

Dynner on Soloveitchik, 'Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Modern Orthodoxy'

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Haym Soloveitchik. *Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Modern Orthodoxy.* The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization Series. London: Liverpool University Press, 2021. 144 pp. \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-906764-38-8.

Reviewed by Glenn Dynner (Sarah Lawrence College) **Published on** H-Judaic (July, 2022) **Commissioned by** Robin Buller (University of California - Berkeley)

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57553>

Few essays have had as great an impact in both academic Jewish studies and the Modern Orthodox world as Haym Soloveitchik's "Rupture and Reconstruction." The thesis is compelling: (ultra-)Orthodox Judaism has moved away from an Old World, "mimetic" Judaism, which was "imbibed from parents and friends, patterned on conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue and school," toward a new dependency on books about religious observance, "avidly purchased and on a mass scale" (pp. 3-5).[1] Soloveitchik connects the new hypertextuality to a "very strong tendency ... towards stringency (*humra*)" in today's Orthodox communities (p. 9). The essay, appearing originally in 1994, has been reprinted, revised, and republished with his "Replies to Critics" in a book by the same title. This repackaging is just one indication that the essay has become iconic. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon the historian to ask whether its broad claims about a mimetic-based Judaism and a textual turn are supported by evidence, whether the evidence is accurate and reliable, and whether

there is sufficient awareness of historical context. Soloveitchik's theory turns out to be considerably flawed—both under-supported and overstated. But it ultimately retains some explanatory power, alerting us to one important factor in the evolution of Jewish traditionalism.

Soloveitchik argues that the initial rupture and reconstruction in east European Jewish society was a product of the secularization process, which he attempts to illustrate by contrasting two classic nineteenth-century publications, the *Arukh Ha-Shulhan*, by Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein (1829-1908), and the *Mishnah Berurah*, by Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1838-1933), known as "the Hafetz Hayyim." Epstein, according to Soloveitchik, stood "firmly in a traditional society, unassaulted and undisturbed by secular movements" (p. 85). He represented the older, mimetic society in which received custom and practice drove ritual legal reasoning. The Hafetz Hayyim, in contrast, stood "at the forefront of the battle against Enlightenment and the growing forces of Socialism and Zionism in Eastern Europe" and felt that common practice had "lost its independent status and needs to be squared with the written word" (p. 5). The *Mishnah Berurah* is deemed the "famous code of the next generation," on the logic that "though the two authors were born only nine years apart, their temperaments and life experiences were such that they belong to different ages" (pp. 84-85).

It is difficult for the historian of east European Jewry to accept these initial claims. Soloveitchik asserts that the *Arukh Ha-Shulhan* was printed "late in the author's life, and parts of it even posthumously, in the years 1903-9" (p. 84). However, the first volume was actually published twenty years earlier, in the winter of 1883. He claims that the *Mishnah Berurah* was published beginning in 1896, but the correct date is 1884. Thus, the two works appeared virtually at the same time—not coincidentally following the death of Iakov Brafman (December 28, 1879), the notorious censor who had devoted his career to suppressing Jewish ritual legal works he saw as abetting a Jewish state within a state. Perhaps Soloveitchik means that the authors were divided by their respective geographical contexts? But both resided in the same yeshiva-rich region, what would later become eastern Poland. Moreover, the Jewish population in Epstein's Nowogródek was at least five times that of the Hafetz Hayyim's town, Raduń. Nor was Epstein less worldly; he spent extensive time in St. Petersburg dealing with censors.[2]

Perhaps the authors' motivations differed? Yet if we read their introductions, we find that their aims were virtually identical: to overcome the confusion caused by numerous commentaries on the *Shulhan Arukh* and other codes. The Hafetz Hayyim did not invoke any manifestation of secularization, as Soloveitchik would have us expect.[3]

