

*Lonely Man of Faith:
The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*

Produced and Directed by Ethan Isenberg
www.lonelymanoffaith.com

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Logline

A rabbinic scholar comes to America, where he battles ignorance, extremism, corruption, and loneliness. His impact is tremendous, but his legacy is complicated.

Synopsis

We certainly share the concerns of man in general, but at the same time we have interests and concerns of our own.

We are part of humanity. But at the same time, we are alone.

-- Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Is it possible to be strictly religious but also open to the opportunities of the modern age? This was the question explored by Joseph B. Soloveitchik throughout his life.

His father, a distinguished rabbi, spent years tutoring him in religious studies, training him to be the next in a line of Lithuanian rabbinic sages. His mother, who had been raised in a more open environment, introduced Joseph to Russian and German literature. When it came time for Joseph to apply what he had learned to the world, he chose to study at the University of Berlin, rather than seek a position at a prominent Jewish academy.

Seven years later, Joseph emerged as an ordained rabbi and a doctor of philosophy, and he and his wife, Tonya, set out for America to make their mark. Rabbi Soloveitchik continued to balance the demands of faith with an openness to the world around him. He worked to strengthen Orthodox Judaism at a time that the movement was “at a low ebb”. Recognizing that education was key to ensuring committed observance, the Rabbi and Tonya built the first Jewish day school in Boston, against much opposition and mistrust. He fought the corrupt forces that were controlling kosher food supervision in that city, despite paying a heavy price. Rabbi Soloveitchik went on to assume a leading position at Yeshiva University in New York, where he trained three generations of rabbinic leaders, reportedly ordaining more rabbis than any other figure in recorded history. His classes became legendary for their brilliance and clarity, as well as the feelings of fear and abject terror that they engendered. To this day, former students regale each other with stories of their experiences in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s classroom.

At the same time that Rabbi Soloveitchik strengthened fealty of American Orthodox Jews to religious observance, he also encouraged their involvement in the outside world. He championed religious involvement in Zionism, a broad engagement with secular culture, and an expanded religious curriculum for women, when these things were not yet popular. And he adopted an approach to a number of important issues that reflected his dual focus. He set up fences between Orthodoxy and the other denominations of Judaism when he felt the need to prevent the blurring of boundaries. But he also built bridges

between the other movements, and supported interdenominational cooperation on community issues. In the wake of Vatican II, Rabbi Soloveitchik made headlines with his intermediate position on interfaith dialogue. He argued against unfettered dialogue on all matters, a position advocated by many of the prominent leaders of the Jewish community. Yet, he also set himself apart from well-respected Orthodox rabbinic leaders by setting guidelines within which dialogue could occur.

In lectures, articles, and essays, Rabbi Soloveitchik relentlessly explored the role of man in the universe and of the Jew before God. He marshalled philosophical tools to explicate Jewish law, and Jewish sources to understand the world around him. It was a search that would slowly gain him the attention of a scholarly audience, as well as the New York Times and Time Magazine. But while Rabbi Soloveitchik gained loyal supporters during his lifetime, his legacy has been subject to much dispute and misunderstanding. Now, over a decade after his death, it continues to be hotly contested by his students, family, and friends.

Ultimately, Rabbi Soloveitchik found that while religious life was full of profundity and meaning, it also engendered pain, frustration, and loneliness. Whether it was the philosophical loneliness of the existentialist thinker, the emotional devastation caused by illness and death, or the personal frustration brought about by a society that was superficial and reductionist, Rabbi Soloveitchik came to learn that faith could be lonely indeed.

Lonely Man of Faith is narrated by Tovah Feldshuh, with readings by Theodore Bikel. The film is produced and directed by Ethan Isenberg. Marilyn Ness is the executive producer.

Biographies

Ethan Isenberg, Director / Producer.

Ethan runs Second Look Productions. *Lonely Man of Faith* is his first documentary film. Ethan studied documentary filmmaking at Columbia University and New York Film/Video Arts, and multimedia at the University of Southern California. He has both a BA in English Literature, with a concentration in Film Studies, and a BS in Computer Science, from the University of Pennsylvania. Before embarking on a career in filmmaking, Ethan worked as a computer programmer. He also spent two years in Israel, studying in yeshivas (advanced Jewish educational institutes). Ethan currently lives with his wife, Nili, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Marilyn Ness, Executive Producer.

