

# Of Language And Nuances

*It is difficult if not impossible to draw a fully rounded portrait of Rav Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik, the scion of Brisk known to many simply as “The Rav,” the man who straddled many disparate worlds. Much as bands of light are scattered by a prism, Rav Soloveitchik’s multifaceted persona was refracted and absorbed in different hues and shades by his many students. Yet of all those students Rav Hershel Schachter, a noted talmid chacham and prominent posek, is recognized for his exemplary exposition and elucidation of the teachings of Rav Soloveitchik. In a riveting conversation with Mispacha, Rav Schachter shares his personal memories of the Rav Soloveitchik that he knew*





My journey to today's meeting began, in a sense, some years ago in an unadorned ground floor apartment on one of Jerusalem's narrow streets. I had made the trip from New York to this humble home in order to enroll in the Brisker yeshiva led by Rav Dovid Soloveitchik, *shlita*. While trying to ascertain whether or not I'd be accepted, the Rosh Yeshiva sat gazing at me wordlessly, intently studying my demeanor.

Suddenly, after a few long minutes of almost claustrophobic silence, he asked, "How old are you?"

"Twenty," was my honest response.

"You don't look twenty," he said. Though his seat at the head of a small wooden dining room table was quite close to mine, he suddenly seemed remote and distant.

My integrity having apparently just been challenged, I quickly remembered that I had my American passport on me. "If the Rosh Yeshiva so insists," I said, as I allowed my hand to hastily search my jacket pocket, "I can prove that I am indeed as old as I have just stated."

"I never said that I don't believe you," was his swift and matter-of-fact reply. "I merely pointed out that you don't look twenty."

I realized that with that short rejoinder the Rosh Yeshiva had given me the first lesson in the lomdus and analytical method of study that his famed grandfather, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk, had pioneered. Telling somebody that he doesn't look as old as he states does not imply that the person in question is misrepresenting his age. A moment later this distinction seemed so simple and elementary. In order to excel in the Brisker *derech*, I knew in a flash, I would have to learn how to differentiate between seemingly identical assertions.

In this manner Rav Dovid inducted a newcomer to the Brisker approach. The many shiurim my beloved Rosh Yeshiva later delivered merely emphasized and advanced the lesson in clear thinking that he'd graciously given me on that first day.

While Rav Dovid tirelessly endeavored to convey to his talmidim the Brisker way of learning, the Brisker analytical and conceptual approach itself – including its theoretical underpinnings – was never formally discussed or analyzed. Our Rosh Yeshiva taught his talmidim how to think, but the effect that this method of thinking has upon a person's intellectual and emotional makeup was not part of the curriculum. That self-reflection and analysis was undertaken across the ocean by another scion of the Soloveitchik dynasty, a first cousin to my Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik ztz"l of Boston (1903-93).

Rav Yoshe Ber, as he was known, was not only one of the great mentors and exponents of the Brisker *derech*, but he was also one of the greatest examiners and articulators of the overall Brisker worldview. In his writings, especially in his seminal work, *Halachic Man*, Rav Soloveitchik explores the personality and weltanschauung of one who sees the world through the prism of the Brisker method; he termed such a person the "halachic man."

In Lakewood's Beth Medrash Govoha library, I first encountered Rav Yoshe Ber's writings and was quickly smitten by his insights, including his multi-dimensional approach to Torah understanding. And I wasn't alone in this endeavor. I soon discovered that some of the best and brightest talmidim of Brisk were fluent in Rav Soloveitchik's thoughts. But it took us some time before his words were able to work upon us their weighty yet melodious, tantalizing magic.

Initially his entire style and tone seemed so very foreign. We had to study his works

with dictionaries at our side. He would employ the most obscure terms to express his insights. How could we full-time yeshiva bochurim possibly know what a "noetic system" or "ontological principle" was? But the further we delved into his works and overcame the proliferation of exotic phrases and novel colloquialisms, the more we discovered how accurate and even traditional his observations and understandings were. His Talmudic genius and penetrating insights were of such awesome power that once you were touched by them it was hard to extricate yourself from their overwhelming spell.

