

'Lonely Man' finds a crowd

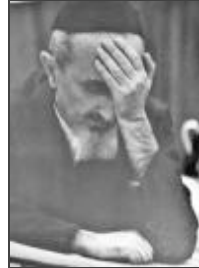
By Julie Masis - Friday November 3 2006

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There is a movie at this year's Boston Jewish Film Festival that has a special connection to Boston. "Lonely Man of Faith" is a documentary about Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the father of modern Jewish orthodoxy and the Maimonides School in Brookline.



Featuring historic footage and interviews with

people who knew the famous rabbi, the documentary traces Soloveitchik's life from the beginning to the end. The viewer learns about the small Byelorussian shtetl where Soloveitchik's parents lived, about his relationship with his father, a very religious man, and his mother, who also read secular and non-Jewish Russian authors, such as Dostoyevsky and Pushkin. The viewer also hears from Soloveitchik's sister about how the family escaped the Soviet Union shortly after the Communist revolution, to settle in Warsaw.

The film follows Soloveitchik to pre-WWII Berlin, where he studied philosophy, fell in love and married. It also reveals some of the major issues Soloveitchik focused on after moving to America, such as his effort to ensure that meat marketed as kosher in Boston butchereries were actually kosher. Soloveitchik also supported the only Jewish demonstration during WWII – a small group of Orthodox rabbis who marched to Washington to protest the fact that the United States was doing nothing about the Holocaust.

Throughout the film, the camera zooms in on photographs of Soloveitchik in a Yeshiva University classroom, and at the Maimonides school, while interviewing former students. Soloveitchik passed away in 1993. First-time New York City Filmmaker Ethan Isenberg, 30, who comes from a modern Orthodox background, made the film after meeting an Israeli rabbi who wrote a book about Soloveitchik. He said he wanted to make the movie because the Rev was different from a typical rabbi since he was both bound in tradition and in modernity.

"I wanted to present a Jewish role model. Somebody who is not really talked about," Isenberg said. He added that most Jewish characters in film fit into a stereotype – it's either a Yiddishe mama, a rabbi who is learned but simple-minded and superstitious, or a stereotypical assimilated Jew.

One look at Soloveitchik's photo, and it's evident that he was different. He wears a yarmulke on his head, but not a large black hat. He has a beard, but shaves a part of his face and doesn't have side locks. He defended the tradition that men and women should sit separately in synagogues, but argued that women should study the Torah as well as secular subjects.

"Some people look at him as an old style yeshiva teacher who was steeped in tradition but knew very well how to package and present

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things. The other group of people see him as a radical modernist,” Isenberg said. “Years later people still have passionate debates about who he was.”

Soloveitchik established the Maimonides School in 1937. Promoting students’ achievement in both religious and secular subjects, the school today has around 600 students, and 150 faculty members, including a dozen rabbis.

“The school is excited about the release of the film because Rabbi Soloveitchik was a towering figure in American Orthodoxy,” said Maimonides School’s Executive Director Josh Wolff.

The Rev joins a class of rabbis whose lives were chronicled through documentaries.

For instance, Isenberg once saw a film about Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Kook – the first chief rabbi of Palestine before the founding of the state of Israel. There is also a movie about the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The funny thing, Isenberg said, is that these three famous rabbis – Soloveitchik, Kook and Menachem Mendel Schneerson – were all students at the University of Berlin at around the same time.

“I have fantasy dreams about them hanging out at the cafeteria playing pool,” Isenberg said.

“Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy” of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik will screen at 8 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 9 at the Museum of Fine Arts.

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