

# Beloved but controversial rabbi is the focus for first-time filmmaker

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | November 9, 2006

Famous and lonely. Traditional and modern. Beloved and controversial.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the long time Brookline resident who was widely considered the intellectual leader of modern Orthodoxy, is, 13 years after his death, simultaneously one of the most revered and least understood figures in American Jewish history.

Now Ethan Isenberg, a 30-year-old Los Angeles native who decided on a whim to dedicate the high school yearbook he edited to Soloveitchik, has made the first film to attempt to examine the life and legacy of the rabbi, who died in 1993 at the age of 90. Soloveitchik, raised in what is now Belarus and raised as the heir to a dynasty of renowned Talmud scholars, came to the United States in 1932, was informally called chief rabbi of Boston, and spent decades commuting between Massachusetts, where he founded the Maimonides School, and New York, where he taught hundreds of future rabbis at Yeshiva University.

"Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik" is a 99-minute documentary which has its world premiere tonight in a sold-out screening at the Boston Jewish Film Festival. It is the first film by Isenberg, but he had some experienced help: Executive producer Marilyn Ness worked on several Ric Burns documentaries for PBS, actress Tovah Feldshuh narrates, and actor Theodore Bikel provides the voice of Soloveitchik.

Isenberg, a modern Orthodox Jew who lives in Manhattan, spoke with the Globe last week about his experience making the film.

**Q** Why Rabbi Soloveitchik?

**A** I wanted to make a film on a Jewish subject that wasn't what's typically seen. I wanted to be able to show somebody who is a complicated individual, who can be religious, but also not be one of these simple, 'Fiddler on the Roof' - type individuals. I wanted to deal with a Jewish subject that wasn't limited to just somebody surviving the Holocaust. There are so many topics within Judaism -- it's such a rich religion and I feel like people outside of that context have no concept whatsoever because they're constantly bombarded with these Hollywood stereotypes, and I saw this is an opportunity to try to present a fascinating individual and give somebody a glimpse into that world.

**Q** How did you balance biography, which obviously is more accessible, with philosophy, which for a lot of people is difficult to relate to?

**A** That was something I was struggling with from the beginning, and I was never sure whether I'd be able to pull it off. I would say in the end we leaned more toward biography, because we realized it's really the story that draws somebody.

**Q** What did you do about the absence of video?

**A** Thank God, we had a lot of photographs. To be honest, if we didn't have any photographs of him, I don't know how I would make the story. And I was actually lucky to get some never-before-seen film and video footage.

**Q** What are the challenges of presenting a nuanced portrait of somebody who is a legendary figure?

**A** That was a huge challenge. To begin with, Rabbi Soloveitchik's legacy is hotly in dispute. There are tons of fights, and people get really passionate about who he was and what he did. And these are not just scholars arguing about him but in most cases these are his own students and in some cases family members. And for many people, Rabbi Soloveitchik is modern Orthodoxy, so they're not just arguing about a person, they're arguing about their own beliefs, their own theology, their own religion. I had to be very careful to keep a balanced approach and had to gain people's trust, and that took time.

**Q** What's next for you?

**A** I wish I had a clear answer for that. One of my ideas is to do a history of the Soviet Jewry movement, but I'm not sure I'm at the point yet where I can actually handle something that complicated. An obvious idea would be to do biographies of other major Jewish figures, like the Lubavitcher Rebbe , or like Shlomo Carlebach , the famous Jewish singer. But I'd also like to do films on current issues and events. ■

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