The written corpus left by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik deals with ideas, as expressed in halakhic and philosophic writings and in public talks or lectures. Until recently, one might have thought that statement to be accurate and that no surviving writings reflected the Rav’s private or public life. That remains the case for the most part when it comes to personal and biographical matters; except for his students’ reminiscences, we still have only the occasional autobiographical fragment appearing in a eulogy or article. Such fragments can be found as well between the lines of his halakhic correspondence, most of it exchanged with his father, R. Moshe (published as Iggerot ha-Gerid Ha-Levi [Letters of the Ga’on, Rabbi Joseph Dov], 5674-5701); they offer an occasional peek, subordinated to other matters, into his personality. As for the public sphere, we knew until now of only one article that dealt relatively broadly with inter-religious dialogue, and we could ascertain his positions on political and Zionist issues from his lectures.

The publication in 2005 of Community, Covenant, and Commitment, edited by R. Nathaniel Helfgot, has partly filled this gap, at least with respect to Rabbi Soloveitchik’s public activities. We have here a collection

*Translated from the Hebrew by Joel Linsider.

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of letters and documents from the Rav’s pen, telling of his concrete actions in the context of American Orthodox Judaism and of his opinions on matters of concern within Jewish public life. In some instances they provide an entirely new perspective; in others, they provide new data confirming what was already known (or assumed); in still others, they show the practical face of a coin whose theoretical side has been long known. They also shed new light on the problems that religious Judaism was coping with at that time and place and the general lines of the Rav’s practical and political thought along the entire front (and I use the military metaphor advisedly). These writings also tell something of the Rav’s standing within the American Jewish community of the time. A substantial portion of the material in the book has appeared before, though not in English and not in easily accessible forums. As far as I know, the book has not yet been subjected to scholarly review.

Two additional factors make this a timely collection. First, the Rav’s essay *Ish ha-Halakhah* often is cited as proof that he viewed the Halakhah as the realm of the a priori, impervious to social reality, and as subject to a method partaking more of mathematics than of the human sciences. (Criticism of that approach seems to have increased following the publication in 1983 of Lawrence J. Kaplan’s translation of the work, *Halakhic Man.*3) But that reading of *Ish Ha-halakhah*, taken alone, can afford a one-sided picture, for the Rav’s halakhic involvement in public affairs was reasonably well known.4 In any case, it is the Rav’s own writings on public affairs that can provide the best illustration of his encounter with these matters—an encounter recognized by the author himself to have had an authentic halakhic component. Moreover, one can sometimes find in these documents a constructive interaction between halakhic positions and extra-halakhic values and concepts—at least on the explanatory plane if not on the substantive. On the one hand, the Rav might incorporate historical or philosophical moments into the presentation of his position; on the other, he might soften the halakhic data (or smooth their edges). At the same time, he might sometimes propose a purely halakhic solution to a social or communal problem, translating the halakhic concepts to meet the needs of the hour without sacrificing their force or original meaning.

Second, since the Rav’s death in 1993 (indeed, beginning with the eulogies at his grave), there has been a growing dispute over his cultural legacy and his personality. The dispute pits those who account for his modernistic vision and his openness to general learning as post-facto (be-di‘avad) submission to the needs of the hour against those who see
these traits as authentic aspects of his identity.\(^5\) It may be naïve to expect a collection of the sort here presented to shed enough light on the question to resolve it; still, the hope endures.

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A small, but to my mind particularly interesting, portion of this material shows R. Soloveitchik in direct interaction with the gentile world. I am not referring here to the analysis of inter-religious dialogue, an analysis directed toward the Jewish community (though it may well have reached gentile eyes as well) in an effort to guide it in its relationships with non-Jewish actors and institutions. Material of this sort certainly can tell of the Rav’s opinions with respect to the gentile world, but its direct addressee is Jewish, not gentile. The Rav, however, was also called upon to represent the normative Jewish world before non-Jewish players.

One outstanding and interesting incident arose out of Cornell University’s request that the Rav clarify the Jewish position regarding use of the human form (that is, representations of biblical figures) in the decorative windows of an interfaith center meant to be used for both Jewish and Christian worship.\(^6\) The Rav’s response is outstanding for its candor, its readiness to integrate philosophical and historical factors into its normative analysis, and its side-stepping of issues likely to generate perplexity.

The Rav begins by declaring that he cannot base his response on formal Halakhah but must look as well to “central historical realities with their deep-seated philosophical meaning. . . . Such an approach is not a novelty in the history of the Halakhah” (4). But why include all this? He begins—in a letter to the president of Cornell University!—with a summary but reasonably complete review of the talmudic attitude toward graphic representations of various sorts. That leads him to a passage in tractate *Avodah Zarah*, from which one can only conclude that the greatest of the amora’im permitted the presence of a non-cultic statue in a synagogue and that this teaching can be seen as normative. (The reader here sees the “teacher”—the melammed, as the Rav liked to call himself—in action. He could have forgone this entire analysis, had he not wanted both to teach Torah and to present the subject as frankly and directly as possible. Or might he have been worried that the addressee would check up on him or receive a permissive opinion that relied on this source?) Accordingly, this source provides a basis for ruling permissively. But the Rav then goes on to find that Judaism historically did not act in accord with this view and, as a practical matter, forbade the pres-
ence of human images in the synagogue. That approach is documented starting in Second Temple times, was consistently followed in the synagogues built in Christian Europe, and remains the practice to this day.

Here, the impact of Christianity proves decisive. In the Christian milieu, the Rav argues with outstanding cultural sensitivity, every human figure found in a cultic site instantly becomes a cultic figure—a consequence of the basic Christian belief in Jesus as a man-god and the view of men in general as in God’s physical image. Moreover, the artistic execution, even if limited to “suitable” biblical figures such as Abraham and Moses, will necessarily reflect the Christian ideal. These circumstances are quite different, then, from those of Babylonian synagogues in talmudic times (6-8). The Rav describes the process without casting any aspersions on Christian belief; at the same time, he emphasizes the profound theological gap that he sees between the two religions. His treatment here of the halakhic sources, I believe, provides not only an example of his deference to the tradition as actually practiced but also an illustration of his comment that when he decides a halakhic issue, he has “always been guided by a dim intuitive feeling which pointed out to me the true path” (276) and that “my inquiry consisted only in translating a vague intuitive feeling into fixed terms of halakhic discursive thinking” (25). That is so even though the argumentation here is far from halakhic, as the Rav himself acknowledges.

