Dear Rabbi Cardozo,

Let me begin by thanking you for your thorough and thoughtful response to my letter. You address many of the points I made and make a convincing argument for some of your assertions, but by no means all. As I mentioned in my previous letter, the complexity and breadth of Rav Soloveitchik’s influence, legacy and works have already filled thousands of pages and will continue to do so, hence it is beyond the scope of this correspondence to address all areas of this subject and from being able to offer anything new that has not already been said. There are however four points I would like to address with regards to your response.

I: On the ‘idolization’ of the Rav:

I believe you are correct to point out that in recent years there has been an ‘idolization’ of the Rav, though again I think you are guilty of your own critique as I shall attempt to demonstrate. As we know, both the secular and charedi communities suffer from a similar malaise. They both create ‘molten images’. The onset of modernity perpetuated what Nietzsche had already predicted in the nineteenth century, that men would become ‘gods’. As the power of human capabilities has grown exponentially, so too has its inability for self-criticism or allegiance to any external authority other than itself. The arrogance and self-belief in our ability to conquer all has led us to worship our own self-image to the detriment of key virtues such as self-sacrifice, humility, self-restraint and faith. The secular absolutizing of humanity left unchecked leads to nihilism, egocentricity, totalisation and metaphoric blindness to anything outside of self, in other words, the ills of society today. In the religious world there exists a parallel situation. The dual threat of modernity and Zionism meant that the ultra-orthodox communities has had to build walls both internally and externally. Their need to reject ‘modernish’ values led to a system of defensiveness rather than innovation. They rejected the ‘idolization’ of the human, in favour of the ‘idolization’ of the Halakha and the ‘Gedolim’. The definition of idol worship is creating an image that is immune to change. An image that we compartmentalise to suit our own agenda, that we ‘use’, or ‘manipulate’, as the idol worshipers did in ancient times, to achieve our goals. There is no doubt that over the years, as witnessed noticeably in the last few months, there has been a move to the right in so called modern orthodox institutions in America. As this process played out the legacy of the ‘Rav’, the ‘Gedol Hador’, was used to justify the status quo by resisting any calls for change. To this extent I agree that there has been an ‘idolization’ (though I would probably term it obsession rather than idolization) of the Rav which is the natural result of the shift to the right in certain modern orthodox circles. In ‘idolizing’ something or someone we create a unitary monolithic image of that thing and hence lose its depth and complexity, and herein lies the danger.

The Rav, as witnessed through his writings and by those who knew him first hand, possessed a profoundly complex and often conflicted personality. He was, like our greatest role models, deeply human. This meant he was subject to constraints both personal and political, as furthermore

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1 This is seen both on a hermeneutic level through the treatment of narratives such as the refusal to criticise the Avot, David Hamelech and his sin turning them into saints as per Christianity rather than humans. (הנער תנך, מוכרים ותיקים debate). But far more disturbing is the practical implications of this mindset. The rampant incidents of sexual impropriety in the Charedi world committed by a given authority – teacher, father, rabbi, that is despicably covered up so as to not to disillusion anyone of the subject’s greatness.

conditioned by the time in which he was living and making decisions. Additionally, his views and personality changed over time (as I argued in my first letter), and hence in the same way that he has been idolized, with his Halachic decisions set in stone by the those on the right, I believe through your depiction of the Rav, you have also totalised his legacy as a failure to move modern orthodoxy forward in the Halachic realm, which is not quite accurate and misses much of its complexity. I quote William Kolbrener (whom you were introducing in your original article) when he says, ‘the attempts of various students and followers to embody Soloveitchik ideals – to manifest that vision in cultural or institutional form- has been the compromise of complexity.’3 He has become, as Kolbrener so correctly posits, a ‘dichotomous image’ acquiring a dual reputation adopted by each belligerent side. Any attempt to oversimplify and polemicize his legacy does it a great injustice – an injustice I believe you too commit.

II: The originality and relevance of Halakhic Man

The Rav wrote and taught on the heels of the greatest crisis for orthodoxy since the destruction of the second temple. The challenge of modernity which manifested itself in movements such as the Reform and Conservative, coupled with the crisis of faith arising from the Holocaust meant there was much searching for answers. You argue that as the leading voice for modern orthodoxy the Rav had a responsibility to present a compelling and enriching religious response. Halakha was for many outdated, irrelevant and incongruent with the enticing values of modernity such as autonomy, creativity and self-determination. Furthermore, Christianity’s assault on Judaism as being too legalistic (an argument originating with Spinoza and adopted by the Reform movement at the time too), was forefront in the minds of many American Jews. The Rav does respond to some of these challenges but I believe the Rav did not see himself as defender of modern orthodoxy. As I will argue the Rav’s works were not polemical or defensive, designed to ‘answer’ religious dilemmas of the time. They were far more personal and cathartic and in being so naturally addressed some, but not all, of the pressing issues.