It hardly needs mentioning that Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik was considered by many to be a leading figure of Modern Orthodoxy in America, which was culturally and ideologically some distance from where we stood. But ironically, nowhere in his writings does he ever promote an alien lifestyle, while his unabashed yiras shamayim is palpable in every word that he penned. And most certainly, he demanded a rigid observance of mitzvahs, while rejecting a watered down version of Yahadus with every fiber of his soul.

Some on the Left even point out that for all his philosophical brilliance, his halachic positions and methodologies do not differ substantively from those of other mainstream Orthodox poskim who rejected modernity, and that he never allowed a single scientific textual theory to impinge on any of his halachic rulings. We also found comfort in the fact that in an early lecture at Yeshiva University he disparaged its ideal of Torah u-Madda, arguing that the synthesis of religious and secular studies was unacceptable.

His brother, Rav Aharon Soloveitchik ztz"l, who served in his later years as Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Brisk in Chicago, argued along with other prominent talmidim that Rav Yoshe Ber was a traditionalist Rosh Yeshiva in the Eastern European mold who utilized modern philosophical language purely to enable his words of Torah to reach a wider, more sophisticated audience. Be that as it may, his philosophical insights undoubtedly opened up new vistas of Torah understanding.

I once merited meeting another scion

of the Soloveitchik dynasty, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik ztz"l of Zurich, Switzerland. Rav Moshe shared with me that he once attended "Der Bostoner's" shiur, as he referred to him, but failed to understand it since it was delivered in English, a language he did not understand. Once again, there is that obstinate language divide.

And then one day, after the passing of Rav Yoshe Ber in 1993, came the invaluable writings of Rav Hershel Schachter, *shlita*. This widely respected Rosh Yeshiva and halachic authority and one of the most outstanding of Rav Soloveitchik's talmidim, reintroduced his renowned Rebbe and his many teachings to the world in the idiom of the yeshivas. Rav Schachter's distinguished books on Rav Soloveitchik, *Nefesh Harav* and *Pninei Harav*, are an integral part today of the Soloveitchik oeuvre. As he deciphers his Rebbe's halachic rulings and practice in a language and style that every ben Torah can easily relate to, he shares with us the respect accorded to him by many renowned gedolei yisroel. He also approvingly discloses a negative review that a Conservative rabbi once wrote on Rav Soloveitchik's writings. According to this non-observant reviewer of Rav Soloveitchik's thought, notwithstanding Soloveitchik's usage of modern expressions and philosophical terminology, Soloveitchik does not put forth a single idea or theory that his grandfather Rav Chaim Brisker would have been reluctant to say. This statement may come as a shock to some who have never glanced into Rav Soloveitchik's works, or taken the time to examine his







penetrating understanding of a halachic man's mindset and the dynamics of his religious experience, but would not even slightly surprise those who studied Rav Yoshe Ber's writings closely.

**Bridge Between Two Worlds** It is a wet afternoon in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan on this inhospitable November day. As I make my way through its slippery streets, I can't help thinking how atypical this neighborhood is. For some odd reason, unlike any other place in New York where Jewish people have settled, this neighborhood is inhabited primarily by two Orthodox Jewish groups that advocate the pursuit of higher secular education alongside the acquisition of Torah knowledge. Yet, at the same time, there is an ideological between these two groups.

One side of this hilly New York City neighborhood is populated by members of the Agudah-oriented Hirsch-Breuer kehilla, with their motto of Torah im Derech Eretz, while the other side is dominated by the more left-leaning Yeshiva University with its ideal of Torah u-Madda.