But now, in concluding the piece, the Rav takes an unexpected and undiplomatic turn. He evidently had become aware that the decision to construct the multi-faith center had already been made and was no longer under discussion. Nevertheless, he adamantly expresses his opposition to the entire project. Here, in a letter written in 1950, the Rav already presents the essential elements of the perspective on inter-religious dialogue that became clearer in the early 1960s with the publication of “Confrontation.” That perspective was built upon, among other things, the premise that each religion is fundamentally different from the others, though not on that account invalid. In the case at hand, he argues (8-10), the differences preclude the construction of a shared place of worship, for architecture and the disposition of space necessarily reflect a culture and a concept of the world. In that sense, Judaism and Christianity represent different and separate concepts of the religious experience, and bringing them together in a common building necessarily entails denial of one in favor of the other. Each religious culture’s right to existence dictates that each be respected and given its own living space—a point that continued to characterize the Rav’s teaching on inter-religious dialogue throughout his
life. It is noteworthy that the Rav manages to deny the legitimacy of a shared house of worship for Jews and Christians without even hinting at the possibility that Christianity has the status of idolatry. It is hard to know whether to attribute that to the letter having been addressed to the (Christian) president of Cornell University or to some more fundamental approach. Either way, his raising a question about the very establishment of the center—a decision that had already been made—requires explanation. It seems to me that the Rav did not want to leave the impression—for his time or for the future—that he supported, even indirectly, the establishment of an interfaith center that would be used as a place of worship for both Jews and Christians. In a certain sense, perhaps, the Rav may base the unbridgeable cultural gap between the religions on an unstated premise that the religion at issue has a questionable theology; but I offer that conjecture hesitantly because there is also a basis for concluding otherwise.

It is hard to avoid the impression that this entire discussion—both the question at its center and the conceptual world invoked in the response—could come about only thanks to a certain American socio-cultural environment. The same may be said of the Rav’s letter on whether Jewish charitable organizations were obligated to do “their part” in taking in children abandoned on New York’s streets, children who, in general, were automatically turned over to Protestant and Catholic organizations. (It should be noted that the question was not posed by an Orthodox agency.) Here, too, the Rav begins with a concise and abstract halakhic summary; but he chooses to rule in accord with more comprehensive halakhic guidelines—indeed, circumventing the sources that first seemed pertinent—and concludes by transforming the halakhic data into ideological terms. The preliminary halakhic discussion considers *Mishnah Makhshirin* 2:7 (“If one finds a cast-off infant—if most of the populace is gentile, [the infant] is gentile; if most of the populace is Jewish [the infant] is Jewish”) and shows—through a characteristic halakhic analysis that does not shy away from such complex issues as whether and how Halakhah should assess probabilities in cases of factual doubt—that despite the temptation to rely on this *mishnah*, it is not really relevant in our case. That is because its epistemological shallowness—that is, its reaching a decision on the basis of which group is in the majority—makes it applicable only when dealing with more trivial issues, such as returning lost property or eating improperly slaughtered meat. In short, “the principle of majority is not applicable in cases of life and death” (17). In this case, the Rav argues, the halakhah should be determined on the basis of two other considerations: (1) the duty to save
a Jewish child from being raised in another religion, something as important as avoiding mortal physical danger; and (2) the applicability of that duty even to a child whose Jewish identity is cast in doubt. It should be noted that despite the Rav’s confident and unambiguous presentation, we are dealing here with determinations that are by no means simple, as the Rav himself suggests (certainly insofar as violation of the Sabbath provides an added dimension with respect to the obligation of rescue). Examination of the issue and all the pertinent sources can teach us much about the complexities of halakhic decision-making.  

At the end of his response (21), the Rav rejects the possibility of relinquishing these children—and not only to avoid “complications that might arise on the level of public relations.” Waiving Jewish rights in this area would “be an admission of a feeling of inferiority and skepticism concerning the worth of our great and ancient faith.” Moving here beyond the formal halakhic framework, the Rav declares—in rhetoric approaching a call to sanctify God’s Name—that such a waiver would run contrary not only to the fundamentals of Halakhah and the tradition but also to human dignity. Transcendent universalism does not warrant renouncing the Jewish sense that our faith is preferable to all others; and while we may not impose our faith by force, neither may we surrender its children (even if their Jewish identity is in doubt) to other religions.

At this point, though, the Rav adds a surprising note: The foregoing statement is true not only of Judaism. Every religion is permitted, even bound, to take that same view of the religious experience it offers. “Religious tolerance asserts itself in the knowledge of the existence of a variety and plurality of God-experiences and in the recognition that each individual is entitled to evaluate his great unique performance as the most redeeming and uplifting one” (21-22). This effort to strike a balance between insisting on respect for Judaism and taking care that the respect not come at the expense of denigrating other faiths is something we will encounter again. Is it simply the product of pragmatism and of the survival instinct, or does it flow from a positive assessment of faith in general in a secularized world that challenges it? (Recall that the letter was not sent to a non-Jewish agency; its addressee was the head of a Jewish charitable organization and an alumnus of Yeshiva University.)

