

**Commemorating
the 25th Yahrzeit
of Rabbi Joseph B.
Soloveitchik zt"l**
The Rav on Religious
Zionism

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THE FIVE DERASHOT AND THE RAV'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ZIONIST PROJECT

My husband has a relative who spent his public life fighting a bizarre war against Zionism and the State of Israel. An offended family member once asked this relative: What would the Jews who were interred in Displaced Persons camps after the Shoah have done without the help of various groups who smuggled them to Palestine?¹ He was completely unruffled by the question: They could have stayed right where they were, he replied, and learned Torah. This, of course, is an extremist's response and it would not be fair to view it as the position of the broader Yeshivish community (which in 1946 was shattered), then or thereafter.

The traditional communal rabbinic leaders, though, in the decades prior to World War II, had rejected the Zionist

movement, along with competing modernist movements that they viewed as mortal threats to the Torah way of life. It would not be unfair to assess their basic attitude as a passive one, resting on the bedrock principle that God would protect His people so long as they remained faithful to His laws. This "quietism" (to adopt the description that Lionel Trilling once ascribed to Chazal) is precisely what Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik came to reject as he gradually moved away from the negative reaction of his family and peers to Zionism. He addressed this fundamental distinction between a fatalistic approach [*goral*] and an activist approach seeking fulfillment of the destiny [*yi'ud*] of the Jewish people in the essay "Kol Dodi Dofek" based on a talk he gave in 1956.² Not surprisingly, that same distinction

— between a passive quietism and an active engagement with reality — underlies a talk he gave during those years to the members of the Hapoel HaMizrachi group, and which forms one of the essays in the collection now known as *Hamesh Derashot*, "And Joseph Dreamt a Dream."³

In this essay, the Rav analyzes two Biblical characters, Joseph the Dreamer and Abraham the Builder. Through his analysis of Joseph the Dreamer, or as the Rav depicts him, Biblical Joseph, the Rav develops the tension between *goral* and *yi'ud*, between a Jew who "is responding to the initiatives taken by others as they attempt to impose their vision of the Jews' place upon him," and a Jew who "chooses his own identity"; between a "Jew as object of the will of others or as subject of his own will."⁴

The young Joseph dreamt two dreams. The first dream featured sheaves of grain, encircling and bowing down to Joseph's sheaf in the middle. The second dream featured the sun, the moon and eleven stars, all bowing down to Joseph. In the Rav's reading, the context for the dispute between Joseph and his brothers was the Divine prophecy issued to Abraham that "your descendants will be strangers in an alien land." The brothers, though, focused on the fact that "Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's wanderings." In their view, life should continue as it had, and it was not their job or Jacob's to plan for changed circumstances that might arrive some time in the future. Joseph understood, though, that his two dreams foretold a rapidly approaching future, a future in which both the security of Jacob's family and a continuation of their way of life was in danger. For Joseph, the wheat represented a new economy and the celestial beings a new secular culture. The combination of the two dreams meant that the decree of *Brit ben haBetarim*⁵ would soon begin. The children of Abraham would find themselves strangers in a strange land, no longer living lives in "holiness and purity."⁶ Soon, Jacob and his family would have to confront a new society with "great and powerful technology creating wonders and changing the foundations of our life."⁷

Joseph feared that, "[i]f we will not be prepared for new conditions, the environment will swallow us! Our intellectual forces will completely assimilate" and only by preparing for the future that we be able to survive.⁸

Joseph advocated that it was necessary for Jacob's sons to put aside their shepherd's staff and embrace new

occupations. He insisted that they transition into farmers and builders. He wanted the family to learn how to cut stone and work with wood and metals, and not only rely on the production of woolen products. In short, he tried to prepare his family to adapt to new conditions.⁹ Joseph wanted his brothers to become Jews "of destiny and purpose," Jews who choose their "halakhic covenantal identity" even if this behavior also requires "historical, even political, behavior."¹⁰

Joseph's brothers strongly disagreed. They relished the "holiness and purity"¹¹ of their life in Canaan. They valued the freedom to live in isolation from the other nations. They cherished the opportunity to learn Torah as they grazed their sheep.

*They looked upon the future as a continuation of the present. They perceived all problems from within the framework of their life in Canaan, the land of their fathers' wanderings ... They did not need new frameworks or novel economic methods.*¹²

The brothers wanted to maintain the status quo.

