

The Arrival of Rabbi Soloveitchik in America: A Documentary Report

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Having married Tonya Lewitt in 1931, the young Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, his wife, and newly-born daughter left Berlin where he had been studying since 1926. In immigrating to the United States he was following in the footsteps of his father, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, who had been the Rosh Yeshiva of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary since 1929.

During a period of restrictive immigration to America, following the [Immigration Act of 1924](#) which limited the number of immigrants in the name of preserving American racial homogeneity, and which especially [curtailed immigration from countries with significant Jewish populations](#), the younger Soloveitchiks were able to enter under an exception for a “minister of any religious denomination” and seminary professors. To qualify for such a visa the Rav had to show he would be employed in his vocation, and through the Agudath Ha-Rabbonim, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, presumably at the urging of Rav Moshe, Chicago’s [Hebrew Theological College](#) extended a job offer to Rabbi Yosef Baer.

(d) An immigrant who continuously for at least two years immediately preceding the time of his application for admission to the United States has been, and who seeks to enter the United States solely for the purpose of, carrying on the vocation of minister of any religious denomination, or professor of a college, academy, seminary, or university; and his wife, and his unmarried children under 18 years of age, if accompanying or following to join him; or

Ministers, etc., practicing profession two years preceding application.

1924 US Immigration Act of 1924 (Sec. 4d).

Setting sail on the S.S. Baltic out of Liverpool, the Soloveitchiks departed on Saturday, August 20, 1932.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
NEW YORK - QUOTA VISAS

LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED STATES

ALL ALIENS arriving at a port of continental United States from a foreign port or a port of the insular possessions of the United States, and all aliens arriving at a port of said insular possessions from a foreign port, a port of continental United States, or a port of the insular possessions of the United States. This (light blue) sheet is for the listing of

S. S. BAL TIC Passengers sailing from LIVERPOOL, 20 AUG. 1932, 19

No. on List	HEAD-TICK STATUS (This column for use of Government officials only)	NAME IN FULL		Age	Sex	Married to	Calling or occupation	Able to—		Nationality (Country of which citizen or subject)	Race or people	Place of birth		Inspected Yes, Present Yes, or Entry Permit number (This space for use of Government officials only)	Landed		Date according to regulations of landing, etc. (This column for use of Government officials only)	Last permanent residence	
		Family name	Given name					Yes	No			Country	City or town, State, Province or District		Place	Date		Country	City or town, State, Province or District
1		Duchanan	Thomas Archibald	30	m		Clergyman	Yes	Yes	St. Britain	English	England	Middleboro	LIV 2284	Liverpool	20 Jul. 1932	England	Alford in, York	
2		Duchanan	Margaret	28	f		Housewife	Yes	Yes	St. Britain	English	England	Manchester	LIV 2282	Liverpool	22 Jul. 1932	England	Leek	
3		Leath	Annie	71	f		Wife	Yes	Yes	St. Britain	English	England	Birmingham	LIV 2286	Liverpool	11 Aug. 1932	England	Fallowfield	
4		Soloveitchik	Joseph	29	m		Lecturer	Yes	Yes	Poland	Hebrew	Poland	Przemyśl	GLV 691	Berlin	2 May 1932	Germany	Berlin	
5		Soloveitchik	Tonia	26	f		Housewife	Yes	Yes	Poland	Hebrew	Poland	Wilno	GLV 690	Berlin	2 May 1932	Germany	Berlin	
6		Soloveitchik	Sarah	3	f		Child	No	No	Poland	Hebrew	Germany	Berlin	GLV 694	Berlin	20 May 1932	Germany	Berlin	

Handwritten notes: "UNDER 18" next to Sarah; "Atera" next to Sarah; "Jubahly of 1102 Ht" and "Aug 29-1932" at the bottom.

Manifest of “alien passengers” aboard S.S. Baltic sailing for New York, Aug. 20-29, 1932 ([click for full image](#)). Note that the Soloveitchiks’ baby daughter Atarah is mistakenly listed as “Sarah” for which there is a penciled correction “Atera.”

