



Rav Soloveitchik Documentary Airs At Yeshiva University

By: Elliot Resnick, *Jewish Press Staff Reporter*

Wednesday, February 7, 2007

Approximately one thousand people gathered this past Saturday night to view the New York premiere of the documentary, “The Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.” The film, directed and produced by a young Modern Orthodox Jew, Ethan Isenberg, was shown in Yeshiva University’s Lampert Auditorium, the same hall where Rav Soloveitchik annually delivered his hours-long public lectures.

The documentary, 99 minutes long, traces the life of Rav Soloveitchik from his youth as his father’s student in Russia through his studies at the University of Berlin to his emigration to the United States, where he founded the Maimonides school in Boston and taught Talmud to thousands at New York’s Yeshiva University. Rav Soloveitchik – or “the Rav,” as he is affectionately known – shaped policy for large segments of American Jewry through his stature and positions in the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) and the Religious Zionists of America-Mizrachi.

Overall reaction to the film was positive. “The film definitely gave me an appreciation for the Rav, his brilliance and knowledge, and the integrity to stand up for his principles,” said Stern College student Judy Gorelick-Feldman.

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, Yeshiva University chancellor and former student of Rav Soloveitchik, told the crowd before the screening that the film would offer “an opportunity to appreciate to some extent why the Rav’s students all but worship him.”

The movie, however, with its slow music and theme of loneliness, engendered melancholic feelings among some in the audience. In a panel discussion after the film, one of Rav Soloveitchik’s students, YU Rosh Kollel Rabbi Hershel Schachter, made a point of stressing that his *rebbe* was also known to crack jokes and relate stories.

Also on the panel was a grandson of Rav Soloveitchik, YU Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Mayer Twersky, who stressed that his grandfather’s loneliness was philosophical, not social. Based on Rav Soloveitchik’s famous essay from which the film takes its title, Rabbi Twersky said his grandfather felt estranged from modern technological society and also experienced the loneliness that a man of faith feels when “he loses his proximity to the *Ribono Shel Olam*, even for a fleeting moment.”

Isenberg, the director, told The Jewish Press that “some of the subtlety that we were able to give to the concept of loneliness, unfortunately, had to be cut in the interests of time.” Nonetheless, he said, the theme of loneliness is “a real one” and that Rav Soloveitchik experienced trouble connecting to others.

One student shown in the film, YU Professor Rabbi Shalom Carmy, remembers Rav Soloveitchik telling him that he thought there “wasn’t any interest” in his writings, in explaining why he didn’t publish more.

Other topics discussed by the panel included Rav Soloveitchik’s attitude to secular studies – “He didn’t think we have to be afraid of secular studies,” Rabbi Schachter said – and Torah study for women. (Rav Soloveitchik delivered the first Talmud *shiur* at Stern College.)

Asked by the discussion’s moderator, the dean of YU’s Center for the Jewish Future, Rabbi Kenneth Brander, to briefly describe Rav Soloveitchik’s legacy, the panelists offered diverse answers. He was a “giant of Torah” said Rabbi Twersky, who remembers his grandfather as “warm, caring and exceedingly humble.”

Rabbi Schachter said, “Rav Soloveitchik felt that we shouldn’t just seclude ourselves in Williamsburg, [but that] we need to have Jews in all of society who are *talmidei chachamim*, as doctors and lawyers...”

And the third panelist, OU CEO and RIETS Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Menachem Genack, recalled that Rav Soloveitchik “had great faith in the individual, [who] possesses *tzelem Elokim*, and was wary of organizations.”

Isenberg added his own reflections in talking to The Jewish Press. “The Rav stresses man’s uniqueness. He stresses the importance of creativity in religious life. For me that was fascinating.

“He was very into independence, which speaks to me. But at the same time, not an independence where ‘I do whatever I want,’ [but one where a person] really works in the framework of halachah and the Jewish tradition.”

Isenberg said he hopes to have a theatrical release, so that Jews and non-Jews who might otherwise not come to a viewing in a shul would also benefit from the film. He also hopes his film will air on television, after which he hopes to release it in CD form, with added material.