In so many ways Torah Umadda and Torah im Derech Eretz seem so strikingly similar. Both promote the attainment of worldly knowledge by Torah-observant Jews. However, their respective ideologies remain distinct in terms of emphasis. As has been argued time and again, while Torah Umadda maintains the idea of some sort of sociological merger between a religious lifestyle and secular knowledge, "Rabbi Hirsch's fight was not for balance and not for reconciliation, nor for synthesis and certainly not for parallel power, but for domination - for the true and absolute domination of the divine precept over the new tendencies" (Dr. Isaac Breuer, Hirsch's grandson).

Another difference is that Torah Umadda's Modern Orthodox worldview permits communal partnership with the non-Orthodox Jewish community. Whereas for Rav Hirsch, "Austritt" (the requirement to have no official ties with non-Orthodox communal institutions) was one his primary callings and, after his passing, it became a defining characteristic of his community.

These outwardly subtle differences have manifested themselves in strikingly dissimilar perspectives and identities. As a point in fact, Rav Shimon Schwab ztz"l, the late leader of the "Breuers" community in Washington Heights, who accepted Torah im Derech Eretz only after a long inner struggle, was one of Torah Umadda's most vocal opponents. The two noted rabbinical families of the Breuers and the Soloveitchiks have additionally been at ideological loggerheads since the days of Rav Chaim, who opposed Hirsch's call to his members to secede for the general non-orthodox community.

The only person who seems to navigate between these two communities with utmost skill, notwithstanding their divergent points of view, is the widely respected and accepted halachic authority who I came to visit here today, Rav Hershel Schachter. Though serving as a rosh yeshiva at Yeshiva University for many years, he was a rav in Breuer's kehilla in Paramus, New Jersey. As Rav Schachter would later tell me, his rabbinical position in Paramus was the only formal rabbinical post he ever held. And while Rav Schachter davens every

Shabbos at Yeshiva University, his wife, Rebbetzin Schachter, attends Breuer's shul, Khal Adath Jeshurun, where she is an active member and where the Schachters had previously sent their children to cheder and schooling.

As I walk towards the front row table of the gleaming, spanking-new Beis Hamedrash of Yeshiva University, where Rav Schachter is seated, I quickly forget about all these conflicting and polarizing ideologies. Taking notice of the unassuming and refined silhouette of a person who is wholly engrossed in learning with his son, my only thought is that perhaps I should reschedule our meeting for a more opportune time, since I would effectively be taking away this esteemed Rosh Yeshiva from the Gemara. He explains that there really is no time that would be more "opportune," since he's almost always by the Gemara and spends most of the day in the classroom or in the Beis Hamedrash of the Yeshiva. After taking one of the glistening elevators to the fifth floor, we settle down in his small but neat office.

**"No One Really Knew Him"** Rav Hershel Schachter appears to be of average height, but of colossal stature. After just a few short minutes, his extraordinary scholastic achievements and understated piety become readily evident. His unusual abilities were recognized early in his life. Born in July of 1941 to Rav Elimelech Schachter, ztz"l, a respected rav and a rosh yeshiva at Yeshiva University, Rav Hershel Schachter became an assistant to Rav Soloveitchik at the young age of twenty-two. After receiving semicha in 1967 at the age of 26, Rav Schachter joined the faculty of Yeshiva University where his father was already serving, becoming one of the youngest Roshei Yeshiva in Yeshiva University's history. He was appointed rosh kollel a few short years later, in 1971.

Rav Schachter's relationship with Rav Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik goes back to his teens. At the age of sixteen, he tells me, he joined Rav Soloveitchik's weekly shiur and continued to attend his Rebbe's shiurim for ten full years. I tell him that he apparently utilized his time quite well, as the notes he took in his early youth of Rav Soloveitchik's shiurim serve today as one of the most respected sources for his famed Rebbe's chiddushim.

