Dear Rabbi Cardozo,

For many years, I have read your articles and publications with interest. I greatly admire the way in which you present the complexity of religion and existence and do not shy away from the burning issues of the moment, sometimes at the expense of long held dogmas that need reappraisal. I would however like to comment on the recent article you penned about Rav Soloveitchik. As you rightly said, Rav Soloveitchik was perhaps one of the greatest thinkers and Halachic authorities in the last century. It is for this reason, he became known by his students as simply 'The Rav'. The gist of your article, if I can brusquely summarise it, suggests that despite his standing, he was not a mechadesh in the important areas of Halacha and seems to implicitly suggest that even his philosophical thinking provided little by the way of novelty. I cannot claim to have studied Rav Soloveitchik's Halachic response in depth, neither can I claim to have read every single one of his writings. However I can say that over the years I have been fortunate to have dissected elements of his thinking which has, on a personal level, profoundly affected the way I approach my faith, my life and my existential struggles. I have read many Jewish thinkers from Levinas to Cohen, Buber to Borowitz, Heschel to Greenberg. They have all added much to my Weltanschauung, but I think the book that both affected me the most and defined so many the inner drama of a religious human being, must be Rav Soloveitchik's The Lonely Man of Faith. Furthermore, one could argue that some of the greatest thinkers and halachic innovators today stand basking in the light of the Rav's thought. Surely Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits book Not in Heaven was influenced by the Rav's Halachic Man and Halachic Mind. By their own admissions, Rabbi David Hartman, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and Rav Lichtenstein, to name just a few, were influenced and shaped by the innovative theological framework of their teacher and colleague.

It is true, as you state, that there is a fight for his legacy, which has as you claim transformed him into a kind of cult leader. I would suggest that it is the very tension you explicate between the novelty in the philosophical realm and the conservatism in the Halachic realm that has created the multifaceted interpretations of the Rav's positions. Furthermore, I would disagree that he has become so to speak idolised, but rather emulating his view of creative and autonomous thought, many of his greatest students are also his greatest critics, which is not something one finds in the charedi world.

Your article focused on one essay and one aspect of the Rav's corpus of thinking and life works. Its narrow focus meant that it also lost the complexity in the development of his thought. Halachic Man was penned in 1944. Whilst writing the book, the very legacy to which the Rav owed his knowledge and foundations were being gassed to oblivion. The Rav felt an obligation to retain the Brisker tradition which as you describe 'depicts an image of an ideal halachic human being who in many ways lives a mathematical and almost stony life'. The dialectical struggle that we see at the start of the book between cognitive man, who is as you describe a cold, calculated individual almost bereft of any emotional attachment to reality, and Homo-religious who is a more traditional religious mystic interested in the transcendent elements of the religious experience, seems to quickly lose ground. By the end of the book there is no real dialectical swing between the two. Homo religious has no place in Halachic Man's persona. This is in contrary to Lonely Man of Faith, which, if we compare and contrast to Halachic Man, retains throughout a deep dialectical tension between Adam 1 and Adam 2 typologies. Adam 1 the scientist can be compared to cognitive man man and Adam 2 the philosopher or religious man, can be compared to homo religious. What has changed? Why in Halachic Man is the ideal persona a Mitnagged Brisker, almost neo-Kantian personality that views the world only through the lens of halachic data, and in Lonely Man of Faith, the ideal religious personality oscillates between the two? The answer is the years in-between, and here I get to what I think you miss in your analysis of the Rav.
Halachic Man is written in 1944, The Lonely Man of Faith is written in 1965. There is no doubt that twenty years in the life of such a deep and reflective individual will change their Weltanschauung. In their now infamous article Singer and Sokol¹ make a claim about the Rav that I think is pertinent to your analysis. They claim that the differences between the two essays lies in chasm of the twenty years in between the two writings. In 1944 the Rav must remain loyal to his roots; The rabbinic academy of Brisk, from where the origin of his yahdot emerged, is being destroyed as he writes and thus as they claim, ‘he is loyal to the tradition of his father and grandfather, which emphasised study, pure emotional detachment and stoic indifference’.² However, twenty years later he feels at greater ease to throw off the yolk of the Brisker tradition and immerse himself in a more hassidic existential aura that celebrates defeat, retreat and humility. He is able to accede to the conflictual and multi-dimensional aspects of a religious personality.

