

# The Evolution of an American Rabbi: A Conversation with Marc Gopin

*Gilah Langner*

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*Heart of Conflict* (Rodale Press, 2004); and *To Make the Earth Whole: The Art of Citizen Diplomacy in an Age of Religious Militancy* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009). A disciple of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in his youth, Dr. Gopin was ordained as a rabbi at Yeshiva University in 1983 and received a Ph.D. in religious ethics from Brandeis University in 1993. In 2005, Dr. Gopin was featured on national Syrian television in a dialogue with Hind Kabawat, a Syrian-Canadian peacemaker, at the Al-Assad National Library in Damascus.

GL: *So often we hear about religion as a source of conflict and division, and especially in places like the Middle East where Jews, Christians, and Muslims have been at odds for generations. You bring something new to the table — a conviction that religion can also play a positive role in peacemaking. Explain how.*

MG: I have to say that most religions have a hard time sustaining relationships between people who are inside the religion and those who are not, or those who are in good standing within the religion and those not considered in good standing by some power group. But in a situation where everybody is considered part of the group, religions have tremendously advanced approaches to the subtleties of human relationships — the ability to acknowledge mistakes, concepts of sin, repentance, and apology, how to make up for things you've done, how to watch what you say, how to listen more than talk, how to anticipate conflict by what you say or do. All of these things are found in all religious traditions — eastern and western, northern and southern — and there is a genius there that is just waiting to be found.

Look at the rules of respect and honor from Jewish tradition — *Eizehu mekhubad? Ha-mekhabed et ha-briot*. Who is honored? One who honors all of God's creatures. It doesn't say "all your fellow Jews" in Pirkei Avot, it says "all creatures."

What's missing, though, is the capacity to extrapolate and apply these traditions to situations across enemy borders. Just as an example, the nineteenth-century Jewish thinker known as the Chofetz Chaim wrote three volumes on every single word a person says or shouldn't say, and how it leads either to bitterness or to good will and love. Nobody has ever thought of applying those insights to the Jewish-Arab conflict. Nobody has thought about the Chofetz Chaim's teachings on *shmirat ha-lashon* [watching your tongue] and dealing with your enemies. And that's because in Jewish literature, as in Christian and Muslim literature, the powers-that-be confined that level of pro-social love and behavior to the small select group, and then "othered" the rest of the world, as a way of — consciously or unconsciously — keeping the faithful faithful and keeping the boundaries to other faiths very high. But in point of fact, in the Rambam, in the Chofetz Chaim, in every book of *musar* [Jewish moral teachings] you would ever pick up, there are subtle and brilliant ways to solve conflict, to apologize, to acknowledge.

I just returned from Israel where I taught a class at Pardes [Institute of Jewish Studies] on halakhic forms of peace building. The Psalms say, *Seek*

*peace and pursue it*, and then the rabbis added, “Seek it in your own place, and pursue it to other places.” We have the figure of Aaron as a peacemaker, who goes between people telling each one that the other is sorry. And no less a figure than Maimonides goes into great detail on how you should apologize for something at least three times before it becomes somebody else’s sin for not accepting your apology. You also have to offer compensation — you can’t just say ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ and expect it to be accepted.

So we have a notion of justice going together with forgiveness, and the idea that apology has to be offered multiple times. Now psychologically that’s very important, because once people are wounded, there is a hard-core set of psychological components that come into play — tunnel vision, group thinking, etc. — that make it impossible to trust the gestures of the enemy. To break through that, you have to address the wound on multiple occasions. Imagine if these ideas were applied to the conflicts in the Middle East — which is what my friends on the ground in Jerusalem do, a small group of beleaguered friends. The *only* thing we do in conflict resolution — Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists — is take these religious principles and apply them across enemy lines.

*Are there similar peacemaking values in Islam?*

Indeed. Like in Judaism, forgiveness is mentioned a number of times in the Quran and associated with Allah. Forgiveness combined with reconciliation yields a reward from Allah. And there are techniques of reconciliation, such as *sulh*, which is a ritual-oriented ceremony often conducted between large groups such as tribes, as a way to forge a new relationship. I’ve heard from Palestinian friends, though I haven’t seen it in person, that there is a version of *sulh* in which the offending party visits the house of the offended person, removes his shirt, places a dagger on his folded shirt, and bows his head. This is a breathtaking act of apology and surrender — it symbolically reverses, with one’s body, the act of injury, and gives the victim control over the life of the offender. The ritual itself is often more powerful than words, certainly more than words alone. And religious systems are masters of ritual.

