

Rabbi Yaakov Simon (YCT '03) received a Master's Degree in Bible from the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies. He currently serves on the Judaic Studies faculty of the Stern Hebrew High School in Philadelphia, PA.

RABBI JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK AS *PARSHAN*

Rabbi Yaakov Simon

It is not the plan of this essay to discuss the theological or philosophical impact of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's *The Lonely Man of Faith*.¹ Instead, it will focus on R. Soloveitchik's exegetical impact, and how he created a paradigm shift in *parshanut*.

For over two thousand years, rabbinic exegesis described a single narrative of creation, employing different interpretations to resolve the apparent discrepancies between the first two chapters of Genesis. In his groundbreaking work, R. Soloveitchik broke from this tradition: he affirmed the discrepancies as real, choosing to read the chapters as two separate narratives of creation. In so doing, he set a new exegetical precedent within the Orthodox world: aspects of Biblical criticism could be incorporated into traditional *parshanut* to create new interpretations of the text.²

R. Soloveitchik's intent was not to write an exegetical commentary, per se, on the first two chapters of Genesis. Rather, he used the differences between these chapters as a springboard to discuss the fundamental dichotomy of religious existence in the modern world. If we compare *The Lonely Man of Faith* to earlier rabbinic exegesis, it becomes clear that Rav Soloveitchik's work was the first Orthodox work to clearly state that there are two accounts of creation in Genesis.

I would like to summarize three major differences between the first two chapters of Genesis.³ The first major difference is the name of God that is used; the first narrative uses the name *Elokim*, while the second one uses the name

¹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1992). (The essay originally appeared in *Tradition*, Summer 1965.)

² The parallels to the more extensive and systematic work of R. Mordechai Breuer in this regard are worthy of exploration.

³ The chapters of the *Tanakh* were created by the Christian Church and 2:1-3 are not necessarily the beginning of the second creation narrative. *Hazal* placed the *aliyah* before 2:4, which possibly indicates that *pasuk* is the beginning of the second creation narrative.

YHVH.⁴ The second major difference is that the first narrative describes seven distinct days of creation, while the second one describes one day of creation. The third major difference is that the first narrative describes the creation of the entire world and all of the animals. The second narrative includes no account of the creation of Heaven and Earth nor the animals. The first narrative describes Adam and Eve being created at the same time, while the second one describes Eve being created from Adam.⁵

In order to appreciate the context of R. Soloveitchik's work, we must examine earlier exegetical explanations of Genesis 1 and 2. Thus, I will summarize the approaches of several medieval commentators, as well as that of R. David Tzvi Hoffman; each of these commentaries is based upon an assumption that there is only one account of creation in Genesis.

Rashi⁶ resolved the discrepancies by asserting that the Bible is not meant to teach the order of creation. Accordingly, the details of creation have been interspersed between the first two chapters of Genesis. Similarly, Radak⁷ explains that the second chapter is complementary, not distinct, in nature. From the first narrative alone we do not know how the plants grew, so the second narrative teaches us that water was introduced to grow them. On the other hand, Ramban⁸ assumes that the second narrative emphasizes the relationship between the rain and plant life. Thus, the verse which states that "plant life had not yet sprouted"⁹ is actually describing the status of plants on day six, before there had been any rain. All of these medieval commentators agree that there is only one account of creation in Genesis.

In the 19th century, non-Orthodox, and non-Jewish Bible scholars claimed that the differences between the two chapters were the results of the work of multiple human authors. R. David Tzvi Hoffman countered that the two chapters were different descriptions of the same creation story. According to R. Hoffman, while the first creation narrative states that all of creation has a purpose which is particular to that creature, the second narrative states that all of creation is to serve humanity in general and the Jewish people in particular.¹⁰ R. Hoffman, in attempting to reject the claims of Bible scholars, asserted that the different accounts were not the result of different authors, but that each account bears a distinct message. In summary, medieval commentators asserted that a sin-

⁴ This would be another proof for 2:1-3 being the end of the first narrative because these verses use the name *Elokim*.

⁵ Rav Soloveitchik emphasizes that the first narrative represents the social aspect of humanity; and the second one represents the alone and existential aspect.

⁶ *Bereshit* 1:1, s.v. *Bereshit bara*

⁷ *ibid.* 2:5-6, s.v. *ve-khol siyah ha-sadeh*

⁸ *ibid.* 2:4, s.v. *eleh toldot ha-shamayim*

⁹ *ibid.* 2:5

¹⁰ *Genesis* (B'nei Brak: Nezach, 1969), pg. 11.

gle narrative was divided over two chapters, and R. Hoffman maintained that one narrative of creation was repeated in two separate chapters, with different focuses.

R. Soloveitchik refuted the claims of Bible scholars while at the same time agreeing that there are, indeed, two distinct accounts of creation:

However, the answer lies not in an alleged dual tradition . . . but in a real contradiction in the nature of man. The two accounts deal with two Adams, two men . . . and it is no wonder that they are not identical.¹¹

This assertion goes beyond R. Hoffman—the two chapters are not simply two perspectives on the creation of Adam, but creation narratives of two distinct Adams. Exegetically, this is a radical approach; R. Soloveitchik does not resolve these textual contradictions in order to create a religiously significant unified text. Like a Brisker *hidush*, he uses the differences between Adam One and Adam Two to create new religious insights. He does not seek to harmonize the two accounts, but to highlight two different aspects of the human condition.

In essence, R. Soloveitchik is stating that God wrote Genesis with two contradictory and independent accounts of the creation of the first human being. God wrote the Torah in this fashion in order to tell us that just as the creation stories of humanity are contradictory; so too human nature is contradictory. While human beings strive to harness and build institutions that are rooted in the reality of this world (Adam One),¹² they simultaneously have an existential relationship with the ineffable which is solely rooted in the supernal and spiritual world (Adam Two).¹³

In even the most cursory and superficial reading of the first two chapters of Genesis, there are obvious differences and discrepancies. For over a thousand years the rabbinic response to and exegesis of these differences was based on the assumption that there is only one narrative of creation. The differences were interpreted to highlight different aspects of the account of creation: How were Adam and Eve actually created? Who named the animals? Where did *Gan Eden* come from? Bible scholars, on the other hand, denied the basic assumption of textual unity and stated that the differences between the two chapters were the result of two narratives written by multiple authors. R. Hoffman responded that although there are two perspectives, there is only one narrative and one author. R. Soloveitchik's paradigm shift of *parshanut* began in combining aspects of the previously contradictory views of R. Hoffman and secular scholarship: he agreed with Bible scholars that there are two narratives of creation, but asserted that they were written by one divine Author. He used the discrepancies found by

¹¹ Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, pg. 10.

¹² *ibid.*, 14.

¹³ *ibid.*, 23.

Bible scholars to create new religious meaning and to provide profound insight into the tension of being a religious Jew in the modern world..

It would be foolish to claim that R. Soloveitchik was suggesting that we study Biblical criticism in order to discover insights such as these. He did, however, set a precedent in revealing the possibility of using the methodology of Biblical criticism to find new interpretations of the Bible. In the wake of R. Soloveitchik's innovative approach, a lush garden of new *parshanut* has sprouted. Furthermore, R. Soloveitchik's work has allowed others to look at Biblical texts in new ways. *Parshanim* today analyze literary themes found throughout the Bible, as well as the poetic structure of Psalms and the Song of Songs. The rich variety of Orthodox Bible study around the world today owes a debt of gratitude to *The Lonely Man of Faith*.