Like the Biblical Joseph, the Joseph of 5662 (= 1902), i.e., the visionaries who founded Mirzahi that year, "had a dark foreboding of something terrifying, an apocryphal vision of catastrophe, of cataclysm, of tempest and imminent destruction." The sheaves of wheat hinted that the Jewish people:

*... would be enveloped by a new economic order. The lion's share of Jewry would be centered in the Western world, and society would be based on science where ... every scientific discovery will be publicized by the newspapers as the greatest sensation.*¹³

The Joseph of 5662:

*... unconsciously sensed that it was forbidden to rely on a continuation of the status quo, that great changes were about to occur in Jewish life for which we would have to be prepared. He sensed the advent of an era when there would be no yeshivot in Brisk, Vilna, and Minsk; when America would be turned into a place of Torah; and when Israel, the State of Israel, would become the core center of Torah.*¹⁴

The Rav's peers and, more important, his family, were opponents of Zionism in any form, including the religious variant.¹⁵ During his early years in America, the Rav was affiliated with Agudah. At some point after the war, though, he had a change of heart and became associated with and ultimately the leading rabbinic figure of the American religious Zionist movement.

The name for the Religious Zionist Movement, or Mizrahi as it is called in Hebrew, was coined from "*merkaz ruchani*," or spiritual center, and refers to the movement that was founded in 1902 [5662] by Rabbi Yitzchak Yakov Reines and others. Rabbi Reines' nascent movement was itself a response to a platform introduced by the Fifth Zionist Congress that had taken place the previous year, a platform that adopted the concept of Cultural, or Spiritual, Zionism. Cultural Zionism, led by, among others, Leo Motzkin, Martin Buber, and Chaim Weizmann, looked to revitalize Jewish culture via the Hebrew language.¹⁶ Secular learning and secular concepts of Judaism would replace part of the Orthodox program so that the State of Israel would not turn into a theocracy.¹⁷

In contrast, Religious Zionism, building on the ideas of the *Mevasrei Zion*, the "harbingers of Zion," sought to:

*Restore not only Jewish political freedom but also Jewish religion in the light of the Torah and its commandments... Judaism based on the commandments is a sine qua non for Jewish national life in the homeland.*¹⁸

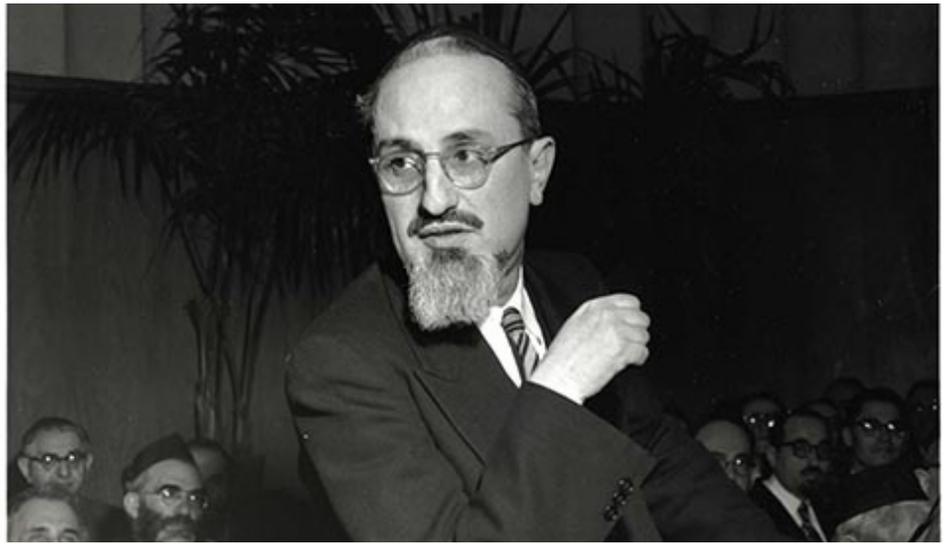
While even the Mizrahi movement was beyond the pale for his family members and the rabbinic world from which he came, the Rav, like his Biblical namesake, looked back at the prewar landscape and concluded that the Mizrahi leaders had been correct. By identifying with Mizrahi, he was legitimizing a secular state of Israel and justifying cooperation with secular Jews in its maintenance. How did the Rav justify that decision? The most basic value was based on his inclination toward “*yi’ud*” rather than “*goral*,” of choosing to control our destiny, to whatever extent possible, rather than be victims of fate, “that a *Torat Hayyim* addresses the realities of the world rather than seeks an escape from them.”¹⁹

