



Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter
teaches

**MAJESTY AND HUMILITY:
THE LIFE, LEGACY, AND THOUGHT
OF JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK**

A STUDY GUIDE

Sponsored by the Tikvah Fund

קרן תקווה
TIKVAH

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INTRODUCTION

More than any other leading figure in American Orthodoxy, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik—known reverently by his followers as “The Rav”—straddled different worlds. Born into a dynasty of great Lithuanian Torah scholars, Rabbi Soloveitchik spent his youth immersed in the aristocracy of Talmudic learning. He was a master student and teacher of Jewish texts, and *halakhah* (Jewish law) stood at the center of his life and work. Yet, he was also at home in the world of the academy, holding a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin and possessing a deep familiarity with the dominant trends of modern Western thought.

It was Rabbi Soloveitchik’s apparently seamless integration of these two opposing worlds that established him as one of the most important American religious leaders and thinkers of the 20th century. From his posts at Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, the Rabbinical Council of America, the Religious Zionists of America, and Boston’s *Va’ad Ha’ir* (Jewish City Council), Soloveitchik exercised a profound impact on what came to be known as the “Modern Orthodox” community in America. He ordained thousands of rabbis, and his nuanced and original thinking on the questions confronting modern men and women of faith continues to influence religious thought—Jewish and non-Jewish—in America and around the world.

In this online course, Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter presents the life, legacy, and thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik in an accessible, compelling, and personal series of eight lectures. A lifelong student of the Rav, Rabbi Schacter weaves together a serious examination of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s writings on Torah study, Jewish law, prayer, Zionism, interfaith relations, and more with personal stories and keen insights into Soloveitchik’s complex personality and fascinating inner life.

Through his work and example, Rabbi Soloveitchik set forth a model for the modern Jew who seeks a life of integrity as he navigates the tension between faithful obedience to the inherited traditions of his people and full engagement with, and contribution to, the modern world. We invite you join us in studying the philosophy, theology, and communal leadership of this unique and inspiring Jewish leader in “Majesty and Humility: The Life, Legacy, and Thought of Joseph B. Soloveitchik.”

ABOUT THIS STUDY GUIDE

This course was originally recorded in New York City during the summer of 2017 before a live audience at one of Tikvah’s summer programs. The lectures were followed by smaller discussion groups, guided by senior instructors, which allowed students to explore, analyze, and debate the issues raised in each class. While no study guide can replicate the atmosphere of a vibrant classroom, this booklet aims to enhance your experience of “Majesty and Humility: The Life, Legacy, and Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik” by posing the same kinds of questions our teachers and students explored when this course was first taught.

MEET JACOB J. SCHACTER

Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter is University Professor of Jewish History and Jewish Thought and senior scholar at the Center for the Jewish Future at Yeshiva University. From 2000 to 2005, he served as dean of the Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik Institute in Boston, and from 1981 to 2000, he served as rabbi of The Jewish Center in Manhattan, moving the congregation from 180 to more than 600 members over the course of his tenure

Rabbi Schacter holds a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Languages from Harvard University and received rabbinic ordination from Mesivta Torah Vodaath. He graduated from Brooklyn College in 1973. Rabbi Schacter was a teaching fellow at Harvard from 1978-1980, director of Yeshiva University's Torah u-Madda Project from 1986-1997, and an adjunct assistant professor at the Stern College for Women at Yeshiva University from 1993-1999. In 1995, he was awarded Harvard's prestigious Daniel Jeremy Silver Fellowship from the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

He is the co-author of *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (with Jeffrey Gurock, 1996) and the editor of *Jewish Tradition and the Nontraditional Jew* (1992) and *Judaism's Encounter with other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?* (1997). He has published numerous articles and reviews in Hebrew and English and is the founding editor of the *Torah u-Madda Journal*.