Another public issue, likewise involving both internal and external considerations, arose in 1951, during the Korean War. The United States military requested that Jewish religious institutions provide a quota of rabbis to serve as chaplains, but the call by Yeshiva University for volunteers from among its alumni failed to produce an adequate response. It
was then suggested that the Yeshiva University Rabbinic Alumni/Rabbinical Council of America require service by imposing significant sanctions on those who declined, and R. Soloveitchik was asked to rule on the propriety of doing so. Once again, the Rav began his response with a methodological pronouncement, this time longer and more detailed; it included a two-fold statement of reservations about the “objective” model of halakhic decision-making. First, every intellectual activity (including even aspects of natural science) combines formal components and human/intuitive components; in our case, he declared, his intuitive inclination was to approve the project (24-25). Second, one must distinguish between (but ultimately combine) “pure halakhic formalism which . . . places the problem on an ahistorical conceptual level . . . [and] applied Halakhah which transposes abstractions into central realities, theory into facts. . . . Under this aspect I gave thought not only to halakhic speculation but also to [the] concrete situation” (25). It is likely—though not certain—that the intuitive component of the process pertained primarily to the practical decision. In any event, it is clear that the Rav was not about to adopt the “mathematical” model of the halakhic process so admired within certain segments of Modern Orthodoxy—a model envisioned as automatically spitting out halakhic solutions solely on the basis of objective expertise. (It must be acknowledged, of course, that the Rav’s essay *Halakhic Man* provided intellectual raw material for that notion.)

Most of the forty-page response deals with a classic halakhic question: is it permissible, on a weekday, for a person to put himself in a situation in which he will be required, at some future point, to desecrate the Sabbath or commit some other transgression? In dealing with the issue, the Rav relies, as would be expected, on the view of R. Zeraḥyahu Halevi, who, in the twelfth century, issued the leading permissive opinion. But this analysis, though clear and penetrating, does not answer the question as posed and fails to engage the key problem. To this point, the response, as a practical matter, deals with the situation of a Jew who wants to volunteer for military service, despite its halakhic challenges. But the question presented is rather different: Is it permissible (and proper) for some other agency—the yeshivah—to impose military service on its alumni, even in a case where the government itself has not drafted the rabbis? (Chaplaincy in the United States military was on a volunteer basis; accordingly, the halakhic obligation to comply with governmental law [*dina de-malkhuta dina*] was not at issue.) To that question, the Rav wanted to provide an unambiguously positive answer.
Here, the Rav invokes an entirely different set of considerations, invoking both the pragmatic and the value-based. First, he warns that the failure of Orthodox rabbis to enter the military will abandon the field—by which he primarily means Jewish soldiers—to Conservative and Reform clergy. Second, he points to experience in the previous war suggesting that soldiers indeed turn to military rabbis in times of personal or normative crisis, and it is desirable that the rabbi in the field be equipped with traditional halakhic knowledge and commitments. Third, if the Orthodox rabbinate stands on the sidelines, the liberal rabbinate will seize the opportunity to characterize the Orthodox as indifferent and uncaring. Finally, that sort of situation would likely have a disastrous effect on the government’s attitude toward Orthodox rabbis and institutions, starting with the military exemption granted to yeshiva students. That last consideration—and it is not my purpose here to praise the Rav’s political instincts!—says volumes about the attitude of Jews toward the American government during the early 1950s. From there, the Rav moves on, almost naturally, to describe the responsibility of the Jewish citizen to his civil homeland: the duty to contribute to its defense and the duty to support the Jewish soldier—and, perhaps, the non-Jewish soldier as well—in the spirit of the exhortation by the war-priest to the ancient Israelite army according to Deut. 20:2-4 and in the spirit of Maimonides’ comments about the purity of the military encampment (Guide of the Perplexed 3:41). The values underlying all this may draw on the Rav’s determination that the “tradition . . . has always wanted to see the Jew committed to all social and national institutions of the land of his birth or choice which affords to him all the privileges and prerogatives of citizenship” (57).

II

Some of the issues treated in these letters and documents pertain to how Orthodox Judaism and Orthodox Jews relate to other religious bodies and movements. Under this heading, I include inter-religious dialogue and contacts with the Catholic Church before the issuance of the Vatican declaration on the Jews; Orthodoxy’s relations with the Conservative movement and its rabbis; and (even!) the relations between Orthodox rabbis and non-rabbinic Orthodox agencies. On the face of it, these groupings seem quite different from one another: What does the Pope have in common with the leader of Mizrachi? Isn’t the very equation of the two demeaning? I would argue, however, that they share a common
element, notwithstanding the vast substantive divides between them. As a practical matter, others have already considered the parallel between the attitude toward other religions and the attitude toward other streams within Judaism; they include Prof. Reuven Kimelman and R. Aharon Lichtenstein (who uses the term “parallel” [hakbalah] in this context). Fundamentally, the Rav sees in each of these contexts the need to strike a balance (which will differ from case to case, of course) between drawing closer and keeping one’s distance, thereby setting the boundaries of cooperation and of estrangement. The obligation to join forces for purposes that are positive and non-threatening must be weighed, on a case-by-case basis, against zealous preservation of one’s identity in the face of factors that imperil it. There is no doubt that Judaism, particularly Orthodox Judaism, had ample reason to feel threatened during the fifties and sixties. At the end of the day, therefore, the Rav’s willingness to draw closer is as deserving of attention as his inclination to keep one’s distance—and that despite the fact that from a socio-historical perspective, he was seen by those drawn to him (“mekorevav,” to use R. Lichtenstein’s term), and even by his circle of followers, as tending to reject dialogue.

1. The most dramatic and far-reaching subject in this group, of course, involves the policies outlined by the Rav with respect to inter-religious dialogue in general and dialogue with the Catholic Church in particular. The subject has been treated before, especially in the Rav’s own writings (“Confrontation” remains the fullest presentation of his position) but also in interpretations written from diverse perspectives; to these must now be added the material in the present volume. Let me first note that the Rav, as we saw earlier, had crystallized his position even before 1950, and the encounter with the winds of change coming from the Vatican during the 1960s was not a factor in their formulation. The subject has recently been treated by Reuven Kimelman, who documented the Rav’s concrete activities during the period of contacts between Jewish agencies and the Vatican in a way that permits cross-checking his ideological statements against his practical activities. Looking back from an Israeli perspective, it is interesting to note that Israeli rabbis and intellectuals did not take part in the nascent dialogue. The Vatican may have preferred, for theological and political reasons, to avoid involving people who might be seen as representing a Jewish political entity; but the lack of Israeli participation may also be explained by the identity of the Israeli candidates for participation. In any case, the central figures in the discussion that developed were Abraham Joshua Heschel on one side and Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the other. The Rav’s reserved stance exerted
influence within the Orthodox community and beyond but failed to persuade the Jewish community overall; and the sixties and seventies were a heyday of inter-religious dialogue.

