

Rabbi Goldberg, an associate editor of *Tradition*, is executive director of the *Intermountain Jewish News* and a member of the Mikveh Team of Torah Community Project.

RESPONDING TO “RUPTURE AND RECONSTRUCTION”

I

In advance of a critical response to R. Haym Soloveitchik’s “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy” (*Tradition* 28:4), I wish to express my gratitude to him for raising critical issues and tying them together in such a way as to try to make sense of an historical epoch. His aspiration is all the more daunting in that the epoch he wishes to interpret is our own, and this, of course, is the most difficult of interpretive tasks. But how does he do? Are his conclusions accurate? Are the evidence and, in particular, the methods he employs to reach his conclusions subject to dispute, modification, or outright correction? Does he oversimplify, perhaps as a result of “venturing into an area well over 500 years removed from that of my expertise”? Is there really a “rupture,” or, to the contrary, a normal shift in emphasis that follows a pattern in Jewish history? Since R. Soloveitchik’s essay is extremely long and my space is not, I must skip over even some of his major arguments and trust that the bare outlines of an alternative picture will emerge from brief comment on a few of his major lines of thought.

R. Soloveitchik’s essay is complex, but one of his conclusions is rather simple: there is no more *yirat shamayim*, as he defines it, among any sector of modern Jewry. He writes: “I think it safe to say that the perception of God as a *daily, natural* force is no longer present to a significant degree in any sector of modern Jewry, even the most religious. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that individual Divine Providence, though passionately believed as a theological principle—and I do not for a moment question the depth of that conviction—is no longer experienced as a simple reality.”

The absolute character of this central conclusion—“no longer present . . . *in any sector*”—places a relatively small burden on the critic. R. Soloveitchik’s conclusion is inaccurate if taken as intended, namely, as a

comprehensive sociological observation. To establish the presence or absence today of what he terms “perception of God as a daily, natural force”—traditionally termed *yirat shamayim*—a central part of his method is to read the privacy of others’ souls by davening in Israeli settings and in an American immigrant minyan, and then deducing from the external character of the davening the internal quality of the *yirat shamayim*. While a person can *guess* what happens in others’ souls, and certainly be inspired (or repelled) by those subjective impressions, one can hardly take this as a method for establishing a sociological, falsifiable critique. To be sure, R. Soloveitchik qualifies his reading of souls by calling it “no more than an *impression*,” but if so, why offer it at all? Why summon it as a decisive piece of evidence for a central conclusion? Clearly, the pride of place that R. Soloveitchik gives his “impression” indicates that he takes it to be integral to his methodology and evidence for establishing a sociologically valid critique. But to establish such a critique, one must inquire. In Israel, at least, I and many others have inquired and learned that countless individuals, including Ashkenazim, say they perceive God as a daily, natural force, and they say their davening (among other things) aspires to reflect this.

But they do not say it very loudly. R. Soloveitchik has confused lack of *yirat shamayim* with lack of open, public proclamation of *yirat shamayim*. That’s not the style today. We live in cynical times. For people publicly to proclaim that they perceive God as a daily, natural force is to identify themselves as relatively unsophisticated. Further, those who are aware of the intellectual climate, not likely to proclaim their *yirat shamayim*, are usually more thoughtful. Many need to question, to understand, as part of perceiving God as a daily, natural force. This is not a simplistic process, but that does not make it any less sincere, religiously profound, or experiential. For example, that a thoughtful Hazon Ish once said he envied a shoemaker for his “*emuna peshuta*” hardly means that Hazon Ish did not possess *yirat shamayim*, even in the sense R. Soloveitchik uses it. Although the less simplistic *yirat shamayim* is less public, it remains a process abundantly shared in conversation between *rebbe* and *talmid*, between religious seekers, and between those who deliver *musser shmuesin* and their audiences, at least in Israel. It is stated and subject to sociological measure.

R. Soloveitchik’s logic would have him reply that people who *say* they take God as a daily, natural force express but a “conviction,” as opposed to a real “experience.” Such reasoning is self-referential, non-falsifiable, impossible to test. Only the subjective stance of R. Soloveitchik verifies it. It yields no objective basis on which to draw a picture

of an entire epoch, still less to read *yirat shamayim* out of it. Of course, observations to the contrary rely on an essential correspondence between what people *say* about their attitude to *yirat shamayim* and what they actually *experience*. In some cases there may be no such correspondence, but it would be irreverent at best, obtuse at worst, to state that this correspondence does not exist among *any* sector of modern Jewry. At the very least, to credit what people themselves say they feel is to offer the basis for quantitative analysis. For R. Soloveitchik to insist on a reductionist reading of people who express a natural, daily experience of God—to say they express but a “conviction,” however deeply felt—is, in effect, to engage in a form of poetry, beyond quantitative analysis and rational discourse.