We do find evidence of an early division over textuality in the realm of women's education, however. As historians have shown, many women in late nineteenth-century east European Jewish society experienced a personal crisis as a result of the neglect of their Jewish education yet unique access to secular education.[4] Epstein rejected the rather obvious solution of formal female Jewish education: "ours has never been the custom to teach [women] from a book, and we never heard of that custom," he explained. "Rather every woman teaches the relevant laws to her daughter and daughter-in-law." He was thus surprised to learn that, "recently, [Jewish] laws pertaining to women have been published in the vernacular for women who can read from them." [5] Rachel and Charles Manekin have demonstrated that the book in question was *Geder Olam* (1889), composed by none other than the Hafetz Hayyim, who blamed current female immodesty on the fact that some young women "don't have parents who can teach them." [6] He urged women to read the book and teach it to those who were illiterate. This textual remedy anticipated his postwar endorsement of Bais Yaakov schools for girls and women in *Likutei Halakhot* (1921, not 1918 as Soloveitchik asserts). [7]

Nevertheless, the "dual tradition of the intellectual and the mimetic" does not yet seem to have begun to "break down," as Soloveitchik puts it. Instead, the *Mishnah Berurah* and the *Arukh Ha-Shulhan* continued both the intellectual *and* mimetic traditions, which were "two different but longstanding and well-established traditions," according to Michael J. Broyde and Shlomo C. Pill (indeed, both variant methods were employed at least as far back as the Middle Ages). [8] Both works were, moreover, reprinted several times over the subsequent decades, though they were rarely incorporated into yeshiva curricula. [9] In addition, "customs manuals" (*sifrei minhagim*), driven overwhelmingly by prevailing practices, became very popular at this time, another likely consequence of the relaxation of censorship after Brafman's death. Abraham Sperling's *Sefer Ta'ame Ha-Minhagim* (1888), for example, was printed,

expanded, and reprinted, including in Yiddish, so that “every person should know how to behave.”[10]

World War I did arguably create something of a rupture and text-based reconstruction, as the Jewish populace was plundered, exiled, and executed as alleged spies and communities were disbanded. Postwar pogroms, in addition, brought devastating sexual violence and over one hundred thousand deaths, while Soviet anti-religious campaigns drove traditionalism underground. Across the border, in the new Second Polish Republic, Jewish secularist and traditionalist movements grew in tandem and in tension. Hasidic leaders responded to the various threats to tradition by institutionalizing Torah study on a vast scale.[11] An unprecedented number of Hasidic yeshivas sprung up, around a dozen of which quickly became world-renowned.[12] The Hasidic yeshiva soon displaced the Hasidic court as the main site of power and prestige; and rebbes began to function more as educators than miracle workers. At the same time, religious observance declined among the growing numbers of secular-oriented youths in both market towns (*shtetlekh*) and cities, yet there was no corresponding tendency toward stringency as had occurred in Hungarian lands. To the contrary, several Polish Hasidic leaders established modernized yeshivas offering secular and vocational education, cafeterias, dormitories, and in-house journals, and they institutionalized women’s education on a wide scale. Their flexible pedagogical response fueled a Hasidic revival in Poland during the last decades before the Holocaust.[13]

As Soloveitchik notes, the shift to textuality became even more pronounced after the Holocaust, when most religious role models had been murdered and surviving remnants of communities were dispersed abroad. The textual dependency of the next generation of American (ultra-)Orthodox Jews may have yielded “stringency, ‘maximum position compliance,’ and the proliferation of complications and demands” in response to the catastrophe, as Soloveitchik proposes (p. 10). However, there are other, equally compelling explanations for the textual turn; most important, the prodigious American printing enterprises were likely also products of the relative cheapness and availability of printing and a stronger consumer base. Additional features of the American context might help explain other departures from old cultural patterns, such as the Protestant discouragement of emotive worship (e.g., weeping) and demonic belief. The concluding

“Replies to Critics” section unfortunately reinforces as many myths as it dispels: the fictional Tevye is invoked to represent bygone Jewish religiosity, and the village rather than the market town (*shtetl*) is incorrectly deemed a typical Jewish setting. A more realistic portrayal of the east European “old country” would consider the increasing diversity of religious observance in both market towns and cities, where most Jews lived, leading to a veritable clash of subcultures. But notwithstanding the errors, oversimplifications, and speculations, surprising as they are for such an eminent historian of *halakha*, Soloveitchik has identified one plausible explanation for the dynamic changes that occurred within Jewish traditionalism, a fascinating paradox, and opened an important conversation.

