Revisionism and the Rav: The Struggle for the Soul of Modern Orthodoxy

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There is a major struggle currently taking place within the modern Orthodox community—one over the correct understanding of the person and teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, zt"h, better known simply as the Rav. The Rav, one of the towering rabbis of our era, was as well known, the teacher, guide, and, above all, the supreme halakhic and haskibat authority of the modern Orthodox community for over fifty years. The struggle, then, is not just scholarly, but ideological as well. Indeed, in the deepest sense, it is a struggle over the direction and future course of the modern Orthodox community, a struggle over its very soul.

This type of struggle is not new to the modern Orthodox community. If we look at other rabbis: heroes of modern Orthodox, for example, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), founder of enlightened German neo-Orthodoxy, rabbinic scholar, Biblical commentator, and communal leader, or Rav Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), the first Chief Rabbi of mandatory Palestine, talmudist, kabbalist, poet, communal leader, and Orthodox herald of the Jewish national renewal, we find that their persons and teachings are well known and, indeed, are the subjects of intense, often heated debate. Nor should this be surprising. Rav Hirsch, Rav Kook, and the Rav were, in different ways, very rich, complex figures: major rabbinc scholars who at the same time engaged seriously in modernity intellectually; individuals whose teachings and persons blended together, in striking ways, modernism and modernity, strict traditionalism and tradition-destroying ideas. It is intrinsically difficult to paint nuanced intellectual portraits that will do justice to the richness of their religious legacies. Moreover, different elements of the modern Orthodox community focus on those aspects in the teachings of those figures that find intellectually or religiously congenial and gloss over those aspects they find uncomenial. Thus, the more modern, "left wing" elements of the modern Orthodox community tend to focus on the more innovative, humanistic, and universalist aspects of the legacies of these three giants, and minimize the more conservative, authoritarian, and particularist aspects of their legacies, while that community’s more traditional, "right wing" elements simply reverse the order of priority.

Thus there are those who emphasize the deep strain of humanism and idealism in the thought of Rav Hirsch, his focus on the Bible as opposed to the Talmud, his refusal to accept rabbinic aggadot as authoritative, and his universalist and dispova-centered vision of the mission of Israel; while there are others who would point to his vision of a separatist Orthodox community, his fierce attacks upon all forms of modern historical Jewish scholarship, his deep Talmudic learning and dedication to his Commentary on the Pentateuch, and his opposition to all changes in halakhic ritual, set forth in his surviving responsa. Similarly, as Dr. David Saper has recently argued, the religious and intellectual legacy of Rav Kook is being vigorously contested, and he has been portrayed by some as a paradigmatic modern Orthodox Jew—open, tolerant, and deeply engaged with currents of secular thought, while others "had him as the moshiach of the pioneering Zionist: a supreme dreamer of a reform Jewish state, believer in the luminosity of the final redemption, and upholder of the Jewish people’s right to the whole of the Biblical land of Israel." In both instances, each of the opposing camps, not surprisingly, dismisses those features stressed by the other as secondary.

A similar battle seems to be shaping up over the teachings of the Rav, but precisely on this account, I would contend, the real task with regard to the Rav—indeed, with regard to Rav Hirsch and Rav Kook—is to avoid the over-simplifications of both the left and the right and arrive at a portrait of the Rav that will do justice to the complexity and multi-faceted nature of his teaching.

Shortly after the Rav’s passing, Rabbi Norman Lamm, President of Yeshiva University, in a eulogy for the Rav delivered on April 25, 1979, urged his auditors to "guard against any revisionism, any attempts to misinterpret the Rav’s work in both worlds [the world of Torah and the world of Medrash]. The Rav was not a lamdim who happened to have and use a knowledge of general culture, and he was certainly not a philosopher who happened to be a kabbalist, a Torah scholar. We must accept him on his terms, as a deeply committed, profound, and broad-minded personality. Certain burgeoning revisions may well attempt to disguise and distort the Rav’s uniqueness by trivializing one or the other aspect of his rich personality and work, but they must be confronted at once."

R. Lamm’s phrase “bubbling revisionism” is significant. It suggests that the process of revisionism is taking place even as he was speaking. Indeed, we can say that this process—and here I am speaking about revisionism from the “right”—began with the eulogy for the Rav, delivered at the Rav’s elevation on hol ha-Ma’amor Peah, April 12, 1993, by his younger brother, the distinguished rabbinic scholar and Rabbi Yeshiva, Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik. In his powerful eulogy R. Soloveitchik offered the following mashal. [There are] three physical phenomena in respect to light: reflection, refraction, diffraction. Reflection designates the process whereby the ray of the sun passes through a certain medium, which has no light of its own. Refraction involves the bending of rays [of the sun], while in diffraction... the rays of the sun are broken up into the spectrum of colors. Reflection and diffraction

both involve the... bending of the rays, except in refraction the rays of the sun are bent on account of passage of the rays without encountering an opaque medium, but in diffraction it encounters an opaque body."

So far the rashi. And what is the nshineh? R. Soloveitchik continued:

[My grandfather's baby] Reb Hayyim Brisker had to have recourse only to the process of reflection. The air of Volozhin was pure and uncontaminated... My father, z'l, had to have recourse to the process of refraction... because he had to give classes at Yeshivas Rabbi Yitzchak Eichenon to American boys, who while pious and devout from good American Orthodox homes, still the air they breathed was not like that of Volozhin and Brisk... However, in his endeavor to publicly teach Torah he did not encounter any opaque medium.