R. Soloveitchik’s view of contemporary Orthodoxy is deficient not only because it is sociologically inaccurate, but substantively narrow. His view on the absence of *yirat shamayim* overlooks the conception of *yirat shamayim* as, broadly speaking, twofold. *Yirat shamayim* is larger than he defines it. He writes of the perception of God as a daily, natural force by understanding that force as the “simple reality” of reward and punishment. R. Soloveitchik’s proof for the absence of *yirat shamayim* is, in part, the editorial policy of religious newspapers that first highlighted R. Peretz’s invocation of this idea and then fell silent about it. Ironically, R. Soloveitchik esteems “experience” of reality but buttresses one of his central conclusions with reference to a reality that, to my knowledge, he has no professional experience of: the newsroom. It is always intricate, in varying degrees politicized or economically or personally motivated. As a newspaper editor, I can think of many alternative explanations for highlighting then dropping R. Peretz’s (or anyone’s controversial) statement. One likely explanation yields a conclusion diametrically opposed to R. Soloveitchik’s. It is possible that the resonance of R. Peretz’s statement among certain religious sectors of Israel, coupled with the repugnance his statement generated in other sectors, led the editors to conclude that it was pragmatically unwise to repeat the statement in light of the negative reaction, and pragmatically unnecessary to repeat it for those who reacted positively. As one Ashkenazi rabbi put it to me then, “Peretz was right, but an idiot for saying so.” Pragmatic considerations control newsrooms more often than the philosophical ones R. Soloveitchik sees there.

And so, we move from at least a stated experience of *yirat shamayim*, defined as *yirat ha-onesh*, among a sector of the Israeli public, to the second basic sense of *yirat shamayim*, in which God is a daily, natural reality: *yirat ha-romemut*, “awe of the Divine majesty”—the sense of

Divine mystery, the awe attendant upon His creation, His incomprehensibility, His vastness. On this definition of *yirat shamayim*, there are countless Jews, at least in settings such as the Rocky Mountains, who have a sense of *yirat ha-romemut* day in and day out. Further, as the mystics point out, one need not necessarily view a lofty mountain, but simply a grain of sand, to feel *yirat ha-romemut*. How many Jews live this way? I need not read souls to know that today's widespread kabbalistic exploration of the reality of God's presence, and that the religion-based camaraderie among Jewish nature types, point, contra R. Soloveitchik, to a daily sense of God, natural indeed.

II

One of the methods by which R. Soloveitchik reaches faulty conclusions on *yirat shamayim* is a misreading of the effect of technological advancement. Technology, he writes, explains vital areas of life that in previous times were taken to reflect the intervention of God or supernatural agents. Today, he says, with so much explained, there is virtually no room for a felt supernatural presence. Technology, including medical science, has invaded the consciousness of Jewry, for whom large spheres of human activity are emptied of religious meaning. This is the gist of R. Soloveitchik's argument.

I see technology and its effect rather differently. Taking one of R. Soloveitchik's examples—medical science—it does not always explain everything, nor even offer a quantitative leap in understanding. I cite the case of a Denverite who suffered mercilessly for years before his untimely demise, and part of the suffering was that the physicians, including researchers at an internationally known institute, could never establish precisely what caused his disease. Mystery reigned supreme, and as a result, "religiously infected rituals of defense" were used. While humanity can now control many diseases to which it once succumbed, a sense of dominance by supernatural forces is still present, at least in many Orthodox Jewish circles. The conclusion that R. Soloveitchik draws from his main, and mainly accurate, point—a neutral technology and indifferent cosmos—is unwarranted. Revolution in technology and cosmology has not supplanted a sense of threat, it has merely displaced the locus of the concern. Orthodox Jews may no longer be ignorant of the etiology, prognosis and process of cure of most human diseases, but often enough this has only transposed the sense of precariousness from the likes of medical technology *per se* to other, but distinctly related, places. Examples:

