

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

THE LONELY MAN
OF FAITH

WITH A FOREWORD BY

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OU PRESS
Maggid Books

The Lonely Man of Faith

An Introduction*

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IN THIS PENETRATING work, perhaps his best known and most influential, Rabbi Soloveitchik tackles a number of major issues, the central ones being mankind's dual role in the world, and the possibility of religious existence in modern, largely secular, society. Along the way, he offers startling insights into a host of other topics. The book's rich range of ideas makes reading it a challenging and exhilarating endeavor, but at the same time this richness can obscure its main point. *The Lonely Man of Faith* is finely crafted, with a clear structure and progression of ideas. In this essay, I would like to examine closely Rabbi Soloveitchik's introductory comments, where he delineates both

* This essay is adapted from Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Urim Publications, OU and Maimonides School, 2012), with permission of the publishers. Readers interested in a detailed reader's companion to *The Lonely Man of Faith* can see chapters 11–18 of *Majesty and Humility*.

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the goal and the method of this work. When we understand how Rabbi Soloveitchik himself defines the issue he wishes to address, we can use this understanding to guide our reading of the rest of the book.

ADAM I AND ADAM II

Let me start by doing something unpardonable: trying to sum up the main argument of *The Lonely Man of Faith* in a few short paragraphs. Although perforce this will be oversimplified, I think it will aid us greatly in understanding Rabbi Soloveitchik's characterization of the work.

Rabbi Soloveitchik proposes that the two accounts of the creation of man (in chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis) portray two types of man, two human ideals. One type, termed Adam the first (or Adam I), is guided by the quest for dignity, which is an external social quality attained by control over one's environment. He is a creative and majestic personality who espouses a practical-utilitarian approach to the world. Adam II, on the other hand, is guided by the quest for redemption, which is a quality of the inner personality that one attains by control over oneself. He is humble and submissive, and yearns for an intimate relationship with God and with his fellow man in order to overcome his sense of incompleteness and inadequacy. These differences carry over to the type of community each one creates: the "natural work community" (Adam I) and the "covenantal faith community" (Adam II).

God not only desires the existence of each of these personality types and each of these communities, but actually bids each and every person to attempt to embody *both* of these seemingly irreconcilable types. One must attempt to pursue both dignity and redemption. This analysis of the two basic tasks of man leads to two important conclusions. First, Adam I's existence

is willed by God and therefore his majestic and creative actions have religious value. Rabbi Soloveitchik, accordingly, has a positive attitude towards the extension of human dominion through general scientific and technological progress, the spreading of culture and the development of civilization. However, one must also give Adam II his due, which leads to the second conclusion: Adam II and his quest for redemption have independent value, regardless of whether they aid Adam I's quest for majesty. Faith (the realm of Adam II) is not subservient to culture (the creation of Adam I); it is a primordial force that has no need to legitimize itself in other terms.

The demand to be both Adam I and Adam II leads to a built-in tension in the life of each person responsive to this dual call; and because one lives with a constant dialectic, a continual oscillation between two modes of existence, one can never realize fully the goals of either Adam I or Adam II. Unable to feel totally at home in either community, man is burdened by loneliness. Since this type of loneliness is inherent in one's very being as a religious individual, Rabbi Soloveitchik terms it "ontological loneliness" ("ontological" relating to being or existence). In a sense, this kind of loneliness is tragic; but since it is willed by God, it helps man realize his destiny and therefore is ultimately a positive and constructive experience.

The contemporary man of faith, however, experiences a particular kind of loneliness, one which is not a built-in aspect of human existence but rather the product of specific historical circumstances; this "historical loneliness" is a purely negative phenomenon. Modern man, pursuant to his great success in the realm of majesty-dignity, recognizes only the Adam I side of existence, and refuses to acknowledge the inherent duality of his being. Contemporary society speaks the language of Adam I, of cultural achievement, and is unable or unwilling to understand

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the language of Adam II, of the uniqueness and autonomy of faith. Worse, contemporary Adam I has infiltrated and appropriated the realm of Adam II, the world of religion; he presents himself as Adam II, while actually distorting covenantal man's entire message.

A UNIVERSAL MESSAGE

We are now in a position to understand Rabbi Soloveitchik's characterization of *The Lonely Man of Faith* in its opening paragraphs. First, from its very title, it is evident that the essay's message is universal. *The Lonely Man of Faith* refers to any religious faith, not just Judaism; the dilemma of faith in the modern world applies to all religions (or at least to Western religions, which were Rabbi Soloveitchik's concern). It should also be noted that *The Lonely Man of Faith* addresses men and women equally; nowhere in the book does Rabbi Soloveitchik distinguish between them. The word "man" in the title, and indeed throughout the work, should therefore be understood as "person."