LECTURE 1:

SETTING THE STAGE: LIFE STORY

In this opening lecture, Rabbi Schacter outlines the life of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, focusing on his upbringing in Pruzhana and Chaslovitz, his time spent studying philosophy in Berlin, and his rabbinic leadership in the United States. The scion of a renowned rabbinic dynasty, Soloveitchik was born in 1903 into a world immersed in Torah study. He vividly recalled the many late nights during which his father, Rabbi Moses Soloveichik, would study Maimonides with his disciples right near his young son's bed. But while his father had been trained to learn and teach Torah to the exclusion of all other subjects, his mother's family combined Torah with secular learning.

Ultimately, Rabbi Soloveitchik decided to travel to Berlin to study secular philosophy, in a marked departure from the approach of his grandfather, the revered Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk. After years of study, during which he met and married his wife, he moved to the United States and eventually established the Maimonides School in Boston—named after the sage who had been such a prominent figure in his childhood.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Rabbi Schacter emphasizes that one cannot divorce an individual's thoughts and ideas from the context in which he or she developed them. He stresses that this is especially true with respect to Rabbi Soloveitchik. Why?
2. Rabbi Soloveitchik says he “met” Maimonides as a child, during the long nights when he overheard his father discussing the sage's teachings. What does the personal way in which Rabbi Soloveitchik speaks about Maimonides tell you about the way Rabbi Soloveitchik related to the sages of the Jewish tradition?
3. Despite the rich environment of learning in which he grew up, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that he was often frightened and lonely as a child. Why might this have been, and how might it have influenced him later?
4. Rabbi Soloveitchik's grandparents had vastly different approaches toward the proper balance between Torah study and worldly knowledge and pursuits. Did he ultimately make a choice between these two approaches? Or did he seek to integrate them?
5. How can the study of secular philosophy add to or detract from the study of Torah?
6. What do you think Rabbi Soloveitchik hoped to accomplish when he left “the world of Rav Chaim,” his paternal grandfather, for the world of cosmopolitan Berlin?

LECTURE 2:

CENTRALITY OF TORAH STUDY AND *HALAKHAH*: ACT AND EMOTION

What might it mean to have a romantic relationship with God? In this second lecture, Rabbi Schacter discusses Rabbi Soloveitchik's response to a frequent criticism of *halakhic* Judaism—that it is mechanical, robotic, and perfunctory. Soloveitchik argues that, to the contrary, the human component inherent in following *halakhah*, Jewish law, is transformative and, in a sense, romantic. A robot may be able to recite blessings, an animal may enjoy eating matzah, but these actions mean nothing without deliberate, thoughtful engagement by a human being. A person who knowingly performs the will of God through the observance of *halakhah* alters himself or herself by establishing a relationship with God, and simultaneously alters the nature of the activity that s/he performs.

In outlining Rabbi Soloveitchik's understanding of *halakhah*, Rabbi Schacter highlights several influences on Rabbi Soloveitchik's thought—from his mother, without whom he “would be a dry, soulless being,” to Maimonides. As Rabbi Soloveitchik explained when he declined the position of chief rabbi of Israel in 1960, his “world consist[ed] of the four cubits of *halakhah*.” This encompassed both the external world, the outward actions prescribed by *halakhah*, and the internal world, the intellectual and emotional relationship forged with God by learning His Torah and committing to His laws.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In Isaiah Berlin's essay, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, he argues that great thinkers either adhere to one grand, unifying principle—like Archilochus's hedgehog, who “knows one big thing”—or else they “pursue many ends,” like the fox, who “knows many things.” In which category does Rabbi Soloveitchik belong?
2. Although Rabbi Soloveitchik was renowned for his broad knowledge of secular philosophy, in his home and classes, he rarely invoked secular scholars. Why might he have sought to keep these two worlds separate in this way?
3. Rabbi Soloveitchik says that when he teaches Torah, he feels “the breath of eternity on [his] face.” What do you think he means by this?
4. Discuss the romance inherent in learning Torah and observing *halakhah* as Rabbi Soloveitchik understands it.
5. Rabbi Soloveitchik discusses the dialogue between generations that is an inherent component of Torah study. Is this conversation unique to the study of Torah?
6. Discuss *halakhah's* role in interpreting, and even determining, reality according to Rabbi Soloveitchik.
7. How can *halakhah* help us think about the nature of evil?
8. How did Rabbi Soloveitchik's mother influence his relationship with *halakhah*?
9. How can *halakhah* help us understand the role and nature of suffering and the human response to it?

