Searching for God and Self: Spirituality and Tradition in the Jewish Philosophy of R. Joseph Soloveitchik

(draft Syllabus)

Introduction to the Course
This course is intended to offer a user-friendly introduction to the philosophy of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1993).

Of course, R. Soloveitchik led the sort of expansive life that can be studied with profit from many angles. For instance, among other things, he played a central role in the creation of the Modern Orthodox movement in the twentieth century; in this capacity, as a religious leader, he helped to build religious and educational institutions, and exerted great influence on the personal identity and social worlds of many people. Indeed that influence continues to be strong today. One might well devote a course solely to studying this important sociological and historical achievement. However, R. Soloveitchik also created a remarkable philosophical worldview, one based on a far-reaching and dynamic integration of modern western philosophy with the vast textual, halakhic, ritual, and historical resources of Jewish tradition. For this accomplishment he was unusually, perhaps uniquely, qualified: the scion of a talmudic dynasty, whose mastery and expertise in talmud gained universal recognition, he also held a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Berlin, where he specialized in the history and philosophy of physics and mathematics. Our focus in this course, then, will be on the remarkable philosophical worldview that Rabbi Soloveitchik forged over nearly fifty years of writing and teaching.

Perhaps the most appealing feature of R. Soloveitchik's philosophy, and one which will guide us here, is its profound wholism or multidimensionality. R. Soloveitchik combines a rigorous intellectual approach to reality with both a practical or action-oriented framework, and an emotionally rich Jewish spirituality. Therefore in this course we will investigate not only R. Soloveitchik's theoretical position, but also the organic way in which it flows into action, feeling, and personal Jewish religious experience.

The first ten weeks of the course attend to the general philosophical orientation of R. Soloveitchik's book Halakhic Man, and the active view of Jewish religious "self-creation" it proposes. However, due both to his own personal experiences and his own intellectual search, R. Soloveitchik changed the emphasis of his thinking in the late 1950's and early 1960's, culminating in a more dialectical approach to human existence. Reaching its most powerful expression in his book The Lonely Man of Faith, this somewhat different perspective recognizes not only the individual's achievement-oriented powers of creativity, but also his or her deep need to acknowledge human limitations, in particular, by enacting decidedly sacrificial and non-achievement oriented kinds of action. By no means did R. Soloveitchik in any sense abandon his earlier focus on study, mastery, and action. Rather, he proceeds in his later writings to add to that earlier focus a new awareness of the internal contradiction or paradox that he has come to believe characterizes human beings. We focus on this view in weeks 11 through 14.

Class Sessions
R. Soloveitchik's writings are very challenging. Therefore class meetings will be devoted to careful readings of R. Soloveitchik's texts, and to engaging, open-ended discussions of the texts and the ideas they advance. The focus will be on making R. Soloveitchik's ideas as clear as possible. We will also explore the relationship between R. Soloveitchik and other philosophers, Jewish thinkers, and social scientists. No prior background is assumed, although basic familiarity with Jewish tradition will be helpful.

Required Texts:

R. Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*
R. Joseph Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*

1. Jan. 30 Organizational Meeting and Introduction to the Life and Work of Rabbi Soloveitchik

2. Feb. 6 Background For R. Soloveitchik I: Kant and Neo-Kantianism


3. Feb. 13 Background for R. Soloveitchik II: Brisk

R. Jeffrey Saks, "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik On The Brisker Method"
R. Mosheh Lichtenstein, "'What' Hath Brisk Wrought: The Brisker Derekh Revisited"

Selections From Sugiyot and Brisker Approaches

No Class 2/20 (School Vacation Week)

4. Feb. 27 Halakhic Man I: Philosophy, Mathematics, Halakhah -- And Lived Religious Experience

*Halakhic Man*, pp. 3-39

(additional optional secondary readings may be assigned)

5. Mar. 6 Halakhic Man II: Norms, Courage, and Loss

*Halakhic Man*, pp. 39-78

(additional optional secondary readings may be assigned)

6. Mar. 13 Halakhic Man III: Individuality and Creativity

*Halakhic Man*, pp. 78-109

(additional optional secondary readings may be assigned)

7. Mar. 20 How Does One Become Halakhic Man? The Journey to God

*And From There You Shall Seek (U-Viskashtem mi-Sham)*, selections

2
First Short Paper -- on Halakhic Man -- due by email, Sunday, 3/24
No Class 3/27 (Pesach)

8. Apr. 3 How We Create Ourselves I: Teshuvah
Halakhic Man, pp. 110-117
R. Soloveitchik, "Blotting Out or Elevating Sin", in On Repentance, 228-265

9. Apr. 10 How We Create Ourselves II: Prayer
R. Soloveitchik, "Prayer, Petition, and Crisis", Worship of the Heart, 13-36
R. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah", Tradition 1978, 55-72

10. Apr. 17 How We Create Ourselves III: Mourning, Suffering, and the Emotions
R. Soloveitchik, "Aninut and Avelut", Out of the Whirlwind, 1-8

11. Apr. 24 The Dialectical Nature of Human Existence
Begin Lonely Man of Faith, 1-42

Second Short Paper -- on Prayer, or Teshuvah, or Mourning, Suffering, and the Emotions -- due by email April 28

12. May 1 Real Connection: The Man of Faith and the Covenantal Community
Finish Lonely Man of Faith, 1-42
Lonely Man of Faith, 43-78

13. May 8 Beyond Power: The Jewish Critique Of Modernity
Lonely Man of Faith, 79-112

No Class May 15 (Shavuot)

14. May 22 The Lonely Woman of Faith: Rabbi Soloveitchik and The Two Faith Traditions
R. Soloveitchik, "Adam and Eve", Family Redeemed, excerpt: pp.18-30
R. Soloveitchik, "Marriage", Family Redeemed, excerpt: pp. 67-72

Final Paper -- Due Date To Be Announced