One of the Rav’s closest students and leading interpreters, Rabbi Walter Wurzberger, wrote as follows:

*The Rav’s z.t.l. endorsement of Religious Zionism is also closely related to his belief that taking the initiative in ameliorating natural, economic, social or political conditions, far from being a usurpation of divine prerogatives, represents a religiously mandated activity of becoming partners with God in the process of Creation.*²⁰

Equally important was the fact that the Rav also looked at all Jewish people as *Bnei Avraham*, a “nationalistic dimension of Jewishness” that:

... comes also to the fore in the Rav’s frequent references to the halakhic opinion that anyone who loses his life



*because of his Jewishness is regarded as having died al Kiddush haShem. He regarded this as precedent for his belief that anyone who gives up his life in the defense of the State of Israel should be viewed as having died al Kiddush haShem.*²¹

After all, “the Nazis persecuted all Jews, irrespective of their religious commitment or lack of same,”²² and for that reason the Rav admired the Zionist leadership for its “significant achievement in the ongoing struggle to create a focus of Jewish identity for Jewries which have lost their traditional moorings in the modern world.”²³

The Rav’s core belief was the primacy of halakha in expressing Jewish values; he insisted that halakha demands a sense of identification with all Jews, regardless of their religious convictions or practices.²⁴ He distinguished between standards for adjudicating halakhic decisions and standards for determining hashkafic or historical decisions. The former is determined by man, since once God gave the Torah to man “the rabbinic majority reigns supreme.”²⁵ The latter, however, is determined by God, who “decides as to whose

interpretation shall become the ‘law’ [historical development].”²⁶ This ruling is beyond dispute. In the controversy between Joseph of yore and his brothers thousands of years ago, God decided in accordance with Joseph’s interpretation of the historical process.²⁷ Similarly, in the debate over establishment of the State of Israel,

*... the Creator of the universe ... decided that the [historical] “law” will be as the Joseph of 5662 [religious Zionists] had predicted — in accordance with the view of him who had little faith in the future of East European Jewry and who dreamed of another land and other conditions.*²⁸

The Rav felt that the “Divine Providence ... employs secular Jews as instruments to bring to fruition His great plans regarding the land of Israel,”²⁹ and as such, we must work with those who are actively building the Jewish State. In reflecting about his choice to identify with Mirzahi, he believes that “there would be no place for Torah in Israel today were it not for the Mirzahi.”³⁰

If Joseph the Dreamer saw the need to plan for a new reality, Abraham the Builder erected the altars and offered the sacrifices upon which the Land of

Israel was acquired. Upon his arrival in the Land of Israel, Abraham built altars on four separate occasions as the Torah describes, and it was through this focus on sacrifice that he acquired a kinyan in the Land of Israel. The first altar that Abraham built was upon his entry into the Land, and on this altar he sacrificed his sense of belonging. Loneliness, “the loss of contact between man and the world in which he grew up, the world in which he was educated and in which he spent his childhood,” notes the Rav, “is one of the tragic experiences that can break a man.”³¹

In parallel, the sacrifice of loneliness was once again offered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by members of the early aliyah movements, and by anyone who left behind family, friends, and community, who through their sacrifice helped to acquire and possess the land of Israel. All the builders of the land built “sacrificial altars.” During the War of Independence, during the pogroms of Tel Chai and Jaffa and Hebron, “when Jewish blood flowed throughout the length and breadth of the land of Israel; when the Arab bullet and the Arab knife did not distinguish between the Hebron Yeshiva students and leftwing kibbutzniks ... the entire Jewish settlement erected that great altar whereby the ancient possessory act of Abraham in respect of the land of Israel and the Lord of Israel was repeated.”³²