When my brother became Rosh Yeshiva in Yeshivas Rabbi Yitzchak Eichenon, he started to encounter opaque people in the right and the left camps... He was forced to have recourse to refraction, reflection, and diffraction. He delivered lectures in Jewish philosophy... From time to time he mentioned Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hobbes, Kant, and Hermann Cohen... Through that he was able to reach many opaque people from different camps.

The clear implication is that the Rav engaged in the study and teaching of both Jewish and general philosophers and resorted to using their writings to extensively in his own essays primarily for apologetic purposes, that is, "to reach opaque people," to lend an air of respectability to traditional Jewish teaching by presenting it through the prism of Jewish and general philosophy.

As R. Lamm indicated, the Rav was a highly complicated individual. One need not and should not therefore deny the existence of an apologetic motif in the Rav's teaching. But to say the Rav used Jewish and general philosophy primarily as a means of teaching "opaque people" is a serious over-simplification which trivializes the Modeh aspect of the Rav's teaching.

This reductionist approach to the Rav's use of philosophy should be contrasted with the more judicious and balanced approach of the Rav's son-in-law, the much lamented Rabbi Professor Yitzhak Twerksy.

The Rav's teaching is not cast as an apology for traditional Judaism or as an attempt to harmonize it with some general school of thought. The "kasharot" is not subordinated to any extraneous system nor does it need to be validated by aligning it with Kant and Hegel. It needs to be appropriated and explicated, to be analyzed and conceptualized. The Rav's teaching—drawing freely from Torah and Ashkenaz—fascinates as for its compelling interpretive insights... its theological subtleties, philosophical perceptions and moral nuances, its beauty and profundity... The Rav's message is the following: When you know your way—your point of departure and goals—then use philosophy, science and the humanities to illuminate your exposition, sharpen your categories, probe the profundities and subtleties of the "kasharot" and reveal its charm and majesty; in so doing you should be able to command respect from the alienated and communicate with some who might otherwise be hostile or indifferent to your teaching as well as to increase the sensitivity and spirituality of the committed.

Note that Professor Twerksy makes place for the apologetic motif in the Rav's use of philosophy, but this is a minor strand in a rich and colorful tapestry. The use of science, philosophy, and the humanities is primarily designed to deepen one's own understanding of the "kasharot." While such use may also enable one to reach perhaps otherwise unreachable opaque people as the alienated, hostile, and indifferent, it also serves "to increase the sensitivity and spirituality of the committed."

The approach taken in R. Aaron Soloveitchik's magnum found fuller expression in a collection of essays about the Rav, *Nishkas ha-Rav* by Rabbi Menachem Schacter, one of the Rav's leading disciples and currently Rosh Kollel Yeshiva University. Of course, any work by R. Schacter is a major and invaluable contribution to furthering our understanding of both Torah ha-Rav and nekesh ha-Rav, for both the teaching and the person of the Rav. At the same time, it must be said that a clear revisionist tendency runs throughout the work. That is, R. Schacter consistently seeks to minimize many of the more innovative and unconventional features of the Rav's activity and person, features that may not, at least in R. Schacter's view, be easily with the image of the Rav that R. Schacter seeks to paint, namely, that of the great traditionalist Rosh Yeshiva. That the Rav was first and foremost a great traditionalist Rosh Yeshiva goes without saying. Still, R. Schacter consistently in *Nishkas ha-Rav* emphasizes and even, at times, exaggerates the traditionalist features of the Rav at the expense of the more innovative and unconventional features.

The first section of *Nishkas ha-Rav* consists of a general portrait of the Rav. In this section R. Schachter, while lauding the Rav's greatness, downplays his originality. Thus, one of the sections' major contentions is that the Rav subordinated himself entirely to the teachings and directives of his teachers and masters, first and foremost of whom was his father, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, who, in turn, received his teaching from his father, the great luminary and leading Talmudic scholar of his generation, Rav Hayyim Soloveitchik. There is no doubt a great deal of truth in this claim, particularly in the realm of talmudic scholarship, though, as I sought to argue in a review essay, even here I believe R. Schachter exaggerates. What is very strange is that R. Schachter claims that the same holds true for the Rav's essays and discourses in the area of Jewish thought. Thus he states, "Together with the tradition [that the Rav] received concerning theoretical halakhic principles and practical rulings, he also received an exceptionally powerful tradition in the realm of kasharot and faith."
But, can one believe that the commandment of imitation seeks to divine attributes of action such as God's loving kindness, righteousness, and justice. What is the basis for the claim that man also imitates God's creativity or His uniqueness? If we take the view of Rabbi Akiva on the practical consequences of the commandment of imitation, as argued by R. Schachter, the commandment of imitation seeks to divine attributes of action such as God's loving kindness, righteousness, and justice. What is the basis for the claim that man also imitates God's creativity or His uniqueness? If we take the view of Rabbi Akiva, the commandment of imitation seeks to divine attributes of action such as God's loving kindness, righteousness, and justice. What is the basis for the claim that man also imitates God's creativity or His uniqueness? If we take the view of Rabbi Akiva, the commandment of imitation seeks to divine attributes of action such as God's loving kindness, righteousness, and justice. What is the basis for the claim that man also imitates God's creativity or His uniqueness?
with remarkable consistency over the course of many decades. I refer to the Rav's view that nowadays women are to be taught Torah she-b'al Peh, and specifically Talmud. This view found clear and public expression in the Rav's insistence that in the Maimonides school, which he founded and guided, Talmud be included in the girls' curriculum, as it was included in that of the boys, as well as in his decision to give the inaugural lecture when the Beth Midrash program was initiated at Stern College. There can be no doubt that the Rav's stance on this issue has been extraordinary influential. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that the teaching of Talmud to women in modern Orthodox high schools and mishnayot would be as prevalent today as it is, given the still controversial nature of this issue, without the precedent set by the Rav. This startling omission can be accounted for only by assuming that, here as elsewhere, R. Schachter has chosen to blur or glide over an innovative or daring aspect of the Rav's teaching.