Shipping News

Incoming Passenger and Mail Steamships

TODAY
(Daylight Saving Time)

Ship and Line	From	Due to Dock	Pier
BALTIC (Br), White Star	Liverpool, Aug. 20; Belfast, Glasgow, Halifax	8:30 a.m.	60 N R, W 19th st
AMERICAN MERCHANT.			
American Merchant	London, Aug. 19	8:30 a.m.	58 N R, W 16th st
MINNETONKA (Br), Red Star	Antwerp, Aug. 19; Havre, Southampton	8:30 a.m.	58 N R, W 16th st
LACONIA (Br), Cunard	Liverpool, Aug. 20; Cobh, Galway, Boston	P.M.	56 N R, W 14th st
VEENDAM (Dt), Holland-America	Rotterdam, Aug. 19; Boulogne, Southampton	3:30 p.m.	5th st, Hoboken
UNITED STATES (Dan), Scandinavian-American	Copenhagen, Aug. 18; Oslo, Halifax	8:30 a.m.	6th st, Hoboken
PRESIDENT ADAMS, Dollar Mail	World cruise	9:00 a.m.	12th st, Jersey C'y
VIRGINIA, Panama Pacific	San Francisco, Aug. 13; Cristobal, Havana	9:00 a.m.	61 N R, W 21st st
SANTA CECILIA, Panama Mail	San Francisco, Puerto Colombia, Havana	9:00 a.m.	Hamilton av, Bkn
COAMO, Porto Rico	Santa Domingo, Cienfuegos		

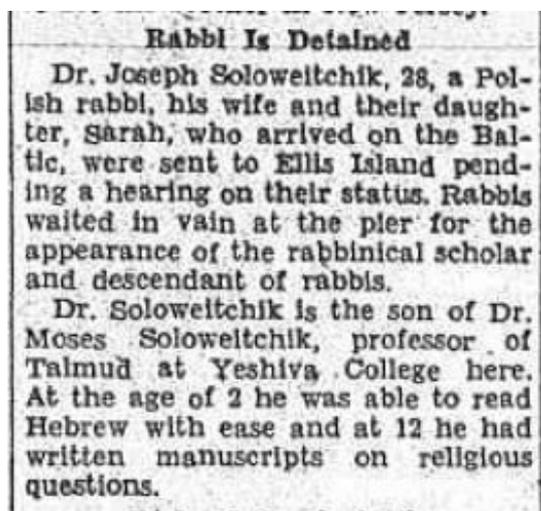
The Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, Monday afternoon, August 29, 1932, announcing the arrival of the S.S. Baltic that morning at 8:30 a.m. at the pier on West 19th Street in Manhattan ([click for full image](#)).

The Rav's daughter, Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein, informs us that after arriving in Liverpool, her parents and sister were guests of that city's Rabbi, [Isser Yehuda Unterman](#) (who would later be elected Chief Rabbi of Israel). To avoid the associated halakhic problems with a sea voyage commencing on Saturday, they boarded the ship before Shabbat.

After a 9-day voyage, via Belfast, Glasgow, and Halifax, the Baltic docked at the West 19 Street Pier in Manhattan (today's [Chelsea Piers](#)) on the morning of Monday, August 29, 1932.

The Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, Monday afternoon, August 29, 1932, detailing the Soloveitchiks' arrival delay due to need for a "hearing on their status" at Ellis Island ([click for full image](#)). Note that the newspaper misreports the Rav's age, and similarly errs in the daughter's name (presumably basing their reporting on the ship manifest).

However, upon arrival in New York, instead of disembarking with the other passengers in Manhattan, the family was detained at Ellis Island "pending a hearing on their status." A delegation of welcoming rabbis was left cooling their heels on the dock. It is unclear what the problem was that called their visa status into question, or if the rabbi and his family were merely the subjects of some measure of "extreme vetting." Ultimately they were allowed entry without suffering too extreme a delay.