What the Rav did in Halakhic Man goes far beyond as you cursorily state ‘reading Emanuel Kant in a Jewish religious framework’. It’s originality stems from its ability to turn the whole Halakhic process on its head. Instead of ‘idolizing’ Halakha as we mentioned is done in the Charedi circles, the Rav transfers the ‘authoritative’ of the Halakha to the individual. The ‘authority’ becomes embedded in human creativity as opposed to the system or the Divine.4 Halakhic Man is neither subdued nor coerced but rather self-determined and creative. For the first time in the history of modern thought the inner working of the Talmudic personality was bought face to face with the enlightened intellectual and as it turned out their worlds were not so far apart. This was the innovation in the Rav’s work.5 Halachic man in contrast to homo-religiosus is practical, active and this-worldly, he seeks

4 It is true that the idea of human autonomy as opposed to Divine authority is already formulated in early Talmudic sources, however this trend became up-surge during the Middle Ages when the Halachic system became evermore stagnant and the general religious outlook was one that favoured the restraint and suppression of the individual in favour of divine or clerical authority. The enlightenment put an end to this religious oppression but at the same time threatened the foundation of religion. Though there was a renaissance in Jewish thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with thinkers such as Buber, Rosensweig, Cohen, no one placed the Halakhic process in the framework of modernity until Soloveitchik’s Halakhic Man.
5 As already noted this response has a superficial air to it. I have presented the Rav’s work in a unitary fashion without conceding to its multifarious and often contradictory elements. This is in order to make a point. However one must acknowledge the argument by Singer and Sokol (David Singer and Moshe Sokol, “Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith,” Modern Judaism, Vol. 2, No. 3 Oct., 1982) and more recently by Dov
answers to religious dilemmas in the workings of the real world not in a transcendent realm. I cannot think of anything more relevant to today's disaffected Israeli youth both secular and religious (who have never read Kant anyway). The ideas need restating in more accessible and modern terms but are still highly relevant.

III: The Rav and Halakhic innovation

The central thesis of your article, as I read it, was that you believe Rabbi Soloveitchik should have made greater Halakhic innovations, which he did not, and hence fails in your eyes as the great leader he is purported to be. I want to offer two different approaches that I believe answer this critique. The first focuses on the practical implementation of Halakhic decisions and the constraints he was under, the second his overall Halakhic philosophy.

1. I acknowledge that his Halakhic decisions were grounded in a more conservative approach than what one may expect based on his theoretical and philosophic writings. However, hindsight is always a wonderful thing. Rav Soloveitchik lived during a tumultuous period, his commitment to Zionism, women’s Torah and Talmud learning and co-ed schooling as well as an uncompromising allegiance to modernity, in the face of much opposition, was itself a colossal challenge. Perhaps the time was not ripe for the changes we would have expected him to make, perhaps, as we have already said, he was not an ‘idol’ with whom the gift of hindsight and prophecy was given. He was not to know that his ambivalent response to subjects such as interfaith or intra-faith dialogue, women in the halachic process, status of the mechitzah or status of non-jews, would be misinterpreted or totally revised by some of his students. It seems on some issues the Rav was treading water, waiting to give a definitive ruling in the ripeness of time, which for him never materialised. This temporization, perhaps an intentional policy perhaps not, legitimised the conservative agenda of the more charedi elements of modern orthodoxy, the corollary of which is being felt today, and that does feel like a failing. Though that failing I believe is less the Rav’s, more the ills of a narrow and parochial mindset typical in certain sectors of orthodoxy.

