



THE RAV

*The World of
Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*

VOLUME TWO

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from various universities. They were not rabbis but simple boys. They come from educated homes, more or less. And somehow they found Judaism. I do not know where, on the street or on campus, but not in their parents' homes. Definitely not.

They listen to every word of my shiur. I start the shiur on time. When I will end, I never know. I started here tonight at 8:00 P.M. When I will end, I do not know. You will have to stay with me the whole night. [Laughter.] Yes, we have accomplished a great deal, particularly through our day schools. However, the final word has not been spoken yet. Who will win the battle in America between Orthodoxy and the dissident groups, such as the Conservative and the Reform? There is no prophet who can foresee the outcome. In my opinion, the battle will be won by the party that understands two things.

Number one, it will be the one that excels not only in piety but in morality. The Orthodox rabbi will be accepted by the whole Jewish community only when he shows the entire community that he not only wears a yarmulka but is a moral person, head and shoulders above the Reform and Conservative rabbis. The Orthodox rabbi must show that he is not a publicity hound; that he is not a lover of money. I do not say that money is bad, but there is a difference between earning a dollar and loving a dollar. The Orthodox rabbi must show that he is more sincere, more committed, and more consistent with himself than the Conservative and Reform rabbis. That is what will decide the battle: higher morality, superior morality.

And I want to tell you, the American Jew is very intelligent. He is intelligent, discriminating, and understanding. I have great faith in the American Jew.

Number two, the outcome of the battle will be decided by the intellectual achievements of the rabbi. For instance, the Orthodox rabbi should be head and shoulders above the Conservative and Reform rabbis as far as knowledge is concerned. I mean knowledge in the widest sense of the word. The Orthodox rabbi should attain a profound understanding of Judaism. He should reach out

for new horizons in his intellectual understanding of Judaism. Such achievements will make him the winner.

Morality and intellectuality, Torah knowledge in the widest sense of the word, will ultimately decide the outcome of the battle. In reality, the battle has not yet been won; we do not know the outcome.

14.07 Halakhic Guidance

Related by the Rav in his lecture on "The Role of the Rabbi" to the Yeshiva University Rabbinic Alumni, May 18, 1955. (Yiddish).

The rabbi must know how to properly decide questions of Jewish law. "And they shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the common" [Ezekiel 44:23]. This is the task of hora'ah, of providing halakhic guidance. There is a great difference between theoretical physics and practical physics. For a long time the theory of building an atom bomb was known. In practice, it required many years to achieve. Similarly, there are many talmudic scholars who can give excellent talmudic lectures, but they do not know how to issue decisions in Jewish law. To be expert in determining the halakhah, one must not only be learned but he must also possess the intuition to understand the circumstances surrounding the halakhah and the context in which the question is asked. In the oral exams which we administer to the rabbinical students at the Yeshiva, I have often found that they truly know the theoretical material. They are masters of the Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah with all the commentaries of the Shakh and the Taz. Nevertheless, when I ask them how they would proceed if a woman calls to ask a question about a milk pan and a meat spoon, they do not know how to begin to handle the inquiry.

Some believe that there is no need to teach the ability to decide Jewish law in the United States, since few questions are asked by our congregants. This is not so. There are more difficult questions in the United States than the rabbis generally received in Lithuania. We have, perhaps, fewer routine questions, such as

those regarding mixtures of meat and milk or permitted and forbidden substances. However, we have the most difficult and unique questions in such areas as those forbidden to marry into the Jewish community or the status of the deserted wife [agunah]. In the past, in Europe, such difficult questions were referred to the leading posekim [experts in deciding Jewish law], such as Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor of Kovno [1817–1896] or Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin of Volozhin [1816–1893]. They would issue a definitive decision, at times with the stipulation that one or two other posekim agree with their conclusions. Thus these questions were resolved.

In America we have very difficult questions regarding conversion, mamzerut, women prohibited to kohanim, forbidden marriages, and even whether one is considered Jewish or not. Here in the United States I receive these complicated inquiries over the phone! When a rabbi receives such questions, he is ashamed to say that he needs time to thoroughly research the problem. He is apprehensive lest his congregants say that the rabbi is not erudite. At times, these most difficult problems—which will have an effect on countless generations—are decided immediately over the phone.

The truth is that many rabbis are prone to the misconception that all questions must be answered immediately. I noticed in your Yeshiva University Rabbinic Alumni program for today that you scheduled a lecture on the halakhic ramifications of artificial insemination. I do not know what was said regarding this topic. You certainly can speak and lecture about it. But let me tell you, it is a bitter question. I do not know how to be posek [how to decide] in this area. When it is a problem of A.I.H. [artificial insemination from the husband], I can be lenient in my ruling. However, when it is A.I.D. [artificial insemination from a donor], I do not know how to decide the halakhah on a practical level. I know all the halakhic opinions regarding this issue, but I still have not reached a conclusion.

