

- Pilnik (Page 1)
- Jotkowitz (Page 3)

SHEMINI

YOU CAN SPONSOR A “LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS” AT
[HTTPS://WWW.THELEHRHAUS.COM/SPONSOR-LEHRHAUS-SHABBOS/](https://www.thelehrhaus.com/sponsor-lehrhaus-shabbos/)

MODERN ORTHODOX JEWS SHOULD BE
TRAILBLAZERS IN HOLOCAUST
EDUCATION

SHAY PILNIK is director of the Emil A. and Jenny Fish Holocaust and Genocide Studies Center at Yeshiva University.

Well, it’s about time!” was the typical reaction when I informed my friends, colleagues, and relatives about my new job as founding director of Yeshiva University’s Fish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. “Are you seriously telling me that YU does not have a Holocaust studies center?” “What took them so long?” was another reaction, somewhat less common, from those more direct. These reactions, coming from both observant and non-observant Jews, made me fairly quickly realize the relative lack of emphasis on Holocaust education and commemoration in the Orthodox community. A deeper historical perspective on this phenomenon highlights the challenges and unique potential for the next generation of students.

For the last thirty years, a plethora of Holocaust museums and centers have dotted the American landscape. Ever since the first official international gathering of Holocaust survivors in Israel in the early 1980s, led by Elie Wiesel, these institutions took a similar shape as products of a hard, creative, and inter-generational endeavor of survivors and their children. In their optimal form, they turned into communal education efforts, grassroots, primarily volunteer-propelled, and stemming from the same four-word *raison d’être*: “Never Forget” and “Never Again.”

It seems to me that such non-denominational efforts have dominated the discourse and largely outstripped the Orthodox community’s efforts in Holocaust education. To varying degrees, this omission has also applied to

institutions and communities that identify as Modern Orthodox. My observation is impressionistic, rooted in my sense of the community and its values, rather than concrete data. I am not aware of studies on the matter, which warrants further sociological research. Of course, many may rightfully object, pointing to some notable examples: the life-long dedication of Dr. Yaffa Eliach to the subject, the literature on Jewish Responsa to the Holocaust, the YU high schools’ *Names, Not Numbers* project, or Azrieli’s Holocaust Education Journal *Prism*. However, in my experience as a Holocaust educator in the Midwest, I sensed a passive attitude toward Holocaust education and commemoration; Orthodox Jews tended to avoid the subject or channel their educational energies elsewhere, both in their own synagogues and inter-denominational, Jewish Community Center, or Federation settings.

This lack of involvement is particularly puzzling and deserves further reflection. For we know that less involvement does not reflect less care about the Holocaust. It is inconceivable that Orthodox Jews are less passionate than their non-observant co-religionists about commemorating the six million Jews who perished in the Nazi ghettos, labor camps, and extermination facilities. On the contrary, in my interaction with Orthodox Jews of all variations, I always sensed that the very foundation of their commitment to Torah, Jewish continuity, and the building of a thriving life both in Israel and the world over, emanated from a profound commitment to the undoing of the Final Solution. The Orthodox Jewish cultural renaissance is the most enduring response to Hitler’s plan.

While the Orthodox response to the Holocaust, viewed from this angle, emerges as longstanding and consistent, it is also noteworthy that the Orthodox voice was the first to appear in the American Jewish arena. Rabbi Eliezer Silver, the head of the Vaad Hatzalah (the Orthodox Union’s body

whose task was to rescue rabbis and yeshiva students trapped in Nazi-occupied Europe), was one of the first responders to unfolding events in Europe. According to Prof. Gershon Greenberg, Rabbi Silver began using the term Holocaust as early as 1942 in reaction to the news about the mass slaughter of Jews coming from Nazi-occupied Europe.¹ Greenberg notes that by stark contrast, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the Lithuanian-born founding father of Reconstructionist Judaism, systematically refrained from making any references to the destruction of Europe's Jews in his writings from the war years and immediate post-war period. The subsequent denominational reversal demands explanation: how come the Jews from whose ranks the term "Holocaust" came have been more passive in recent decades about Holocaust commemorative and educational activities?