Marilyn Ness is a two-time Emmy Award winning documentary film producer with ten years of experience. Before opening her own production company, Necessary Film, Ness produced films with director Ric Burns. Their collaborations include *The Center of the World*, the eighth and final episode in the PBS series *New York: A Documentary Film*, about the rise and fall of the World Trade Center, as well as biographies on Eugene O'Neill, Andy Warhol, and Ansel Adams. She associate produced *Meltdown at Three Mile Island* and *Surviving the Dust Bowl* for the Emmy Award winning historical documentary series *The American Experience* on PBS. Other credits include *National Geographic*, *Court TV*, and Aviva Kempner's *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg*.

Mike Dewitt, Writer.

Mike DeWitt has produced more than twenty-five hours of national television programming for PBS, A&E, History Channel, Discovery Channel, and Animal Planet. In 2002, DeWitt won a New York Emmy Award and Edward R. Murrow Award for his documentary *Taking the Fifth*, about the race for Congress in Connecticut's Fifth District. In 2001, he produced the two-hour History Channel special *Raise the Alabama!* about marine archaeologists efforts to excavate the legendary Confederate warship CSS Alabama off the coast of Northern France. DeWitt's critically-acclaimed documentary *Delta Jews* aired nationally on PBS in 1998. He has produced and written celebrity profiles for A&E's Biography series, and produced 15 episodes of Discovery's Justice Files. In 2003 he was a producer of *Our Genes/Our Choices*, a nationally-broadcast forum on genetics and social policy for the PBS/Fred Friendly Seminars at the Columbia University School of Journalism.

David A. Ford, Director of Photography.

Over the last decade, David has worked on numerous commercial, narrative and documentary films. His credits include Executive Producing and DP'ing *GidyUp! On The Rodeo Circuit*, which appeared on Logo, as well as being cameraman on two Emmy Award winning documentaries: Steeplechase Films' *New York* and Florentine Films' *Divided Highways*. His lighting designs can be seen in four feature-length independent films. David also teaches Cinematography in the Columbia University Graduate Film Department.

Don Bernier, Editor.

Don received a graduate degree in Media Study from SUNY-Buffalo and has been involved with documentary media for over a decade. Most recently, he directed and edited *In a Nutshell: A Portrait of Elizabeth Tashjian*, which premiered at the Slamdance Film Festival and was nominated for a 2005 Gotham Award. Other editing credits include *Gary and the Romans*, a verite documentary selected for the 2005 IFP Market. Don has also served as associate editor on several PBS programs including Stephen Ives' *Reporting America at War* and David Grubin's *Marie Antoinette*.

Tovah Feldshuh, Narrator.

For her work on the New York stage, from *Yentl* to *Sarava!* to *Lend Me A Tenor* to *Golda's Balcony*, Tovah has earned four Tony nominations for Best Actress and won four Drama Desk Awards, four Outer Critics Circle Awards, the Obie, the Theatre World Award and the 2003 Lucille Lortel Award for Best Actress. On October 3, 2004, *Golda's Balcony* became the longest-running one-woman show in the history of Broadway. Tovah just finished a successful run at the Paper Mill Playhouse as the starring role in *Hello Dolly*. Besides a variety of title roles in theater, she had been featured in a number of television shows and feature films, including *Law And Order*, *Kissing Jessica Stein*, *Holocaust*, *The Amazing Howard Hughes*, *Citizen Cohn*, *A Walk On The Moon*, *Happy Accidents*, and many others.

Interview Subjects

Joseph Abelow	Boston friend
Rabbi Yosef Adler	Principal, Torah Academy of Bergen County
Rabbi Saul Berman	Professor of Jewish Studies, Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University
Rabbi Abba Bronspigel	Talmudist, Lander College for Men
Rabbi Shalom Carmy	Assistant Professor of Bible and Philosophy, Yeshiva University
Rabbi Reuven Cohn	Teacher, Maimonides School
Rabbi Dr. David Ellenson	President, Hebrew Union College
Ann Gerber	Sister
Rabbi Dr. Marc Gopin	Director, Center on Religion, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University
Rabbi Dr. Reuven Kimelman	Professor of Talmud, Liturgy and Halakhah, Brandeis University
Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm	Chancellor, Yeshiva University
Abraham Levovitz	President, Maimonides School
Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein	Dean, Har Etzion Institute; (Son-in-law)
Hannah Lightman	Boston friend
Rabbi Dr. Aaron Rakeffet	Professor of Rabbinic Literature, Joseph Gruss Institute, Yeshiva University

Dr. Jonathan Sarna	Professor of American Jewish History, Brandeis University
Rabbi Dr. Jacob J Schacter	Senior Scholar, Center for the Jewish Future, Yeshiva University
Rabbi Hershel Schachter	Talmudist, Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary
Rabbi Cantor Abraham Shonfeld	Former Teacher, Maimonides School
Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld	Rabbi, Young Israel of Kew Gardens Hills
Dr. Chaim Waxman	Senior Fellow, The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute
Rabbi Dr. Moshe Wolghelelnter	Professor Emeritus of English Literature, Baruch College