*And yet these models presume that the wounding is not ongoing, and that there is a clear distinction between wounder and wounded. Is it possible to extend this model to the Middle East and other conflicts when there are rights on each side, wounding and wounded on each side, and the wounding is ongoing?*

That’s definitely an issue. Usually a ritual such as *sulh* assumes that

there is only one offending party. But the combatants might be able to agree on specific incidents on both sides that are regrettable or subject to a process of reconciliation and apology. A larger issue is whether a particular ritual can be meaningfully used when it has roots in only one culture.

*Have you been able to use religious teachings to reduce Arab-Jewish conflict?*

One thing I try to do is listen more than I speak, and not answer people in the hour of their wrath, which is specifically what the Talmud teaches. Since I'm in a 'wrathful generation' and I'm the only Jew and the only American many Arabs have ever met, they're bound to be angry when they speak with me. I was just yelled at in Vienna in an all-Arab over-60s group for two hours on every evil of Zionism. I listened and responded and

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gave them a third way, that was neither apologetics and blind defense of Zionism but neither was it anti-Zionist. I introduced to them the kind of Zionists who had earnestly wanted to create a country of equality with Arab neighbors well before the events of 1948. The crowd loved me but persisted in telling me every wound they had suffered, and there were many. But I couldn't respond to some of the outrageous things they said because you don't answer people in the hour of their rage, you find a right way to appease that rage and move them to a different place.

In 2005, when I visited Syria for the first time, it was a terrible time. There was the sense that the U.S. government was trying to do regime change in Syria, there had already been a hundred thousand people killed in Iraq, there were a million and a half refugees inside Syria, and the religious leaders, including the foremost leader, the Grand Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Ahmad Hassoun, were beside themselves with anger. First, they were outraged that the United States, the bastion of freedom, could have committed the sins of Abu Ghraib, engaged in torture, and killed so many people indiscriminately. Second, they were outraged by the Shiite/Sunni killings of one another. The

Grand Mufti is a liberal enough man that he saw both outrages, and he was upset both with politicians in the United States and with the Arab and Muslim world for feeding this.

So when the Mufti invited me to the mosque in Aleppo on a Friday in the middle of all this fear and anger, I didn't know what I was walking into. After he spoke, he invited me to speak at the end of the service. And then, without warning me in advance, he introduced me to a survivor of Abu Ghraib who had been tortured for six months and forced to live inside a coffin for six weeks. I was so overwhelmed that I stopped the whole ceremony and went over to this man and said, I need to apologize to you in the name of the American people. I asked him about his family, and who was still missing — his brother was never seen again after he had been in Abu Ghraib — and I promised to tell their story in the United States.

For me, spiritually, what I was doing was engaging in the mitzvot of repentance and apology. I didn't know that of the three thousand people in the mosque, half of them were Iraqi refugees, and their rage against Americans was unbelievable, they had lost all their homes. They actually challenged the Mufti — why did you bring an American here, he voted for Bush. When I got the translation, I took the microphone and I responded, But we didn't vote for torture.

*What kind of effect did this have?*

I didn't think it would have such a big impact on the whole of Syrian society, but it made headlines in the Syrian newspapers, because they filmed it for national television. Or that it would affect the President of Syria, Bashar Assad, which it did, because someone who has a personal relationship with President Assad specifically told us that what we had done in the mosque had more of an impact on him than all of American policy at the time. I also recently found out that it was partly because of our work that the U.S. moved away from plans to bomb Syria. And Israel and Syria started talking indirectly in Turkey and other places. So we set the stage for the possibility of a connection, and a way to talk about painful things and grievances, without hatred and without the intention of war.

*I understand that you not only talked to the Syrians about loving your neighbor and turning enemies into friends, but also about very practical economic ideas.*

I spoke about tourism the first time I got there, in my major speech.

I said, where are the tourists? Because I see Syria becoming a major hub for tourism from all over the world. And when I came back three or four years later, I saw construction everywhere. You know, Old Damascus is five times the size of old Jerusalem. It's a massive old city, 7000 years old, with anthropological roots that go back 35,000 years. I think it might be the oldest continuously occupied city in the world. When you go to Damascus Museum you see the layers.

