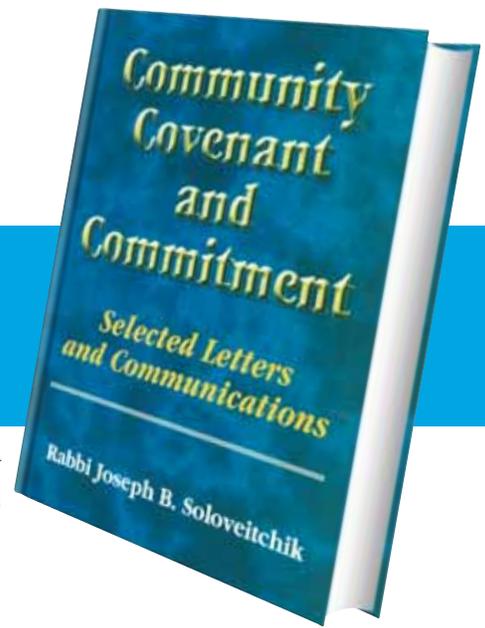


Commitment:



Edited by Nathaniel Helfgot
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352 pages

Reviewed by Moshe Meiselman

This book comprises many letters that span the course of the Rav's public life. Many pictures of the Rav emerge from these letters. For those who are historically unaware, the Rav's domination of communal life during the post-war period emerges with great clarity. The editor indicates that the Rav's daughters and son-in-law chose the letters included in this volume. He also provides a brief background to various letters both in his introduction and in the preface to the letters themselves. It would have been more enlightening to have someone with a more intimate knowledge of the Rav write such an introduction, especially some of the historical background.

To his credit the editor does not use his position to editorialize about his interpretation of the Rav and his life. This is a welcome relief from others who try to introduce their narrow agendas into the broad sweep of the Rav's personality and intellectual interests.

In evaluating such a book that mostly concerns the Rav's public life in the 1950s and 1960s, we first must understand that the Rav was essentially a shy and very private person. His public life was consequent to the fact that his chosen life of teaching propelled

him into the leadership of the Modern Orthodox rabbinate that was mostly comprised of his *talmidim*. In addition, he entered the public arena because he either perceived a serious threat to the Jewish people or to traditional Jewish life. Although the Rav was very often flexible to the point of frustration for those who wanted a more dogmatic approach, when he perceived that the specific issue at hand created a danger, he could be inflexible and totally dogmatic.

When the first suggestion was made in Congress for humane legislation that would impact on *shechitah*, the Rav reacted strongly. The memories of pre-war Europe where legislation limiting *shechitah* preceded other anti-Semitic activity were never far from his mind. Furthermore, the Rav always wanted the Orthodox rabbinate to present a dignified and educated position to the outside world. He felt that the ultimate spread of Torah to the non-observant Jewish world depended upon this perception of the rabbinate. The Rav's participation in the Congressional committees that dealt with this legislation was a major *kiddush Hashem*. The surrounding publicity of his participation created a very positive public perception of Orthodox Judaism at a time when such perceptions were few and far between.

A similar situation motivated the Rav in his dealing with the approach of the Catholic Church to the Orthodox

community to engage in theological dialogue. The Rav felt that not only was such dialogue with the Catholic Church wrong, but he also felt that its ultimate goal was *shmad* (apostasy). Post-Holocaust Christian theological triumphalism always weighed heavily in his mind. This was also evident in his discussion of Zionism. The establishment of the State of Israel was not only a refutation of this triumphalism but also of all of Christian theology. In *Kol Dodi Dofek*, he made explicit reference to this. For him there was a very real threat of *shmad*. Nor did he feel that the Orthodox Jewish community was exempt from this threat. While he never wavered from his initial response, it was a few years until he formulated his well worked through intellectual position in *Confrontation*.

The Catholic Church exerted much pressure upon the Rav. Its ultimate goal was not dialogue with Conservative or Reform leadership; it wanted dialogue with the Orthodox rabbinate. This never occurred, because of the Rav's stubborn and unyielding position. Many Orthodox rabbis, who desired such contact, tried futilely to change his mind. I remember when one leading member of the Orthodox rabbinate questioned his fear of *shmad*, the Rav replied, "I am afraid of your being influenced as well. I am afraid of your *shmad*."

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Yisrael lo yeshaker (The Eternal One of Israel does not lie). This clarity and certitude, so strongly reflected in these letters, affected thousands of his pupils. We, generations later, and our descendants even “a thousand years” from now, are the beneficiaries of this confidence and certitude. **JA**

Notes

1. Arnold Wolf, *Shma*, 19 September 1975: 295.
2. *Between Berlin and Slobodka: Jewish Transition Figures From Eastern Europe* (New Jersey, 1985), 197.
3. *Ishim Veshitot* (Tel Aviv, 1966), 64.
4. 1, pp. 3-10.
5. 12, pp. 110-113.
6. 20, p. 140. In another letter (18, pp. 133-136), the Rav writes, “It would be better not to hear the shofar than to enter a synagogue whose sanctity has been profaned.”
7. 14, p. 119.
8. 11, pp. 93-105.
9. 9, p. 83.
10. 10, p. 91. This verse from Isaiah 60:5 was also used by Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook in his speech at the opening ceremony of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1924.
11. 10, p. 91.
12. 38, p. 206.
13. 37, pp. 203-204.
14. 36, p. 202.

