

A Novice Filmmaker Profiles a 'Lonely Man of Faith'

When the mail arrived one day in the late summer of 2004, Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter found a large envelope bearing the return address of one Ethan Isenberg.

ON RELIGION

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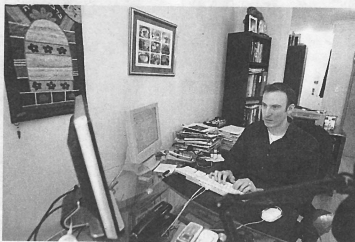
Manhattan, a young man who was working as a computer programmer.

At this point, Rabbi Schacter was serving as dean of the Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik Foundation in suburban Boston, dedicated to the legacy of its namesake, who died at age 90 in 1993 as arguably the most important Orthodox rabbi in 20th-century America. Anyone interested in doing serious scholarship about Rabbi Soloveitchik tended to make contact with the foundation eventually, asking for assistance, money, formal approval or all of the above.

The foundation had probably never received a petitioner as ambitious and unlikely as Mr. Isenberg. He proposed to write and direct a documentary film about Rabbi Soloveitchik's life and work. His filmmaking résumé consisted of some basketball highlight films and Purim satires he had shot as a student in a yeshiva high school in Los Angeles. Whatever he had learned about cinema since then had come through a few internships and college courses.

Mr. Isenberg's goal was, to put it mildly, daunting. In death as in life, Rabbi Soloveitchik was a figure at once monumental, controversial and obscure. Within the Orthodox sector, he had been so revered as a philosopher, Talmud scholar and teacher of young rabbis that he was known, in worshipful tones, as The Rav, The Rabbi, a proper noun implying there were no equal. Mr. Isenberg had been hearing of Rabbi Soloveitchik from his childhood rabbi through high school and into a postcollege year of religious study in Israel, growing ever more fascinated.

Yet to the 90 percent of American Jews who are not Orthodox,



RUTH FREEMAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ethan Isenberg began in 2004 to pitch a documentary film he had in mind on the life and work of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik.

to say nothing of the 98 percent of Americans who are not Jewish, Rabbi Soloveitchik remained largely unknown. His opposite number in Conservative Judaism, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, had a far higher profile.

Indeed, as Mr. Isenberg pitched his audacious project, no thorough biography of Rabbi Soloveitchik existed for the general public. The rabbi's own books, and those about him, had been published almost entirely by small religious presses, sometimes only in Hebrew.

"It was definitely a crazy idea," Mr. Isenberg, a 31-year-old who has lived in New York for the last decade, said, recalling his approach to Rabbi Schacter about the documentary. "I thought, 'Who am I to make a film about Rabbi Soloveitchik?' I felt I didn't have the seasoning, the skills, the authority to take on this subject. But I was also impatient. I didn't want to go to film school. I didn't want to do more internships, just answering phones or hanging around sets."

The combination of fear and fearlessness must have served Mr. Isenberg well. The provisional script he sent to the Soloveitchik Foundation, the product of a year of unpaid labor, impressed Rabbi Schacter. The foundation did not have money for the documentary, as Mr. Isenberg had hoped it had, but Rabbi Schacter became the first prominent rabbi and scholar to ratify a neophyte filmmaker's promise.

"You have to start somewhere," said Rabbi Schacter, currently a professor of Jewish history and thought at Yeshiva University in New York. "He put a lot of time and energy into it. And what impressed me most was the depth and sophistication."

Complimented but still broke, Mr. Isenberg encountered an elderly, self-made business magnate in Southern California. Beginning with about \$20,000 in the spring of 2005, enough for Mr. Isenberg to film an 18-minute trailer, this philanthropist (who has refused to be publicly identified) supplied the project with financing in "the high six figures," Mr. Isenberg said. As important, the donor trusted Mr. Isenberg enough to give him editorial control, vital to the film's sense of journalistic and academic integrity.

By late 2007, Mr. Isenberg had compiled nearly 90 hours of footage and winnowed it to the 99 minutes that comprise "Lonely Man of Faith," a title he borrowed from one of Rabbi Soloveitchik's most famous essays. Since then, the documentary has been shown at film festivals in the United States, Israel and Canada. But as if to demonstrate the marginal status for Rabbi Soloveitchik in mainstream circles, "Lonely Man of Faith" has yet to be picked up for cable, public television or art-house release, or even a major Jewish film festival.

Whether or not the film ultimately escapes its ghetto, its quality has struck knowledgeable

observers. "I thought the film was very fine," said Jonathan D. Sarna of Brandeis University, a leading historian of American Jewry.

While Rabbi Soloveitchik's roles as Talmudist and philosopher "are impossible to translate to the screen," Dr. Sarna continued, "the film does give viewers a sense of why The Rav was revered in his lifetime and continues to inspire modern Orthodox Jews to this day."

The documentary covers all the necessary factual ground, tracing its protagonist from his upbringing in a renowned rabbinic family in Eastern Europe to his studies of secular philosophy at the University of Berlin through immigration to the United States in the 1930s and a career at Yeshiva University. Mr. Isenberg's film also makes the case that Rabbi Soloveitchik embodied many of the signal trends within the modern Orthodox movement. He founded a religious day school, the Maimonides School in Brookline, Mass., at a time when virtually all American Jews were attending public school. He embraced Zionism in midcentury while many Orthodox authorities opposed the concept of any Jewish state until the messianic era. He supported religious dialogue with Conservative and Reform Jewish figures, again in defiance of Orthodox norms.

The theme of loneliness runs through both Rabbi Soloveitchik's public and private lives. His lifelong effort to reconcile Orthodox observance with modern secular life invited a backlash from many Orthodox Jews on his religious right. Even some of his own students, Rabbi Soloveitchik says in the film, rejected his example.

The other form of loneliness turns on the personal portrait of Rabbi Soloveitchik.

Educated by a brilliant but emotionally remote father, introduced to secular literature by a more worldly mother, transplanted first to Germany and then to America, Rabbi Soloveitchik in his later life repeatedly expressed a sense of isolation, even when surrounded by protégés and admirers. The documentary quotes a rabbi and professor as calling him "the loneliest man I have ever met in my life."