The answer to this difficult question is encapsulated in a two-word Latin term that any student of Holocaust Studies must be familiar with: *sui generis*, constituting a class of its own, the dominant approach to Holocaust Education in the post-*Schindler's List* era. In this view, the Holocaust takes place on "Planet Auschwitz," or as the French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard put it, it is an "earthquake which destroys not merely lives, buildings and objects, but also the instruments used to measure directly or indirectly, making the event impossible to quantify." In contrast, however, Orthodox Jews tend to crystallize the memory of the Holocaust not as a separate category, but rather as seamlessly connected with the grander scheme of Jewish history and destiny. Hence the attempt, while not boycotting communal Yom HaShoah commemorations, to seek alternatives to it, like featuring Holocaust programs on Tish'a Be-Av or Asara Be-Tevet.² Hence the commitment to the Jewish day school movement and to the rebuilding of the annihilated world of the predominantly traditional dead Jews of Europe. Usage of the term *Hurban* ("destruction") or its Yiddish inflection *churben* instead of *Holocaust* or *Shoah* ("darkness") creates a thematic link to the ancient destructions of the First and Second Temples, thereby implicitly rejecting a founding principle of Holocaust Studies. The desire to conceive of the Holocaust in Jewish holistic terms and as continuous with the Jewish past and future, while sometimes misunderstood by outsiders, has characterized the uniqueness of the Orthodox response to the Holocaust.

The reason for taking this posture was twofold: the view of Jewish life as a response to the Holocaust that we touched upon earlier, and the concern about the *sui generis*

approach of Holocaust education over the last decade as shaped by predominantly non-observant Jews. To put it another way, the forces operating here were a pull - the gravitation toward Jewish continuity and Torah - and a push, the gravitation away from a commemorative, educational enterprise that appears to be increasingly severed from Jews, Judaism, or Jewish history, rather highlighting foreign concerns: genocide, immigration, bullying, religious tolerance, human rights, anti-bullying (to name only a few).

However, while we need to confront genocide and other universal concerns, the Shoah cannot merely be the "gold standard" by which to evaluate these important subjects.³ Modern Orthodox Jews have a unique potential and pressing obligation to endow the Holocaust with a sense of sacred, intrinsic Jewish content, intervening in an inter-denominational discourse that would otherwise continue to drift away from its original Jewish context. The tension between *sui generis* and *Hurban* is perhaps emblematic of the larger aims of Modern Orthodoxy. In essence, recognizing the need to be active players in the secular arena of the Holocaust echoes Rabbi Josef Dov Soloveitchik's call in his masterful sermon *Kol Dodi Dofek* to support the secular state of Israel.

It is this Modern Orthodox voice, committed both to *Torah* and *Mada*, to engaging both the realms of the sacred and profane, that the fields of Holocaust remembrance and education need precisely at this present moment. With public interest declining, with antisemitism on the rise, and with no survivors, Modern Orthodox Jews must do what they have, perhaps rightfully, avoided for decades: to roll up their sleeves and further engage in the Holocaust education activities, not only in the confines of their own communities, but particularly in the *sui generis* ones, the ones partaken by Jews of all denominations and the non-Jewish world. Doing so would help ensure that the Holocaust will continue to loom large as a subject of interest, a lesson, and a warning.

¹ See the forthcoming recording of the lecture by Gershon Greenberg, "Jewish Religious Thought during The Holocaust," on the Fish Center website.

² Jacob J. Schacter, "Holocaust Commemoration and Tish'a Be-Av: The Debate Over 'Yom Ha-Shoah,'" *Tradition* 41, no. 2 (2008): 164-197.

³ See my *Tablet* article on the dilution of the Holocaust and its impact on the field.

A RETURN TO THE WORLD OF MEDIEVAL ASHKENAZ

ALAN JOTKOWITZ is Professor of Medicine, Director of the Medical School for International Health, and Director of the Jakobovits Center for Jewish Medical Ethics at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Review of Haym Soloveitchik, *Collected Essays: Volume III* (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2020).

In 2016, I wrote an essay in *Tradition* marking the publication of the first two volumes of Professor Haym Soloveitchik's collected essays.¹ The world of academic Jewish studies is now blessed with the long-awaited arrival of the third volume of essays. It is worthwhile to call attention to its publication, particularly given that its significance might have been overlooked due to the terrible pandemic we are all experiencing. Like all of Professor Soloveitchik's studies, the book is distinguished by the thoroughness of its scholarship and attention to even the smallest details, either pertaining to the pedigree of a particular manuscript or a historical fact or occurrence.

The book is composed of two sections; the first one contains a number of studies related to *Sefer Hasidim*, and the second concerns Ravad—Rambam's famous interlocutor—and the scholars of Provence.