Notes

[1]. Soloveitchik refers to both the “Orthodox” and the “ultra-Orthodox” but argues that the hypertextual change took place in “its swiftest and most intense form” in the ultra-Orthodox camp (p. 2).

[2]. Eitam Shimon Henkin, *Taarokh Lifonai Shulhan* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2018), 236-42.

[3]. The Hafetz Hayyim explained that many have “lost heart and have been overcome by troubles, for if a person seeks by such study to know the proper application of a typical law he must toil with it for several days and sometimes several weeks.... It is very difficult to derive the law’s practical application owing to the numerous differing opinions brought by the later authorities, and a person doesn’t know whether to turn himself to the right or to the left.” Israel Meir Kagan, *Mishnah Berurah: Orah Hayyim* (Warsaw: Yosef Unterhendler, 1884), 6. Epstein similarly explained that the multiplicity of commentaries inadvertently caused “the doubts and the confusion to come back.” Yehiel Mikhel Epstein, *Arukh Ha-Shulhan* (Warsaw: Natan Shriftgisser, 1883-84), 3.

[4]. Shaul Stampfer, “Gender Differentiation and Education of the Jewish Woman in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe,” *Polin* 7 (1992): 459–83; and Rachel Manekin, *Rebellion of the Daughters: Jewish Women Runaways in Habsburg Galicia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

- [5]. Epstein, *Arukh Ha-Shulhan*, section "Yoreh Deah," 246:19.
- [6]. Israel Meir Kagan, *Geder Olam* (1889; repr., Warsaw: H.mo.l, 1892), 27.
- [7]. Rachel and Charles Manekin, "The Hafetz Hayyim's Statement on Teaching Torah to Girls in *Likutei Halakhot*: Literary and Historical Context," *Seforim Blog*, May 27, 2020, <https://seforimblog.com/2020/05/the-hafetz-hayyims-statement-on-teaching-torah-to-girls-in...>
- [8]. See Michael J. Broyde and Shlomo C. Pill, "Building the Set Table: An Introduction to the Jurisprudence of Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein's *Arukh ha-Shulhan* in Contrast to the *Mishnah Berurah*," *Dine Yisrael* 33, no. 1 (2020): 36.
- [9]. An exception was the Hafetz Hayyim's own yeshiva. See Ben Tsion Klibansky, *Ketzur Halamish: Tor Ha-Zahav Shel Ha-Yeshivot Ha-Litaiyot Be-Mizrah Eyropa* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2014), 327.
- [10]. Abraham Sperling, *Sefer Ta'ame Ha-Minhagim U-Mekore Ha-Dinim* (Lemberg: Salat, 1896), introduction.
- [11]. The founders of the Mesivta yeshiva, for example, cited the "destruction of nearly every Torah institution," as a result of which the youth were "forcibly cut off from Torah study, the study halls were left desolate, and the Torah was left in a corner without strivers or seekers." In response, they founded "a yeshiva, a fortress 'stronghold' for Torah, 'a sturdy tower' [Proverbs 18:10] for divine awe, a firewall for religion and faith." See *Mossad Ha-Yeshivah Ha-Gedolah Ve-Ha-Megoarah Metivta* (Warsaw: Rekord, 1922), 5-7.
- [12]. Shaul Stampfer, "Hasidic Yeshivot in Inter-War Poland," in *Families, Rabbis, and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Littman, 2010), 252-76.
- [13]. See my forthcoming book, *The Light of Learning: The Hasidic Revival in Poland on the Eve of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Citation: Glenn Dynner. Review of Soloveitchik, Haym, *Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Modern Orthodoxy*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2022. URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57553>

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