Among significant segments of Orthodox Jewry, it is common to

consult with Talmudic scholars, hasidic rebbes or local rabbis for advice on which doctors or hospitals to use or not to use and for spiritual help through illness. Either way, it is the religious adept who is consulted in this transposed religious folkway, since technological knowledge has not removed the fear that accompanies serious disease. It is also common to be instructed on the necessity of “having faith” in the doctor as part of the precondition to cure—hardly a neutral attitude. Even less neutral is the intuition that specialists must rely on when confronted with conflicting scientific data—a fairly common conundrum. Indeed, to witness doctors reduced to speculating in the context of life-and-death situations is to be frightened by the limits of science’s neutrality. Still more extreme, if less common—but common enough, and close enough to R. Soloveitchik’s invocation of *shedim* and such in previous epochs of Jewish history—standard scientific guidance is dispensed with altogether in favor of “alternative” modes of medicine. The milder forms range from acupuncture and herbal medicine to midwifery and chiropraxis. Finally, for some, technology is not superseded by folkways at all. When medical technology is helpless, some resort to such distinctly modern but equally non-scientific folkways as diet, exercise, and various rituals that, against terminal cancer (for example), don’t work, but that, given the helplessness of the medical technology, are devoutly believed in and even experienced as direct control of the natural world. These examples abound because of the failure of technology to master the human body, whether in intractable diseases like many forms of cancer or in daily difficulties like back pain. Taken as a whole, these transposed non- or semi-scientific modes, some of which are as superstitious as the medieval mentality R. Soloveitchik describes, are sought due to the the limits of technology. As knowledge grows, mystery may be displaced, but not supplanted. *Yirat shamayim*—the sense of need for Divine help against forces of evil, and the personal reliance on God and His presence to carry one through pain or perplexity— will naturally have a different coloration in a technological age, but it is hardly absent.

Nor is it unidimensional. Many varieties of *yirat shamayim*, taken as felt experience, are found in Jewish history. It an oversimplification for R. Soloveitchik to bifurcate *yirat shamayim* into the way it is now, and the way it was in “the past millennium.” *Yirat shamayim* is a staple of Jewish spiritual life that has been subjected to ramified interpretation and life experience. One example: *yirat ha-romemut*. Another example: *yirat ha-onesh* itself. R. Soloveitchik defines *yirat ha-onesh* a single way, then says it is virtually absent from Musar literature of the past half-century. But it is not. It is defined differently there.

R. Soloveitchik argues that “the thousand year struggle of the soul with the flesh has finally come to a close,” and does so separately from his argument on *yirat ha-onesh*, but the two are interconnected, at least from the perspective of the Musar thought he cites. Here, as in other parts of R. Soloveitchik’s essay, it is difficult to make sense of his argument, for it is a moving target. In the *text* of his essay, R. Soloveitchik asserts that the struggle with the flesh has ended, and that the absence of this struggle in the Musar literature of the last half century is evidence thereof. But in a *footnote*, he writes that “this conclusion is tentative, as I have made no thorough study of contemporary ethical literature.” He includes in this “ethical literature” that which is written by “spiritual heirs of the *musar* movement,” thus further confusing the matter, for he writes in the same footnote, “asceticism is noticeably absent from the writings of two of the most influential figures of our times, R. Eliyahu Dessler and the Hazon Ish.” This is confusing because R. Soloveitchik does not indicate whether he regards Hazon Ish as a spiritual heir of the Musar movement, apparently not realizing that there is a history (and literature) of dispute as to whether Hazon Ish did, in fact, advocate Musar as taught by the movement’s founder, R. Israel Salanter. Thus, when R. Soloveitchik writes in support of his tentative conclusion about the death of the ascetic ideal that he consulted “a random sample of thirty-odd works of contemporary *musar*,” one wonders how many of these works represent the spiritual heirs of the Musar movement at all. One also wonders about an essay that praises mimesis and mourns excessive textuality, yet relies almost exclusively on texts to reach conclusions about Musar. This irony, which pervades R. Soloveitchik’s essay, relying as it does almost exclusively on texts or tapes (not people), is particularly problematic in the Musar movement, which has a rich oral tradition found in neither texts nor tapes.

The facts, garnered from both texts and the oral tradition, are as follows: A “war on basic instinct” (R. Soloveitchik’s definition of asceticism) is of the essence in the writings of R. Israel Salanter. However, R. Israel widened the definition of instincts to include not only those mentioned by R. Soloveitchik (drives that seek physical pleasure). R. Israel also included, indeed centrally so, those drives that yield psychological deformations. Such drives, different in every individual, include the abusive exercise of power, manipulation, and other ethical failings. R. Israel regarded the pursuit of psychological deformation as generating intense pleasure, such that Musar’s denial of this malevolent pleasure could become a form of asceticism. To subjugate one’s mind, tongue, and manipulative gestures can be as painful as to deny the flesh. R.