LECTURE 3:

“MAN” INTERACTS WITH THE WORLD: EDUCATION AND ACTION

Rabbi Soloveitchik presents many of his ideas through descriptions of particular human “types.” For example, *The Lonely Man of Faith* and *Halakhic Man*—two of his best-known works—depict people who fit into a typology, who experience and think about the world in specific ways and display specific traits. And yet it seems he never discusses the sort of man he was himself—the staunch adherent to *halakhah* who is also engaged in learning from and contributing to the general culture.

He does, however, speak of his belief “that the Jewish child is capable of carrying a double load, the universal secular and the specific Judaic.” And in many of his writings, he conveys the idea that people are endowed with a dual nature and dual responsibilities, that “there is a real contradiction in the nature of man.” The tension inherent in both a dual nature and a double load is fundamental to Rabbi Soloveitchik’s philosophy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between the “universal secular” and “specific Judaic”? Where should that line be drawn? Can it be drawn at all?
2. Why do you think Rabbi Soloveitchik considered devotion to exclusively Judaic or exclusively secular education to be “a philosophy of doom”?
3. In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that “[m]an of old who could not fight disease and succumbed in multitudes to yellow fever or any other plague with degrading helplessness could not lay claim to dignity.” Is this true? Is there a form of dignity that is inherent in man, or is dignity entirely acquired?
4. How does the act of creation confer dignity upon human beings?
5. In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rabbi Soloveitchik appears to extol civilizational advances in technology, art, music, and so on. Do these forms of progress truly constitute the essence of civilization?

LECTURE 4:

RELATING TO GOD: PRAYER AND REPENTANCE

Rabbi Soloveitchik asks a surprising question about prayer: How is it even possible? This differs from asking why we pray, what we should pray, or what our prayers accomplish. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, prayer entails standing before God—an unimaginable encounter. Prayer is audacious, a presumptuous desire on the part of man to speak to the Almighty. And yet Rabbi Soloveitchik also believes that man is unable to live without prayer. Since we are compelled to pray by our very natures, we therefore *must* pray. Rabbi Soloveitchik also relies on Biblical precedents to justify prayer: If the Patriarchs and Moses prayed, then prayer is clearly part of the “worship of the heart.” And, as Maimonides teaches, prayer is inextricably linked to repentance; even the most sinful may pray, and through prayer, people may become “beloved [by God], close, and dear.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does prayer entail?
2. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that his illness “initiated him into the secret of non-being.” What might this mean?
3. Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that only “the committed person” is qualified to pray. What does this mean? Who is the “committed person”? Rabbi Soloveitchik also emphasizes Maimonides’s teaching that even the most sinful may pray. Are these two ideas mutually exclusive?
4. In what way is prayer related to repentance?
5. Explain the phrase, “worship of the heart.”
6. In this lecture, prayer is alternately described as a privilege, a right, and a necessity. Do you agree with these characterizations? Are there any with which you disagree?