As many have already noted, the Rav’s reservations about inter-religious dialogue were grounded in two different arguments. First, he was concerned about the missionary impulse that, he believed, remained characteristic of the Church. Acknowledging that the impulse was legitimate from the perspective of Christian theology, the Rav did not call for its abolition or raise any complaints against it. He simply objected to Jews cooperating with it or willingly submitting to it. Perceiving a sociological environment in which the majority community had an advantage over the minority community, he believed it necessary to avoid a dialogue that would lead to a comparison between the religions—a comparison that, at the end of the day, would blur and even breach the boundaries between them. I need not quote passages in which this stance is expressed, but let me stress that the reader of these materials must become sensitive to the code words used in them. The term “dialogue,” for example, signifies not an academic seminar but a personal-educational-therapeutic encounter in which each side is expected to learn from the other and even to be transformed through internalization of the values imparted by the other. One who enters into a dialogue without being ready for this sort of transformation—to a greater or a lesser degree—is considered to be acting in bad faith. It is no coincidence that the term “dialogue” was widely used for inter-personal encounters in those days, when Martin Buber served not only as a philosophical inspiration but also as a psychological guide. In any event, the encounter premised on similarity is what gave rise to the Rav’s fears, and he proclaimed his Jewish-existential dread. 18 On the one hand, he spoke his words proudly and fearlessly; on the other, they resonate with age-old Jewish anxiety. He was not making small talk when he went out of his way to inform Cardinal Willebrands, during one of their private meetings, that his mother kept him indoors during the Easter season, lest he be attacked on the street. 19 In short, the Rav thought that nothing good for Jews or Judaism could come from inter-religious dialogue, though, as we shall see, he did not reject the Jewish-Christian encounter.

Second, the Rav posited a philosophical foundation for rejecting dialogue—a foundation that had already been set in place in his 1950 letter to the president of Cornell. As mentioned earlier, he argued even then that every faith community has its own structure, forms of expression, and content, and that they cannot coexist within a single architectonic
space. In the present document, he speaks not of physical space but of spiritual. There can be no shared spiritual discourse because when it comes to faith and religion, there is no common language—or if there is a common language, it will rapidly become clear that that the words in it have different connotations. The autonomy of faith means more than the autonomy of the religious phenomenon vis-à-vis historical and sociological categories; it means as well the autonomy of each religious vis-à-vis the others. Not only is Judaism uninterested in hearing what Christianity has to say; by rights, Christianity should be uninterested in hearing what Judaism has to say, for there is no correlation between them. Each faith community has its own legitimacy, autonomy, and intimacy. I noted earlier that the Rav discusses Christianity without touching on the question of its halakhic status as a monotheistic religion. It may be that his emphasis on the unbridgeable gap between religions (between religions in general, but, in the present context, between Judaism and Christianity) is effectively equivalent to tarring Christianity with the brush of idolatry, for it precludes any dealings with it—and in conditions of exile, one cannot hope for more.

Of the two rationales for rejecting inter-religious dialogue, the second—the philosophical one—seems the more problematic, presenting both methodological and biographical difficulties. With respect to the former, we must recall that the article “Confrontation,” known to us as the basic text rejecting inter-religious dialogue, figures in Orthodox thought on an entirely different plane as well. Section II of the article declares that there is an obligation to participate, shoulder-to-shoulder with all humanity, in universal tikkun olam (“improving the world”), in both the technological and social realms. Quotations from this article appear in anything written by Orthodox thinkers about tikkun olam. It is easy to see that the Rav is painting too rosy—too American—a picture here, but that is not our present concern. The point is that this joint effort will likely involve the spiritual leadership of all mankind, Jews included, and it is fair to assume that these spiritual and religious leaders will think and speak in the religious terms that come naturally to them. In this declaration, the Rav wanted to ensure that this effort at tikkun olam would not be a purely secular enterprise; but doesn’t that necessarily open a back door to inter-religious dialogue? In one of the documents here (261), the Rav tries to get around these difficulties lurking in the corner, and the reader must judge whether he succeeds:

Jewish rabbis and Christian clergymen cannot discuss socio-cultural and moral problems . . . in agnostic or secularist categories. . . . We [rabbis
and clergymen] evaluate man as the bearer of God’s likeness. We define
morality as an act of *imitatio Dei*, etc. . . . Even our dialogue at a socio-
humanitarian level must inevitably be grounded in universal religious
categories and values. However, the categories and values, even though
religious in nature and Biblical in origin, represent the universal and the
public—not the individual and private—in religion. . . . We are ready to
discuss universal religious problems. We will resist any attempt to
debate our private individual commitment.

Just how firm and clear is this distinction between universal and specific?
Does it lend itself to unambiguous application in practice? In any event,
the presence of spiritual values, which are likely to promote common
discussions among neighboring religions—even if the Rav does not rec-
ommend such discussions for their own sake—provides an opening.

Nor does the personal side of things—that is, the Rav’s own intellec-
tual and spiritual pursuits—necessarily suggest absolute exclusion of
inter-religious dialogue; the issue is more complex than that. For one
thing, there is the Rav’s widely noted affinity to the thought of Karl Barth
(to which we may add Søren Kierkegaard, Rudolf Otto, and Max Scheler
—not coincidentally, it seems, all Protestants); more recently, his affinity
to the thought of Emil Bruner has become more evident. The Rav him-
self thus was open to non-Jewish religious thought and found it valuable
(though one can always say that this view pertains only to the “universal”
aspect of such thought).