But Rav Schachter nevertheless has his regrets. "The first couple of years I had no *sechel*," he tells me ruefully "Rav Soloveitchik would travel from Boston to New York every Tuesday and would give a shiur each Tuesday and Wednesday on two different Mesechtos. Initially I only attended the Tuesday shiur, till I realized

that I was missing out, and might as well partake in both shiurim. I heard three complete cycles of shiurim on Yoreh Deiah from him. The second time I enjoyed it more than the first time, and the third time I enjoyed it more than the second time. Had I had *sechel* I would have heard it five or six times. But what can we do? He made Yoreh Deiah come alive.

"What Rav Soloveitchik wrote of his grandfather Reb Chaim, was true of him as well. 'Suddenly, the pots and pans, the eggs and onions disappeared from the laws of meat and milk; the salt, blood and spit disappeared from the laws of salting. The laws of kashrus were taken out of the kitchen and removed to an ideal halachic world... constructed out of complexes of abstract concepts.'"

Then he tells me something that I find quite surprising. "In the ten years that I was in his shiur, he never mentioned a single philosopher. Only once, when explaining the words of Rabbeinu Nissan in Sanhedrin, where he expounds upon the concept of gravity, did he say that the two approaches cited in the Ra"n represent two known interpretations of Aristotle. That was the one and only time in the ten years that I attended his shiurim that he mentioned any philosopher or a philosophical theory."

It always had seemed to me, that quite to the contrary, what made Rav Soloveitchik so unique was his multi-dimensional approach to learning. He seemed to look at every concept from so many different angles and perspectives. "Not in his halacha shiur," Rav Schachter rejoins. "His shiurim were strictly halacha."

I ask Rav Schachter whether any revisionisms have arisen that attempted to

disguise and distort the Rav's uniqueness by trivializing one or the other aspect of his rich personality and work.

"All of the students who learned by Rav Yoshe Ber," he tells me, "each one of them thought that they understood him. But no one really did, because everyone only saw but one small aspect of him. No one ever got to see the whole picture. Some only heard his shiurim on Gemara and Shulchan Aruch, while others heard his lectures on Jewish Philosophy in the Bernard Revel Graduate School."

"And your sefer Nefesh Harav on the Rav's personality and teachings, on which aspect of his multifaceted persona is that?" I wonder.

"Solely on the one that I saw," is his unequivocal response. "Somebody wrote me a letter from Eretz Yisroel following the publication of my book, complaining that I failed cover a certain aspect of the Rav. My answer was that I hadn't covered that aspect because I didn't see it. I gave my sefer to his son Chaim Soloveitchik. While thanking me for the respect I had accorded to his father, he told me that I did a very good job from my perspective as a talmid in New York. However, he had known him as a son in Boston, and from that perspective he was an entirely different person."

**Of Nuances and Absolutes** "What though do you find the single most alluring characteristic of Rav Yoshe Ber?" I persist.

"His unequalled elegance," comes the response. "He was exceptionally regal and princely. The way he spoke and the way he would explain things was with great style.







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The manner in which he would issue rulings was with such class and sophistication. Oftentimes we would wonder why he behaved differently than others. And as we got older and we would look into Shulchan Aruch we discovered that he simply followed its rulings. The question was on *us* - why we behaved otherwise. He was a great stickler to the Shulchan Aruch. Every minhag stated in Shulchan Aruch was of unyielding importance to him, and he was adamant that we follow each and every one of them. He would disagree with a ruling of the Chazon Ish that was based upon a strict interpretation of the halacha without taking an established minhag into account.

“He was very nuanced. When he gave an answer to a halachic inquiry he chose every word with precision and approached it from different angles and covered various aspects. Once an Israeli journalist

published an interview he gave him. Rav Yoshe Ber was very upset that he left out all the nuances, thus distorting the meaning of his words.”

“Did you inherit that style?” I ask.

“I wish. Those who learned by Rav Moshe Feinstein cannot write a teshuva like him, and those who learned by Rav Yoshe Ber cannot deliver a yahrtzeit drasha like the four-hour ones he would deliver in tribute to his father. One can try to emulate only small tidbits of his style.”