Consider then Rabbi Meir Soloveitchik's recent article in the distinguished journal of Orthodox Jewish thought, Tradition, entitled "The Torah, Feminism and Public Policy," whose purported goal is "to explore, explain and define the approach of...[Rav] Yosef Yitzchak Schneur z"l to the entire issue of women's prayer groups, halakhic, adloyd and all the sundry other topics that have emerged from the feminist movement." But as one begins to read the article, it soon becomes evident that R. Meiselman has a broader, more far reaching agenda. For what we find in this article are the outlines of a revisionist portrait of the Rav that makes R. Schachter's portrait look positively mild by comparison.

R. Meiselman, a noted rabbinic scholar and nephew of the Rav, subtitles his essay "An Insider's Overview." As he states: "I write these lines not only from the perspective of a close disciple, but also from that of one who was privileged to be part of his family and household, and who was able to know him, speak to him and learn from him as only a family member can." While I was a student of the Rav for several years and, indeed, was privileged to work closely with him in the course of my translation into English of his halakhic essay, Ikh ha-Halakhah, unlike R. Meiselman, cannot claim to have been his close disciple, and I certainly do not possess any insider's view. I therefore do not wish to address the issue of the Rav's attitude to feminism, where R. Meiselman reaps on his recollection and understanding of his private conversations with the Rav. But, as one who has been a close student of the writings of the Rav and the writings about the Rav for some thirty years, there are two things I can confidently say with regard to the larger picture of the Rav that R. Meiselman attempts to paint. First, R. Meiselman's "insider's view" is, at many points, clearly contradicted by the insider views of other distinguished members of the Rav's family who were also his close disciples. I have in mind particularly several addresses and eulogies for the Rav written by his two sons-in-law, to whom I have already referred, R. Professors Yehuda Tsvienik and Yisrael Tennenbaum. R. Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein. Second, and even more important, wherever it is possible to check R. Meiselman's claims against the Rav's writings, it turns out that those claims are clearly and explicitly contradicted by clear and explicit statements of the Rav.

Regarding R. Meiselman's "insider's view," I will limit myself to two points. First, R. Meiselman, like R. Aaron Soloveitchik, suggests that the Rav's use of philosophy in essays like Ikh ha-Halakhah (Halakhic Man) was intended to "show the general American public the intellectual respectability and sophistication of halakhah." This reductionist suggestion, as I have already indicated, needs to be greatly modified in light of R. Twersky's much more perceptive and balanced "insider's" analysis of the significance of the Rav's use of philosophy. (I should add parenthetically that 95-99% of the "general American public" would not have been able to understand the rich halakhic Hebrew of Ikh ha-Halakhah. As the Rav once quipped to me: "Who could read Ikh ha-Halakhah? Only rabbis! But what do rabbis know about philosophy?")

Second, in the course of his article R. Meiselman refers to the Rav's classic eulogy for Rav Hayyim Ozer Grodzinski (delivered in 1940 while the Rav was still a member of the Agudas Israel) where "the Rav declared that the halakhic Judaism is the leader of the community in all areas, halakhic and political as well." In a footnote R. Meiselman comments: "The supposed claim by some feminist authorities that the Rav subsequently changed his mind about the position taken in this eulogy is contradicted by the fact that the Rav chose to have it reprinted in the early eighties." I must say that this argument strikes me as extraordinarily weak, as people do not reprint all the time essays of theirs with which they may no longer be in full agreement. But since my perspective may be dismissed as that of an outsider, let me cite the following nuanced "insider's" analysis of R. Aharon Lichtenstein:

The Rav did not over the course of time continue to espouse the ideology of [Devar Torah, which claims that all political issues contain a clear-cut halakhic dimension and therefore are subject to the binding and exclusive decisions of Godol Torah.] At the start he advocated this view and presented it with passion [in his eulogy for Rav Hayyim Ozer]. But after a while he abandoned it, and during subsequent decades accepted and even sharpened the distinction between matters of halakhah (dinei mitpalel), which are subject to the rulings of rabbinic authorities, and matters of policy (dinei rivay), where significant consideration is to be accorded to the views and authority of other groups. At the same time, though he desired a decisive role for rabbinic authority in the political dimension, he insisted that activity in that sphere be guided by fundamental values and...a pure spiritual perspective which can be provided only by...[yehidas agodah].

I now turn to the second and more critical question of how R. Meiselman's claims on two central issues: 1) particularism and universalism; and 2) religious Zndonism measure up against the Rav's writings.
Particularism and universalism. R. Metzelman, on the basis of his conversations with the Rav, claims: "The Rav in all his concerns was exceedingly parochial. He viewed all social issues of the day from one pragmatic standpoint: how they would affect the spiritual and practical needs of the Jewish people... I do not believe that one can find a single instance where the Rav was involved in any of the universal issues of the day. His concerns and involvement revolved around his parochial concern for the well-being, both spiritual and physical, of the Jewish people."  