You ask me when I think the time may have been ripe for the Rav to make these changes? Despite your contention to the contrary, I believe he did make changes, in your opinion not enough, in my opinion just enough to keep him balancing all the political baggage. You yourself acknowledge that he made attempts to create a bet din with Rabbi Saul Lieberman of the JTS, through which perhaps he felt more change could be administered, though it ultimately failed. Those who called for radical Halakhic change during the 50’s and 60’s such as Hartman and Greenberg, were seen as pariahs in certain circles, though now their thought is seen as far less radical. These voices were needed (hence the Rav’s private legitimisation of many of the projects and view of these personalities) to

Schwartz (Dov Schwartz, Religion or Halakha: The philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Leiden: Brill, 2007) that Halakhic man is simply apologetics, ‘dressing up Talmudism in neo-Kantian garb’, and the counter response to this by David Hartman, with whom my sympathies lie. It is also prudent to look at chapter 28 and 29, especially the references to all the leading literature on the subject, in Reuven Ziegler, Majesty and Humility, The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Urim Publications 2012 Israel.

See Seth Farber, An American Orthodox Dreamer, Brandeis University Press 2004 chapter 4 where he outlines the novelty of both co-ed schooling and Talmudic study for women and shows them to have become the defining feature of modern orthodoxy in America. To this Rav Soloveitchik must be credited.

I adopt a word used by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg in an article in a forthcoming book of proceedings of the Oxford Conference entitled: The Road not Travelled: Modern Orthodoxy and the Work of Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

I quote from your response “The Rav admitted to Rabbi Rackman that he may have been right”. Rabbi Greenberg and Rabbi Hartman both suggest the Rav legitimised various actions they took whilst in public he
pave the path for change today, however for the Rav to legitimise such change was perhaps too soon. As he himself quotes in 1945 at the opening of the Maimonides school “the dreamer of yesterday is often the architect of tomorrow”.  

2. It may very well be that the reason you fail to understand the Rav on this issue is because you are coming from a totally different starting point. The Rav believed that psak follows from whatever the Halakhic system dictates. It seems to me that your thinking is that the halakhic system should follow whatever is necessary for the sake of whatever psak is needed for this day and age. Both views may be legitimate but one cannot be held up against the other for their fundamental view of the Halakhic system differs fundamentally.

To put it another way, if we take two extreme views of halakha, on the one side, "Chadash asur min haTorah" of the Chatam Sofer and "Where there is a Rabbinic will, there is a halakhic way" of Blu Greenberg, while the two of them could argue on a philosophical level which view is more correct, it would be meaningless for them to argue that the other should embrace their specific psak halakha since they are coming from such different approaches.

It appears you have more in common with Blu Greenberg while the Rav has more in common with the Chatam Sofer (again this paints an inaccurate black and white picture of the issue that does, however, underscore the point at hand). This is highlighted in the new book Halakhic Morality where amongst other things Soloveitchik writes "The Halakhic system is basically constant and unalterable". By contrast, he claims that ethics have much more room for reformulation and change.

You will surely ask, if this is in fact his 'true' view, what about the creativity and innovation as well as the ethical activism that he so clearly advocates in Halakhic Man? To that I would reply by saying the following:

1. The chiddushim he speaks about were personified by his grandfather Rav Chaim. These were not cases where someone came with a practical halakhic question and he wanted to adapt the halakha to give a certain answer but rather the reverse where clever learning of texts led to a certain answer that differed from previous understandings. The desired answer was not the driver nor the creative element, rather this was embodied in the exposition itself.

2. Based on the theory that Halakhic Man is based on the Rav's father, the Rav's sister tells of how post WWI, there was a huge aguna problem on a scale never before experienced and the Rav's father was active in trying to deal with it by writing letters to the government and Rabbis near the front. He found many novel ways to free agunot using his utmost halakhic creativity but he "never deviated from the Halacha".

The two differing interpretations I have offered above should leave us in no doubt that your critique of his lack of Halakhic ingenuity is unfounded.

IV: The Rav and issues of concern

You write:

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You write:

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10 I am indebted to Meir Valman for this insightful point as well as other important points he made in an initial reading of this response.
“I wonder why he never dealt with some extremely important issues that keep many people away from Orthodoxy. Two examples suffice: 1) The issue of Torah Min HaShamayim and Bible criticism; and 2) the matter of belief in God (especially after the Holocaust) and the conflict between science and belief.”

At the start of The Lonely man of Faith the Rav states:

“I have never been seriously troubled by the problem of the Biblical doctrine of creation vis-à-vis the scientific story of evolution at both the cosmic and the organic levels, nor have I been perturbed by the confrontation of the mechanistic interpretation of the human mind with the Biblical spiritual concept of man. I have not been perplexed by the impossibility of fitting the mystery of revelation into the framework of historical empiricism. Moreover, I have not even been troubled by the theories of Biblical criticism which contradict the very foundations upon which the sanctity and integrity of the Scriptures rest. However, while theoretical oppositions and dichotomies have never tormented my thoughts, I could not shake off the disquieting feeling that the practical role of the man of faith within modern society is a very difficult, indeed, a paradoxical one.”