Likewise complex and subject to varied interpretations was the Rav’s
personal response to the openings offered by Catholicism during the
1960s. On the one hand, there is no question that he was firmly opposed
not only to Jewish participation but even to Jewish presence at the dis-
cussions in Rome. According to one report, he used his conversation
with Cardinal Willebrands to reject any possibility of inter-religious the-
ological dialogue; and he acted accordingly with any Catholic representa-
tive. Another report, however, tells that at one of their meetings he asked
Willebrands whether Catholic theology could ever believe in the salva-
tion of a Jew loyal to his faith—a very different position on theological
dialogue. But what is most provocative is that the Rav’s great essay “The
Lonely Man of Faith” was first presented, in 1964, as a lecture before a
Catholic audience that had gathered at St. John’s Seminary in Brighton,
Massachusetts. In that essay, the Rav affords extensive treatment to the
concept of covenant, not only between Adam and Eve but also between
the Jewish community and God. Covenant, as noted, was among the ten
subjects on which the Rav rejected inter-religious discussion. According
to the Rav’s family (specifically, Dr. Atarah Twersky, according to Kimelman), the article pertains entirely to the universal aspect of religion. If that is so, the theological wall that marks the scope of inter-religious dialogue—as distinct from the sociological boundary—is neither so high nor so firm; and R. Lichtenstein has already noted the impact of context in general on the Rav’s policies here.

There is, I want to suggest, another document that indicates the complexity of the Rav’s approach to religious dialogue as a universal phenomenon. In the spring of 1955, he proposed a change in the course of study leading to rabbinic ordination at Yeshiva. Among other things, he suggested that candidates for ordination be trained in philosophy, especially philosophy of religion (pp. 96-97, 100-101). In that context, he argues that if Second Temple Judaism had been able to formulate its ethical principles in philosophical terms comprehensible to Jews and gentiles alike, Christianity would have been unable to claim that it had uncovered new religious horizons. It is noteworthy that the Rav here calls for religious discourse addressed to gentiles as well and laments its absence in the past. But he is speaking not only of the past, for the context of his comments is a practical proposal. Moreover, he portrays American culture (in contrast to European) as open to religious discourse and responsive to religious philosophic stimuli. He sums it up in these terms: “Unfortunately, the all-inclusive, dynamic Halakhah has become completely divorced from this querying and questing and is not involved in this Sturm und Drang theological movement which is so characteristic of the American religious scene today.” It is not my concern here, of course, to locate the sources for this characterization or to discuss the great value the Rav attached to the intellectual dimension of religious discourse. What is important for us is what this plea says about the person who uttered it. We certainly cannot conclude that the person speaking these words was encouraging the rabbis he ordained to go out and arrange theological dialogues with their local Christian priests. What we can infer is that the Rav yearned, personally, for a cultural environment in which Judaism partook of shared spiritual-theological discourse with everyone (non-Jewish clergymen included) who engage in that sort of discourse—all as part of its integration into the American experience and ethos. That yearning evidently had no effect on his formulation of public policy, but it resided within in his heart.

2. Among the pressing intra-Jewish problems of those years was the relationship among the various Jewish streams and, in particular, the
attitude of the Orthodox stream toward the others. We can here identify
two leading issues: the need for a *meḥīzah* (partition) and/or separate
seating for men and women in the synagogue, and the participation of
Orthodox rabbis in umbrella organizations that included Conservative
and Reform rabbis as well, such as the Synagogue Council of America
and the New York Board of Rabbis. On the first issue, the Rav’s position
was forceful and unambiguous. His dramatic ruling, renewed each year
at the pertinent time in the American press, called on Jews to forgo
hearing the shofar on the Rosh Hashanah if hearing it would require
their presence in a synagogue having no separation between men and
women. 25 It is as if he saw the issue as nothing less than the battle for the
survival of Torah Judaism in the United States. His position on the sec-
ond issue—Orthodox participation in umbrella organizations—was
more nuanced, however.

Here is one treatment of the issue, excepted from an interview with
the Rav (145-146):

> When we are faced with a problem for Jews and Jewish interests toward
> the world without . . . then all groups and movements must be united. . . .
> In this realm we must consider the ideal of unity, as a political-historical
> nation, which includes everyone from Mendes-France to the “old-fash-
> tioned” Jew of Me’ah She’arim. . . .

> With regard to our problem within [the Jewish community], howev-
> er—our spiritual-religious interests such as Jewish education, syna-
> gogues, councils of rabbis—whereby unity is expressed through spiritual-
> ideological collectivism as a Torah community . . . Orthodoxy cannot
> and should not unite with such groups which deny the fundamentals of
> our *weltanschauung*. . . . The fundamental difference in ideology and
> observance make such a unity impossible. 26

He tells us, for example, that “I tore up . . . immediately” a “responsum . . .
*sent me on the question of grafting human bone tissue. . . . I refuse to
deal with any halakhic essay . . . prepared by a representative of a group
whose philosophy is diametrically opposed to Torah and tradition and
which does not accept the authority of Halakhah as a Divine and tran-
scendental guide. . . .” (119). The distinction parallels the one developed
by the Rav in his discourse “Kol Dodi Dofek” between the covenant of
fate and the covenant of destiny, though it is here applied in the practical
world. But it also parallels the attitude toward the broader non-Jewish
world: as long as we are speaking of general social questions, we should
work shoulder-to-shoulder with Christians; but once we are speaking of
particular spiritual values, there is no possibility of cooperation.
Although these principles are quite clear, their application, naturally enough, is more problematic. The Rav uncompromisingly rejected synagogues that did not seat men and women separately, yet he did not insist—as far as I know—on excluding rabbis who served such synagogues from the Rabbinical Council of America. He repeatedly declined (151-57) to issue a response on the participation of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations and the Rabbinical Council of America in an organization that included synagogues of all streams, citing “the hysterical climate” (155) in which the issue had been discussed in rabbinic circles. He did participate, as he said, on matters related to “Jewish interests”; for example, he represented American Jewry in its entirety (including all the religious streams and even secular Jewish bodies) before the United States Secretary of Agriculture with regard to supervision of kosher slaughter—a matter of great historical and practical sensitivity in the Diaspora.