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The few letters in the volume regarding the issue of the Synagogue Council are but a tip of the iceberg of one of the major issues in Orthodox Jewish life of the fifties. Unfortunately, the time has not yet come when the background and details of this controversy can all come to the fore. In 1956, a letter was signed by eleven of the leading *roshei yeshivah* of the United States forbidding participation in rabbinic or synagogue groups together with members of the Conservative and Reform movements. This would have meant that members of the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) could no longer be members of the Board of Rabbis—a mixed group—and that the Orthodox Union would no longer be able to continue its longstanding affiliation with the Synagogue Council of America. The letters of the Rav in this volume reflect that the publication of the *issur* (prohibition) of the eleven *roshei yeshivah* came as a surprise to the Rav. In the time immediately preceding the publication of the *issur* there was an intense dialogue between the Rav and Rav Aharon Kotler on reaching a compromise text, to which the Rav could be a signatory. Both of these *gedolim* were interested in avoiding the divisions within the Orthodox com-

munity that would result from the lack of a compromise. There were two other individuals whose political interests were served by a lack of compromise. These individuals published the earlier text, thereby aborting the dialogue about a compromise text. The Rav never forgave these two individuals for creating the unfortunate tensions and acrimony that resulted from the lack of a compromise text. One can debate whether the Orthodox community gained anything from the participation of the RCA in the Synagogue Council. However, the isolation of the Rav from the rest of the yeshivah world as a result of this controversy was certainly a tragedy that greatly limited his participation in, and impact on, the general yeshivah world.

This review is certainly not the venue for a total discussion of the Rav's position on Zionism. However, whereas one quarter of the book revolves around this, one must draw some conclusions from a few of the letters. The Rav was firmly opposed to all changes in the *sid-dur*. The letters discuss this both in response to the Holocaust and to the State of Israel. There were two reasons for this opposition. First, as he points out (p. 120) prayer is speaking to God, and much of the current liturgical

changes are statements addressed to ourselves or to an audience, but they are not proper prayers addressed to God. Second, the text of prayers reflects *takkanot* of the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah or of the Rishonim and cannot be trifled with. When, after the Six-Day War, there were suggestions to eliminate Nacheim from the Minchah service of Tishah B'Av, the Rav reacted strongly. Rebuilding the Old City of Jerusalem, he said, cannot rectify the destruction—the *churban*—described therein. The destruction detailed in Nacheim is the destruction of the sanctity of Jerusalem and Har Habayit that will persist until the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash. I asked him, how can we recite the phrase “*vayeva'uboh legionot* (Jerusalem is swallowed up by legions of a foreign army)?” In other words, how can we state that Jerusalem is occupied by a foreign army, when it is not? The Rav answered that whereas Chazal made such a *takkanah*, it can only be revoked by a *Sanhedrin*. Hence, he said, Chazal understood that until the coming of Mashiach, Har Habayit would be under the control of a foreign army. This prescient description of the current situation came from a deep belief in the words of Chazal. The Rav's famous outburst on Yom Ha'atzmaut 1978 when he called the ceremony for Yom Ha'atzmaut “acute halachic mental retardation [*sic!*]” was a result of a deeply held antagonism to all changes in the *siddur*.

The Rav's hesitation to take the office of Chief Rabbi of Israel was a multi-dimensional one. A major factor was that ultimately it meant becoming a *rav mitaam*, a government-appointed rabbi. This emerges clearly from the letters. The downward spiral of the Chief Rabbinate into the political position it has become today, rather than the spiritual position originally hoped for, certainly confirms all of his fears. Professor Yeshaya Leibowitz often repeated a conversation that he had had with David Ben-Gurion. He asked Ben-Gurion why he insisted on a Chief Rabbi when he had nothing but contempt for *rabbanim*. Ben-Gurion answered that he realized that a Chief Rabbinate was inevitable. However, this way he would control it. That is why the Rav turned down the position.

In a conversation that I had with the Rav during the period when he was considering the position, he mentioned to me en passant that, due to all of the tensions in the position, he was sure that the next Chief Rabbi would be fired before the end of his term. As a naïve young man, I argued with him that such a thing was unthinkable. When Rabbi Isser Yehudah Unterman, who became Chief Rabbi, was ultimately dismissed from his position to make place for Rabbi Shlomo Goren, I realized *chacham odif minavi*.

An important aspect of the Rav that emerges from all of his letters is his desire not to have the Orthodox Jewish community marginalized and ghettoized. He saw great value in the full visual participation of an educated Orthodox laity in all aspects of American life. This was a constant theme of many of his activities. One can see this in *Chomesh Drashos* and in the herein published letters about the Mizrachi movement.