LECTURE 5:

INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

Rabbi Soloveitchik carefully studies the nature of “man’s” relationship to God as well as “man’s” relationship to those around him, again through the lens of *halakhah*. He understands that because people are simultaneously social and individual beings, actions such as prayer and charity are performed on both a personal and communal level; hence, as he writes, there are “prayer communities,” “teaching communities,” and so on. Rabbi Soloveitchik particularly focuses on what it means to be included in *Knesset Israel*—the congregation of Israel—and the elements of choice and fate that bind individual Jews to a nation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain Rabbi Soloveitchik's perspective on *Knesset Israel*. What does it mean to belong to it, or to lose faith in it?
2. What is the difference between the *halakhah's* approach toward the individual and the community? Why does the individual come "first" in *halakhah*, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik?
3. Why are most prayers recited in the plural?
4. Explain the idea of a "teaching community."
5. In his eulogy for the Rebbetzin of Talne, Rabbi Soloveitchik discusses differences between "teaching communities" established by men and women. What are some of the differences between the two?
6. Why is storytelling, passing along a vivid "historical memory" to children, so important?
7. Explain the difference between the "covenant of Sinai" and the "covenant of Egypt." What are the "chains of fate" and the "bonds of destiny"?

LECTURE 6:

ZIONISM AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Although Rabbi Soloveitchik visited Israel only once in his life, he was a passionate Zionist. He speaks warmly of Israel as “one bank of the river...of Jewish existence,” and as proof that God was “knocking on the door” of the Jewish people, in the words of King Solomon’s Song of Songs. Rabbi Soloveitchik also addresses key disputes regarding Israel—there were, and continue to be, questions concerning the role of the Jew in the Diaspora; how to address secular Zionists; and the fervent belief among some in the Orthodox world that the state will not be legitimate or worthy of celebration until the coming of the Messiah.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the role of the Jew in the Diaspora? Are these Jews simply “ignoring the knock” of their Beloved?
2. What are some of the differences between secular and religious Zionism?
3. Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that there are two “banks” of the “river of Jewish existence”—the State of Israel, and the Sages of previous generations. What might this mean, and what do these two “banks” provide?
4. Discuss the ways in which Rabbi Soloveitchik’s views on Zionism differ from those of his ancestors, and how he combined reverence for the past with strong support for religious Zionism.
5. Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that a murdered Jew must be buried in the clothes in which he was killed, and movingly compares the Israeli flag to such clothes. Explain this religiously informed view of the Israeli flag, and how the flag differs from those of other countries.
6. Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that because God created the State of Israel, it is “brazen” of “flesh and blood” to oppose it. Explain this view.
7. Discuss Rabbi Soloveitchik’s use of the Song of Songs to explain the creation of the State of Israel, and the long night that preceded it.
8. Some in the Orthodox world objected to the idea of willingly putting Jewish lives at risk to fight for the State of Israel, yet Rabbi Soloveitchik defends this practice, arguing that Jews should take pride in fighting their enemies. Discuss these positions. What is the cause that Rabbi Soloveitchik believes to be worth fighting, and possibly dying, for?

LECTURE 7:

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

In the decades following the Holocaust, many Christian leaders, most notably in the Catholic Church, re-evaluated their approach to Judaism. In 1965, the Vatican released its “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” or *Nostra Aetate*, which detailed the Church’s new toleration and even appreciation of the Jewish people and the Jewish faith. This proclamation, and related interfaith efforts, elicited a variety of responses from Jewish leaders: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel embraced the Church’s attempt to promote dialogue between Christians and Jews, while Rabbi Moses Feinstein condemned it as merely a new strategy in its mission to convert Jews. Rabbi Soloveitchik, however, adopted a third way. He believed that different faith communities could cooperate in certain non-religious spheres, while maintaining a necessary and absolute independence in theological and spiritual matters.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There were mixed reactions to *Nostra Aetate* among Jewish leaders: Some rejoiced at the Catholic Church's newly tolerant stance toward Jews, while others felt that the Church had not taken adequate responsibility for its past abuses. What are your thoughts on the intent and consequences of this document?
2. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that “no religion is an island,” and that all faiths “stand on the brink of the abyss together.” Do all religions face common dangers?
3. Why does Rabbi Moses Feinstein so strongly oppose a rapprochement with the Church?
4. In what respects does Rabbi Soloveitchik agree with both Rabbi Feinstein and Rabbi Heschel?
5. Why do you think Rabbi Soloveitchik's essay on Jewish-Christian relations is titled “Confrontation”?
6. Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that the “language” of any given religion cannot be translated into the language of any other religion. Why not?
7. Rabbi Soloveitchik also writes that there is a universal language shared by “modern man” that different religious communities can use to communicate with one another. Is this true? If so, of what does this language consist?
8. Rabbi Soloveitchik views the encounter between God and man as private, to the extent that no one can understand anyone else's experience of God. Do you agree? If so, then how should we think about the nature and purposes of religious communities?