For the Rav the dilemma of science and biblical criticism in regard to the Torah was not as serious a challenge as the role of faith in modern society. For the Rav the answer to problems of faith come through the ‘experience’ of the religious personality and its development. Though this is not found in Halakhic man it is certainly expressed in later works such as U-Vikkashtem Misham and The Lonely Man of Faith. It is from these and other places where the Rav describes this intensely loving relationship with the Divine his thoughts on belief and faith can be inferred. Thus overemphasis on history and texts was not of any concern since the man of faith is impervious to such issues.12

Furthermore your use of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks as an example of someone who has addressed the issue is imprudent since I believe the inspiration for his thinking on this subject came from Rav Soloveitchik! I would suggest that his approach is based on what he calls the ‘epistemological pluralism’ of the Rav. In an early essay13 Rabbi Sacks skilfully analyses The Halakhic Mind and in doing so formulates the Rav's position on science and religion by showing their mutually exclusive realms. This purposeful disintegration allows, he says for religion to be ‘presented autonomously, as a cognitive system independent of, but parallel to science’.14 Anyone familiar with Rabbi Sacks will already detect from this the seeds of his thinking on science and religion, expressed so brilliantly and originally in his recent book The Great Partnership.

You seem to suggest that because he was great he should have dealt with these important contemporary topics. I think that is the wrong way round. He dealt with what mattered to him in a highly original and unmatched way and because of that he became great. I would argue that that is why he is still so revered. Issues of biblical criticism, science, belief in God tend to come and go and some of the arguments are only really relevant to a few intellectuals that grasp them in all their details. The Jewish responses to them often look very dated today hundreds of years later or even a few years later in the case of some of the scientific debates. But Rav Soloveitchik’s focus on the crisis of faith in modern society and the need for religious experience is probably even more relevant today than when he was alive and touches far more people.

12 For an in depth study on this question and some interesting answers and theories see Arye Sklar, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and the Problem of Biblical Criticism Kol Hamevaser Nov. 2016
14 Ibid. p77
We must concede that Rav Soloveitchik’s works were perhaps more a cathartic individual process than a polemic for the public but it is this that makes them so powerful and compelling. Regarding the Holocaust, it is true the Rav never offered a systematic and complete response, he was not as such a post Holocaust thinker. In Kol Dodi Dofek he indeed grapples with the challenge, but it is integrated into a general discussion of suffering and Zionism, and hence arguably does not provide a satisfactory response for someone looking for something comprehensive.

V: Conclusion

You, Rabbi Cardozo are a radical thinker. As an educator myself I often use your ideas and thoughts to shake up complacent minds, or present an idea from a novel perspective. Yours is a much needed voice in a time of reappraisal and revision; the Judaism you champion is authentic and raw. However acknowledging the couple of occasions you have acted on these ideas, I stand by my original critique that it is the ideas you espouse, as opposed to actions that you take, that defines your position. You are therefore not so far removed from the critique you levy at Rav Soloveitchik. I would like to suggest that Judaism needs bold thinkers more than ever today and it is to this task you have successfully set yourself. Equally, it needs courageous Halakhic innovation; however this will take time, it will not and cannot happen overnight. Today in Israel through organisations such as Tzohar and ITIM (the founder of which Rabbi Seth Farber, was a Yeshiva University graduate and deeply influenced by Rav Soloveitchik thought) and Halakhic authoritative personalities such as Rav David Stav, Rav Yuval Cherlow Rav Benny Lau and Rav Yossi Zvi Rimon the ethical and ritualistic realm in Halacha is being addressed in a serious and formative way, but there is still a long road ahead.

We are standing at the horizon of a new tomorrow, one that Judaism must be ready to face head on. I would like to think that Rav Soloveitchik lay the groundwork but in the end it’s all a matter of interpretation, and as long as we keep our minds open to new ways of seeing, and resist the temptation to ‘idolise’, even our own ideas, we will fulfil what Chazal state: אלו ואלו דברי אלוקים חיים - the living breathing God is found in the multiplicity of interpretation and complexity of life - ‘these and these and the words of the living God’.

With Best wishes

Tanya White