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THE ROLE OF TEACHER AND STUDENT IN JEWISH EDUCATION ACCORDING TO RABBI JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK

Introduction

For decades, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was a recognized leader in Jewish education. As *Rosh Yeshiva* in Yeshiva University he taught many of the rabbis who filled positions in Orthodox schools and synagogues. In Boston, he founded the Maimonides School which served as a model for modern Orthodox yeshivah day schools. Besides the legacy of the educational institutions that he served with distinction, Rabbi Soloveitchik spoke and wrote about Jewish education.

This article seeks to identify two themes about Jewish education in Rabbi Soloveitchik's public lectures and published essays and discuss their implications for the educator in modern Orthodox yeshivah day schools today. Since education involves the meeting of teachers and students, this paper will discuss Rabbi Soloveitchik's view on the roles of the teacher and the student in Jewish education.

The Role of the Teacher

Rabbi Soloveitchik describes the role of the teacher as engaging in a dialogue with his students while delivering a monologue as they listen

in. In the dialogue, the teacher and his students approach the Torah as mature intellects discussing and arguing about its interpretation. In the monologue, the teacher and his students relate to Torah as young children connecting to Judaism emotionally. The teacher's monologue describes his own educational experience; the student listens in to his teacher's self-reflection and grows in his own emotional connection to Jewish practice.¹ In this way, the teacher imparts to him the "living experience" of Judaism.

Rabbi Soloveitchik describes the dialogue between *rebbe* and *talmid* as the merging of the generations of the *Mesorah* that takes place when the *rebbe* delivers a *shi'ur*. In a talk given on the occasion of the *pidyon ha-ben* of a boy whose father and grandfather were his students, he describes this experience in great detail:

I start *shiur*. I don't know what the conclusion will be. Whenever I start the *shi'ur* the door opens another old man walks in and sits down. He is older than I am. He is the grandfather of the Rav; his name is Rav Hayyim Brisker, without whom you cannot learn nowadays. The door opens quietly again and another old man walks in. He is older than Rav Hayyim. He lived in the 17th century. What's his name? Shabbesai Cohen, the famous Shakh who must be present when *dinei mamonot* are discussed... More visitors show up, some from 11th, 12th, 13th centuries, some from antiquity: Rabbi Akiva, Rashi, Rabbenu Tam, the Ra'avad, the Rashba, more and more come in. What do I do? I introduce them to my pupils and the dialogue commences. The Rambam says something and the Ra'avad disagrees: sometimes it's very nasty; the Ra'avad uses very sharp language. A boy jumps up to defend the Rambam against the Ra'avad and the boy is fresh. You know how young boys are. He uses improper language so I correct him. Another boy jumps up with a new idea, the Rashba smiles gently. I try to analyze what the young boy meant... another boy intervenes... we call upon Rabbenu Tam to express his opinion and suddenly a symposium of generations comes into existence. Generations, young boys twenty two or twenty three, and my generation, the generation of Rav Hayyim Brisker, of the Shakh... of Rabbenu Tam, Rav Hai Ga'on, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Elazar, and Rabbi

Yohanan Ben Zakai... We all speak one language... We all chat. We all laugh. We all enjoy the company. We all pursue one goal. We all are committed to a common vision and we all operate with the same categories. There is *Mesorah* collegiality, friendship, comity between old and young between antiquity and Middle Ages and modern times... This unity of generations, this march of centuries, this conversation of generations this dialogue between antiquity and present will finally bring the redemption of the Jew.²

The implications of this are that the teacher must connect the students to the entire *Mesorah* going back all the way to Mount Sinai. The teacher should remind his students who each of the Sages was and when and where he lived. This gives them a greater appreciation of whom they are speaking about. He should train the students to analyze the opinions of our Sages not as detached observers but as active participants in the chain of the *Mesorah*.