I can not, of course, exude for the contents of R. Metzelman's conversations with the Rav. What I can state is that his claim that "the Rav in all his concerns was exceedingly parochial" is contradicted by the Rav's writings where universal concerns are clearly to be found. Thus, in his classic article "Confession," in which R. Metzelman explicitly refers, the Rav writes: "We Jews have burdened with a two-fold task... We believe that we are the bearers of a double charismatic load, that of the dignity of man, and that of the sanctity of the covenantal community... We are summoned by God, who revealed Himself at both the level of universal creation and that of the private covenant, to undertake a double mission—the universal human and the exclusive covenantal confrontation."  

Interestingly, the Rav acknowledges the often narrowly parochial focus of much of the Jewish community, but attributes this focus to the "unfortunate" fact that "the non-Jewish community has confronted us throughout the ages in a mood of defiance." The Rav explains: "As long as we were exposed to... a relentless attack..."  

Similar statements appear in "The Lonely Man of Faith." Let me just cite, however, a passage from an unfortunately little known policy statement formulated by the Rav, "On Interfaith Relationships," which brings out the universalist dimension of Judaism in perhaps an even sharper fashion than the passage we cited from "Confrontation."  

The Jewish religious tradition expresses itself in a fusion of universalism and particularism. On the one hand, Jews are vitally concerned with the problems affecting the common destiny of man. We consider ourselves members of the universal community charged with the responsibility of promoting progress in all fields, economic, social, scientific, and ethical [emphasis added]. As such we are opposed to a philosophy of isolationism... which would see the Jews living in a culturally closed society.  

On the other hand, we are a distinctive faith community with a unique commitment, singular relationship to God, and a specific way of life. We must never confuse our role as the bearers of a particular commitment and destiny with our role as members of the family of men.  

We should also remember that, as many individuals very close to him have testified, the very last public act that the Rav performed was to phone the members of the Knesset in Israel and insist that they support the call for a special commission to investigate the Christian massacres at the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatila. If they did not do so, he threatened, he would publicly resign from his position of honor president of the Knesset. In the light of the Rav's written views cited above, I believe it is fair to conclude that this last public act of his reflects that "fusion of universalism and particularism" which he so eloquently espoused, and that he was motivated in this act, as in others, by both more particularistic concerns as well as general ethical ones.  

Because R. Metzelman misunderstands the Rav's position regarding universalism and particularism, he also misunderstands and misrepresents the Rav's stance on interfaith dialogue. R. Metzelman, referring to the Rav's essay "Confrontation," claims that "When Pope John XXIII opened dialogue with the Jews, the Rav viewed this as a serious danger to Judaism, and claimed that no such dialogue could be pursued... Despite the opposition of a few Orthodox rabbis, the Rav's position carried the day and almost without exception no dialogues have been conducted between Orthodox rabbis and the Catholic Church." But, as is well known, the Rav, with his delicate balance between universalism and particularism, never opposed interfaith dialogue. What he opposed, as he states in "Confrontation," was interfaith theological dialogue. He always, however, approved of interfaith dialogue about matters of general ethical and social concern. Again, this position comes out with particular force and clarity in the Rav's position paper, "On Interfaith Relationships": "We are... opposed to any public debate, dialogue or symposium concerning the doctrinal, dogmatic or ritual aspects of our faith vis-à-vis similar aspects of another faith community... When, however, we move from the private world of faith to the public world of humanitarian and cultural endeavors, communication among the various faith communities is desirable and even essential. We are ready to enter into dialogue on such topics as War and Peace, Poverty, Freedom, Man's Moral Values, Civil Rights, etc., which revolve around the religious spiritual aspects of our civilization. Discussion within these areas will, of course, be within the framework of our religious outlook and terminology [emphasis added]."  

In this connection, it is worth citing another "insider" view. The past president of the Rabbinical Council of America, Rabbi Bernard Rosenweig, who worked closely with the Rav on matters of communal policy, writes in his article "The Rav as Communal Leader": "The RCA remained loyal to the guidelines which the Rav had set down [concerning interfaith dialogue] and distinguished between theological discussions and ethical secular concerns.
which have universal validity. Every program involving either Catholic or Protestant churches in which we participated was carefully scrutinized. . . .

Every topic which had possible theological nuances or implications was vetoed, and only when the Rev. pronounced it to be satisfactory did we proceed to the dialogue.

So much for R. Meiselman’s claim that, in accordance with the Rev’s position, “almost . . . no dialogues have been conducted between Orthodox rabbis and the Catholic Church.”

Religious Zionism. Here R. Meiselman’s misrepresentations of the Rev’s position are, if possible, even more serious than his misrepresentations of the Rev’s position on the issue of secularism and universalism. R. Meiselman writes:

In his epoch for his uncle, Rev Yitzhak Ze’ev Soloveitchik (the Bialer Rev), published subsequently under the title of Maar de-Nidhe Mitzvot, the Rev said that whereas a secular Jewish government in Israel does not fit into any halakhic categories, it is religiously irrelevant. This was not just a formulation of the uncle’s position, but was his as well. This is the essential theme of his essay Kol Dodi Dofek, in which he states clearly that the importance of the State of Israel has to be evaluated in exclusively pragmatic terms. In (that essay) he lists the reasons that the achievements of the State are religiously positive and therefore outweigh whatever negative aspects may be present. Certain things have intrinsic value. Others have pragmatic value and have to be looked at in strictly pragmatic terms. There is no intrinsic value to which that does not have halakhic meaning.44

Thus, as R. Meiselman concludes in an endnote, “The Rev’s difference of opinion with other Torah giants was the degree of accommodation with the government of Israel. It existed on a pragmatic level only.”