When I mentioned to Rabbi Saul Silber, our College president, that I planned to visit Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik (father of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik), Professor of Rabbinics at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in New York, he admonished me not to eat any food that might be set before me, because then the family would not have enough for dinner. Indeed, to preserve an interesting note in history, I record that Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, who is considered the leading international Orthodox authority, was brought to this country with immigration papers issued by the Hebrew Theological College; upon his arrival at Ellis Island in 1932, however, my alma mater sent word to the Union of Orthodox Rabbis that it was unable to pay his salary, and a position on the East Coast should be found for him.

Oscar Z. Fasman, "[After Fifty Years, an Optimist](#)," *American Jewish History* 69 (December 1979): 160.

It is possible that the delay was caused by the fact that the Rav's promised employer in Chicago had backed out of its offer. The long-serving rabbi and communal leader [Oscar Z. Fasman recalled](#) that, in light of the Great Depression, the Hebrew Theological Seminary was in fact unable to produce the salary, and cast the responsibility to provide a position for the Rav back on the Agudath Ha-Rabbonim in New York.

כשנסע לברלין והתחיל ללמוד לימודי חול כבר
היה מלא כריסו בש"ס ורמב"ם והיה גדול הדור.
גם בלימודי חול הצליח ורכש הרבה על ידי
כשרונותיו האדירים והצטיין במדה מרובה, מה
שאי אפשר להצטיין יותר עפ"י חוק וסדר
הלימודים שם. אם כי גם אז הקדיש כל עתותיו
לתורה ומעט מזער נתן ללימודים כללים, והשלים
חוק לימודיו ויצא בתואר ד"ר פילוסוף. גם
בחכמה זו הוא גאון גדל ומחדש. וחיבר חיבור
גדול בשפה האשכנזית הכל על טהרת הקדש.
החיבור עוסק בשאלת והמציאות על פי הפילוסוף
סופיה הקאנטאנית החדשה מיסוד בית מדרשו
של הרמן כהן. נוסף לזה הוא בעל מדות טובות
שקשה למצא כמותו. מקבל את כל אדם בסבר
פנים יפות. שואל ומשיב בנחת, ונושא פנים של
חן לכל אחד ואחד. מתון ומתישב בדעתו בכל
דבר. ועוד ועוד.

"When he travelled to Berlin and began his secular studies, his belly was already full with Shas and Rambam, and he was the greatest of his generation. Similarly, he succeeded in his secular studies and accomplished much through his phenomenal talents and greatly excelled, as much as can be achieved according to the academic standards there. However, even there he dedicated all of his time to Torah and just a bit did he give over to the general studies, completing his degree and graduating with a doctorate of philosophy. And even in this field he is a great genius and innovator (*gaon gadol u-mechadesh*). He composed a lengthy work in German—all within the parameters of holiness and sanctity." *Ha-Pardes* 6 (October 1932): 5.