Halachic man has all the trappings of a neo-Kantian outlook. Absent is any existential allusions. The Lonely Man of Faith, written after the death of his wife and deep into the life of an individual who has lived and seen life through the lens of loss, loneliness and struggle, presents a far more complex face of the religious experience. Halachic man is not seen solely as a monolithic system or normative framework, rather as the very tool used to create the constant tension and oscillation within the persona of every individual who lives an authentically religious life. This change is reflected not only in these two essays but can be seen as a developing trend throughout his lifetime, essays such as Majesty and Humility, Al Ahavat Ha-Torah u-Geulat Nefesh Hador, Kol Dodi Dofek, to name a few. This dialectic is seen most poignantly in 1977 through a eulogy the Rav delivers for his son in law’s mother, the Rebbetzin of Talne, where he describes the difference between the approach to Judaism of his mother and his father. He writes:

“The laws of Shabbat, for instance were passed on to me by my father; they are part of musar avikha. The Shabbat as a living entity, as a queen, was revealed to me by my mother; it is part of torat imekha. The father knew much about Shabbat, the mothers lived the Shabbat, experienced her presence, and perceived her beauty and splendour……most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not in formal compliance of the law but also a living experience….. I learnt from her (his mother) the most important things in life – to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting on my frail shoulder’.³

In your article, you use Rabbi Heschel to critique Soloveitchik, but there is no doubt that here in this extract we hear echoes of Heschel’s ‘The Sabbath’. Perhaps only in his later years having gained the insight of a life lived to the full, does Rav Soloveitchik allow himself to let go of the Neo-Kantian epistemology of the Halachic Man and move towards the more existential, empiricist feel of The Lonely Man of Faith.

Though your criticism may be justified, one must not underestimate the impact his thought had on so many. His seamless interweaving of western philosophy with Jewish tradition spoke and continues to speak to so many who are struggling between the two worlds. His elevation of classic concepts such as inner defeat, self-negation and self-sacrifice, from antiquated destructive values to the highest form of freedom, was antipathetic to the societal norms of autonomy, freedom, self-aggrandizement in the 1960’s, yet this was his accomplishment whose impact is still being felt today. The Lonely Man of Faith has been an inspiration for so many spanning a plethora of cultural and religious divides. (Just yesterday I finished a book by American journalist David Brooks on the state of American society today. He uses the framework of adam 1 and adam 2 to build his innovative theory of individual and societal character building. Even the fact that your own autobiography is called Lonely but not Alone is reminiscent of Rav Soloveitchik Lonely Man of Faith).

¹ Singer and Sokol: Joseph Soloveitchik: The Lonely man of Faith, Modern Judaism 1982
² David Hartman: Love and Terror in the God Encounter p98
³ A tribute to the Rebbetzin of Talne, Rabbi J.B Soloveitchik, Tradition 1977
How does this address the critique you levy at him in your article for his lack of innovation in the Halachic realm. The answer I believe is that for many reasons the Rav was halachically straitjacketed, and his unwillingness, or inability to take a controversial and novel stance on important halachic issues is one that is both disappointing and surprising, considering his innovation in the philosophical realm. However just as we see in Halachic, the Rav felt a strong obligation to the tradition of his fathers. Perhaps he felt it was too early to depart from or radically reinterpret thousands of years of Halachic stringencies and inertia. However, he laid the path for those after him to do the work. His insistence on women’s learning especially of Gemara was an opening of doors for the developments we see today.

As I have argued in an article to be printed in an upcoming book on Rabbi Greenberg, the Rav’s essay Confrontation was theologically ambiguous and thus paved the way for interpretation that could ultimately lead to interfaith dialogue.

Rav Soloveitchik, like any great individual, was human. He was working within the confines of political, religious and personal constraints. However perhaps if we focus on the development of his thought, if we see the movement from a neo-Kantian, strictly mitnagged outlook to a more existentially religious experience, we might argue that his thought as opposed to his halachic rulings define the man and his legacy. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg titles one of his essays ‘Two doors Rabbi Soloveitchik opened but did not walk through’ which points to the fact that it may be his greatness lay in positioning the ground work for doors his students and future generations would walk through.

Finally, I hope you do not mind me mentioning something that has bothered me over the years and that is particularly relevant in light of this essay. As I mentioned at the start I greatly admire your thinking, I believe you raise issues that deserve much attention and debate. Like Rav Soloveitchik, you are a bold and innovative thinker. However, your call for halachic innovation and change, is seldom followed by any action. I understand that unlike the Rav, you are not a posek in the same fashion, though you could by anyone’s standards be a respected rabbinical authority. Surely the only way to create change, as you correctly preach and advocate would be to take the action in the halachic realm that is needed.

Thus my question is, are you so far removed from the critique you levy against the Rav? In your thought, you are bold, innovative and assertive, but in practical halachic terms, unless I am misinformed, I have not seen any great steps. You argue quite correctly that Halacha has become stagnant where it should be innovative and dynamic, but the flourishing of halacha is happening again, perhaps more at the grass roots than at the helm, but for it to be truly successful we need people like yourself to take the wheel and steer in the right direction. We live in a time of great change, I pray our great, great grandchildren will look back on this period and proclaim we were the engineers of a new and bold religious reality, which as I have argued may have begun with the Rav. However, it will require not just the ideas but the practical halachic guidance and courageous decisions to allow it to happen and the question is who will be brave enough to actually walk through that door?

With best wishes,

Tanya White

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It is beyond the scope of this letter to go into all the constraints, mainly during his days at Yeshiva university, the political constraints of his position.