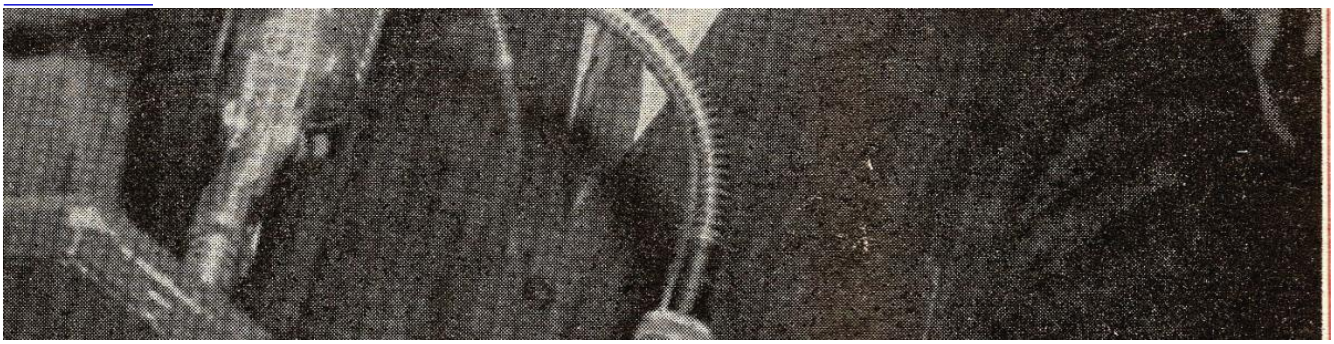
Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Views on Orthodoxy in Israel

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On Friday, September 27, 1935, the *Boston Jewish Advocate* published an extensive interview with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who had recently returned to Boston following a four-month stay in Palestine. In what is arguably the most comprehensive articulation of his early Zionism—if one takes seriously the citations of the interviewer, Carl Alpert—Rabbi Soloveitchik set forth in this interview his perspective on the role of Orthodoxy in *Erets Yisrael*.

According to the*Jewish Advocate*, Rabbi Soloveitchik said, “The future of Palestine is with Orthodoxy, just as the future of Orthodoxy lies in Palestine. I make this statement not as a rabbi, but as an objective observer. The recent newspaper announcement that ministers are being sent to Palestine to propagate Progressive Judaism is nonsense. Orthodoxy will be the only form of Judaism in *Erets Yisrael*.”

Later in the article, Rabbi Soloveitchik predicted that “When Palestine Orthodoxy is well-organized, it will reclaim even those who have gone astray. After all, even among the most radical *halutsim* there exists a subconscious desire and longing for religious life and observance that temporarily finds its outlet in the redemption of the soil and the renaissance of the Jewish people. If this religious fervor will be

cultivated and brought into clear light, it will eventually lead to traditional Judaism."

Finally, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested, "It is the task of Orthodoxy to redeem not only the soil of Palestine, but also the souls of its sons and daughters, and bring them within the traditional fold."

Although there are many dimensions to Rabbi Soloveitchik's comments, some of which I recently addressed in an article analyzing Rabbi Soloveitchik's early Boston career, the following article explores each of these statements from the contemporary perspective (inserting *Medinat Yisrael* for Palestine), asking if Rabbi Soloveitchik's statements still ring true today, and if they calibrate with the ethos of contemporary Orthodoxy.

Is the future of Medinat Yisrael with Orthodoxy, and is the future of Orthodoxy in Medinat Yisrael?

Rabbi Soloveitchik's first statement was made at a time when Orthodoxy in the United States still represented the normative religious community—at least in name—for the majority of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Today, of course, although Orthodoxy is the norm (by law) in Israel vis-à-vis marriage and divorce and is generally adopted as the norm in synagogue life and burial, the layers of resentment felt among the non-Orthodox population are balanced by those who are content with the traditional model. Still, it is not difficult to imagine *Medinat Yisrael* without Orthodoxy. In fact, many claim that the Orthodox monopoly in the modern state is deleterious to its Jewish and democratic nature.

A number of years ago, I flew on a plane with Effy Eitam, who was then the leader of the National Religious Party in Israel. As I described to him my work within the religious establishment helping secular Israelis navigate religious life, he stopped me and said: "Let me tell you why you won't ever be successful: The religious Zionist rabbinic leadership has a messianic vision that everyone will be Orthodox. I'm not sure that you are convinced that this is an ideal."

Many Orthodox Jews remain unsure about Orthodoxy's universal application among the contemporary Jewish community—especially in Israel. I'm not convinced that religious coercion is viable on the tactical or strategic planes. This certainly throws into question whether the future of *Medinat Yisrael* is with

Orthodoxy.