Credits listing

Cast

Narrator
Tovah Feldshuh

Voice of Rabbi Soloveitchik
Theodore Bikel

Crew

Producer/Director
Ethan Isenberg

Executive Producer
Marilyn Ness

Co-Producer
Cheryl van Grunsven

Writers
Mike Dewitt
Ethan Isenberg

Editor
Don Bernier

Project Researcher
Josh Blechner

Director of Photography
David A. Ford

Composer
Michael Bacon

Assistant Editor
Mark Franks

Stills Animation
Thomas Fondano

Main Title Design and Animation
Verb!

Assistant Camera
Edwin Martinez

Sound Recording
Evan Blaustein
Theo Caris
Mark Mandler
Trokon Nagbe
Kevin Parker

Score Preparation
James Oakar

Additional Research
Daniel Vatsky

Interns
Eva Greenspan
Jill Virag

Transcription
Tara Sad

Voiceover Recording
Artie Butler Music
Matt Gundy/Duart
Chris Foster/Sync Sound

Re-Recording Mixer
James Redding/Sync Sound

Post Production Editor
Evan Anthony/Frame:Runner, Inc.

Production Accountant
Amy Crowley

Fiscal Sponsor
Maimonides School

Senior Advisor
Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff

Advisors

Rabbi Shalom Carmy

Nancy B. Finn

Rabbi Menachem Genack

Jeffrey S. Gurock

Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot

Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter

David Shatz

Rabbi Reuven Ziegler

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Beloved but controversial rabbi is the focus for first-time filmmaker

By Michael Paulson

GLOBE STAFF

Famous and lonely. Traditional and modern. Beloved and controversial.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the longtime Brookline resident who was widely considered the intellectual leader of modern Orthodoxy,

is, 13 years after his death, simultaneously one of the most revered and least understood figures in American Jewish history.

Now Ethan Isenberg, a 30-year-old Los Angeles native who decided on a whim to dedicate the high school yearbook he edited to Soloveitchik, has made the first

film to attempt to examine the life and legacy of the rabbi, who died in 1993 at the age of 90. Soloveitchik, raised in what is now Belarus and raised as the heir to a dynasty of renowned Talmud scholars, came to the United States in 1932, was informally called chief rabbi of Boston, and spent decades commuting between Massachusetts, where he founded the Maimonides School, and New York, where he taught hundreds of future rabbis at Yeshiva University.

"Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik" is a 99-minute documentary which has its world premiere tonight in a sold-out screening at the Boston Jewish Film Festival. It is the first film by Isenberg, but he had some experienced help: Executive producer Marilyn Ness worked on several Ric Burns documentaries for PBS, actress Tovah Feldshuh narrates, and actor Theodore Bikel provides the voice of Soloveitchik.

Isenberg, a modern Orthodox Jew who lives in Manhattan, spoke with the Globe last week about his experience making the film.

Q. Why Rabbi Soloveitchik?

A. I wanted to make a film on a Jewish subject that wasn't what's typically seen. I wanted to be able to show somebody who is a complicated individual, who can be religious, but also not be one of these simple, "Fiddler on the Roof"-type individuals. I wanted to deal with a Jewish subject that wasn't limited to just somebody surviving the Holocaust. There are so many topics within Judaism — it's such a rich religion and I feel like people outside of that context have no concept whatsoever because they're constantly bombarded with these Hollywood stereotypes, and I saw this is as an opportunity to try to present a fascinating individual and give somebody a glimpse into that world.

Q. How did you balance biography, which obviously is more accessible, with philosophy, which for a lot of people is difficult to relate to?

A. That was something I was struggling with from the beginning, and I was never sure whether I'd be able to pull it off. I would say in the end we leaned more toward biography, because we realized

it's really the story that draws somebody.

Q. What did you do about the absence of video?

A. Thank God, we had a lot of photographs. To be honest, if we didn't have any photographs of him, I don't know how I would make the story. And I was actually lucky to get some never-before-seen film and video footage.

Q. What are the challenges of presenting a nuanced portrait of somebody who is a legendary figure?

A. That was a huge challenge. To begin with, Rabbi Soloveitchik's legacy is hotly in dispute. There are tons of fights, and people get really passionate about who he was and what he did. And these are not just scholars arguing about him but in most cases these are his own students and in some cases family members. And for many people, Rabbi Soloveitchik is modern Orthodoxy, so they're not just arguing about a person, they're arguing about their own beliefs, their own theology, their own religion. I had to be very careful to keep a balanced approach and had



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Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik shaped modern Orthodoxy.

to gain people's trust, and that took time.