LECTURE 8:

COMMUNAL LEADER: TAKING A STAND

In this last lecture, Rabbi Schacter discusses key moments of decision in Rabbi Soloveitchik's life as a communal leader and *halakhic* decisor as well as the enduring influence of Rabbi Soloveitchik on world Jewry. His public positions on a number of issues continue to be debated, and as his daughter, Dr. Tova Lichtenstein, notes, his ideas have had different impacts in different communities. Rabbi Soloveitchik himself had written of his fear that he had failed to convey the true depth of the religious experience, that he had somehow transmitted intellectual teachings without a corresponding love of Torah. Yet as Rabbi Schacter notes, Rabbi Soloveitchik's capacity to admit his own worries and confusion contributes to the power of his work. His legacy may itself contain a duality: As Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein writes, his father-in-law "imbued us both with the frailty of majesty, and the majesty of frailty."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Rabbi Soloveitchik support co-educational Torah study even while he strongly opposed the practice of men and women praying together?
2. Discuss the role of personal disclosure in Rabbi Soloveitchik's writings and in the development of his thought. How can self-revelation serve as an educational tool?
3. Rabbi Soloveitchik feared he had not fulfilled his mission as a teacher, in part because he felt he had not conveyed the emotional component of religion, the "Torah of the heart," properly. Why might he have felt this way? What is the nature of the love he describes?
4. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein writes that his father-in-law, Rabbi Soloveitchik, "imbued us both with the frailty of majesty, and the majesty of frailty." Discuss the meaning and significance of these concepts.
5. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that there are two interpretations of the kind of dust from which man was fashioned: "cosmic dust" from everywhere in the universe, and dust from one spot on a hill on which the altar was eventually constructed. What do these two types of dust signify? Must man be both a rooted and a cosmic being? Why or why not?
6. How did Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein, Rabbi Soloveitchik's daughter, explain the lasting influence of her father? Why does his legacy seem to be different in America and in Israel?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The volume of work written and spoken by and about Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is vast and ever-growing, and space does not allow us to provide a comprehensive compendium of the available material. Below are additional resources selected by the course instructor for the students who attended the original lectures in person. If you are interested in further exploration, we recommend all the publications in the MeOtzar HoRav series as well as the archives of Tradition, which are available online here: <http://traditionarchive.org/archives>.