The second altar that Abraham built was constructed between Bet El and Ai.³³ Rashi, referring to the midrash in *Bereishit Rabbah*, explains that Abraham was praying for the welfare of his future children when they would be conquering the city of Ai

under the leadership of Joshua.³⁴ When discussing this altar, the Rav refers to ordeals of the early Zionists in working the land of Israel, and equates their work with suffering on behalf of acquiring the Torah since:

*There is no contradiction between building up the land and building up of the Torah, between breaking up the earth about the olive trees and clearing rods, and building yeshivot ... The crown of Torah bestows upon us our uniqueness and our individuality.*³⁵

The third altar that Abraham built also relates to the idea of children and preparing for their future. After Abraham separated from Lot, God appeared to him and promised him that his children shall be greater in number than the dust of the land. God commanded Abraham to walk around all four corners of the land which his descendants will be given.³⁶

The fourth and final altar is the one built on Har HaMoriah, where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham was commanded to take Isaac together with two lads,³⁷ whom Rashi identifies as Ishmael and Eliezer.³⁸ Why was it necessary for Abraham to take his son by Hagar [Ishmael] and his *aide de camp* [Eliezer]? And furthermore, why were the two young men only able to accompany Abraham to the foot of the mountain? The Rav sees this story as a paradigm for how we are to get along with non-religious Jews, especially those who toiled to make the land of Israel habitable. There must have been some reason why Abraham needed his two companions. Perhaps Abraham would not have survived the journey to the mountain of Moriah if had gone alone with only Isaac. We must cooperate and work with those we live with. But we only cooperate to

a point. Our identity is at stake if we cooperate to a point of watering down ideals and sacrificing the basic tenets of the Torah.

*We, the members of Mizrahi, put into practice the philosophy formulated by Abraham in his declaration to the lads. To build a State of Israel, we march together with all the parties, because we believe that the State of Israel is the road that leads to Mount Moriah, and it is clear to us that we cannot succeed in this journey alone.*³⁹

While the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel convinced the Rav of “the correctness” of Mizrahi’s paths, the Rav notes the following caveat, extending the concept of sacrifice:

*I built an altar upon which I sacrificed sleepless nights, doubts and reservations ... The Mizrahi must understand that Jews like me ... who joined the movement and who draw their nourishment from the ancient Talmudic soil of Abaye and Rava, are in the category of Joseph. They are required to sacrifice on this altar their peace of mind as well as their social relationships and friendships. The Mirzahi must also understand that we do not use the phrase “Zionism plus religious” or “religious Zionism.” For us, there is only one unique noun — Torah. Israel is holy and dear because the Torah sanctified it and because the Torah’s future is tied to it.*⁴⁰

This switch was not an easy one for the Rav to contemplate. He faced opposition from his family and his peers. The switch was representative of his intellectual honesty and desire to provide a haven for the Jews.

But there is a limit to cooperation. In matters which relate to Mount Moriah, to matters that relate to halachic observance, we advance alone. There is to

*be no compromise regarding ... the final goal of our twice millennial journey back to the land of Israel and the ultimate transcendental-eschatological purpose and destination.*⁴¹

What, then, is the Rav's view on Zionism? The essay "And Joseph Dreamt a Dream," penned 60 years after the formation of the Mizrahi Movement, makes clear that the Rav saw Zionism as an extension of his general belief toward "man as an initiator, as active agent, as one who makes historical processes happen and promotes the achievement of social and historical objectives."⁴² How does this belief translate into action, especially in light of his reluctance to recite Hallel on Yom Ha'Atzmaut and his opinion toward aliyah?

Many have commented that the Rav's reluctance to recite Hallel on Yom Ha'Atzmaut stemmed a variety of halakhic considerations. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, the Rav's son-in-law, noted that one major consideration was the Rav's understanding of *bal tosif*, the prohibition of adding mitzvot to the Torah.⁴³ Another consideration is the concept of *meharef u-megadef*, violation of the Talmudic principle that "He who recites Hallel every day is a blasphemer," since he is seeing God's presence in the miraculous and not in the providential.⁴⁴ Rabbi Moshe Meiselman, the Rav's nephew, notes that if the Rav was present at a minyan where Hallel was being recited on YH, "he simply stood there, silently, with his tallit over his head, until Hallel was concluded."⁴⁵