I proceed to correct R. Meiselman’s misrepresentations serioulsy.

First, R. Meiselman runs together the government of Israel and the State of Israel. But both in his essay “Brit Avot” and his essay “Al Abhanat ha-Torah u-Gevul Nefash ha-Der” the Rev clearly and emphatically differentiates between government and State. As the Rev explains in “Brit Avot”: “We know that the government itself is not the State. Governments come and governments go, but the land—and the State—we hope to God, remain forever.” And in “Al Abhanat ha-Torah” he devotes an entire section to distinguishing between the government and the State. In that section he laments the fact that “many of my Haredi friends and many of the leaders of the secular [Israeli] parties” commit this error of confusing government and State.

This confusion on R. Meiselman’s part leads to his second error, namely, his claim that the State of Israel, for the Rev, does not possess intrinsic halakhic significance, but just pragmatic value. This claim flies in the face of clear and unambiguous statements of the Rev in both “Brit Avot” and “Al Abhanat ha-Torah.”

Thus, in “Brit Avot” the Rev bases himself on the view of the Ramban regarding “yishuv Eretz Yisrael,” that maintains that “the establishment of the State possesses halakhic significance since by means of it we shall be able to fulfill the mitzvah of possessing the land of Israel . . . . The existence of the State of Israel and the fact that Jews and not Gentiles determine its laws; that Jews and not Arabs are the political masters in the country; and that a Jewish government, army, and police force exist, is the greatest possible fulfillment of the mitzvah of settling in Eretz Yisrael.” Similarly, in “Al Abhanat ha-Torah” the Rev argues that “the State is the possession of the entire people to whom God has given it. In His abundant loving kindness, there is a complete identification between the land in its holiness and the State. The commandment of taking possession of and settling the land of Israel expresses itself not just in cultivating and developing the land . . . but by the Jewish people taking hold of the land and exercising political dominion over it. The very fact that there exists Jewish political sovereignty and that Jews rule over the land . . . gives expression to the primary aspect of the commandment of taking possession and settling” (emphasis added).

Third, R. Meiselman claims that in “Kol Dodi Dofek” the Rev “states clearly that the importance of the State of Israel has to be evaluated in exclusively pragmatic terms. Really? In “Kol Dodi Dofek” the Rev maintains that the establishment of the State of Israel was and continues to be God’s great act of loving kindness on behalf of a Jewish people who had just suffered through the terrors and horrors of the Holocaust. God, as the Rev writes in his poetic and passionate imagery, “suddenly manifested Himself and began to knock at the door of His despondent and disconsolate love [. . . the Jewish people], twisting convulsively on her bed, suffering the pains of hell. As a result of the knocks on the door of the maiden, wrapped in mourning, the State of Israel was born.”

As is well known, the Rev goes on to state that God knocked on the tent of His love at least six times. Let us look at the first three of those knockings.

First, the knock of the Beloved was heard in the political arena. No one can deny that from the standpoint of international relations the establishment of the State of Israel, in a political sense, was an almost supernatural occurrence. Both Russia and the Western countries jointly supported the idea of the establishment of the State. This was perhaps the only proposal where East and West were united. . . .

Second, the knocking of the Beloved could be heard on the battlefield. The small Israeli Defense Forces defeated the mighty armies of the Arab countries. The miracle of the “many in the hands of the few” took place before our very eyes.

Third, the Beloved began to knock as well on the door of the theological tent. . . . All the claims of the Christian theologians that God deprived the Jewish people of its rights to the land of Israel . . . have been publicly refuted by the establishment of the State of Israel. . . . It is the voice on my Beloved knocking.”
That God's hand was manifest in the "almost supernatural" political establishment of the State, in the miraculous victories won by the Israeli defense forces, and in the State's theological significance as the public refutation of Christian theological claims—where in all this do we find an evaluation of the State in "purely pragmatic terms"?

Fourth, in fairness to R. Meiselman it must be said that the Rav does resort, among other things, to a pragmatic evaluation of the significance of the State. Thus the fourth, fifth, and sixth divine knockings mentioned in "Kol Dodi Dofek" are primarily pragmatic in character. The fourth knock is the important role of the State in slowing the process of assimilation, particularly among the young; the fifth knock is the fact that "for the first time in the history of our exile, divine providence has surprised our enemies with the sensational discovery that Jewish blood is not lighter," that is, the establishment of the State has given the Jewish people as a collective the power to defend themselves; and the sixth knock is the opening of the gates of the land, the fact "that a Jew who goes from a hostile country will know that he can find a secure refuge in the land of his ancestors."

At the same time, the Rav views even these more pragmatic aspects of the significance of the State from a theological perspective. Thus, as the Rav suggests in "Kol Dodi Dofek" and as he states more explicitly in "Brit Avo," the pragmatic fact that the State has slowed the process of assimilation, the pragmatic fact that even partially assimilated Jews are still attached to the Jewish people via their concern for the well being and security of the State and its inhabitants, are not of exclusively pragmatic significance, but are the primary expression in our time of the covenant of fate that God made with the Patriarchs and then confirmed with the people of Israel as a whole when they were still in Egypt.