The essay's universalistic bent is further expressed in the choice of the text that stands at its center: the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, the parents of humankind. Significantly, references to Judaism and Jewish sources appear almost exclusively in the footnotes. Finally, it is worth mentioning that *The Lonely Man of Faith* originated in a lecture to Catholic seminarians and in a series of lectures, sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health, delivered to Jewish social workers of all denominations.¹

1. When *The Lonely Man of Faith* was first published (*Tradition* 7:2, Summer 1965), it offered no information about its origins. However, when it appeared as a book in 1992, a note at the beginning stated: "The basic ideas of *The Lonely Man of Faith* were formulated in Rabbi Soloveitchik's lectures in the 'Marriage and Family' program of the National Institute of Mental Health at Yeshiva University

A PERSONAL DILEMMA

In the book's opening sentence, Rabbi Soloveitchik informs the reader that he will not address the intellectual challenges that modernity poses to faith, but rather something much more basic: the challenge modernity poses to the *experience* of faith. He will focus on "a human life situation in which the man of faith as an individual concrete being...is entangled" (p. 1). In this sense, *The Lonely Man of Faith* is not a work of abstract speculation but rather "a tale of a personal dilemma," whose power derives from the fact that it is based on "actual situations and experiences with which I have been confronted" (ibid.). In a striking characterization of the work, Rabbi Soloveitchik concludes:

Instead of talking theology, in the didactic sense, eloquently and in balanced sentences, I would like, hesitantly and haltingly, to confide in you, and to share with you some concerns which weigh heavily on my mind and which frequently assume the proportions of an awareness of crisis. (Ibid.)

Furthermore, he later confesses that he does not have a solution to the problem he will pose, "for the dilemma is insoluble" (p. 6). Why, then, does he bother to present the problem at all? He offers two reasons:

1. "All I want is to follow the advice given by Elihu the son of Berachel of old, who said, 'I will speak that I may find relief' (Job 32:20); for there is a redemptive quality for

in New York City." Rabbi Walter Wurzbarger, a disciple and close associate of Rabbi Soloveitchik, added in a 1994 essay (reprinted in his *Covenantal Imperatives* [Jerusalem, 2008]) that *The Lonely Man of Faith* "was first presented as an oral lecture at a Catholic seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts" (p. 146).

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an agitated mind in the spoken word, and a tormented soul finds peace in confessing” (p. 2).

2. “...the defining itself [of the dilemma] is a worthwhile cognitive gesture which, I hope, will yield a better understanding of ourselves and our commitment” (p. 6).

Why is the dilemma insoluble? Let us first consider Rabbi Soloveitchik’s definition of the dilemma, and then we will return to this question.

BEING LONELY AND BEING ALONE

The nature of the dilemma can be stated in a three-word sentence. I am lonely. (p. 3)

Here we must distinguish between being alone and being lonely. Aloneness means lacking love and friendship; this is an entirely destructive feeling. Loneliness, on the other hand, is an awareness of one’s uniqueness, and to be unique often means to be misunderstood. A lonely person, while surrounded by friends, feels that his unique and incommunicable experiences separate him from them. This fills him with a gnawing sense of the seemingly insurmountable gap that prevents true communion between individuals. While painful, this experience can also be “stimulating” and “cathartic,” since it “presses everything in me into the service of God,” the Lonely One, who truly understands the lonely individual.

As mentioned above, loneliness – the sense of the uniqueness and incommunicability of one’s inner life – can have two possible causes: ontological and historical. These two forms of loneliness, while stemming from the same basic dichotomy in the human personality, are experienced differently and must be addressed separately.

**ONTOLOGICAL LONELINESS:
EXPERIENCING INNER CONFLICT**

The ontological loneliness of the man of faith derives from the very nature of his religious experience. In a phrase that may seem surprising at first, Rabbi Soloveitchik describes the religious experience as “fraught with inner conflicts and incongruities”; he also calls it “antinomic” and “paradoxical” (pp. 1–2).²

This portrayal of the religious experience initially strikes one as odd because modern man often equates religious belief with tranquility and peace of mind. However, bearing in mind the earlier summary of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s argument, it should be clear why Rabbi Soloveitchik totally disagrees with the “peace of mind” approach. In his view, God demands of man to live in two seemingly incompatible modes of existence – that of Adam I and that of Adam II. Thus, one who heeds God’s dual demand lives a life full of dialectical tension.

NO ENCHANTED ISLAND

However, it is important to understand that this tension does not derive only from the requirement to be both Adam I and Adam II, but is inherent within Adam II himself, within “Religious Man” and the religious realm proper. Religious Man himself, and not only the compound persona of Majestic Man and Religious Man, is an antithetical character. He constantly grapples with dichotomous concepts and experiences located

2. “Antinomic” means contradictory, or, in our context, self-contradictory. This is not to be confused with “antinomian,” which denotes refusal to recognize the authority of moral law. (In theology, “antinomianism” is the position that salvation is attained through faith alone, not through obedience to a moral or religious code.) While Rabbi Soloveitchik loved a good antinomy (i.e., a dichotomy or paradox), he hated antinomianism, which espoused rejection of Halakha.