Following in the footsteps of other scholars (particularly Jacob Reifman and Ivan Marcus), Professor Soloveitchik maintains that *Sefer Hasidim* was composed by two different groups of writers, the first group whom he calls pietists, and the second group whom he labels German Pietists or the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. The first section of *Sefer Hasidim*, written by conventional pietists, emphasizes "introspection and religious inwardness, an aspiration for virtue and not just good deeds (important as the latter may be), an accountability for thoughts and feelings no less than for actions, a call for moral education and for the cultivation of virtue. . . . In short, pietism as is found the world over."²

The second section of *Sefer Hasidim*, which was written by the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, contains the radical elements such as the doctrine of *retson-haborei* [the Will of the Creator] (which Professor Soloveitchik feels is the most distinctive element of *Hasidei Ashkenaz* thought as it legislates hundreds of new demands as expressions of Divine will), the extensive use of *gematriot*, penance, asceticism, the appearance of ghosts, demons, soothsayers, and miracles. These are all missing from the first section composed by

conventional pietists. As Professor Soloveitchik demonstrates, the first section had more of an impact on the Jewish community (proven by an analysis of the surviving manuscripts). On the other hand, the impact of the radical *Hasidei Ashkenaz* thinkers on medieval Ashkenaz was minimal. As Professor Soloveitchik writes:

The religious and social programs of the Pietists should have triggered numerous communal controversies, however, not a whisper of this is to be found in the entire medieval literature of Ashkenaz. The German Pietists were too few, their doctrines too radical and idiosyncratic to merit any mention by their contemporaries...The people standing in Times Square with placecards inscribed 'Repent Now – The Day of Judgement is Near' envision themselves as engaged in a titanic struggle with the forces of evil. Other see them differently, if they see them at all.³

Professor Soloveitchik maintains that the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* were a reaction to the revolution in Torah study marked by the dialectic methodology championed by Rabbeinu Tam and Ri. "It is the tosafist movement—surely not one of the more bashful events in Jewish history—that forms the backdrop to *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. Much of *Sefer Hasidim*, both good and bad, is a product of a response to the disruptive effects of the new dialect. The Hasidic movement was a reaction to, and at the same time part of, the intellectual revolution sweeping Ashkenaz in the twelfth century."⁴ The century-old traditions of the German Ashkenazi elite were threatened by what Professor Soloveitchik calls "the French invasion" of Rashi and his descendants. Their Torah learning could not compete with the new dialecticians, who dissected and harmonized the halakhic corpus with novel distinctions and comparisons. Their traditional world of *piyyut* and communal prayer was disappearing before their eyes. *Sefer Hasidim* was an attempt to turn back the clock and preserve their ancient values and traditions in the face of the French intellectual onslaught.

It was also, perhaps, a reaction to Rabbeinu Tam himself: "The disappearance of anonymous authorship, which the Pietists mourn . . . , and the phenomenon of plagiarism . . . are parts of the same development (One cannot help the feeling that the giant shadow cast by Rabbenu Tam should somehow figure in this account . . .)"⁵ Rabbeinu Tam's fiery personality inspired awe and fear among his contemporaries, and he was not shy about expressing his

opinions, even those that conflicted with ancient communal traditions. He was certainly not an anonymous figure in medieval Ashkenaz, and his genius led to imitation by his students who did not share his prodigious intellectual abilities. The pietists were reacting to these aspects of his personality and legacy.

According to Professor Soloveitchik, this revolution in Talmudic thinking led by the Tosafists was also the cause of the *Mishneh Torah's* failure to achieve the halakhic dominance that Rambam intended. He writes, "Anyone who comes to the Mishneh Torah from studying a sugya with the writings of the Tosafists, with their vast collation of data, their discovery of hidden problems, and proffer of multiple solutions, will find Maimonides' presentations thin and simplistic. Valid, at best, but far from the final word."⁶

The section on Ravad, which I think is more accessible to non-scholars (such as the current writer), begins with the important point that Ravad should not be primarily seen as the writer of *hassagot* [marginal notes] on the *Mishneh Torah*, but as one of the greatest of all Talmudic commentators because of his other works and impact on later Rishonim. Meiri makes this point forcefully, and he does so by referring to Ravad and not Rashi as the "greatest of commentators" (although Meiri, like Ravad, was from Provence in southern France). In the words of Professor Soloveitchik:

Ravad takes a tractate or a field in its entirety as his subject, interprets it in toto in his own categories, and dwells at length on those topics which he finds stimulating. In Ravad's writings one witnesses a mind working unaided and untrammelled in (what to his view is) virgin territory. And subsequent generations found in his interpretation, in his categories—in brief, in his conception of the field—greater stimuli, more fruitful points of departure, than in the works of the Geonim, which now began to appear distant. And Ravad's impact upon Talmudic studies was correspondingly massive.⁷

Why then was Ravad known primarily as a Maimonidean critic? Professor Soloveitchik suggests it is due to the ill fate of living at the same time as Rashi and having been followed by Ramban and Rashba. He writes, "His works [Ravad], as I have noted did not attain that scope or total cohesion which was Rashi's when he consummated the

work of centuries, nor did they approach that wondrous felicity of presentation which again was Rashi's alone. Indeed, Ravad's commentaries are singularly lacking in literary grace."⁸ And regarding those who came after him, Professor Soloveitchik comments, "It was Ravad's misfortune, however, to be followed by two giants—Ramban and Rashba. These two thinkers fused Ravad's insights with their own extrapolation of the tosafist dialectic and transformed both. The end result was greater than that which Ravad had created, and, in the course of time, his works fell into desuetude."⁹

While reading the sections in the book on Ravad, I couldn't help but recall the memorable words of Professor Soloveitchik's father, the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, describing how he gives a *shiur*:

Suddenly, the door opens and an old man, much older than the Rabbi, enters. He is the grandfather of the Rabbi, Reb Chaim Brisker. . . . The door opens again and another old man comes in. He is older than Reb Chaim, for he lived in the seventeenth century. His name is Reb Shabtai Cohen, known as the Shach, who must be present when civil law is discussed. Many more visitors arrive, some from the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, and others harking back to antiquity—Rabbenu Tam, Rashi, Rambam, Rabad, Rashba, Rabbi Akiva, and others. These scholarly giants of the past are bidden to take their seats. The Rabbi introduces the guests to his pupils, and the dialogue commences. The Rambam states a halacha; the Rabad disagrees sharply, as is his wont.

The Rav is primarily interested in these figures as transmitters of ideas and as links to the *mesorah* and tradition. However, in the writings of Professor Soloveitchik, they come alive as people. You almost get the sense that he knew them personally. For example, "Ravad was a loner's loner. Whether he had some commentarial tradition we shall never know, because he basically declined to use it. . . . Ravad explored new continents and illuminated dark places. Like most explorers of wild lands, he was a man who was wont to stride alone, and if someone collided with him on the way, he could get very irate."¹⁰ And regarding Baal ha-Maor—a Talmudic commentator born in Spain who moved to Provence—and his rivalry with Ravad, "R. Zerayah came from a distinguished Catalan family whose lineage went back at

least four generations, and, in all probability, he was among the founding fathers of the Gerona community. He was also at home in philosophy and belles-lettres and was himself a religious poet of no mean stature. He demeaned Ravad's common lineage and his ignorance of Andalusian – Jewish culture."¹¹

As for Rashi, "Many of the traits that we associate with Rashi—reticence, modesty, temperateness of expression—are common to the literature of the eleventh century."¹² Where did Professor Soloveitchik's impression of Rashi come from? In a note, Professor Soloveitchik comments that "close to a decade's work in the literature of the eleventh century has given me the sustained impression that Rashi is unique in the near total cohesion of his thought and in the lucidity of his presentation but hardly atypical in character and general bearing."¹³

Finally, regarding Rabbeinu Tam, he writes that "the towering intellect of R. Yaakov and his leonine personality inspired awe and admiration among his contemporaries."¹⁴ And later, "The combination of restless creativity and difficulties of writing, especially of sustained composition, often leads to a dangerous disproportion between personal accomplishment and literary legacy, an imbalance that is strikingly noticeable in the works of Ravad's greatest contemporary, Rabbenu Tam."¹⁵ Professor Soloveitchik also makes the important point that Rabbeinu Tam had an orderly and organized disciple in Ri to record his thoughts for posterity, while Ravad had no such pupil or luck.