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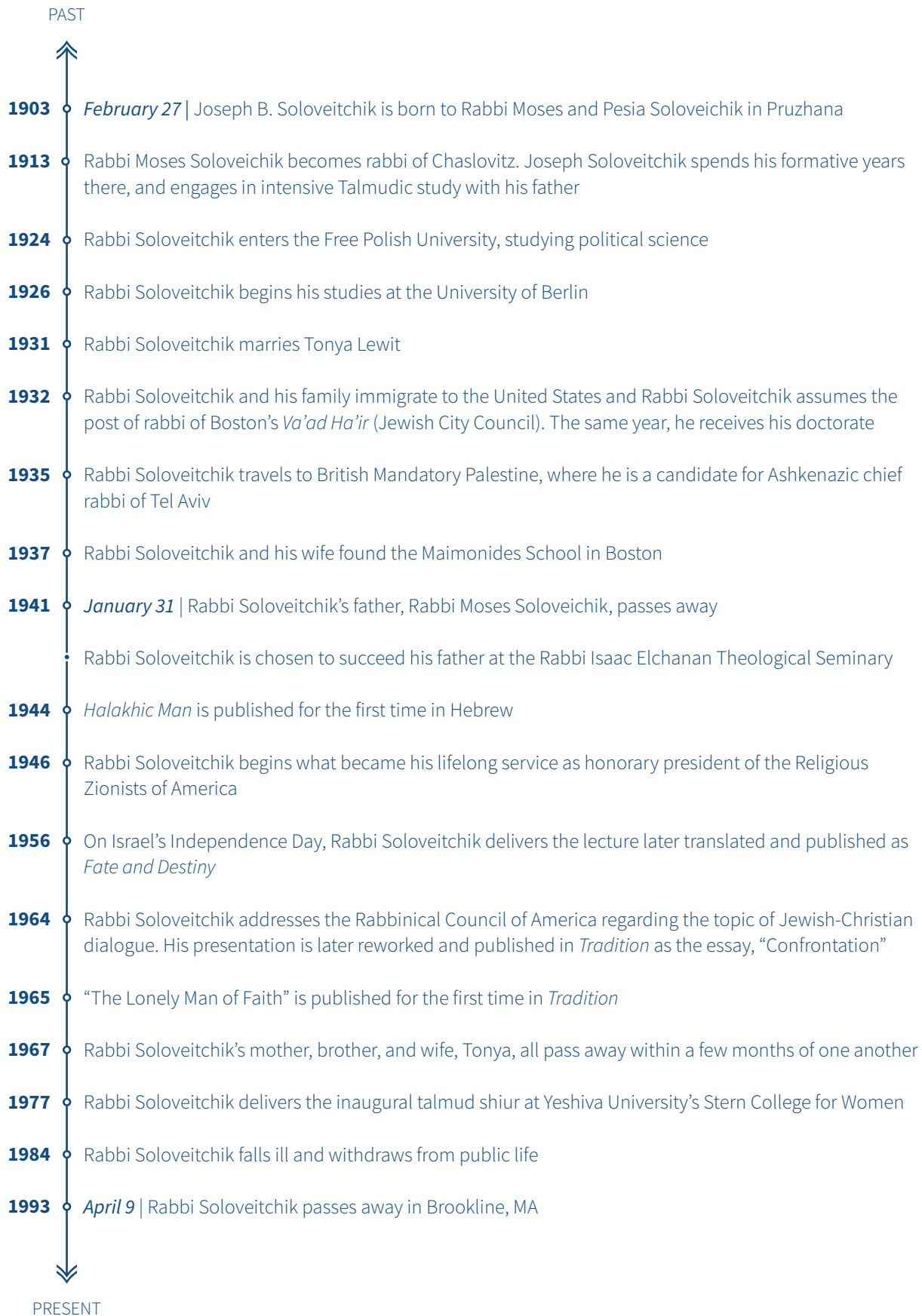
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TIMELINE



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The Tikvah Fund is a philanthropic foundation and ideas institution committed to supporting the intellectual, religious, and political leaders of the Jewish people and the Jewish state. Tikvah runs and invests in a wide range of initiatives in Israel, the United States, and around the world, including educational programs and fellowships. Publications supported by Tikvah include the *Jewish Review of Books*, *Mosaic*, Princeton University's Library of Jewish Ideas, *Hashiloach*, and *Tzarich Iyun*.

Our animating mission is to advance Jewish excellence and Jewish flourishing in the modern age. In pursuing that Jewish mission, Tikvah is politically Zionist, economically free-market oriented, culturally traditional, and theologically open-minded. Yet in all issues and subjects, we welcome vigorous debate and big arguments. Our institutes, programs, and publications reflect this spirit of bringing forward the serious alternatives for what the Jewish future should look like, and bringing Jewish thinking and leaders into conversation with Western political, moral, and economic thought.

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