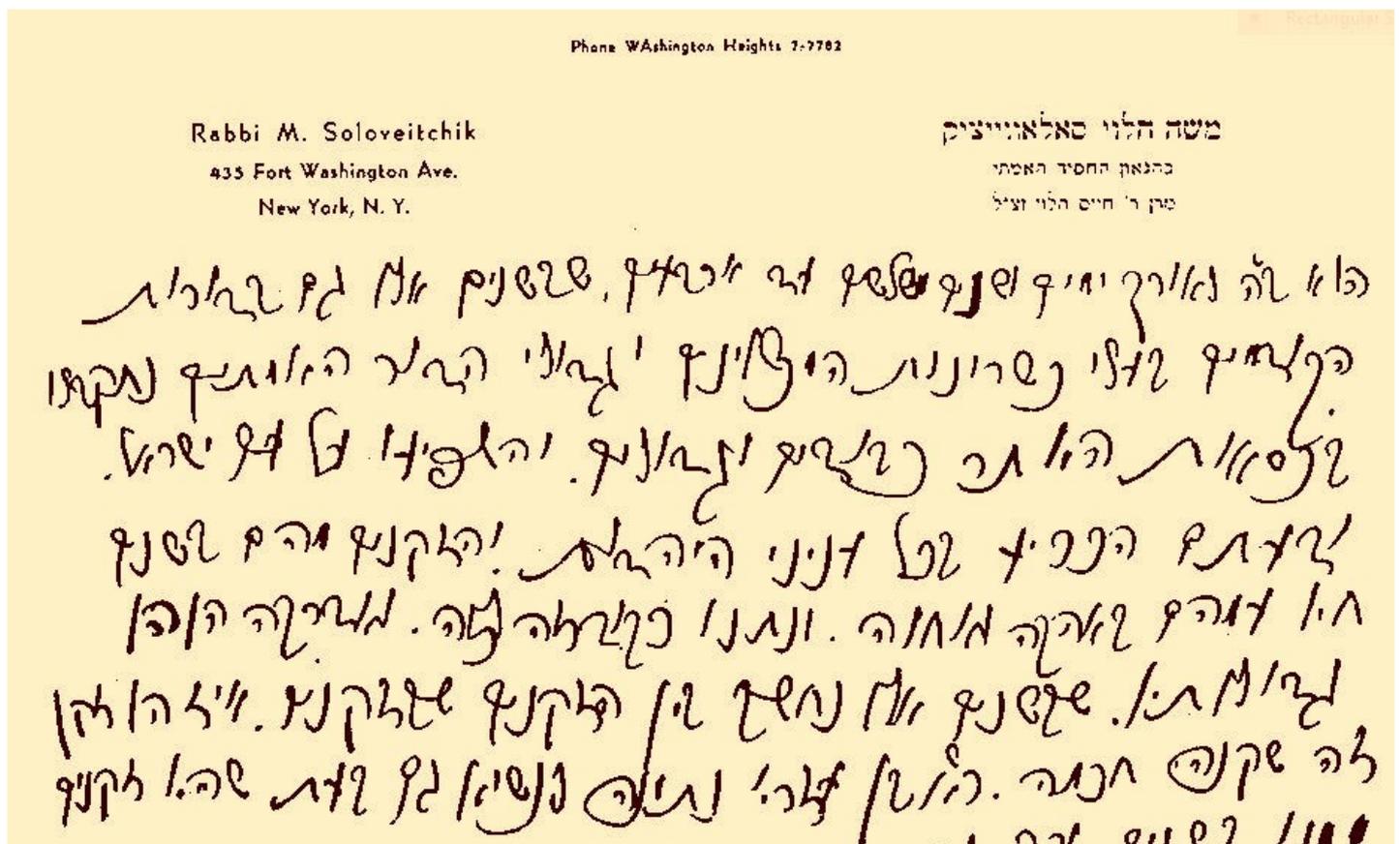
With his prospects for the future still murky, the Agudath Ha-Rabbonim held a reception to welcome the Rav to America at its executive committee session on October 10. That month's issue of the American rabbinical journal *Ha-Pardes* reported on the session and on the Rav's arrival in the most flowery praise for his genius, with tales of the *illuy's* childhood brilliance at the knee of his grandfather, Rav Chaim Brisker. Interestingly, the anonymous article is not shy about mentioning the Rav's academic career, but was quick to mention that pursuing a doctorate in neo-Kantian philosophy in Berlin in no way interfered with his full-time engagement in Torah study.

The article sounds completely authentic as the type of reportage of a rabbinic event of the time; it similarly reads like a notice that the newly-arrived young rabbi was open to any and all appropriate job offers! The article in *Ha-Pardes* concludes with the letter of approbation that was written for Rabbi Soloveitchik a year before his departure from Europe by the last Rav of Kovno, [Avraham Duber Kahana Shapiro](#), which reads in part:

The spirit of his illustrious grandfather, the leading rabbi of his time, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, rests upon Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. Just like his grandfather, he too is a master of the entire range of talmudic literature. . . . Happy is the country that will be privileged to be the home of this great sage. The sages have ordained him to be the true interpreter of all religious problems, and the Halakhah shall always be in accordance with his rulings.

Translated in: Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Ktav, 1999), vol. I, 25.

Three years later, in the summer of 1935, Rabbi Soloveitchik was a candidate to become the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. In connection with that campaign, Rav Moshe wrote a full-throated, exuberant letter of support of his son, addressed to the head of that city's religious council. The letter was published by [Manfred Lehmann](#) in a *festschrift* published in honor of the Rav (co-published by Mossad HaRav Kook and Yeshiva University, 1984; [text available online here](#) and [translated to English here](#)).



