

The Lonely Man Of Fidelity

By RABBI JEFFREY SAKS

I first encountered about 20 years ago, as a public high-school student testing the waters of Orthodoxy and observance. In those days, before the essay was published as a book, it was hard to get your hands on a copy of the issue of the journal *Tradition* in which the *The Lonely Man of Faith* was first published, 40 years ago this summer). But an NCSY adviser loaned me his blurry xerox of a xerox, and I endeavored to make sense of it.

I had become interested in the essay quite by mistake: assuming the "faith" of the title referred to belief, I thought it might shed light on the issues that were engaging and vexing me as a novice, teenage *ba'al teshuva*. If it could help me work a way out of my own loneliness — that gnawing sense of being unlike both my public school classmates and my Orthodox yeshiva friends — then all the better.

Alas, as many have since pointed out, Rabbi Soloveitchik was not writing, in this or any other essay, a handbook for simplified, tranquil religious life and experience.

That religious consciousness in man's experience which is most profound and most elevated, which penetrates to the very depths and ascends to the very heights, is not that simple and comfortable. On the contrary, it is exceptionally complex, rigorous, and tortuous (*Halachic Man*, p. 141).

My teenage self was most certainly not seeking the tortuous.

As I read on, I discovered that the essay presented neither a proof for belief in G-d or revelation nor an argument for the legitimacy and integrity of rabbinic law and interpretation. In short, it was not a guide to my perplex-

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ty. However, on that first read, I learned something about a life committed to Torah that has stayed with me long after those other questions ceased being issues.

Not an essay about faith, I discovered, but on being faithful, or true. Faith in the etymological sense of that term, from the Latin *fides*, which gives us the word fidelity — meaning true, loyal, devoted (and devout). True to a code, halacha, which is wholly autonomous; also true to oneself.

"To thine own self be true" only holds meaning if you know who you are. Only through self-knowledge can one refine a personality, I seemed to hear the Rav whispering from between the lines. Only by mastering oneself can one attain redemption, and achieve community with G-d and fellow man.

Understanding loneliness — coming to grips with the different worlds I was simultaneously occupying — helped me to plod forward in the thorny task of constructing a religious identity. Identity construction, complicated enough for any adolescent, was complicated tenfold by my trying to find my way in Orthodoxy at the same time. Later, when I read the Rav's *On Repentance*, I realized more clearly and felt validated in the understanding that *teshuvah* — and the religious life in general — is ideally a quest for personal re-creation. Not to create from scratch by breaking with the past (which the Rav associated with *teshuvah me-yirah*), but to restructure and reorient, rebuild on the past and from within — *teshuvah me-dava*.

In the hard work of constructing a meaningful religious, emotional, and intellectual identity and experience — be one a *ba'al teshuvah* or a "striving insider" — it is never enough to merely enhance one's own "majesty" (the trait of Adam). This, to the Rav, is the source of modern man's "special loneliness" (p. 6).

There are simply no cognitive categories in which the total commitment of the man of faith could be spelled out. This commitment is rooted not in one dimension, such as the rational one, but in the whole personality of the man of faith. The whole of the human being, the rational as well

as the non-rational aspects, is committed to G-d (p. 99). Only a "whole" person, a spiritually mature Jew, can form covenant and overcome loneliness.

"To the man of faith, self-knowledge has one connotation only — to understand one's place and role within the scheme of events and things willed and approved by G-d [at creation].... This kind of self-knowledge may not always be pleasant or comforting. On the contrary, it might from time to time express itself in a painful appraisal of the difficulties which man of faith, caught in his paradoxical destiny, has to encounter, for knowledge at both planes, the scientific and the personal, is not always a eudaemonic experience (pp. 8-9).

After a trip to the dictionary stand I understood the Rav to be saying that learning about yourself, which in my case meant weaving my way through the maze of adolescence, wasn't always going to produce happiness (eudaemonic). "However," he exhorted me, "this unpleasant prospect should not deter us from our undertaking" (p. 9). Go on, I heard him say, get on with it: grow up already.

These were the sentiments that left their impact on a teenage boy trying to make sense of life, G-d, and the universe — and attempting to envision for himself what he might become in the scheme of these ideas and the lifestyle they might mold. In this sense it can be said that *The Lonely Man of Faith's* hero is actually the Man of Fidelity. The person who knows who he is, what community he belongs to, and the role he plays there; a person who is true to his authentic self.

To be absolutely clear, there were many factors encouraging and advising me during those formative years. Primarily they were human resources, rather than essays or books, that guided me — friends and advisers, and a particularly caring rabbi. But *The Lonely Man of Faith* presented ideas that were both a startling line and goal posts in my ongoing attempt for spiritual maturity. To my mind, this is the enduring message of Rabbi Soloveitchik's *Lonely Man of Faith* for us all. ■