Israel advocated both a sublimative and a subjugative, ascetic approach to both physical and psychological pleasures, such that the denial of forbidden psychological drives could generate an ascetic sense equal to the denial of physical pleasure. Have things changed among R. Israel's spiritual heirs? On the psychological side, no. On the physical side, relatively. If, to take one example, we measure the general rise in standard of living in contemporary Israel, as against mid-19th century Lithuania, and we then compare the chosen standard of living of the Musar movement's spiritual heirs to the contemporary standards, physical asceticism remains in place. As an ideal, it is alive in contemporary Musar circles.

To R. Israel, *yirat ha-onesh* includes fear of punishment for two types of sin: straight-line halakhic violations and deformations of character. The latter include unjustified physical and psychological indulgence. These violations—to bring the discussion back to where we started—are understood by R. Israel and his spiritual heirs (with the possible exception of R. Joseph Z. Lipovitz) to elicit Divine punishment that, at best, can be understood *only by the sinner himself*. This is radically different from *yirat ha-onesh* as formulated by R. Soloveitchik, in which a religious adept (such as R. Nissim Yagen) can understand why *others* have been punished. That type of *yirat ha-onesh* is foreign to the Musar sensibility, even though it is steeped in *yirat ha-onesh*. Under Musar, one judges oneself harshly and others favorably, even for the same sins for which one judges (and sees God judging) oneself harshly. In Musar, it is natural to accept reward and punishment as a daily reality (and a reality in *olam ha-ba*), but to be reticent on how this has applied in *someone else's* life. For R. Soloveitchik to deny the existence of *yirat shamayim*, in part because R. Yagen's different view of *yirat ha-onesh* was supposedly squelched in newsrooms for philosophical reasons, is to oversimplify about journalism, about *yirat ha-onesh*, about asceticism, and about the continuing role that the latter two play in various Ashkenazi sectors today. Of course, R. Soloveitchik is, alas, only too correct that overall, *yirat shamayim* has declined, but then, R. Israel said the same of his own epoch.

A final word on physical asceticism: if a decline in *yirat shamayim* is a continuing theme in Musar, there is, among perceptive *ba'alei musar*, no fixed identification of the locus of the decline. Challenges to *yirat shamayim* manifest themselves differently in different epochs. Effective Musar speaks to that which constitutes a given epoch's most challenging trials (*nisyonot*). Today, when the poorest *kolel* student in Bnei Brak has more than the average householder of the *shtetl*, poverty is not one of the most challenging trials; it would be strange if Musar

were to emphasize it. When the *nisayon* was poverty, it could drive people from faith to communism, and Musar needed to respond. Today, when new trials drive people to apotheosize secularism, power, science, and immorality, Musar needs to respond differently. But just because grinding poverty is not rampant does not mean that contemporary Musar ignores physical asceticism. There are Orthodox leaders who place limits on what couples can pay for apartments and for weddings; more to the point, there are, especially since 1982, when a popular *bet haMusar* was established in Jerusalem, groups in Israel and abroad who aspire to disciplines of asceticism, physical and psychological. R. Soloveitchik mistakenly sees an absence of the former where there is merely an appropriate lack of emphasis.

III

In sum, to take two of R. Soloveitchik's examples—asceticism and *yirat shamayim*—there is no “rupture” with the past, for the past is more complex and nuanced than he describes. Accordingly, there is no “reconstruction,” for the selection among and fine-tuning of different modes of asceticism and *yirat shamayim* in light of contemporary trials are part of a pattern in Jewish history. The point is best illustrated with perhaps the most vaunted claim of R. Soloveitchik's essay, the supposed substitution of “texts” for the living transmission of Judaism, the elevation of ever more specialized texts to a supposedly unprecedented and devitalizing role in contemporary Orthodoxy. He refers to a publishing explosion and “the new and controlling role that texts now play in contemporary religious life.” This, he says, has corollary difficulties, all indigenous to a modernizing Jewish community for which the time-honored methods of sustaining Jewish particularism are deficient. It would take me beyond the present scope to detail the difficulties in his argument as applied to Jewish particularism, but the argument itself—the present role of texts—is not sufficiently put into context. In fact, it is blown way out of proportion.

Generally, the growth and specialization of texts is not unique to religious life. Multiplication of Orthodox Jewish texts is but a small part of a large trend toward specialization in all advanced systems of knowledge. As knowledge grows, so does specialization. Even a cursory perusal of anything from a medical journal to the *American Historical Review* reveals this. (Opening a recent edition of AHR at random, one finds reviews of titles such as “Fair to Middlin’”: *The Antebellum Cotton Trade of the Apalachicola/Chattahoochee River Valley*, or *Proletarians of*

the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933.) R. Soloveitchik does not appreciate the general—and rather unglamorous—context for the growth of specialization in Orthodox thought. Specialization is everywhere.

