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# Soloveitchik isn't dead

## Film about Rav's legacy brings director with Portland ties to Jewish film festival

By **Paul Haist**  
*Jewish Review*



**DURING** his more than 40 years at Yeshiva University, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik ordained more than 2,000 rabbis.

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As a 30-year-old today who grew up in Los Angeles, filmmaker Ethan Isenberg had no opportunity to meet the subject of what was to be his first documentary film.

To the best of Isenberg's knowledge, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who died when Isenberg was a teenager, never came to the West Coast.

Now, however, film goes in Portland will be able to meet the renowned and revered late rabbi when Isenberg's film, "Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik," is screened at the Portland Art Museum on the afternoon of Jan. 21, the fourth film in this year's Portland Jewish Film Festival.

Apart from the intrinsic attraction of a

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**JEWISH REVIEW**

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film about a man widely regarded as the most influential American rabbi of the 20th century, "Lonely Man of Faith" will be of interest to Portlanders also for the fact that Isenberg is married to the former Nili Schiffman, a Portland Jewish Academy graduate and the daughter of Charles and Marsha Schiffman of Portland.

The Isenbergs live in Manhattan now.

Charles Schiffman is the executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland.

Although Isenberg had no direct contact with Soloveitchik, there was indirect influence from the man some hail as the indisputable leader of Modern Orthodox Judaism in America.

"The rabbi of my shul was a student of Soloveitchik," said Isenberg, who began reading Soloveitchik on his own only a few years ago.

"As I read more of his biography, a lot of things appealed to me. He promotes the value of creativity in Jewish life," said Isenberg.

He contrasted this aspect of Soloveitchik's thinking with a view among some Jews that there is not so much room for individualism and creativity in observant Jewish life.

"Lots of people see it as just being obedient to a higher will...subordinate to the demands of God and your religious authorities," said Isenberg.

But Soloveitchik, he added, "came from a line of rabbis in which being creative and unique was highly valued."

Soloveitchik defended Orthodox Judaism "against critics who thought it old-fashioned and stifling," according to Isenberg.

"That inspires me," he said. "I like trying to be unique. In artistic work, you try to be your own person. Soloveitchik counseled his students to be themselves. He guided his students to find answers on their own."

What Isenberg called an "intriguing" consequence of the appeal of Soloveitchik's thinking in this area—finding answers on one's own—is the fact that on controversial issues in the Jewish community "Soloveitchik is often quoted by people on both sides."

Soloveitchik's challenge and achievement among American Jewry, issues that Isenberg addresses in his film, are aptly summarized on the film's Web site ([lonelymanoffaith.com](http://lonelymanoffaith.com)).

"Rabbi Soloveitchik spent much of his life trying to negotiate between the demands of Judaism and the opportunities of the modern age, and this struggle became a constant theme throughout his writings and teachings. He encouraged his community to accommodate the positive developments of modernity, while fighting those trends he perceived as negative, such as increased secularism and excessive parochialism."

Soloveitchik's influence emanated not only from his role as an important philosophical thinker, but also from the fact that many of today's senior rabbis were instructed and ordained by him.

During his more than 40-year tenure at Yeshiva University, where he was acknowledged as a Talmudic mastermind, he ordained more than 2,000 rabbis.

To tell the story of Soloveitchik and the legacy that keeps him alive in the minds of Jews everywhere, Isenberg found some rich visual resources.

While there may be no shortage of fascinating scholarship about Soloveitchik, Isenberg acknowledged that if he the rabbi had been a 19th-century figure, this wouldn't have been much of a film."

Fortunately, the rabbi was extensively photographed during parts of his career, including by famed photographer Cornell Capa for a 1950s Life magazine spread on Judaism, part of a series the magazine ran on the world's great religions.

Capa and a reporter attended one of Soloveitchik's classes and were blown away," said Isenberg. "They came back a second day; we got hold of some of those films (photographs)."

He and his production team found more, including film footage and early videotape. "We also got hold of little-seen films," he said, including a film of what is believed to be the first wedding at which Soloveitchik officiated after coming to the United States.

There is also film of the rabbi, perhaps from the 1960s, at the Maimonides School, a Jewish day school in Brookline, Mass., which the rabbi established in 1937.

Then, when the film was practically in the can—after nearly four years of writing and production, about a dozen videotapes of Soloveitchik lectures from the 1970s were discovered in someone's basement.

"We got them in the last week and were able to make changes to the film," said Isenberg. Four-time Tony-nominated actress and singer Tovah Feldshuh narrates the film. Theodore Bikel is the voice of Soloveitchik.

Isenberg studied documentary filmmaking at Columbia University and Film/Video Arts in New York. He studied multimedia at the University of Southern California. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in English Literature with a concentration in film studies, and a bachelor of science in computer science, both from the University of Pennsylvania.

Besides having worked previously as a computer programmer, Isenberg spent two years of study at a yeshiva in Israel.

The Jan. 21 screening of "Lonely Man of Faith" begins at 4:30 p.m. Isenberg will be on hand to introduce the film. For ticket information, see the boxed feature on the preceding page.

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