On a personal level, the Rav maintained friendly ties with Conservative and Reform rabbis. At times, however, the ideological problem proved perplexing and discomfiting. I get that sense from his letter (125-27) regarding his participation in an event honoring a Conservative rabbi in Boston. He declares his long-standing friendship with the honoree, the respect he accords him and his wife, and his wish that he could respond positively to the invitation. Had the event been devoted solely to this individual, the Rav would gladly have added his name to the list of sponsors. But because the event was to celebrate as well the dedication of a new synagogue for the honoree’s congregation, a synagogue without separate seating for men and women, the Rav would see his participation as affording tacit approval for that arrangement, against the dictates of his conscience. I doubt the Rav struggled much in coming to this conclusion, but I sense from his words that his need to respond in the negative resulted in an unpleasant situation for him. (It is, by the way, typical of the Rav that the Conservative rabbi’s years of service in a mixed-seating Conservative temple [the term used by the Rav, also adopted by non-Orthodox Jewry of the time] did not disqualify him as a friend in the Rav’s eyes.)

His impassioned rhetoric notwithstanding, then, neither of these two subjects was unambiguously resolved by the Rav. Looking back forty years later, R. Lichtenstein could sum up that “application of the distinction [between permissible and impermissible cooperation] was often flexible, and his statements were not always precisely consistent. The circumstances, the subject, the public—all left their mark.”27
3. Let me add a third piece to this discussion of the Rav’s attitude toward non-Jewish and non-Orthodox actors: his posture vis-à-vis non-rabbinic actors—laymen and organizations working on behalf of Jewish causes, including non-rabbinic Orthodox and Religious Zionist bodies. Here, too, the Rav set boundaries and maintained a degree of distance. Loyalty to Halakhah, as the Rav interpreted it, was the determinative standard, from which it followed that halakhists, and only they, were authorized to decide halakhic matters or matters touching on Halakhah. It should be noted that the Rav had rigorous aesthetic and religious standards and rejected the trivialization and lack of coherence that marked various proposed liturgical innovations. In practice, he took a strongly conservative position on liturgical matters. Affirming the coherence of the Halakhah and the deliberateness and authoritativeness of the liturgical formulations arrived at by the talmudic sages and their successors over time, he rejected various efforts to introduce new liturgical formulations or structures. Even where a proposal did not warrant immediate dismissal, it would be wrong for the liturgy to respond hastily to the events of the day; in that regard the Rav would quote the talmudic account (Shabbat 21b) of the institution of Hanukkah: “in a later year they established them and made them into festival days”—they were established only after calm reflection. In short, the Rav was not much occupied with halakhic “dynamism”; and even when he acted in a way that effected changes, he portrayed the results he reached, in typically conservative fashion, as following from classical Halakhah.

To take one example, he declined to introduce any reference to the Holocaust into the Passover Haggadah, whose structure, in his view, was based on a closed and self-sufficient liturgical logic that precluded reference to any historical tragedy other than the enslavement in Egypt. And if there was a need for liturgical recognition of the bicentennial of American independence, the task should be assigned by Orthodoxy to its rabbis, who would follow the guidance provided by the spirit of Jewish prayer, and not to non-religious players (115-18). The Rav himself expressed his willingness to participate in such a task force, if it were established. He more or less characterized R. Shlomo Goren’s proposal to recite Hallel on the night of Yom ha-Azma’ut as outrageous foolishness, and one can only imagine his reaction to the crazy-quilt of prayers proposed by the Israeli rabbinate for use on that night. His opposition to a proposal that the RCA disseminate liturgical material for Yom ha-Azma’ut prepared by Mizrachi (123-24) manifests his sense
that a rabbinic organization should never serve as the agent for some other body with respect to halakhic matters. The issue was not the amateurishness of the materials but the fundamental impropriety of the suggestion; rabbis should never give up their full measure of authority with regard to anything having a halakhic aspect. It is, simply, “below our dignity to serve in the capacity of a mailing agency for any group” (124).

But the Rav showed conservatism in liturgical matters even where he did not reject a proposal on halakhic grounds. He recommended that mourning for the victims of the Holocaust be incorporated into the Fast of the Ninth of Av—a widespread traditionalist position—but he did not look kindly on the writing (even by contemporary rabbis) of special dirges on the subject. He took that position even though the existing collection of dirges includes poems devoted to events other than the destruction of the Temple. At issue here, in effect, is not any halakhic prohibition but liturgical conservatism pure and simple—a conservatism grounded, on the one hand, in recognition of the careful formulation of the prayers that have come down to us and, on the other, in deference to the great figures who composed the prayers. But whatever its origins, the position is a conservative one.28 Notwithstanding the widespread image of the Rav as “halakhic man,” then, we find many cases in which he decided an issue in accord with the historical model that presented itself to him, that is, the conduct of the community of Israel and its great scholars through the ages as he perceived them—a sort of “image of his father’s face in the window,” as in the midrashic account of Joseph in Potifar’s house. This trait gained explicit expression in the letter to the president of Cornell discussed earlier, as well as in his attitude toward liturgical innovations in memory of the Shoah.

III

At this point, we should consider some characteristics that cut across specific issues. Two terms that appear frequently in the present volume are “dignity” and “respect.” The Rav is very concerned that Orthodoxy has lost its dignity. He does not mean by this that it is insufficiently formal, nor is he referring to any lack of honor, of ceremonialism. On the contrary, he already discerned, early in the 1960s, that American Jewry had become disillusioned with the ceremonial sheen of organized religion, and he saw the beginnings of the search for less established religions—though he certainly did not foresee the emergence of New Age
sensibilities (188). He was referring primarily to an absence of personal spiritual depth and to intellectual decline—tendencies that he saw in the public arena as well. One gets the sense that he regarded American Jewry, and Orthodox Jews in particular, as a spiritually and culturally enervated group, whether compared to the Jews of Western Europe or to those of Eastern Europe. In drawing those comparisons, to be sure, he had in mind the elites of those communities; but he believed no such elite existed in America. His students were talented and well prepared, but he decried their lack of historical (and religious) rootedness, their personal roughness, and their limited spiritual development. Accordingly, Orthodoxy needed to internalize the recognition that it represented a significant, venerable tradition and to act accordingly.

