to study his Torah and receive inspiration from his thought, we are reminded that he admonished his *talmidim* time and again to think for themselves. Perhaps we would best honor him by asking WWJBSD a little less frequently. We will flourish as a religious community and be most loyal to his teachings by continuing the creative struggle to confront the religious, spiritual, intellectual, and moral challenges of our day with no fear, to create ourselves as complete beings and complete *kehillot*.

WE ARE PLEASED TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY to express our gratitude to the Maimonides School and Kehillah for their sponsorship of this special issue in expression of their fidelity to the vision of their founder; and to Isaac Selter, our yeoman editorial assistant, for his ongoing professionalism, good counsel and judgment, and for keeping the *TRADITION* train on its tracks.

JEFFREY SAKS
Editor

* For more on our journal’s ancient history see Zev Eleff, “The Tradition of the Lamm and the Fox,” *TraditionOnline* (June 7, 2020): www.traditiononline.org/the-tradition-of-the-lamm-and-the-fox.

§ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” *TRADITION* 17:2 (1978), 64.