The second aspect of the relationship between *rebbe* and *talmid* is the *rebbe's* monologue in which he communicates the "living experience" of Judaism. Rabbi Soloveitchik describes his formative educational experience as a monologue that he heard from his first teacher, a *melammed* who was a *hasid Habad*. While studying the story of Judah confronting Joseph, the teacher questioned why Joseph asked his brothers if they had a father. The *melammed* then began to speak in a monologue, as if to a mysterious visitor, with the students listening in:

He said: Joseph was not talking about a visible father, *avot de'itgalin*, but about a mysterious hidden father, *avot de'itkasin*; he inquired about existential parenthood not biological parenthood. Joseph was anxious to discover whether they feel themselves committed to the origin... Do you look upon your father as branches look upon the roots of the tree? Do you look upon your father as the foundation of your existence? Do you look upon him as a provider and sustainer of your existence? He suddenly stopped addressing himself to the strange visitor and he began to talk to us raising his voice: Are you modest and humble? Do you believe that the old father, who represents the

old tradition, is capable of telling you something new, something exciting, something challenging that you did not know before, or are you arrogant, insolent, vain, and demand independence from the father? He addressed himself to the one who had a reputation as a prodigy whose father was a blacksmith... Who knows more, Izhik who knows 150 pages of Gemara by heart, or his father Jacob the blacksmith who could hardly read Hebrew, can hardly daven? Are you proud of your father, are you humble? If a Jew admits the supremacy of his father in effect he recognizes also the supremacy of the universal father, who is very, very, very old and is called 'atik yomin'.

In learning this approach, which was a symbolic interpretation of the question, you can then also interpret in the same manner the second question: Do you have a brother? Do you have a biological brother with identical genetic code from that parent? This is irrelevant. Does your time awareness encompass the present or the future as well? Does my existence embrace my parents, family, friends or generations before me? Do you plan not for the world of today, but for the world of tomorrow? Do you believe in the improbable, in the fantastic? Do you behold a vision to make the improbable and fantastic happen so that it can turn to reality? Do you believe what the future can bring? The brothers responded: Yes master, we do have a very old father. We feel that we are all deeply rooted in him. *Ve-yeled zekunim katan*. Yes master, we have a young talented bright child with a shining eye representing the world of tomorrow. This child is challenging us to make the generations unborn yet possible and to make nonbeing emerge as something real.³

In this way, Rabbi Soloveitchik indicates that a teacher must transmit to his students a commitment to both the *av zaken* symbolizing our "great past," as well as the *yeled zekunim*, representing a "glorious future." When the elderly teacher communicates with his bright, young pupil, he transmits to the young student the divine discipline and divine romance of Judaism; the law and the religion.

In an oral communication, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein touched upon the importance of transmitting this emotional experience of Judaism. As I was embarking on my career in Jewish education as a teacher

in a yeshivah high school, Rabbi Lichtenstein shared with me that just as important as the Torah content and skills I would teach my students in the classroom are the *melava malkah*'s I should provide them at my home. Experiential education is just as important as formal education.

Rabbi Soloveitchik similarly describes a dialectic between *mussar avikha*, the formal textual learning and analysis of Torah, and *torat immekha*, the “living experience” of Torah and Judaism.⁴ This living Judaism of *torat immekha* ideally takes place in the home and synagogue. Rabbi Soloveitchik wonders whether a teacher can communicate to his students the experience of Judaism. For example, how can one communicate the stirring liturgical tunes of the Days of Awe and the emotions that they evoke?⁵

However, the challenge today is that teachers cannot assume that *torat immekha* is being transmitted in the home. Many day school students come from families of *ba'alei teshuvah* who do not have a tradition of living Judaism that they can effectively communicate. Others come from families where the commitment to *torat immekha* is less than stellar.

Jewish educators sometimes make the mistake of limiting experiential learning to informal educational activities. While hosting *melava malkah*'s at one's home is important, it is no less important to bring the *melava malkah* experience into the classroom. Rabbi Soloveitchik communicated the experience of *Har Sinai* through his daily teaching. His public introspection, his sharing of his personal feelings and experiences about Judaism with his students, connected him with them in profound ways. Dr. Kalman Stein, formerly a principal at The Maimonides School, Rabbi Soloveitchik's flagship day school in Brookline MA, often exhorts his faculty to “sing” in the classroom. By metaphorically “making music” in the classroom, teachers communicate the beauty and the wonder of Judaism, its awe and power.

Another widely practiced mistake is substituting purely experiential education for material content. This mistake is the opposite of the first. In the former, one teaches only content to the exclusion of any emotional attachment with the material. In the latter, one is so focused on giving over a Jewish experience that one does not rigorously teach Torah texts. One spends so much time talking about Judaism with his students that he wastes time that could be better spent teaching Judaism to the students.