Another characteristic evident in some of the letters is the Rav’s willingness to go forward on the basis of an existing situation, even if problematic. We saw one example in his readiness to confront the religio-cultural significance of the spiritual center to be built at Cornell, though not concealing his sense that it would have been better had the project never been conceived. An additional example, which I have not considered here, is his attitude toward establishing a medical school within Yeshiva University. On the one hand, he understood that the project would be a halakhic adventure, to say the least. He declares at the outset that he was not asked in advance about “the necessity and practicality of a medical school under the auspices of Yeshiva” (86). The question posed to him is only be-di’avad (post facto). And yet, he reminds us, all of life is be-di’avad; “it would have been preferable for man not to have been created, but now that he has been created. . . .” Accordingly, he considers the project to be a given; as such, the policy toward it should be one that blends respect and suspicion. On the one hand, one should recognize the great opportunities offered by the new institution for enhancing Orthodoxy’s image, building bridges between the religious public and a medical community not known for holding the tradition in great esteem (he here refers to the writings of Y. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleikhem!) and promoting the welfare of the community. At the same time, one must take pains that any affront to Halakhah be kept to a minimum. It seems to me that the Rav’s attitude toward Zionism similarly draws, at some points, on this same distinction between be-di’avad and le-khatteḥilah (pre-facto) and on his willingness to work on the basis of a situation as given.
The book includes materials on many other public issues, but I will conclude with some texts on a personal matter, namely, the give and take regarding the possible appointment of the Rav as Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel following the death of Chief Rabbi Unterman in 1959. Some of this material has already been published, some not; in any case it is now gathered and presented in one place. A critical question, I believe, is the extent to which the reasons offered by the Rav for declining the appointment were, in fact, the only reasons. He begins one of the letters on the subject by noting that he is writing without taking into account the effects of his decision on his family and friends. We do not know how the Rav’s wife reacted to the suggestion that they move from Boston to Jerusalem and that the Rav take on the role of Chief Rabbi.

The basic rationale articulated by the Rav was the political and public nature of the Chief Rabbi’s role—two separate features of that role, both of which he shied away from. He had in mind both the Rabbinate’s ties to the government in general and the intrigue within religious Judaism itself. (He told me that David Ben-Gurion had sent an emissary to assure him that if he agreed to be nominated for the job, he—Ben-Gurion—would ensure that he was elected. In reply, he told the emissary that it was precisely Ben-Gurion’s ability to ensure who was elected Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel that kept him from accepting the office. The Rav alludes to this proposal in a May 1960 letter to Moshe Unna [191] but says he is not free to disclose the identities of the players in the episode.) He saw himself as a teacher of Torah and a thinker, and he had doubts about whether he would be able to maintain those roles while also serving as Chief Rabbi. He describes at length his informality, a trait ill-suited to the image of the Chief Rabbi current in Israel; he did not, in fact, dress as a rabbi or speak in rabbinic style. In America, too, he was called upon to play a public role, but the extent of that role was vastly smaller than what could be anticipated in the role of Chief Rabbi, as he well understood. His concerns strike me as eminently reasonable and perceptive. He envisioned a rabbinic ideal of study and spiritual leadership, and he doubted—with justification—whether he could carry it out, particularly given his weakened physical state following surgery for stomach cancer. While he indulged no illusions, he thought he could bring his learning and personality to bear on the non-observant public in Israel, though he fully understood that the time was not ripe for a mass return to religion (185). One may ask whether his personality was well suited to playing such a role.
What is surprising in this exchange of letters is the seriousness with which the Rav entertained the possibility of serving as Chief Rabbi. A careful reading of the letters and interviews shows that he took a positive view of the proposal at the outset and even envisioned, in his mind’s eye, how he would carry out the role (175): “I had decided to assume the spiritual burden of the nation.” Among the changes he would insist on—and he thought about the stipulations—was the placement of (religious) education under the authority of the Chief Rabbi. That he be granted authority in the area of education was the only concrete demand he seems to have presented, and it is very characteristic of him. In his letter to Moshe Shapira he writes that he cannot respond positively “at the moment” (176); and while that phrase may have been added only out of politeness, it may also convey some interest in leaving the door open. He wrote to R. Reuven Katz that, at the outset, he “decided to listen to you and take up the burden of the great rabbinate” (177). And in his final letter to Unna, in January 1961, he sums up the situation by saying “regarding the issue itself, the air must first be cleared . . . and this cannot be done except through far-reaching changes in the election procedures for and the powers of the Chief Rabbinate” (194). The word “first” suggests a possibility of reopening the discussion, as unrealistic as that seems. But this is by no means clear, and it is entirely possible that he meant only to end the matter smoothly and pleasantly.

Community, Covenant, and Commitment includes documents and letters written by the Rav on other subjects, and much could be said about them as well. The present essay is by no means exhaustive. The reader will find, for example, units on education, on the “Who Is a Jew” question posed by David Ben-Gurion to Jewish sages, and more. Beyond its specific contents, the volume attests not only to the Rav’s involvement and centrality in the life of the Orthodox community but also to the way in which he applied principles and commitment to those principles in dealing with issues arising in day-to-day life. Naturally, some of these issues have already become obsolete, but that is certainly not the case regarding the spirit and method applied in treating them. The final word in the title, “Commitment,” is a modern term (and, perhaps, a modern concept), which, I believe, became prominent in its prevailing sense in existentialist thought; but the Rav used it extensively, as a code for what he demanded of those who heed his teachings. It accurately characterizes his own way even outside the world of the study hall.
More than anything else, the issues I have discussed here shed light on the image of the Rav as a public figure drawing on a deep spiritual heritage while confronting a new and changing world. I have included no sociological/historical discussion of the influence exerted on his contemporaries by the Rav, his positions, and his pronouncements, nor have I sought out the concrete background for those positions. Those inquiries require tools and knowledge different from those brought to bear on the present discussion.