What was his attitude toward aliyah? Rabbi Meiselman notes that he heard the Rav discuss that the "Ramban's version of the mitzva to settle the Land of Israel is not mainstream halakha and is not relevant in

practice."⁴⁶ He did attempt to make aliyah in 1935 when he made what was to be his only visit to Israel, "wishing to build his home and his future" in the Land of Israel.⁴⁷ He did not receive the position of Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv and moved to Boston where he founded the Maimonides School in 1937. Yet it appears that he did consider another visit in the 1960's. In a poignant letter of response to Miriam Shiloh of Givat Washington,⁴⁸ he responds to her query about why he never made aliyah, especially since "now is a propitious time as well as a time of spiritual crisis" [she had just taught his essay "Kol Dodi Dofek" to her students]. His response, dated 17 Tammuz 1967, says the following:

Last year we decided, my wife z"l and I, to come to the Land and to spend six months there, to see the Land and the nation dwelling there. But many thoughts are in the heart of man, and what happened happened, and my sighs are many and my heart grieves! ... How could I now ascend to Jerusalem, when I am a man of a harsh and bitter spirit? G-d is not manifest when one is depressed, upset and pained. Madam need not justify her words. I, too, am a simple Jew. In the language of the Sages of Yavneh (Berachot 17), I would say: I am a teacher, and many work with the community in the field of Torah education, as teachers. My work is in the large city of New York, in an institution with many students, and their work is in Givat Washington or in another community in a small institution. Whether one does much or little, so long as one directs his heart toward Heaven. The work all of us do is dedicated to nurturing the values of Judaism, the ancestral tradition and the Torah of our masters, authors of the tradition and its sages.

It is over one hundred years since the formation of the Mizrahi, seventy years since the founding of the State of Israel, and 45 years since the Rav penned this article. Much has changed, and much remains the same. Not everyone who lives in Israel is a Zionist and not all Zionists believe that the focal point of the State of Israel should be Mount Moriah and the service of God. We tend to take for granted the existence of the State of Israel and perhaps are not fully aware of the significant contributions Israel has made in the worlds of science and culture. There are still sacrifices — far too many of them. But without the dream that Joseph dreamt, without his plans for a new future, where would we be today?

Endnotes

1 Many of the survivors did make it to mandatory Palestine, although the intransigence of the British who were enforcing the White Paper of 1939 frustrated the effort at every turn. There is a large and growing literature on the actions of President Truman and his administration following his receipt of the report prepared by Earl G. Harrison and his committee describing the desperate situation of the Jewish survivors. See, for instance, Angelika Konigseder and Juliane Wetzel, *Waiting for Hope: Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-World War II Germany* (Northwestern University Press 2001). A quick glance at some of the literature reveals that disappointingly, though not surprisingly, the actions of the administration in trying to get England to admit Jews in to Palestine is now mired in the same controversy as every other event relating to Jews settling the Land of Israel, in the battle between left, right and center over the legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise and the generosity (or duplicity) of the various nation-state actors depending on one's perspective. According to the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, some 136,000 displaced Jews resettled in Eretz Israel, and over 80,000 in the U.S.

2 Rav Aharon Lichtenstein cites this very point, “the status of man as initiator, as active agent, as one who makes historical processes happen and promotes the achievement of social and historical objectives,” as the “alpha and omega of all forms of Zionism,” and as the key for understanding the Rav’s attitude toward Zionism. <http://www.gush.net/alei/14-02ral-zionism.htm>.

3 In a private communication, the Toras Horav Foundation confirmed that this talk was delivered in 1962. The derashot printed in the various editions over the years were delivered to the Mirzahi / HaPoel HaMizrachi membership between 1961 and 1966 (not 1962-1967 as the English volume indicated) but, except for the greetings sent in December, 1966, are not dated in the published volumes. The talks were given in Yiddish and four (plus the 1966 greetings) were published in Yiddish in 1967. A Hebrew translation of five derashot plus the greetings was issued in 1973 and an English translation of the Hebrew followed about ten years later. Page references in this article are to the Toras Horav reissue of the English version in 2002.

4 Gerald J. Blidstein [1989]. “On the Jewish People in the Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.” *Tradition* 24,3, p. 28.

5 Bereishit 15, 13.

6 “And Joseph Dreamt a Dream” in *The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses on Israel, History, and the Jewish People*. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik 2002: Toras HoRav Foundation, p. 28.