I return to where Rav Schachter observed his Rebbe most, in a small classroom, and I inquire about Rav Soloveitchik’s demeanor there. “In those years he became quickly impatient when someone failed to comprehend the shiur. I remember one of the boys asked him once a question on Yoreh Deiah. He got so agitated that he raised his voice, saying: ‘What’s the matter with you? How can you possibly not understand? The walls here already know Yoreh Deiah.’ So another boy piped up: ‘True, but the walls heard it already ten times. This is the first we’re learning it.’

“Rav Belkin, the formal Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University at that time, used to say: ‘Your Rebbe is wonderful. I learned in Radin by Rav Naftali Tropp ztz”l, and hardly anyone understood his shiurim. However, your Rebbe is unbelievable; he can explain the most complicated concepts so that the boys actually understand what he’s saying. Yet he has one shortcoming; he thinks even the biggest dummy can comprehend his teachings. That good of an educator he’s not.’

“He was not very close to his talmidim nor did he know how to show friendship. After his wife died in 1967, he realized that human beings have weaknesses, and some may actually not understand his teachings. His attitude softened then significantly. The students would ask the most senseless questions and he would be most tolerant.

“He was truly grief-stricken by his wife’s passing, and mourned her immensely. He would recite the Kaddish for her countless times, and he walked around an entire month wearing the jacket to which he had done the kriah, in a lost and bewildered state. It was terrible. The year he lost his wife, he had lost his mother and a few weeks later a brother of his passed away as well. The shiurim suffered a bit during that tragic period. When he finally came back to say shiurim after the passing of his wife, he learned with us hilchos aveilus. He was clearly in a state of deep sorrow.”

**“It All Seemed So Simple”**

Surely being Rav Soloveitchik’s assistant at the young age of twenty-two was a life altering experience for Rav Shachter, and I ask him about that. As with everything else that relates to himself, Rav Schachter plays down its significance. “Assistant just means I was designated by him to mark the student’s tests.”

He relates that Rav Soloveitchik did not review the marks he gave, as he recalls the following anecdote with a slight chuckle. “Once someone came to complain to him that the mark I had assigned wasn’t fair. Rav Soloveitchik said to the boy that he would review his exam paper and the mark he received from me. After a couple of days he returns the test to the kid and tells him that he’s very lucky. Had he marked his test himself he would have given him a much lower mark. He advised the boy to thank me.” Rav Shachter smiles, then says, “I’m not sure he even bothered looking at the boy’s answers.”

Then he somehow allows that being Rav Soloveitchik’s assistant consisted of a bit more than merely being the one who was charged with marking the student’s tests. “I would also give the chazarah shiur, where I repeated to the students the shiur he gave a couple of days earlier. At first Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, his son-in-law, gave this shiur and would mark the exams. When Rav Lichtenstein started giving his own shiur, Rav Soloveitchik asked me to take over Rav Lichtenstein’s position.”

He recalls with obvious awe the self sacrifice his Rebbe displayed in order to deliver the shiurim. “After he had surgery for colon cancer his doctor told him that he needed to take it easy and that he should stop saying shiurim twice a week on two different mesechtos, limiting himself to

one single Mesechta a week. So instead of saying shiurim eight hours a week on two different mesechtos, the next semester he started saying shiurim for nine hours on one mesechta. That’s the way he outsmarted the medical professionals. But I guess his outmaneuvers worked since he lived till the ripe old age of ninety, although he suffered from Alzheimer’s later in life.

“Whenever he finished a shiur, we would kick ourselves, wondering why we didn’t think of his interpretation at the very start. In retrospect, it all seemed so simple and self evident. When I used to go to Pirchei gatherings on Shabbos, kids from different yeshivas would always repeat a question and answer they heard from their rebbe. We talmidim of Rav Yoshe Ber had nothing to say over. What should we repeat, first the false way of looking at the Gemara and then the correct one? There was nothing to repeat from him. He always gave the most basic and elementary interpretations. At least that’s the way it seemed after the fact.