Fifth, R. Meiselman states that in his eulogy for his uncle, Rav Velvele Soloveitchik (the Brisker Rav), the Rav attributes his uncle's opposition or indifference to the secular Jewish government in Israel to the fact that since such a government does not fit into any halakhic category, it is religiously irrelevant. Once again, R. Meiselman confuses government and State. In the eulogy the Rav does not speak about his uncle's opposition or indifference to the government of Israel, but to the State of Israel. But more troubling, R. Meiselman goes on to say that this view of the State is "religiously irrelevant" because it "does not fit into halakhic categories" was "not just a formulation of his uncle's position, but was as well." This is simply not so.

In his eulogy, the Rav, contrary to the position of his uncle, expresses the view that the State of Israel, despite or because precisely because of its secular nature, serves as a difficult but inspiring challenge to the halakhic community in general and the religious Zionist community in particular to show that the halakhah can be implemented in and serve to guide, fashion, and shape a modern Jewish society and State. To be sure, the Rav attributes this view to anonymous "yeh emrim," that is, "there are those who are of the opinion," but it is as clear as day that the "yeh emrim" are none other than the Rav himself, and that he adopts this guise only in order to take issue with the view of his uncle regarding the religious status and significance of the State of Israel, without having to frame that disagreement in personal terms.

Indeed, the Rav goes on to say in the eulogy, again uses the device of the "yeh emrim" to take issue with Rav Velvele regarding the religious desirability of the institution of the Chief Rabbinate.

Sixth, and finally, as we have shown, the Rav did not view the State of Israel in exclusively pragmatic terms—and there is much more we could say about the subject—it follows that it is false to claim that "the Rav's difference of opinion with other Torah giants [regarding ... the government] is better "State" [i.e., Israel] ... exist on a pragmatic level only." To the contrary. The Rav's difference of opinion with Torah giants from the Haredi community concerning the State of Israel expressed itself precisely in the fact that they evaluated the importance of the State in exclusively pragmatic terms, while the Rav ascended the State intrinsic positive religious and halakhic (though not material) significance.

R. Meiselman's claim that these positions of the Rav are, in the final analysis, just part of a larger effort on his part to "harmonize" the Rav, that is, to minimize, to the extent possible, the distance separating the Rav from the Gedolei Torah who are part of the Haredi community. In this connection R. Meiselman "envisions" distinctly when the Rav told Rav Aharon Kotler, "Our goals are the same (same mature iz d'yesh), we disagree only on how to achieve that end.

The difference between the Rav and that towering leader and spokesman of the Haredi community, Rav Aharon Kotler thus reduces itself to one of tactics, just as the difference between the Rav and the Torah scholars from the Haredi community regarding the State of Israel supposedly exists "on a pragmatic level only."

In light of all the above, I would be extremely reluctant to decide such an important question as the similarities and differences between the Rav's views and policies and those of Rav Aharon Kotler solely on the basis of the reliability of R. Meiselman's memory. At the very least, I would like to know the context in which the Rav made that comment. But even granting the comment's reliability, I would contend that R. Meiselman misunderstand its import. To be sure, in a certain sense the Rav and Rav Aharon Kotler had the same goal: maximal halakhic observance and maximal Torah study. But what is evident and undeniable is that they sharply disagreed as to what were the implications of such maximal observance and study. For Rav Aharon Kotler, such maximal observance and study require that the Jew minimize, to the extent possible, his involvement with general culture and society. It certainly demands of the Jewish male that he devote only the absolutely minimal amount of time necessary for secular studies. To use a phrase of the Rav as we cited above, a phrase the Rav did not intend as a compliment, Rav Aharon's philosophy was a "philosophy of isolationism ... which would see the Jew living in a culturally closed society." But the Rav, as we have seen, was strongly
opposed to such a culturally isolationist philosophy. For the Rav, maximal observance and study is consistent with and, indeed, demands to be complemented by significant study of Hebräism and significant involvement in the general culture and society, though, to be sure, such general social and cultural involvement needs to be hedged about with equally significant qualifications. If R. Meiselman fails to understand this, he simply fails to understand what the Rav was all about; he simply fails to understand the very heart of the Rav.

In sum, the fact that a distinguished rabbinic scholar like R. Meiselman, despite his having been a close disciple of the Rav and despite his having been "privileged to be part of his family and household," could write such a flawed article, an article that presents such a narrow, distorted, and almost unrecognizable picture of his uncle, only serves to underscore the dangers of the revisionist drive on the part of the "right" and the impossibility of reformulating the Rav to fit a Haredi mold.

While the most significant revisionism about the Rav has come from the right, the left has also done justice to his views. A single, but revealing, example of revisionism about the Rav from the left delves with the Rav's position on interfaith dialogue. Both Rabbis Irving Greenberg and David Hartman, two thinkers prominently associated with the Orthodox left, have argued in various speeches that the Rav's opposition to interfaith theological dialogue was not a matter of principle, but an accommodation with a sociological reality. In their view the Rav's position regarding interfaith theological dialogue as set forth in "Confrontation" is highly problematic. Here the Rav writes:

The word in which the multivariate religious experience is expressed does not lend itself to standardization or universalization. The word of faith reflects the intimacy, the private, the paradoxically inexpressible feelings of the individual for and his linking up with his Maker. It reflects the ominous character and the strangeness of the act of faith of a particular community which is totally incomprehensible to the man of a different faith community. Hence it is important that the religious or theological logos should not be employed as the medium of communication between two faith communities whose modes of expression are

unique. . . . The confrontation therefore is unlikely to occur at the theological, but at the mundane level. There, all of us speak the universal language of modern man. . . . Our common interests lie not in the realm of faith, but in that of the secular order. . . . In the secular sphere, religious communities may together discuss positions to be taken, ideas to be evolved, and plans to be formulated.