Let me tell you what happened to me. A few weeks ago on a Sunday morning, the phone rang at 7:15 a.m. A woman called from New York. The woman's husband could not father children. Five years earlier she bore a son as a result of artificial insemination. She now wants another child through artificial insemination. However, she was told that such a child could very well be a mamzer. The woman turned to her Conservative rabbi, and he tactfully explained to her that he could not decide such a difficult question. He suggested that she consult with me.

"What should I do, Rabbi," she asked me.

"I do not know," I answered.

"Rabbi, what do you mean you do not know? They say you are a great scholar," she exclaimed.

Pleading ignorance, I answered her: "I do not know if I am a great scholar or not, but I do not know the answer to your question."

"Shall I break the appointment with the doctor?" she asked.

"Break the appointment," I answered, "and call me back in four or five weeks. Perhaps I will have a definitive answer for you at that time."

This particular case is very difficult for me because the woman already has a son through A.I.D. If she cannot do it a second time, then the first child is a mamzer. No matter what I decide I will be in a difficult predicament under these circumstances. In such a situation, the Talmud already declared: "Woe is me because of my Creator, woe is me because of my evil inclination" [Bera-khot 61a: "Woe if I follow my evil inclination, and woe if I combat it"].

I am not one of those rabbinical scholars who is afraid to issue a halakhic decision. When I see it clearly I am posek.

Some questions, however, simply do not lend themselves to any clear determination. If it is a question of whether one has to repeat Ya'aleh ve-Yavoh [the special appendix to the Amidah prayer on the New Moon] at the Minhah [afternoon] prayer, I will be lenient if I see it clearly. However, in instances of vexatious

questions of family status and pedigree, many times I am hesitant. Did not Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai already declare that "there are two ways before me, one leading to Paradise and the other leading to Gehinnom, and I do not know by which I shall be taken; shall I not weep?" [Berakhot 28b]. Certainly, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai knew how to decide questions of Jewish law better than the Halakhah Committee of the Rabbinical Council of America and its chairman [i.e., Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik]. Nevertheless, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was frightened by this responsibility. We certainly should be. We cannot answer these questions superficially.

I remember that once I was studying Talmud with my father. I asked him why the Talmud did not resolve the problem under discussion in so many cases. Instead the Talmud concludes with the phrase *teiku* ["stalemate"]. Why was no conclusion reached by the talmudic sages? My father explained to me that a Jew must apprehend that he cannot understand and comprehend everything. When a Jew learns that there are halakhot which are ambiguous, then he will also come to the realization that there are other areas that are also not clear-cut. In matters of faith, *teiku* will also be encountered. The greatness of Abraham, our forefather, was that he knew how to say "Here I am" [Genesis 22:1] even though he did not understand the request that God made of him. The basis of faith is *teiku*. If a Jew does not master the concept of *teiku*, then he cannot be a true believer. It would not hurt if the rabbi possessed the courage and resoluteness to admit to *teiku*. The rabbi must not be ashamed to declare that he must refer the question to greater experts on the topic.

Excuse me, please, if I ask you a question which is close to my heart. I receive many inquiries from the rabbinical graduates of the Yeshiva. Sometimes I want to disconnect my telephone and tear the wires out of the wall. For some rabbis it has become a mania to call me and confer with me about all the questions that they receive. With all this, I do not receive enough of the difficult questions that I know exist in the United States. I am certain that the

hundreds of Yeshiva-ordained rabbis receive many such inquiries. Whom do they consult with? Whom do they ask? I checked with my colleague Rabbi Moshe Shatzkes [1881–1958; Yeshiva University rosh yeshiva and former rabbi of Lomza], and he too does not receive many questions of this nature. The Halakhah Committee of the Rabbinical Council and I should be receiving many such inquiries. Where are these American sheilahs [halakhic questions]? To whom are they being referred? The rabbi should know how to pass these problems on to the proper authority. I do not know all the answers, but let me stress once again that it does not hurt to admit this. A rabbi will not lose his rabbinic crown if he declares that he cannot answer a particular question on the spot.

14.08 The Monsignor's Funeral

Related by the Rav in his lecture on "The Role of the Rabbi" to the Yeshiva University Rabbinic Alumni, May 18, 1955. (Yiddish).

There are questions that only a true scholar [lamdan] will recognize and delineate. These exist mainly in areas of public relations. There are great pressures upon the rabbi in the areas of relations with non-Jews and similar issues.

I would like to share with you an experience that occurred a few weeks ago. I was awakened out of a sound sleep at 6:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning. I have a phone by my bed, and sleepily I lifted the receiver and asked who it was. The man identified himself. He was a sincere, honest, and responsible rabbi who lives in one of the suburbs of Boston. In a tremulous voice, he said to me: "Rebbe. Do you know what happened yesterday? The monsignor of our hometown died!"

I said to myself: "Nu, baruch dayan ha-emet [Blessed be the True Judge, the benediction on hearing news of a death]. May he have a prominent place in heaven!"

The rabbi continued: "I have received a telegram from the Catholic hierarchy asking me to be present in the church for the