A section from the concluding page of Rav Moshe Soloveitchik's letter to the Tel Aviv Religious Council (19 Elul 5695/September 17, 1935) – [click for full image](#).

Careful examination of Rav Moshe's letter leads us to conclude that the anonymous 1932 *Ha-Pardes* essay was written by none other than the Rav's father himself. The two texts share a remarkable amount of parallel content and language. Even bearing in mind that all rabbinic approbations and letters of support share a certain amount of boiler-plate verbiage, there can be little doubt that these two documents were the products of the same pen (click here for a side-by-side comparison). And this explains one of the noteworthy characteristics of the *Ha-Pardes* essay: In introducing the 29-year old new arrival to an American audience (in the hopes of generating offers of employment), amidst all of the praise heaped upon him, the one item the anonymous author

omits is what would have been the customary rehearsal of the Rav's *yihus* as the son and *talmid muvhak* of his father, Rav Moshe. The virtual absence of the father, among the premier rabbinical scholars in the United States at the time, can only be explained by the fact the he himself omitted it in his modesty! Had the journal's editor penned the essay he surely would have included the deserved praise for Rav Moshe.

In fact, [as the Rav's sister reports](#), it was her father, Rav Moshe, whose "strong-mindedness and devotion" to his son Joseph Baer, resulted in a campaign to secure a respectable position. The most obvious venue would have been to hire the Rav at Yeshiva College, but Dr. Bernard Revel reluctantly rebuffed Rav Moshe's entreaty, with the very real excuse that Yeshiva, too, was on the verge of bankruptcy. Yet, through Rav Moshe's efforts, the Rav was invited to serve as Chief Rabbi of Boston. This offer was long-thought to have been presented by the Chevra Shas of Greater Boston, but [as Seth Farber has shown](#), it was likely at the initiative of the newly founded Va'ad Ho'lr under the leadership of Morris Feinberg. In all cases, the position involved the spiritual leadership of eleven conglomerated Orthodox synagogues. The next issue of *Ha-Pardes* reported:

באסטאן, הגאון העצום העילוי הנפלא הרב
ר' יוסף דוב הלוי סאלאווייציק שליט"א בנו של
הגאון הגדול הרב ר' משה סאלאווייציק שליט"א
נתקבל לרב אב"ד לאגודת הקהלות בעיר באס-
טאן, בתקוה אשר יתרומם שמה כבוד הרבנות
והעיר באסטאן יכירו יקר ערכו של כל רב ורב
להיות להם די הספקתם בכבוד הראוי, ובפרט
רום ערך גדולתו של הרב הגאון ר' יוסף דוב
שליט"א, אשר שמו מהולל בפי כל גאוני דורנו
שליט"א, וכולם משבחים ומפאדים אותו לגאון
גדול אשר כל רז לא אנים לו, אשרי לעיר באס-
טאן שזכתה לרב האי גאון גדול, לנהל עדה
על מבועי התורה והידאה.

"Boston—The great Gaon, spectacular *illuy*, HaRav R. Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik *shlita*, son of the great Gaon, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik *shlita*, has been accepted as the Rav Av Beit Din of the united congregations in the city of Boston, in the hopes that he will elevate the glory of the rabbinate there ... Fortunate is the city of Boston to have merited this great Gaon to manage the holy affairs of this flock with Torah and piety." *Ha-Pardes* 6 (November 1932): 4.

His arrival in Boston at the beginning of December 1932 actually coincided with the approval of his [doctorate on the philosophy of Hermann Cohen](#) by the faculty of Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. While he had completed all the requirements before departing Europe the previous summer, his degree was issued only on December 19. His official instillation as Chief Rabbi of Boston was attended by rabbinic luminaries such as R. Zev Gold, president of American Mizrahi, R. Meir Bar-Ilan of World Mizrahi, and others. From this platform he quickly began to set his focus on his high priority of rejuvenating Jewish education in the city, as evidenced by

the December 25, 1932 interview in the *Sunday Advertiser*—recently unearthed by Lehrhaus.

Sources

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