An even more basic context for the growth of texts—including Orthodox Jewish texts—is surprisingly omitted from an article that attributes so much influence to technology. That context is computers. There has been no larger influence on Hebrew publishing since the invention of the printing press over 500 years ago. The process of producing a book is easier, cheaper, and more decentralized than ever before. The largest publisher of Orthodox English Judaica in the world did not even exist 22 years ago. R. Soloveitchik's time frame for the explosion of Orthodox Jewish texts dovetails, more or less, with the emergence of relatively inexpensive, user-friendly—and very sophisticated—computers. “Geometrical” describes the growth of book publishers large and small, Jewish and gentile. Like specialization, computers are everywhere.

R. Soloveitchik claims that the recent growth of texts results from a rupture between Orthodox Jews and living embodiments of tradition. This claim misses the preponderant contemporary Jewish context for the growth of texts. It is also an elitist assertion. It assumes that when one speaks of contemporary Orthodoxy, one need keep in mind, as R. Soloveitchik does, only that segment of contemporary Orthodox Jewry that actually has, or remembers, a living link to a previous generation. But for most Jews, including many Orthodox Jews, a living link to the Jewish community has been gone for up to five generations. If mimesis is diminished and the gap between Jews and living teachers is wide, for most Jews this is not due to non-independent intellectual modes in the Orthodox publishing explosion. Just the opposite. For most, the present textual explosion fills in for Orthodox parents, teachers, mentors, or rabbis who have been missing since long before “contemporary Orthodoxy.” It is in this context that there is a textual process of reconstruction—an attempt to *reestablish* a link to the living past, not to *replace* it. R. Soloveitchik confuses cause and effect. The preponderance of new texts has not *caused* the diminishment of mimesis, but has creatively *responded* to the diminishment. The new texts, against the background of a missing living link to the previous generation, help refashion the link. Mimesis is superior, but it has never been available to most Jews today, including many Orthodox Jews. Their dilemma finds virtually no place in R. Soloveitchik's essay on “contemporary Orthodoxy.” Frustrated congregational rabbis used to say, “If only we had a reliable translation of, explanation of, defense of”—*Tanakh*, Jewish history,

Jewish biography, Jewish thought, Jewish law—fill in the blank. Now that we have these texts (of varying quality, to be sure), they help bring many Jews under the wings of the Divine presence. They are “living waters.” But R. Soloveitchik discovers in them a pivotally negative side. He misses their preponderant, “horizontal” context.

And—most important of all—he misses their “vertical” context. That which he takes to be “new and controlling” is, in fact, part of a time-honored pattern in Jewish history. Without insisting on too strict a parallel and without ignoring contemporary nuances, the increased reliance on text at the expense of mimesis describes conditions that obtained in successive epochs when, for example, the *Mishna* was formulated, the Talmud was formulated, and the decisions of the *Rishonim* were codified in the *Shulhan Arukh*. In all these cases, where previously there was reliance on mimesis and a measure of halakhic diversity, now there emerged reliance on “texts” and a reduced measure of halakhic diversity. Where previously there was a living teacher, now there was also a written one. Where previously certain matters of halakhic discussion had practical import, now, with fixed decisions, they had mostly theoretical import. In short, while making due allowance for periodic coloration and local conditions, that which R. Soloveitchik takes to be “rupture” is, in fact, part of a familiar pattern. In another irony, this pattern is ultimately responsible for the conditions for which R. Soloveitchik seems to have so much nostalgia and appreciation. Perhaps things now feel so new and disturbing to some because we ourselves are living through a transition period that, for want of universal assent to an agreed-upon term, has been described as “the end of the *Abaronim*.” In any event, R. Soloveitchik seems disturbed by transitions; “contemporary Orthodoxy” is not the first period in which he has perceived excessive textuality and *humra* and recoiled therefrom. Commenting on R. Moshe Isserles and the Tosafist movement in his “Three Themes in the *Sefer Hasidim*” (1976), R. Soloveitchik saw in Rema a “judicial tendency for stringency” and in the Tosafist movement an expansion of religious norms to “undreamt-of frontiers.” “Expansion” of religious norms and attendant disfigurements, which R. Soloveitchik devoted much attention to and etched with great precision in his “Three Themes,” are continual, cross-temporal themes for him. He dwells on them. His current complaints are part of his own pattern—his own historiography.

Note: “*Incognito, ergo sum*” is attributed to Sidney Morgenbesser by John Murray Cuddihy in his *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (1974).