As to the converse claim of Rabbi Soloveitchik, that the future of Orthodoxy is with *Medinat Yisrael*, I equally remain unconvinced, notwithstanding my personal decision to live in Israel. A number of years ago, I delivered a paper at the Orthodox Forum in New York about the so-called brain drain to Israel. The argument that many of my contemporaries put forward was that talented young leaders of (Modern) Orthodoxy were making *aliya*, thus depriving the North American Jewish community of its best and brightest. I argued that I believe Orthodoxy has flourished in North America, notwithstanding the departure of rabbinic leadership such as Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, or Rabbi Danny Tropper. In fact, the great renaissance of Orthodox Day Schools and Orthodox synagogues happened after each of these three men moved to Israel.

Ironically, it was Rabbi Soloveitchik himself who—failing to receive the position of Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv in 1935—forged contemporary Orthodoxy in the United States. I believe that the type of Orthodoxy Rabbi Soloveitchik contemplated might have had exclusivity in *Medinat Yisrael*, had history unfolded differently. But contemporary Orthodoxy is comprised of so many subgroups that it is hard to imagine that the future of Orthodoxy lies—at least exclusively—in *Medinat Yisrael*.

*Will the religious fervor of the "***halutsim***" lead to traditional Judaism?*

This second assertion of Rabbi Soloveitchik needs to be put in its immediate historical context as well. Just days before the interview in Boston, Rabbi Soloveitchik had paid a visit to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who was then ailing, and would pass away just before Rabbi Soloveitchik returned to Boston. No doubt this was a dramatic meeting for Rabbi Soloveitchik. (Rabbi Kook had studied with Rabbi Soloveitchik's grandfather in the Volozhin yeshiva.) During his visit to Israel, Rabbi Soloveitchik had met with a number of students of Rabbi Kook. The statement which relates to a "subconscious desire and longing" may find its anchor in the influence of Rabbi Kook's thinking on Rabbi Soloveitchik in the mid-1930s.

Whatever the case, today's contemporary Jewish scene in Israel is a work in progress. There are still elements of the*ba'al-teshuvah* movement of the 1970s, but more and more individuals who have a religious fervor (including those from the Orthodox community) are seeking a new-age type of religiosity that is a far

cry from the type of Orthodoxy that Rabbi Soloveitchik espoused (and a far cry from the Orthodoxy that the normative Modern Orthodox community espouses). Sometimes known as ChabaKook (short for Chabad, Breslav, and Kook /Carlebach), this ideology has some connection to halakha but emphasizes the religious ecstatic moment rather than the disciplined cerebral one. It certainly is not "traditional" Judaism. My sense is that this is a phenomenon more central to *Medinat Yisrael* than to the North American Jewish community.

Again, given the contemporary Orthodox scene, I think there is still a lot of questioning going on in Israel about what is normative Orthodoxy. The ideals (and dreams) of Rabbi Soloveitchik do not appear to be either relevant or able to be realized given the contemporary Orthodox scene in Israel.

Is it the task of Orthodoxy to redeem not only the soil of* Medinat Yisrael *, but also the souls of its sons and daughters, and bring them within the traditional fold?

The last claim of Rabbi Soloveitchik is remarkable and deserves close attention. In many respects, notwithstanding the commitment to halakha that Orthodox Jews share, this statement reveals a layer of Jewish life not often spoken about. Orthodoxy is not only about *kibbush* (conquest), but also about *kiruv* (bringing near). I imagine it was hard to conceive—particularly in the mid 1930s—that these two notions might stand in opposition. During the last three decades, too much emphasis in the Orthodox community has been placed on redeeming the soil (in the broadest sense of the term), and not enough emphasis has been placed on exposing the non-religious community to the beauty of traditional Judaism. The Modern Orthodox community has expended enormous resources on the settlement movement in Israel, without paying attention to the Jewish lives of Jews in Tel Aviv or Rishon Letzion. These Jewish souls have been exposed to a much more fundamentalist, Hareidi Orthodox approach, speaking in the name of halakhic Judaism. This is a trend that needs to be rectified.

Of course, one could argue that *kiruv* isn't an essential part of Orthodoxy, or certainly halakhic practice. But in its broadest sense, Orthodoxy in Israel should see *kol yisrael arevim zeh lazeh* (all Jews are responsible for each other) not only as a descriptive adage, but rather as an imperative. If one can see Rabbi Soloveitchik's terminology of "redemption of souls" as a charge to expose rather

than impose traditional Judaism within the secular community, then I believe such a responsibility is still central to our community.

The challenges to contemporary Orthodoxy in Israel are enormous, and the implications of modernity and the founding of the State of Israel for traditional Judaism are still being explored in Israel. Notwithstanding the rising political clout of the Hareidi Orthodox parties in Israel, I believe that the Modern Orthodoxy that Rabbi Soloveitchik spoke of still has a place in Israel, and will ultimately play a central role in its future.