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at the heart of religious existence: “temporality and eternity, [divine] knowledge and [human] choice (necessity and freedom), love and fear (the yearning for God and the flight from His glorious splendor), incredible, overbold daring, and an extreme sense of humility, transcendence and God’s closeness, the profane and the holy, etc.” (*Halakhic Man* [Philadelphia, 1983], p. 142).

Many contemporary popularizers of religion portray faith as offering ready comfort and easy inner harmony to believers, providing a refuge from the discord, doubts, fears and responsibilities of the secular realm. From his earliest writings until his latest, Rabbi Soloveitchik took umbrage with this shallow and false ideology, which he found to be particularly prevalent in America.³ Religion does not provide believers with instant tranquility, but rather forces them to confront uncomfortable dichotomies; it is “a raging, clamorous torrent of man’s consciousness with all its crises, pangs, and torments” (*ibid.*). Religion is not less demanding than secularity, but rather more so. It does not offer an escape from reality, but rather provides the ultimate encounter with reality. It suggests no quick fixes, but rather demands constant struggle in order to attain spiritual growth. As Rabbi Soloveitchik so memorably put it, “*Kedushah* (sanctity) is not a paradise but a paradox” (“Sacred and Profane,” *Shiurei Harav*, p. 8).

HISTORICAL LONELINESS: THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS

Thus far we have discussed the ontological loneliness of the man of faith, the crises and tensions inherent in religious existence. However, Rabbi Soloveitchik informs the reader that in

3. Rabbi Soloveitchik’s two classic treatments of this theme are found in “Sacred and Profane” (reprinted in *Shiurei Harav* [Hoboken, 1994]) and footnote 4 of *Halakhic Man*. This footnote is a small jewel of an essay in its own right.

this essay his “prime concern” is not ontological loneliness but rather the man of faith’s experience of historical loneliness, in which “a highly sensitized and agitated heart, overwhelmed by the impact of social and cultural forces, filters this root awareness [of ontological loneliness] through the medium of painful, frustrating emotions” (pp. 4–5). Rabbi Soloveitchik does not wish to focus on a general, timeless theological issue, but instead to address the predicament of the *contemporary* man of faith who, “due to his peculiar position in our secular society... lives through a particularly difficult and agonizing crisis” (p. 5). A sharp and prescient social critic, Rabbi Soloveitchik is here keenly sensitive to the changes society has undergone and to the need to reassess the role of the man of religion within it:

Let me spell out this *passional*⁴ experience of contemporary man of faith.

He looks upon himself as a stranger in modern society, which is technically minded, self-centered, and self-loving, almost in a sickly narcissistic fashion, scoring honor upon honor, piling up victory upon victory, reaching for the distant galaxies, and seeing in the here-and-now sensible world the only manifestation of being. What can a man of faith like myself, living by a doctrine which has no technical potential, by a law which cannot be tested in the laboratory, steadfast in his loyalty to an eschatological vision whose fulfillment cannot be predicted with any degree of probability... – what can such a man say to a functional, utilitarian society which is *saeculum-oriented*⁵ and whose practical reasons of the

4. *Passional* = expressing suffering.

5. “*Saeculum*” is an Augustinian term denoting the world of human life within time.

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mind have long ago supplanted the sensitive reasons of the heart? (Ibid.)

Rabbi Soloveitchik is certainly not anti-intellectual, nor is he opposed to technological advances. What he is asserting here is the autonomy of faith. Modern society speaks in pragmatic and utilitarian terms, and expects religion to justify itself in these categories. But the value of religion, Rabbi Soloveitchik believes, is independent of its practical utility, its usefulness in helping man attain dignity and majesty. Rather, faith is a response to a divine summons, a call to submit oneself to God. Its meaning and value far exceed justification by the human intellect.

However, pragmatic modern man – whether secular or religious – works only with categories of the intellect, not realizing their limited purview. He adopts religion to the extent that he deems it as being useful and comprehensible to him. His is a religion of convenience, not commitment; it is geared to suit his own needs, not to serve God's will. He does not comprehend the meaning of total devotion and does not sense the need for redemption, which constitute the essence of faith. The danger, then, is not just that secularists have ceased to understand the man of faith; it is that adherents of religion have ceased to understand themselves and their commitment.