I ask Rav Schachter for his impressions of the newly released book *The Rav Thinking Aloud*, which consists of transcripts of impromptu personal conversations with Rav Soloveitchik. He tells me that he does not believe that every off-the-cuff and off the record remark is fit to print. People speak differently in the privacy of the home from the way they speak when they address Klal Yisroel, and that distinction needs to be honored.

**A Posek Against His Will** Rav Schachter tells me that he holds no rabbinical post, nor is he formally a rosh yeshiva. “Dr. Norman Lamm, the former president of Yeshiva University, although he never gave any shiurim, has the title of Rosh Yeshiva. I am simply a maggid shiur.” When I express my surprise, he tells me that Rav Soloveitchik too never had the title of Rosh Yeshiva. That position was held by Dr. Samuel Belkin, who learned at the yeshivas of Mir and Radin, and received semichah from the Chofetz Chaim zt”l at the age of 17. Rav Belkin was appointed rosh yeshiva in 1935, when he was only 24, and was appointed to serve as its president in 1943. When he passed away, that dual title was given to Dr. Lamm. I vocalize that if Rav Soloveitchik was also never considered to be the Rosh Yeshiva, that might clarify matters somewhat.

Then I remember that Rav Schachter’s brother-in-law, Rav Yerucham Shapiro, the administrator of Bais Yaakov girls school of Boro Park, once told me that

Rav Schachter is currently one of the most sought after poskim on complex questions and his phone rings off the hook with halachic inquires. “Wouldn’t you call that being an active rabbi?” I ask.

“Well, I have an unlisted phone number. But people do once in a while ask me sheilos; okay.

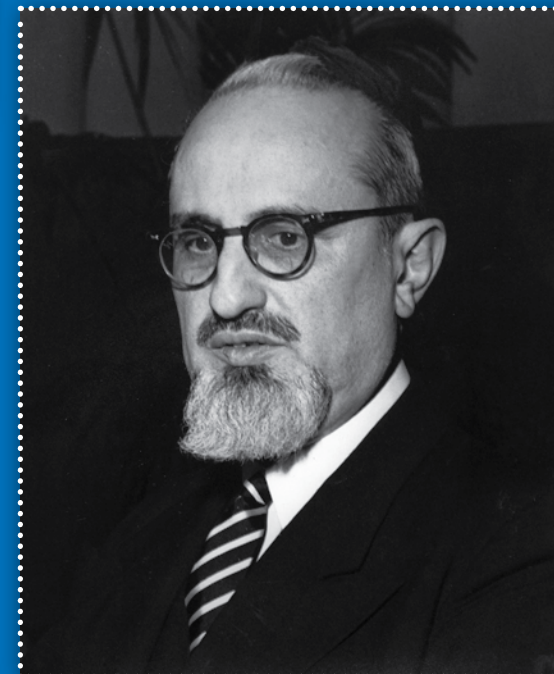
“Occasionally we have talmidim here who subsequently discover that their mother had a Reform conversion, or had no conversion at all. So then I get involved in geirus. All the rebbes here over the years had situations when a boy was going for smichah and then discovered that he wasn’t

Jewish. Recently, one of the magidei shiur spoke during Shalosh Seudos about geirus. It really wasn’t his turn to speak, but we had a last minute cancellation, so he spoke about conversion. A boy who was going for his smichah then realized that although he has been observant all his life, he was not even Jewish. So we administered his conversion. We frequently have similar situations, which forced me to become involved in conversions.

“My father was involved in rabbanus all of his life. He said the person who would always ask him questions relating to family purity was a ger tzedek in his



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kehilla. The others would take the liberty in deciding these questions on their own, which was customary at that time.”