While engaging the heart was one aspect of Rabbi Soloveitchik's lectures, he believed that the best way to help students experience Torah was to engage their minds by teaching them on the highest level possible. Rabbi Soloveitchik was the finest role model for this. When he gave *shiur*, he utilized the most complex methods of analysis, conceptualization, classification, and definition known to the Torah world. It was through Torah content that he presented his students with the experience of Mount Sinai. It was not a dry intellectual pursuit, neither was it a sentimental talk; it was an exciting, stimulating experience of Talmud Torah.

The Role of the Student

According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, the role of the student is to experience Talmud Torah, which he regards as a reenactment of *ma'amad Har Sinai*.⁶ He demonstrates this from the fact that the Talmud prohibits a *ba'al keri* from learning Torah. The reasoning given by the Talmud (*Berakhot* 21a) is that just like the *ba'al keri* was forbidden to participate in *ma'amad Har Sinai*, so is he forbidden to engage in Talmud Torah. Rabbi Soloveitchik deduces from this that the act of Talmud Torah should be approached with the same fear and awe as *ma'amad Har Sinai*.

Rabbi Soloveitchik says that the experience of Talmud Torah has a longer lasting and more profound effect on a person than witnessing the revelation of the *shekhinah*. He proves this from a homily in the Talmud (*Bava Kama* 82a) based on the episode when the Jews traveled from the Red Sea for three days and complained that there was no water to drink. The Talmud says that the water symbolizes Torah and since the Jews did not learn Torah for three days they started to complain. Rabbi Soloveitchik points out that this is in spite of the fact that they saw at the Red Sea an unparalleled revelation of God's presence in the world. The effects of this revelation wore off after three days. Only Talmud Torah would have a more lasting effect on the Jewish psyche.⁷

Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that Talmud Torah affects the Jew through a two stage process. The first he calls *gadlut ha-mohin*, greatness of the mind, while the second he calls *katnut ha-mohin*, insignificance of the mind. When a scholar involves himself in the act of Talmud Torah, he frees his mind for tremendous creativity. He is the

architect who constructs intellectual worlds through the study of Torah.⁸ In his classic essay *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Soloveitchik compares this to the mathematician who uses mathematical constructs to create an ideal world and then tries to relate this theoretical world in his mind to the real world around him. Similarly, the halakhic man establishes the essential halakhah in a theoretical sense and then tries to relate his halakhic constructs to the world around him.⁹ This experience leads one to a great sense of confidence in his intellectual abilities: *gadlut ha-mohin*.

Rabbi Soloveitchik adds that this should also lead the Torah learner into a rendezvous with God. The learning of Torah unites human beings with God. This is due to the fact that both God and the Jewish people concentrate their minds on one object, the Torah. Since both God and the Jewish people are united in the Torah, by studying Torah the Jewish people are united with the Almighty. In Rabbi Soloveitchik's words, "if the knower and the object known are merged into one, then two knowers whose minds are concentrated on the same object are also united."¹⁰ He explains this using the axiom, if "a=c" and "b=c" then "a=b". In this case, "a" represents God, "b" represents the Jewish people, and "c" represents the Torah. Since both God and the Jewish people know the Torah, then it is through the Torah that the Jewish people can know God.¹¹

This is only the first stage in the learning process. The confrontation with God experienced through Talmud Torah should lead one to a second stage, an intense feeling of *katnut ha-mohin*. The meeting with the Infinite should elicit a realization of one's own finitude and lowliness compared to the Almighty. One should change from an intellectual relationship with God, where one imitates God's creative abilities, to an emotional relationship with God, where one feels like an infant who is nothing without God.¹² Rabbi Soloveitchik describes this as "a rendezvous with Mother Shekhina."¹³ Through learning Torah, one meets God and experiences His love on an emotional level the way a child experiences his mother's love. This meeting should have a profound impact on the person's experience in Torah. Rabbi Soloveitchik observes that while the first stage of intellectual creativity in Torah learning is relatively common in our schools today, the second stage of intellectual humility is, unfortunately, very rare.¹⁴