Q. What's next for you?

A. I wish I had a clear answer for that. One of my ideas is to do a history of the Soviet Jewry movement, but I'm not sure I'm at the point yet where I can actually handle something that complicated. An obvious idea would be to do biographies of other major Jewish figures, like the Lubavitcher Rebbe, or like Shlomo Carlebach, the famous Jewish singer. But I'd also like to do films on current issues and events.

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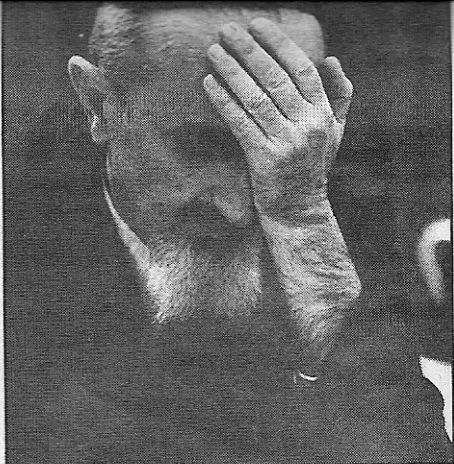
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Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

'Lonely man' captures the enigma that was the Rav



by Ed Silverman

Special to NJ Jewish News

For a towering figure in modern Judaism, it's probably a safe bet that relatively few people, beyond certain circles, know the name Joseph Soloveitchik. And that's a shame. Soloveitchik was arguably *the* most influential rabbi of the 20th century.

Why? Consider this: Soloveitchik was not only an unparalleled talmudic scholar, he was a visionary. As the head of the Rabbinical Council of America, he championed the notion that Orthodoxy should coexist with the world, hastening what we now think of as Modern Orthodoxy. He formed alliances with the Conservative and Reform movements. In a significant about-face, he came to embrace Zionism — and did so in a very public way. And as the *rosh*, or head, of the rabbinical school at Yeshiva University, where he ordained nearly 2,000 rabbis, he encouraged girls and women to study Torah at the Stern College for Women.

Not surprisingly, Soloveitchik sometimes found himself isolated from key members of the rabbinate. With a mind like the proverbial steel trap, he had few peers who could match his intellect. And though he built a large and loyal following with his passion for Judaism, the Rav, as he came to be known, was also feared for his disinclination to suffer fools gladly. In short, he was somewhat of a loner who was never fully understood as a person.

A new intelligent and moving documentary nonetheless captures the enigma that was Soloveitchik. Narrated by Tovah Feld-

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shuh, *Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* uses a number of talking heads from his YU days and marvelous footage of the Old World from which Soloveitchik sprung. There are fascinating snippets of life in the villages of White Russia and later the bustling cities of Warsaw and Berlin, where he spent a crucial time in his life before coming to the United States in 1932.

Smartly, this is more than mere travelogue. Soloveitchik descended

Soloveitchik helped a people rethink its way of living and cast a new image for themselves.

from studious rabbis on both sides. But one family was more inclined to embrace the world, while the other believed firmly in a Torah-only way of life. The filmmakers do a good job of explaining this contrast and how it shaped the young Soloveitchik, who eventually lived the dilemma himself.

After conventional religious training, he enrolled in universities in Poland and Germany while simultaneously mastering the Talmud. There, he sharpened his mind even further by studying phi-

losophy. But Soloveitchik also adopted his status as outsider — he hailed from a shtetl and now spent his time immersed in a cosmopolitan city, and he was an observant Jew learning Western thought in a bastion of modernity.

In this way, Soloveitchik was a product of his time. Unlike some others, though, he deliberately forged a mid-ground, refusing to insulate himself entirely from the larger world or rushing to embrace this world to the point where he compromised his beliefs. But what made him significant and important to so many other Jews — and Judaism — was his conviction that such a path held promise for the future.

Depending on one's view, such ideas may seem very wrong, very right, or simply muddled. But there's no question that Soloveitchik helped a people rethink its way of living and cast a new image for themselves when they looked in the mirror. He may have been lonely, but he was very, very special. ■

The New Jersey Jewish Film Festival screens Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Wednesday, March 21, at 7:30 p.m. at the Leon & Toby Cooperman JCC, Ross Family Campus, West Orange. There will be a post-screening discussion with director Ethan Isenberg.

Ed Silverman runs www.pharmalot.com, a Web site owned by The Star-Ledger of New Jersey.