However, in a footnote to this paragraph the Rav introduces the following qualification: "The term 'secular order' is used here in accordance with its popular semantics. For the man of faith, this term is a misnomer. God claims the whole, not part of man, and whatever He established as an order within the scheme of creation is sacred."

But, query Rabbi Greenberg and Hartman, does not the Rav by introducing this important qualification undermine the entire distinction he seeks to draw in the text between "the realm of faith" and "the secular order"? For if there is no "secular sphere," given that all the spheres God "established within the order of creation [are] sacred," does not "the secular sphere," then, also belong to the "realm of faith"? But if this sphere does belong to the realm of faith, how, in turn, is it possible for interfaith dialogue to take place in this supposedly secular-but-in-actuality-religious sphere, given the private nature of "the realm of faith"? Conversely, if interfaith dialogue can take place within this sphere, despite its religious nature, why can it not also take place within other religious spheres, say the more strictly theological sphere? Both Rabbi Greenberg and Hartman, believing that the Rav must have been aware of this weakness in his argumentation, conclude that such argumentation was not and could not have been the real reason for his opposition to interfaith theological dialogue.

In support of this conclusion, they point out that they informed the Rav in private conversations that they would engage in such interfaith theological dialogue, and he did not express any opposition. R. Hartman therefore suggests that the real reason the Rav opposed such dialogue were first, because he was afraid that too many Orthodox rabbis lacked self-respect and would be swayed by the prospect of theological dialogue with the Vatican that there was the danger they might desert away fundamental Jewish beliefs, and second, because he was doubtful that there were enough Orthodox rabbis able to engage intelligently in such dialogue.

With reference to the problem that Rabbi Greenberg and Hartman discern with regard to the Rav's position regarding interfaith theological dialogue, even if we grant that their objection is valid, this does not constitute a sufficient reason for not taking the Rav at his word. But, in point of fact, I would argue that the problem they raise may be resolved if we look at the Rav's more nuanced discussion of this matter as found in "On Interfaith Relationships.

In this article the Rav's description of the boundary between permissible and forbidden interfaith dialogue differs subtly but importantly from his description of that boundary in "Confrontation."

As we saw earlier, the Rav in "On Interfaith Relationships" was opposed to any public debate, dialogue or symposium concerning the doctrinal, dogmatic or ritual aspects of faith, aspects belonging to "the private world of faith." He, however, supported "communication among the various faith communities" in the public world of humanitarian and cultural endeavors, on topics which "revolve about the religious spiritual aspects of our civilization." But it is important to note how the Rav understood this distinction. The Rav in this article is careful never to speak of "the secular order" or "the secular sphere." He speaks of "the public world of humanitarian and cultural endeavors," "areas of universal concern," of "socio-cultural and moral problems."
Most important, he speaks of "universal religious problems." For, as the Rav emphasized: "Discussion within these areas will, of course, be within the framework of our religious outlook and terminology. As men of God, our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and terminologies bear the imprint of a religious world outlook. We define ideas in religious categories, incomprehensible to the secular. In a word, even our dialogue at a sociohumanitarian level must be grounded in religious categories and values. However, these categories and values, even though religious in nature and Biblical in origin, encompass the entire universe and public—no the individual and private in religion" (emphasis added).

In sum, the line between permissible and impermissible interfusion dialect is not between interfaith dialogue in "the realm of faith" and interfusion dialogue in "the secular sphere." It is between two types of religious interfusion dialogue: "the Rav, that is, was opposed to interfusion religious theological dialogue concerning the doctrinal, dogmatic or ritual aspects of faith," for those aspects represent the individual, unique, and private side of religion, but he supported interfusion religious humanistic dialogue concerning sociocultural and moral issues, for such dialogue was grounded in religious categories and values that represent the universal and public side of religion. The revisionists of the left and the right thus prove to be, in many respects, mirror images of each other. Both revisionists tend to rely on private conversations in preference to the Rav's writings. And while revisionists from the right find the Rav's profound engagement in the study and teaching of philosophy to be too "modern" for their tastes, to be discordant with their image of the Rav as the great Talmudist, and they consequently argue that it should be seen as a pragmatic accommodation with a sociocultural reality, revisionists from the left find the Rav's opposition to interfusion theological dialogue to be too "traditional" for their tastes, to be discordant with their image of the Rav as the sophisticated philosopher and theologian, and they consequently argue that such opposition should be seen as a pragmatic accommodation with a sociocultural reality. I would argue, in opposition to both revisionists, that our task is precisely to understand the complex mix of modern and traditional elements in the Rav's person and teaching, and not to explain away every element we may find unconvincing. Our task is precisely to see the Rav as both great Talmudist and sophisticated philosopher and theologian, and not to stress one side of his personality at the expense of the other. I cite the eloquent words of R. Lamam:

No one-sided distortion of this complex intellectual and spiritual giant [the Rav] should be countenanced. Let it be stated clearly and unequivocally: his attitude to the "wisdom of the nations," to Torah U-Mitzvot, to the broader Jewish community was "de izvish'tshik, not kitshez. Any contrary assertion diminishes the Gesist of this unconventional Rosh Yeshiva and geon shi'ur-gezon. The Rav was an integrated human being whose thinking was compressed and unified, so that even the slightest suspicion of any effort to cut him down to size the size of our own minds, minds so much less capacious, less bold, less profound than his... The Rav was a man of the broadest vision, intellectual and spirituality."