When I ask him if Rav Yoshe Ber would get involved in practical halachic rulings, he tells me that he did, but that was not his dominating prowess. “His strong suit was the shiurim he would deliver. He once said jokingly: ‘The world refers to my noted cousin, Rav Moshe Feinstein, ztz”l, as the Rosh Yeshiva, and to me as the Rav, when in reality the opposite is the case.’ Rav Moshe truly was the one who was engaged in the practical aspect of the halacha, forever answering people’s halachic queries. Rav Soloveitchik was fluent in many old European traditions how to rule on various issues, but shied away from the task as much as he could. When I get a query and remember how he had ruled on a similar matter I no longer have to research it, but rely on his ruling.”

At these words, I can’t help but recall Rav Soloveitchik’s words in Halachic Man: “The foundation of foundations and the pillar of halachic thought is not the practical ruling but the determination of the theoretical Halacha. Therefore, many of the greatest halachic men avoided and still avoid serving in rabbinical posts. They rather join themselves to the group of those who are reluctant to render practical decisions. And if necessity - which is not to be decried - compels them to disregard their preference and to render practical decisions, this is only a small insignificant responsibility which does not stand at the center of their concerns. The theoretical Halacha, not the practical decision, the ideal creation, not the empirical one, represents the longing of halachic man.”

Indeed, according to many, the highest calling in Judaism, is not being a posek, but a Rosh Yeshiva. Being a lamdan is a bigger attainment than being a rav.

**The Impossible Dream** I wonder how many pupils he has in his class. “At the beginning of the semester I start out with sixty-five. After the first written test a bunch of guys leave. Later I lose some additional students. As the shiur progresses, more and more realize that it is not for them, since it is somewhat demanding. Towards the end of the year I’m left with half the students I started out with.”

One morning I was privileged to join one of Rav Schachter’s shiurim, where many of his students sit with laptops taking notes. The clarity of his delivery was simply astonishing.

I ask whether there has been a turning to the right in Yeshiva University, as rumor has it. Rav Schachter rejects the term “right,” but nevertheless says that shmiras Hamitzvohs has definitely risen to



a much higher level than in the previous generation. He attributes this to the fact that in all Modern Orthodox high-schools, most graduating students go to a yeshiva in Israel for a year or two.

“During the time they spend there, the boys are garner a more Torah adherent lifestyle, which in turn has an effect on their entire family. This phenomenon has revolutionized and elevated all of Modern Orthodoxy. In the past the parents did not know the dinim; the children coming back from Israel show them that their improved behavior is not some form of zealotry, but is simply based upon the Shulchan Aruch.”

When I ask him how he distinguishes between the charedim and the Modern Orthodox, he gives me an answer that sheds light upon his view of secular education. “The difference between the two,” he tell me, “is that the modern Orthodox believe that one has to work for a living. If you’re not going to be educated, how are you going to make a living? I was planning to go to law school in order to support myself. When Rav Aharon Lichtenstein learned of my plans, he dissuaded me and told me that I wasn’t motivated enough to succeed as a law professional. He suggested that I take a teaching position in the yeshiva.”

I realize that there is absolutely no glorification of secular studies at play here; it’s simply a matter of economics. Yet Rav Shachter has something even more interesting to add.

“Whenever someone asked the Rav for advice, he always suggested that they get a graduate degree. That was because he had a deep sense of resignation after European Jewry was destroyed and never thought that kollel in America would ever take off. Towards the end of his life he was shocked when he learned how many people were

sitting and learning full time.

“Rav Yoshe Ber was never made aware as to the extent that Torah spread here and how many people stayed on to learn full time. He was in Boston where there were merely a handful of frum people, and here in the yeshiva all of what he saw was that the boys were going into secular fields.”

Rav Schachter then says with a reflective look and in a pensive voice: “He was far more cut out for the kollel life. He just didn’t think it was going to work here.”

**“I Couldn’t Do It Without Rav Schachter”** The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (UOJCA), more popularly known as the Orthodox Union (OU), is one of the oldest Orthodox Jewish organizations in the United States. Its affiliated synagogues, and the rabbis who lead them, are usually identified as Modern Orthodox. Yet the divide between the Modern Orthodox and charedi grows ever more nebulous, as OU’s kosher supervision service and its circled-U hechsher insignia, is today widely accepted throughout most of the charedi community.