Anyone who spoke to him heard this as a recurring theme of all of his conversations. He often said that we have to bring Torah from the *resbut hayachid* to the *resbut harabim* (from the private to the public domain).

The letter about Albert Einstein College of Medicine is a case in point. The Rav asserted that he was dealing with a *bedieved* situation but went on to describe what positive results could emerge from such a school under the auspices of Yeshiva University. He identified two such consequences. One, that it will enable Orthodox Jewish young men to enter the medical profession without compromising their principles. Two, it will produce the visible educated Orthodox Jewish laity that the Rav so longed for. However, he asserted that all of this demanded “that the Yeshiva will have full spiritual and religious control over the direction of the school and the administration of the Yeshiva will stand guard to ensure that no religious principle will be compromised. . . . ad hoc desecration of *Shabbat* must also not be condoned or permitted.” Whereas the Orthodox Jewish community has progressed since the fifties and most major medical schools accommodate those who keep *Shabbat* and *mitzvot*, one wonders whether the Rav's dream is being realized or violated.

The Rav's position on the learning of *Torah Shebe'al Peh* by women is referred to in two letters. The halachic brief on the topic that the Rav promised to write never happened. This has given many people, unfamiliar with the Rav, license to engage in speculation as to his position and to ascribe to the Rav conclusions drawn of their speculation. The Rav did not believe in the unisex approach that claims that women and men share the same psychological make-up and roles. He wrote that it is the father's task to instill in his child “discipline of thought as well as . . . discipline of action.” It is the mother's task to teach the child to “feel the presence of God . . . to appreciate *mitzvot* and spiritual values, to enjoy the warmth of a dedicated life.” He felt that the discipline of thought that is necessary in halachic development was the male province. However, he balanced this with a different concern. He was afraid that people who viewed halachah as “random and arbitrary” would never be committed to proper halachic observance. By exposing them to Talmud, they would be appreciative of the sophistication of halachah and the halachic process. When he gave his introductory *shiur* in Talmud at Stern College for Women, he reiterated this position in the car on the way home. He said that the teaching of Talmud would be a “springboard to expose them (i.e., the students of Stern) to the *masa u'matan* of the *Torah Shebe'al Peh*” and that “exposure to *Torah Shebe'al Peh* would show them that the halachic process is not random and they would see the sophistication in Torah as in other areas.”

It is interesting to note that in the Rav's entire advocacy of the learning of Talmud for women, he never introduced them to the study of *Nashim* and *Nezikin*, the areas that he spent most of his time teaching to men. He restricted their exposure to *Moed*, *Berachot* and *Chullin*. Since the goal was to

develop an appreciation of the halachic process, he restricted their exposure to those areas that have practical halachic relevance. The attempt to equate men and women in the approach to the learning of Torah, and the consequent desire to produce *posekot*, is alien to the Rav's goals. The Rav had definite practical goals in his introduction of women to the study of Talmud. He never meant to equate the mitzvah of Torah study for men with that for women.

In the summer of 1968, the Rav taught *masechet Nazir* in Boston. A woman showed up to one of the *shiurim*. The Rav informed her that women were not welcome to these technical *shiurim*, even if they sat on the other side of the *mechitzah*. She told him that she had traveled all the way from New York to listen to his *shiur*. He said that if she remains he would stop the *shiur*. On the following day, when she showed up again, she stood behind a column to remain unnoticed. The Rav noticed her in the middle of his *shiur* and informed her that unless she left forthwith he would stop the *shiur* immediately.

The book contains a letter referring to an early draft of the essay "*uVikkashtem miSham*." This was meant to be a sequel to the Rav's essay "*Ish ha-halakhah*" (*Halachic Man*). After the passing of the Rav's wife, the Rav returned to that earlier version and invested much time in further developing the manuscript. He called it "*Ish ha-Elokim*." He gave the manuscript to a certain individual to have it typed. That person left it in an attaché case in his automobile in Manhattan.

The car was vandalized and the attaché case stolen. The Rav was devastated. That night, when he was informed about the theft, he told me that that manuscript reflected his finest work. He told me that he would have to go back to the earlier version, but was not capable of reconstructing the whole piece. "*uVikkashtem miSham*" was a minor attempt to reconstruct "*Ish ha-Elokim*."

A full evaluation of all of these letters, especially the philosophical points and issues raised at the end of the book, is beyond the scope of a short review. It awaits the honest analysis of someone deeply familiar with the Rav's thought—halachic and religio-philosophical—and his position on all of the communal issues addressed in these letters. We hope that such a study will be forthcoming.

In a book of such great historical value one would have expected that the technical aspects would have been carried out with greater care. There are typographical errors throughout the book. Sometimes, the errors are such as on page 315, where the word Talmudist is spelled Tamludist. Sometimes, it is as we find on page 334 where the word fellow has a clear misprint. On page 151, Brooklyn is written Broo16lyn. These are three examples of many places where a lack of care in the technical preparation of the book is evident. In the days of spell check by computer, such sloppiness should have been avoided. It is hoped that The Toras HoRav Foundation will take greater pride in its sacred trust. Hopefully, this situation will be remedied in the second edition. 