

Rav Soloveitchik Returns

Saturday Night Event Draws Large Crowd

Elliot Kaminetzky

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On Saturday night, February 3rd, over 1,100 roshei yeshiva, administrators, alumni, students, and guests packed the Lamport Auditorium for a sold-out screening of Ethan Isenberg's documentary *The Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*. The film offered a vivid and complex image of the YU icon, highlighting the Rav's feelings of loneliness. According to Isenberg, the Rav felt that he could not communicate with his society, writing in his work *Lonely Man of Faith*, "I am lonely, because I am a man of faith in the modern world." Later that evening, this facet of the Rav's character was challenged by a panel consisting of four of the Rav's students. The screening was preceded by an address from Chancellor Rabbi Norman Lamm, who stated that the film was not to serve as a critique, but instead as a means to better understand the Rav.

Next to speak was Ethan Isenberg, the documentary's director and producer, who shared his goals in making the film. He wanted to provide insight into how important a personality Rabbi Soloveitchik is for his (Mr. Isenberg's) generation. Having never met the Rav himself, Mr. Isenberg was guided by Rabbi Dr. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, a former student of the Rav, who had always wanted to create such a documentary.

The documentary provided its viewers with an intimate understanding of the Rav's personality, which emerges from his words, his interactions, and his history. The film began with the story of the Rav's childhood. His father, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, knew well that he bore the responsibility of raising a future leader, and trained him vigorously in the Brisker analysis approach to Talmud. But it was his mother, Pesha (Feinstein) Soloveitchik, who provided Yosef with his religious passion, as well as an appreciation for the knowledge of the secular world - Mada. When he left for the University of Berlin, not knowing whether he would ever see his father again, Rav Moshe simply shook his hand and sent him off with a blessing. The Rav explained that his father felt that the more deep and intense the emotion, the more it must be kept locked within.

The film revealed a very human Rav Soloveitchik who fell in love with a fellow PhD Philosophy student, Tanya Levitt, without the consent of his father. He simply responded to his father's complaint with a Talmud that proved such consent was not necessary. After the death of his father, the Rav began teaching shiur at YU. On the 4th floor of Furst Hall Rav Soloveitchik began giving what was described as the most dynamic and frightening shiur YU had ever seen. "What kind of nonsense is that," he would respond to a half-witted answer. "A question," one student recalled, "meant putting your life at stake." Rav Schachter, barely able to contain himself when describing his rebbe's shiur, said, "when the Rav gave shiur it was like angels were descending from heaven. It came together like a symphony orchestra."

Weaved throughout the documentary was a theme of the Rav's loneliness, resulting from many factors. Intellectually, the Rav stood above all of those surrounding him, and he felt his students were unable to understand him. His staunch commitment to his centrist ideals, specifically those concerning secular education, put him at odds with the right-wing community. As America underwent rapid modernization, he felt religiosity was becoming a means of self-fulfillment.

Following the screening, a panel of the Rav's students unanimously

rejected the interpretation of what the Rav had meant by his loneliness. Rav Schachter pointed out that many of the pictures in the film were of a smiling Rav Soloveitchik, a happy man, not a lonely one. Rav Twersky offered an interpretation of what the Rav had meant by his loneliness, limiting it to a philosophical and ontological one, and not an emotional one.

Another point that was addressed was the ambiguity of the Rav's halachic stances. The film had quoted someone as saying that two people sitting in the same class would understand the Rav differently. Rav Schachter denied that this was unique to the Rav, but rather represented the overall nature of Halachic responsa - different answers can be legitimately offered to the same question.

With regards to the panel's limiting the Rav's notion of loneliness to one existing simply on a philosophical/ontological plane, the filmmaker responded that, unlike the panel, he was not privileged to know the Rav personally, but based on his extensive research, he had reason to believe that the Rav's loneliness existed on the emotional plane. Isenberg sighted a proof from the Rav's work *Kol Dodi Dofek* in which he describes his loneliness as a type of depression.

This screening offered a complex and beautiful image of the man whose ideals still continue to shape Yeshiva University. These intricacies were ironed out by the panel, who wanted to share the ways in which the Rav remains in their own memories.

Memories were brought to life; Rav Charlop announced that, like Moses bringing up the bones of Yosef from Egypt, Ethan Isenberg brought up the life of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik for everyone to appreciate.