I was left with two almost conflicting perspectives on the efforts of Professor Soloveitchik to bring alive these giants of our faith. Certainly, I was left wanting to know more, not only about their personalities but also about how they lived, worked, learnt, and survived in a medieval Europe largely hostile to Jews and Jewish learning. But I was also left wondering how important knowledge of these facts is to a student of *Halakhah*.¹⁶

Awareness of this information, however, might be of crucial importance if we consider the book's conclusion, which is about whether a halakhic jurist might have been influenced by concerns external to *Halakhah*. Professor Soloveitchik uses the term "angle of deflection," a principle he invented and has used in many of his studies. He writes, "Anyone claiming that a jurist's thought has been influenced by outside forces or inner ambiguities must be able to point to some obvious flaw in the thinker's argument, a measurable deflection from the expected line of reasoning that indicates that something impinged upon

the mind of the jurist and diverted his thoughts from its normal course."¹⁷

In this essay, Professor Soloveitchik better defines what constitutes a measurable deflection that would indicate that the halakhist in question might have been influenced by outside forces. He delineates three rules which can be helpful to other scholars in determining whether there has been a deflection when they study a particular Talmudic passage or a broader halakhic discussion:

1. The judge's reasoning must conform to the elementary rules of logic.
2. The second rule is linguistic. One cannot explain words in the Talmud contrary to the way they have been uniformly interpreted by all commentators, medieval and modern.
3. The third is: ignoring judicial hierarchy.¹⁸

If the jurist has done any one of these three things, then there may have been a "deflection."

This book of academic essays on the history of *Halakhah*, comprising a lifetime of groundbreaking work, ends with an important message. Professor Soloveitchik points out the limitations of using halakhic texts in attempting to understand Jewish society, tradition, and culture:

These are some of the dangers which attend those who seek to describe Judaism on the basis of legal sources. It is immensely difficult to capture the intimate experiences of Jews in bygone days—relations between parents and children, husbands and wife's, for example, not to speak of the value systems of their society: their notions of honor and shame, of self-worth and abnegation, of rest and toil.¹⁹

For example, one can study all of the laws of Shabbat and the thousands of responsa written on these laws without fully understanding the true nature of Shabbat and the power of rest and renewal which it brings.

These words echo the sentiments expressed by Professor Soloveitchik in perhaps his most quoted and famous essay, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," published in *Tradition* in 1994. In that work, he notes a change in Judaism from a mimetic

tradition to one where texts now play a controlling role in contemporary religious life.

To this reader, it is intriguing that he ends a series of three books—which, for the most part, attempt “to describe Judaism on the basis of legal sources”—with a warning about the limitations of this methodology. He continues by adding that “any real reconstruction must draw upon a far wider range of sources.”²⁰ I don’t know if this is hinting at further studies by Professor Soloveitchik himself or if it is meant as a message to younger researchers on “how to describe Judaism” in their own studies. In any event, reading Professor Soloveitchik’s three volumes of magisterial essays will certainly engage and educate the reader, and one can only hope that we will merit to see a fourth volume in the not too distant future.

¹ Alan Jotkowitz, “Haym Soloveitchik’s Collected Essays: An Appreciation,” *Tradition* 49.4, 71-88. Available at <https://traditiononline.org/haym-soloveitchiks-collected-essays-an-appreciation/>.

² Haym Soloveitchik, *Collected Essays: Volume III* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2020), 89.

³ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 264. This is an interesting observation as Rambam has been used by the Briskers as the primary text for their greatest, most novel interpretations and insights.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 258-59.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 260-61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹² *Ibid.*, 48.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁶ Of course, other scholars have written works that bring these giants of men to life. See, for example, Professor Isadore Twersky’s classic, *Rabad of Posquieres: A Twelfth Century Talmudist* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1962), Professor Avraham Grossman’s *biography of Rashi*, Professor Avraham (Rami) Reiner’s *doctoral dissertation on Rabbeinu Tam*, Professor Haviva Pedaya’s *work on Ramban*, and the recently published intellectual *biography of the Ramban* by Oded Yisraeli (Jerusalem, 2020).

¹⁷ Soloveitchik, *Collected Essays III*, 407.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 410.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 421.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

THE LEHRHAUS EDITORS:

Yisroel Ben-Porat

David Fried

David Kollmar

Yosef Lindell

Lea New Minkowitz

Tzvi Sinensky

The Lehrhaus Consulting Editors

Miriam Krupka Berger

Elli Fischer

Miriam Gedwiser

Chaim Saiman

Jeffrey Saks

Jacob J. Schacter

Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld

Shlomo Zuckier

Please Contact us at
editors@thelehrhaus.com