7 Dream p. 28.

8 Dream p. 28.

9 Dream p. 27.

10 Blidstein, p. 28.

11 Dream p. 28.

12 Dream p. 29.

13 Dream p. 31.

14 Dream p. 3.

15 Rav Aaron Rakefet-Rothkoff, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Vol. II*, pp. 112-116, (concerning R. Chaim, the Rav’s grandfather and R. Velvel, his uncle); it is true that the Rav’s father taught in the 1920’s in a Mizrahi seminary in Warsaw before coming to New York. Rakefet Vol. I p. 25-26; Shulamit Meiselman, *The Soloveitchik Heritage: A Daughter’s Memoir* (KTAV, 1995), 203-205. Rav Moshe was severely criticized for doing

so and he was cut off from the mainstream Yeshiva world, according to his daughter. (p. 216). That lesson was not lost on the Rav and it was not at all obvious that he would embrace Mizrahi.

16 Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/religious-zionism>, retrieved February 5, 2018.

17 Dream p. 35; the Rav observes that his grandfather loved Zion but wanted no part of Weizmann’s dream. On this point the Rav did not change his position when he became a Mizrahinik.

18 Jewish Virtual Library.

19 Walter Wurzbarger [1994], “Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post-Modern Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 29, 1, p.7.

20 Wurzbarger, p. 10.

21 Wurzbarger, p. 12.

22 Blidstein, p. 29.

23 Blidstein, p. 34.

24 Wurzbarger, p. 11.

25 Dream p. 25.

26 Dream p. 25.

27 Dream p. 32.

28 Dream p. 32.

29 Dream p. 36.

30 Dream p. 36.

31 Dream p. 25.

32 Dream p. 22.

33 Bereishit 12, 8.

34 *Bereishit Rabbah* 39, 16.

35 Dream p. 42.

36 Bereishit 13, 14-18.

37 Bereishit 22, 3.

38 Rashi ad loc based on *Pirkay deRabbi Eliezer* 31.

39 Dream p. 46.

40 Dream p. 36.

41 p. 47.

42 Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, “Rav Soloveitchik’s Approach to Zionism,” *Alei Etzion* 14, 2 2006.

43 In the article listed above, Rav Lichtenstein

draws an analogy from JT *Megillah* 1:7 about reciting Hallel on Purim.

44 Rabbi Moshe Meiselman, Communications, *Tradition* 33,2, 1999. In the original article, which appeared in 1998 in *Tradition* 33, 1, Rabbi Meiselman notes that the Rav explained that there are two ways in which “man sees God in nature. Some see God only in the miraculous. However, our obligation is to see God in the everyday process of nature. It is in this context that we recite the daily section of Psalms recited every morning, *pesukei de-zimra*, wherein we say *hak natan ve-lo ya’avor*, ‘He has given laws (to nature) that cannot be violated.’ Hallel, however, is for the miraculous. The Rav showed that Rashi says that only a prophet can distinguish between the providential and the miraculous. Hence, we may only say Hallel for a miracle identified by a prophet as such. Everything else remains providential. Someone who says Hallel every day sees God only in the miraculous and not in the providential. Similarly, the Rav maintained, someone who recites Hallel on non-miraculous events does so because he has skewed the importance of the providential aspect of God. He, too, is a blasphemer.”

45 It is worth noting that when Rabbi Meiselman consulted the Rav about what to do about reciting Hallel on Yom Ha’Atzmaut when Rabbi Meiselman was the Rosh Yeshiva at YULA, the Rav advised him not “to undermine his communal work.” As a result, writes Rabbi Meiselman, they would recite Hallel after the Kaddish Titkabel and not immediately after Shemoneh Esreh as would be customary on Yom Tov. This was a practice also recorded by Rabbi Walter Wurzbarger in his article “Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post-Modern Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 29, 1, 1994.

46 *Tradition*, 33:2, 1999

47 *Alei Etzion*, 14, 2. During this visit, at a time when he was still affiliated with the Agudah Movement, he applied to be the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, but did not receive the position.

48 Rav Hershel Schachter, *MiPninei HaRav*, 2001, Bet Midrash of Flatbush, p. 254 with English translation by Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner on his blog “The Rebbitzin’s Husband.”