This idealized description of learning has profound educational implications. Educators need to communicate intellectual modesty to their students. It is not enough to elevate them with a sense of intellectual prowess. One must also help them appreciate their intellectual limitations when confronting the Almighty. Rabbi Soloveitchik questions our success in conveying humility of spirit to students. He is confident, however, that teachers will accomplish this in the future.¹⁵

Submission to Authority

According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, intellectual modesty is absolutely necessary in the Torah learning process because its absence leads to halakhic anarchy. If students are free to be as creative as their minds fancy in Torah learning without a countervailing ethic of humility pushing them to recognize the limits of their creativity, they can ignore all legal precedent and established community practice to create their own unique halakhic system completely at odds with any accepted halakhic tradition. I believe it is this problem that Rabbi Soloveitchik was addressing when he spoke on a number of occasions about the need for the human being to surrender to the authority of halakhah.

Rabbi Soloveitchik introduces this ethic of submission to halakhic authority by relating the sad story of a *giyyoret tzedek* who met a non-religious Jew after her conversion and nurtured him back to Judaism. They got engaged and were about to be married when the boy discovered, upon a visit to his grandfather's grave, that he was a *kohen* and could not marry his fiancé because a *kohen* is forbidden to marry a convert. What could they do? Sometimes there is nothing one can do. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that one must surrender to the authority of the halakhah.¹⁶

Rabbi Soloveitchik describes this human suffering on account of the halakhah as an experience of catharsis. Just as catharsis means to purify metal by subjecting it to fire, so, too, the suffering that one endures when surrendering oneself to halakhic authority has the effect of purifying the person's soul. The halakhic hero will both surge forward in his pursuit of greatness and retreat and recoil the moment he reaches the limits of the boundaries of halakhah.¹⁷

According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, the ethic of submission is an essential aspect of Talmud Torah. The submission to the will of the

Almighty stems from recognition of one's own insignificance when compared to the Almighty Creator. One who learns Torah properly and uses it as a vehicle to reach God, will naturally surrender to God's infinite intellect and power. One who only learns Torah to celebrate his own cognitive prowess and revel in his intellectual gymnastics, however, will not be willing to surrender his mind to any authority, even the authority of God.

This is the "divine discipline" that Rabbi Soloveitchik spoke about as one of the things that the *av zaken* must teach the *yeled zekunim*. Discipline means resignation. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains:

The capacity to resign from something which is tempting and beautiful, to resign from something which all I have to do to get it is to reach out, [and] it is in my grip. According to *Yahadut*, man – in contradistinction to the brute – expresses himself in a disciplined existence.¹⁸

This act of resignation and surrender is perhaps the hardest thing to communicate to students today. American day school students are immersed in the culture of American hedonism. Part of that culture is based on instant gratification. This often translates into a Jewish observance based on convenience. Students only adhere to the standards of halakhah when it is convenient, while compromising these standards when it is not. Some even seek to demean modern Orthodoxy as condoning this laxity of observance, distinguishing modern Orthodoxy from the more right wing brands of Orthodoxy on account of the compromises it makes when halakhah is not convenient.¹⁹ Rabbi Soloveitchik spoke out against this. The reason, he said, that *Hazal* articulate the concept of accepting mitzvot as *kabbalat 'ol malkhut shamayim* and not just *kabbalat malkhut shamayim* is because sometimes halakhah is an 'ol, it is a yoke around our necks but it still must be followed. Teachers in modern Orthodox yeshivah day schools are challenged to convey to students the need to embrace western culture without making compromises in the area of halakhah.

Conclusion and Further Implications

Rabbi Soloveitchik viewed Jewish education as uniting the *av zaken* with the *yeled zekunim*. The *av zaken* teaches the child not only the knowledge of the Torah, but the experience of receiving the Torah as

well. This has implications for methodologies of both formal Jewish education and for the importance of Jewish experiential education, as well.

According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, the relationship between *rebbe* and *talmid* is in the form of both an intellectual dialogue between them and an emotional monologue with the *rebbe* sharing his experience of Judaism while his students listen. Learning Torah transcends history as students engage in an active dialogue with their teacher and with all the *hakhmei ha-mesorah* dating back to Mount Sinai. Teachers need to excite their students in order to make them active participants in the learning process. The teacher should also involve himself in a monologue in which he communicates to his students his emotional connection to Judaism.