Notes

1. Riverdale, NY, 5601.
4. For another work dealing with R. Soloveitchik’s communal and educational activities, see Seth Farber, *An American Orthodox Dreamer: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Boston’s Maimonides School* (Hanover, NH, 2004).
6. Pp. 3-11. The request came from Professor Konvitz (the son of a *rav talmid hakham* and a man of strong Jewish identity), who served as the Jewish representative on the committee in charge of the project, but Konvitz made clear that the response would be directed to the president of the University and to the center’s donor. According to the book’s editor (p. xvi), the president of Cornell had agreed to abide by the Rav’s determination—a surprising phenomenon in its own right.
7. Note that the Rav does not take the easy way out, which would have been to argue simply that the presence of human forms identifies the place as non-Jewish.
8. The Rav would look to the midrash that tells that Joseph mustered the fortitude to resist Potifar’s wife’s advances when he saw the image of his father’s face in the window. It was not the normative rule that proved decisive but the vision of the ideal figure.
the Means] (Jerusalem, 2000), 261-292 (violation of the Sabbath to save one from converting). It should be noted that this subject—preventing conversion at the price of Sabbath desecration—is of the sort likely to generate, in addition to written legal sources, an oral tradition reflecting accounts of actual incidents. For a contemporary discussion showing the complexity of the issue, see Shaul Yisraeli, Ḥavvat Binyamin 1 (Jerusalem, 5752 [1991-92]), sec. 14 (“Ha-aliyyah mi-Rusiyyah ve-gidrei pikkuaḥ nefesh”). The Rav’s position on the issue draws on that of R. Ḥayyim; see Aharon Lichtenstein, “Mah Enosh: Reflections on the Relations Between Judaism and Humanism,” The Torah u-Madda Journal 14 (2006-7): 29 and 57, n. 132.

11. “I cannot lay claim to objectivity if the latter should signify the absence of axiological premises and a completely emotionally detached attitude. . . . In all fields of human intellectual endeavor there is always an intuitive approach which determines the course and method of the analysis. . . . Hence this investigation was also undertaken in a similar subjective mood.”

12. This sort of acknowledgement is unusual but not entirely unprecedented. Cf. Rosh’s Responsa 32:5: “With respect to this captive I tried in all ways to find a basis for permitting her [marriage] but I despaired of finding an opening.”

13. Note that the Rav would refer to his essay “U-Vikkashtem mi-Sham,” before it was published, as a work whose subjectivity would complement the objective aspects of Halakhic Man.

14. The full discussion deals with questions of compulsion and force, with the distinction between cases involving mortal danger and those where that element is lacking, and with the distinction between a transgression that is certain and one that is only possible. The rather superficial summary I provide here is adequate for my purposes; but study of the issue in its entirety would certainly disclose additional relevant points and uncover interesting dimensions of the Rav’s halakhic and value-based thought.


16. See Kimelman, “Rabbis . . . .”

17. On the members of the group organized by the American Jewish Committee, see Kimelman, 253. At one point, there was an effort to bring in Dr. Chaim Vardi of the Israeli Foreign Ministry as the World Jewish Congress’s official observer at the Vatican Conference, but it was rejected both by the Vatican and by Jewish agencies (257).

18. “We are therefore opposed to any public debate, dialogue, or symposium concerning the doctrinal, dogmatic, or ritual aspects of our faith vis-a-vis ‘similar’ aspects of another faith community” (260). The Rav goes on to enumerate ten specific topics that may not be the subject of a comparative dialogue; they include monotheism and the trinity, the messianic idea, the Jewish attitude toward Jesus, the idea of the covenant, and so forth. Without making too much of it, it seems to me that his use of the word “public” is not coincidental. Cf. David Hartman, Love and Terror in the God Encounter: The Theological Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Woodstock, VT, 2001), 131-65. In any case, I find in the Rav’s writings no willingness to compromise on the point.
19. Kimelman, 267, n. 31, reported by Atarah Twersky, the Rav’s daughter. The meeting took place in the mid- or late 1960s at the Rav’s home in Brookline.


22. Again, I note the term “debate” appearing at a critical point in the final sentence.

23. My comments in this paragraph correspond to Kimelman’s observations.

24. In addition to the citations provided by Kimelman, see Gerald Blidstein, “Biblical Models in the Contemporary Thought of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik,” Literature and Theology 8, 3 (1994): 243-45, where I consider as well how the Rav’s treatment of the Adam and Eve stories differs from Barth’s.

25. The present volume includes several documents that give voice to the Rav’s unyielding position on the matter; see pp. 125-42. On the distinction between a mixed-seating synagogue and a synagogue with separate seating for men and women but no mehizah between the sections, see the Rav’s statement to a court in Cincinnati, Ohio that was considering the matter, 129-31. The Rav also rejected Orthodox participation in the committee preparing a new translation of the Bible, on the grounds that the translation would not reflect the Oral Torah’s understanding of Scripture (110-11).

26. Here, too, however, the Rav adds a more tactical rationale: “too much harmony and peace can cause confusion of the minds and will erase outwardly the boundaries between Orthodoxy and other movements” (146).

27. This translation is by the translator of the present article, Joel Linsider.

28. The Rav attacked this issue from various perspectives but always arrived at the same result. See, now, Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, The Lord Is Righteous in All His Ways, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Jersey City, 2006), 266-67, 289-301, 300-302, and index, p. 343, s.v. Holocaust. For an attempt to identify the Rav’s position with Haredi thought, see A. Edrei, “Keiżad Zokherim? Zikhron ha-Sho‘ah ba-Hevrah ha-Datit u-ba-Hevrah ha-Hilonit” [How to Remember? Memorializing the Holocaust in Religious and Secular society], Tarbut Demokratit 11 (2007):15, 43-44. And that is how his opinion is recalled by students and audience members; see Edrei, 15, n. 31.

[Editor’s Note: Further discussion of the Rav's views on interfaith relations is found in the exchange between Yoel Finkelman and Meir Y. Soloveitchik later in this volume.]