We can now appreciate the true import of the concluding sentences of Rabbi Soloveitchik's introduction:

If my audience will feel that these interpretations are also relevant to their perceptions and emotions, I shall feel amply rewarded. However, I shall not feel hurt if my thoughts will find no response in the hearts of my listeners. (pp. 6–7)

Rabbi Soloveitchik is not being coy or diffident here. Rather, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out, this is “an expression characteristic of the man of faith in the modern world. He no longer speaks the shared language of society...How then is he to communicate? Simply by speaking out of his inner situation and hoping to find an echoing response in his audience.”⁶ Thus, the man of faith’s uncertainty about his ability to communicate lies at the very heart of his problem.

THE INSOLUBLE PROBLEM

Returning now to the question of why the dilemma this essay poses is insoluble, we must offer a dual response.

(A) In terms of ontological loneliness, the answer should be clear. An essential dichotomy is woven into the very fabric of the religious experience. As such, this basic dialectic is not subject to “solutions”; it is part of the very definition of religious existence.

(B) There is no a priori reason why there should not be a solution to the problem of historical loneliness. This feeling does not stem from any inherent qualities or basic definitions of religiosity. Rather, it is the product of the confrontation of the man of faith with specific historical and cultural circumstances. Therefore, as you read *The Lonely Man of Faith*, keep in mind the following questions: What are the possible solutions to the problem of the man of faith’s historical loneliness? Is it perhaps insoluble? Even if the problem admits of no solution, one must still respond to it somehow. What course of action

6. *Tradition in an Untraditional Age* (London, 1990), p. 41. To be sure, any depiction of inner human experience is necessarily subjective and therefore it is difficult to convey; but the man of faith’s alienation from contemporary society makes it even less likely that his words will strike a responsive chord in his listeners.

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does Rabbi Soloveitchik advocate? Consider these questions especially when reading the end of the book.

THE LONELY MAN OF FAITH TODAY

Beyond the question of how Rabbi Soloveitchik himself understood the historical loneliness of the man of faith when he wrote this work approximately fifty years ago, there is the question of its contemporary relevance. Is today's man of faith lonely in the same way? Is the dialectical balance Rabbi Soloveitchik advocates challenged more by an ascendant Adam I or by an overreaching Adam II? At the time he wrote *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rabbi Soloveitchik was concerned with Adam I's encroachment upon Adam II, but other situations would call for ensuring that the reverse does not occur.

In fact, over the course of his career Rabbi Soloveitchik himself shifted the emphasis of his concern. Early in his career, he took issue with those who saw man only as a spiritual being; later in his career, he took issue with those who saw man solely as a natural being. Although the dialectical tensions presented in *Halakhic Man* and in *The Lonely Man of Faith* are not identical, it is noteworthy that in the former, Rabbi Soloveitchik's main dispute is with the otherworldliness of *homo religiosus*, while in the latter his major dispute is with Adam I's despiritualization of man. When one espouses a dialectical philosophy, changing circumstances may demand a changing emphasis, but nevertheless it is critical that one keep in mind the dialectic in its fullness. Thus, in applying Rabbi Soloveitchik's thought, one must reassess which side of the dialectic he posits requires strengthening today. It may turn out that it is the same element Rabbi Soloveitchik felt the need to highlight in his time and place, or it may turn out that it is the opposing element; in either case, the dialectical

whole, and the value system it expresses, retains its cogency and significance.

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A READING GUIDE

To assist the reader in following Rabbi Soloveitchik's argument, I would like to conclude by presenting two outlines of the book, one briefly tracing its overall structure and the other detailing the contents of each chapter.

THE OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK:

Introduction – I.A	The problem
I.B	Biblical framework
I.C–II, IV.A	Contrasts between Adam I and Adam II
III, IV.B–VII	Contrasts between communities formed by Adam I and Adam II
VIII	Ontological loneliness
IX	Historical loneliness
IX.D, X	Conclusion(s)

THE CONTENTS OF EACH CHAPTER:

Introduction

- I. The issue: loneliness
 - A. Ontological and historical loneliness
 - B. The Biblical framework: Genesis I and 2
 - C–D. Adam I
- II. Contrasts between Adam I and Adam II
- III. Adam I's community (natural work community)
- IV. A. Dignity vs. redemption (more on Adam I vs. Adam II)
B–C. Adam II's community (covenantal faith community)
- V. God as a member of the Adam II community
- VI. The cosmic encounter with God

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- vii. Prayer and prophecy communities (Adam II)
- viii. Ontological loneliness – Adam I/Adam II oscillation
 - A. Man's tragic destiny; the role of Halakhah
 - B. Man must be both Adam I and Adam II
 - C. Complete redemption is impossible
- ix. Historical loneliness
 - A. Contemporary dilemma
 - B. Religion of Adam I
 - C. Autonomy of faith (Adam II)
 - D. Implications of A–C (Conclusion #1)
- x. Conclusion (#2)