It is, in conclusion, the task of the modern Orthodox community to staunchly resist any and all "bureaucratic revisionism," whether from the right or from the left, and to strive mightily, both intellectually and spiritually, to live up to the vision of the Rav in all its breadth, depth, complexity, and grandeur.

NOTES
even here it is simply not true to say that the Rav's extensive reference in that essay to the modern non-Jewish philosophical tradition is solely for the purpose of explicating the medieval Jewish philosophical tradition.


7. Schachter, "The Rav," p. 34.

8. Nitschke, "The Rav," pp. 94-95. For the significance of the titles, see e.g. p. 19.

9. See, however, the caveat on p. 3.


11. Note, however, the caveat on p. 3.


27. See, however, Kennedy, "The Rav: The Critical Legacy of Rabbi Schachter" (Jerusalem: Keter Press, 1994).


Jewish and anti-fascist, but also false, cruel, inhuman, and destructive. This opposition led him to sympathize with the U.S. government's wartime attempts to prevent the installation of a communist government in South Vietnam. Again, we find the Rev's motivations to be a "fusion of universalism and singularity."

I think it would be fair to characterize the Rev as a political conservative. And, no doubt, political conservatives on the whole are more appreciative of the virtues of particularism than are political liberals with their often facile universalism. At the same time, I would claim that just as it is possible to be a political liberal without succumbing to such a facile universalism, so it is possible to be a political conservative without succumbing to the narrow type of parochialism that R. Meiselman, inaccuracy, as we have seen, attributes to the Rev.

33. Meiselman, p. 22.


35. Bernad Rovne contraction, "The Rev as Commercial Leader," Tradition 30.4 (1999): 314-315. In this connection, the following story, relayed by a long-time confidant of the Rev, is illuminating. Rabbi Dr. Walter Waisburg, may he rest in peace. An RCA committee was once reviewing possible topics for an inter-faith dialogue. One of the suggested topics was "Man in the Image of God." Several members of the committee felt that the topic had too theological a slant and wished to veto it. When the Rev was consulted, he approved the topic and quipped, "What should the topic have been? Man a Naturalistic Creature?" Cf. On Interfaith Relationships, p. 80.


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55. In truth, I believe that even in "Confrontation" the Rev had this distinction in mind, though his impression management blurred his point and left his argument in that essay open to the criticism leveled at him by Rabbi Greenberg and Hartman. He got it just right the second time around. To be sure, the distinction the Rev draws in "On Interfaith Relationships" may also be called into question. But while it is possible to change the Rev's discussion in "Confrontation" with being inconsistent, such a charge, in my view, cannot be brought against his discussion in "On Interfaith Relationships."

The other arguments of Rabbi Greenberg and Hartman are easily answered. Regarding their private conversations with the Rev, I would make the same point that I made with regard to R. Meiselman's assessment of his private conversations, namely, that one cannot rely on private conversations, redacted to the vagaries of memory and the multiple possibilities of ambiguity or misunderstanding, to override close text and coherently maintained public pronouncements that the Rev made in writing. As for the pragmatic reasons R. Hartman painted forward to account for the Rev's opposition to inter-faith theological dialogue, even if these pragmatic considerations did play some role in his opposition, this does not preclude his opposition to theological dialogue on grounds of principle. Indeed, if one is looking for a pragmatic reason to supplement the Rev's opposition in principle to inter-faith theological dialogue, one should seek it not too much in his supposed suspicion of the self-respect or theological coherence of the Orthodox rabbinate, but rather, as Dr. Aryeh Biehman has argued, in his suspicion, expressed in a number of public addresses in Hebraic Yidish, of the possible insinuating intentions behind the Catholic Church's call for such dialogues. See Aryeh Biehman, "Avodat" (in Haorad in "Torah") (the Hebrew translation of "Confrontation") as published in a pamphlet by the Torah Divisions of the Department for Education and Culture of the Jewish Agency (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 24-25.

By contrast, all personal incisiveness or recollections of private conversations recounted in this essay serve a purely supplementary function, that is, they serve only to elucidate upon or sharpen ideas already to be found in the Rev's writings.

57. In fairness, I should state that no example of revisions from the left of which I am aware even comes close to the type of revisions found in R. Meiselman's article.

58. Norman Lamm, "Continental Address," delivered on May 28, 1997, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Rabbinical Seminary Theological Seminars.

59. At the same time I am not to speak for this article, Tradition 33.2 (1999) appeared, containing three Letters to the Editor by Rabbi Yoel Riss, Nachshon Haffgott, and Eli Clark responding to R. Meiselman's article, and R. Meiselman's reply. Some of the points made in the letters overlap with those presented here. Nothing in R. Meiselman's reply indicates me to change a single word of my essay.

Error

In "Letivnu: Drawing Near the Other," by Susan E. Shapiro (Spring 1999), the words "plaid skirts" should read "plaid shirts," p. 228. We regret this error.