It is a late Tuesday afternoon, and the Orthodox Union’s halacha webcast is about to take place at the OU’s vast headquarters on the fourteenth floor of a skyscraper on the southern tip of Manhattan. The live webcast, featuring OU Kosher authorities and senior halachic consultants Rav Yisroel Belsky and Rav Hershel Schachter’s unrehearsed answers to questions submitted by listeners via email, is part of OU Kosher’s continuing educational outreach to the Jewish community. In today’s webcast presentation, these two internationally-renowned Poskim will bring

their halachic scholarship and practical know-how to bear on Shabbos issues in the kitchen, including: bishul achar bishul and use of common Shabbos devices such as a blech, crock-pot, and urn.

Only a few people are present in the relatively large size conference room. Rabbis Belsky and Schachter are seated at a table in front, with two other OU rabbis seated at their sides. Rabbi Eliyahu Safran, the moderator, is standing at the lectern, as the camera begins to roll. And then the questions start coming. It’s hard to believe that the Poskim’s analytical and encyclopedic on-the-spot answers are impromptu. But perhaps what is most moving is the level of respect and accord that exists between these two Gedolim, notwithstanding their diverse backgrounds.

“Around twenty years ago,” Rav Hershel Schachter had explained to me, “Rabbi Genack of the OU asked me to work in Kashruth. So I sought permission from Dr. Lamm, since it would take away a little bit from my activity at the yeshiva. But as I made clear to him, I would only be at the OU on Friday when there was no shiur at the Yeshiva anyway. He thought about it for a week or two, and then told me that it was fine.

“At the time I first started, they had around three rabbanim working in the office. Now the OU has over thirty. One is in charge of all the spaghetti, one of all the mustard, one of the meat, and so on. Rav Belsky and I set the policies throughout the entire Kashruth division so that all of the Rabbanim’s kashrus rulings are uniform and do not contradict each other. Rav Belsky used to come to the office twice a week. Now, both he and I are here only on Fridays.”



“In light of the fact that Rav Besky is a talmid of Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky and Rav Moshe Feinsein and you of Rav Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik, don’t you occasionally encounter a divergence of opinion?” I query.

“There is always a divergence of opinions between us. But most of the time we come to the same conclusion for different reasons. If we happen not to, then we both think about the two responses. After a year or two, I would oftentimes think that Rav Belsky’s ruling to be more correct, and he would come to the conclusion that mine was the more accurate one. We would both change our minds so we would be back to square one.”

“What message would you like to relay to Klal Yisroel regarding kashruth?” I solicit.

“Years ago, Kashruth was relatively simple. Back then a company would only manufacture one product. Today they don’t do that anymore. In the morning the machines would make chazir schmaltz, then they’ll do water, and then they’ll do treif wine. They keep on switching. The machines are now compatible. Thus sometimes even water is treif. It is extremely complicated. And the flavors used in food are even more complicated.

Hence having a proper hechsher is of extreme importance,” he emphasizes.

As the OU’s two kashrus authorities offer responses to the complex questions at today’s webcast, I do not detect a single divergence of opinion. These respected Poskim rather keep on bolstering each other’s point of view with utmost respect and grace.

After it’s over I gently ask Rav Belsky to give me his opinion about Rav Schachter.

“Well, he is a gadol in Torah, yiras shomayim and middos, and I couldn’t do this without him,” is his unhesitant response.

“And don’t your diverse backgrounds cause for differences in opinion to occasionally arise?” I finally ask.

“We both share the same yeshivishe background and approach,” Rav Belsky says, rather matter-of-factly.

As I step back out onto Manhattan’s windswept thoroughfare on that blustery November day, I think about the ease with which this singular man of halacha moves from the theoretical realm, to practical decisions, from the ideal creation, to the empirical one, although abstract analytical concepts represent the ultimate longing of a true halachic man. ■