In their experience of Talmud Torah, students should be led to intellectual creativity; to attain *gadlut ha-mohin* as they take great pride in their intellectual accomplishments resulting in communication with God through His Torah. In turn, the encounter with the Almighty should guide our students to intellectual humility, *katnut ha-mohin*, an intellectual humility that leads one to surrender to the authority of the Halakhah. This, in turn, can become a cathartic experience.

NOTES

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- 1 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Al Ahavat Hatorah Ugeulat Nefesh Hador," *Be-Sod ha-Yahad ve-ha-Yahid*, edited by Pinchas Peli (Jerusalem, 1976), 414-417.
- 2 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Uniting of Generations-Pidyon Haben" (1974). Retrieved on 8/3/2004 from <http://www.613.org/rav.html>. A summary of this talk appears under the title: "The First Jewish Grandfather," in Abraham Besdin, *Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav* Volume Two (Hoboken, 1989), 15-24.
- 3 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Concepts in Jewish Education," (1975). Retrieved 8/3/2004 from http://www.ericlevy.com/Recordings/Recordings_The%20Rav.htm.
- 4 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "A Tribute to the Rebbetzin of Talne," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring, 1978) 73-83.
- 5 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Concepts," *op. cit.*
- 6 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Kerias Hatorah" (Yarhei Kalla, Boston, 1975).
- 7 *Ibid.*

- 8 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Al Ahavat Hatorah," *op. cit.*, 408-410.
- 9 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia, 1983) 18-29.
- 10 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Torah and Humility" (1971) summarized by Ronnie Ziegler. Retrieved on August 10, 2004 from <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/rav/rav11.htm>.
- 11 *Ibid.* It is interesting that Rabbi Soloveitchik uses the devotional definition of *Torah lishmah*, with its emphasis on *devekut* advanced by Rav Shneur Zalman of Ladi and other kabbalists, rather than using the cognitive definition of *Torah lishmah* advanced by Rabbi Soloveitchik's progenitor and spiritual antecedent, Rav Hayyim of Volozhin. This is despite the fact that Rabbi Soloveitchik himself quotes Rav Hayyim's cognitive definition of *Torah lishmah* verbatim in *Halakhic Man*, 87-89. See *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sakes* by Norman Lamm (Hoboken, 1989), 190-253, for a complete discussion of these two definitions. In "Al Ahavat Hatorah Ugeulat Nefesh Hador", 410, Rabbi Soloveitchik reconciles the cognitive definition of *Torah lishmah* formulated by his forebears with the devotional definition explicated by the *Tanya*, for whose philosophy Rabbi Soloveitchik clearly has an affinity. He creates synthesis where on the one hand one studies Torah for the Torah's sake like the philosophy of Rav Hayyim of Volozhin while on the other hand through this act of study one meets God who also involves himself in the four cubits of Halakhah similar to Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi.
- 12 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Al Ahavat Hatorah," *op. cit.* 408, 411.
- 13 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Torah and Shekhinah," in, *idem.: Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships* (Boston, 2000), 176-178.
- 14 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Al Ahavat Hatorah," *op. cit.* 417-419.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Gerus and Mesorah (1)" (1975). Retrieved on 8/3/2004 from http://www.ericlevy.com/Recordings/Recordings_The%20Rav.htm. A partial transcription of this talk by Eitan Fiorino under the title, "Talmud Torah and Kabbalas Ol Malchus Shamayim" appears at http://mail-jewish.org/rav/talmud_torah.txt. Retrieved on 8/15/2004.
- 17 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Catharsis," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring, 1978) 38-44.
- 18 Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "Concepts in Jewish Education," *op. cit.*
- 19 Walter Wurzburger: "Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post- Modern Orthodoxy" 1-2. Retrieved on 8/11/2004 from http://www.lookstein.org/articles/soloveitchik_posek.htm, originally published in *Tradition*, Volume 29, 1994. For this reason, Norman Lamm wishes to change the identifier for those who strictly adhere to Orthodoxy while embracing the knowledge of western culture as "Centrist Orthodoxy." Wurzburger himself prefers the term "Post-Modern Orthodoxy."