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 comes up to me and says: "I read the Torah."

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*Does anyone visit?*

No, nobody is there. I said to myself, that's an opportunity. By pushing for new tourism opportunities, I was aligning myself with Syria's interests and being pro-cultural and interfaith rather than anti-Israel. The Syrians are very proud of their Christian, Muslim, and Jewish roots. You have to be there to appreciate this, to feel the pride of someone showing you both Christian and Muslim sites at the same time. Recently, in Damascus, a woman came up to me, a woman in her 60s, very short, completely black-veiled, she's the director of a center for non-violence, and she comes up to me and says: "I read the Torah." I still can't believe it.

*Start us back earlier with the roots of your commitment to this work. You grew up in Boston. What kind of work did your father do and where did your family come from?*

My father was a kosher butcher and a small real estate owner. His father was a butcher and his parents had bought up a lot of real estate in the Depression and eventually divided it among their seven children, so all of them became real estate owners. My mom took care of my dad's books — it was complicated, with buildings, tenants, etc. My great grandfather had been involved with cattle in Eastern Europe; when he came over in 1910, he tried a chicken farm which didn't work, and then they moved into the kosher butcher business. They lived in the west end of Boston which is where most

of the Jews were at the turn of the century. When I was three or four, my parents moved to Brookline where I grew up.

*Was your family Hasidic?*

They were in orbit around the Stolín-Karlin rebbe, on my father's side. My mother was a Litvack. That was a real difference — between my mother's Lithuanian and Latvian background, and my father's upper Ukrainian origin. But there was no Stolín-Karlin rebbe in Boston, so that ended when they moved here. The Gopins came from a town of a few hundred Jews in northwestern Ukraine, called Troyanevka, near Kovel. But they lost all contact with the family in World War II — the Jews there all were killed on one particular day in 1941.

*It's somewhat surprising that a hasidic family would become close to one of the great mitnagdim [opponents of Hasidism] and leaders of modern American Orthodoxy, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. How did that happen?*

Most of my childhood I went to Maimonides Day School and it was also the shul of the Rav, as he was called. We became close and I developed a friendship with him when I was a kid. He used to come to our house for Kiddush on Saturday. My father would always invite him, because the Gopins were very close with the Soloveitchiks. My grandfather was close to the Rav because they had both worked valiantly on the issue of kosher meat — which was a huge war in Jewish culture in the early part of the twentieth century. There was a great deal of unkosher meat that was passing as kosher, there was a lot of mafia-type corruption, and Rabbi Soloveitchik stood up to that, and he got in trouble with the kosher butchers who were not delivering kosher meat. My grandfather stood with him, and protected him when Soloveitchik was attacked in the 1930's with lawsuits. Based on that, Rabbi Soloveitchik was very kind to my family even though they were very simple people, and Rabbi Soloveitchik was intellectually just in a different stratosphere from them.

But he would come because my father would persuade him to have certain traditional foods, like reitach — a special radish from that part of Europe, or other specialties. My father was a fabulous cook!

My earliest memory of the Rav is of him offering me a drink from his cup, but I was too afraid and ran behind my father. Then mostly all the memories blur into being in the synagogue with him and watching him all the time, because I sat very close to him. It was a very small shul, Maimonides, and we were two rows away from him. Basically my family sat surrounding

him — the people who were close to the Rav liked to sit near him, so we had two rows thick with Gopins!

*How did your own relationship with him begin?*

I felt bad for him early on because he was already going through serious troubles in his life — he had some medical troubles, then his wife became sick with cancer, and then he lost three people in one year — his wife, his brother, and one other — which was a major turning point in his life.

That's when I started getting close with him. It started out as me just walking with him. He would walk past my house both to and from shul every Saturday, and there were some people who would walk with him and I wanted to join them, just to listen. Then it turned into something else — he developed cataracts and he was falling a lot, but he was a fiercely independent person and he didn't want any help.

In our community it was a bit of a crisis because he refused any help. Everyone was worried. I talked with my parents and took it upon myself to walk home with him from shul. It was a long walk, and when he got to this steep path up a hill, he would send everyone away. The first few weeks Rabbi Soloveitchick would turn around and growl at me, "Go home." But I kept walking — I don't know why, I was only 11 or maybe 12, I don't remember, but I just didn't take no for an answer, I'd continue walking about six feet behind him. He was so angry, he couldn't get rid of me! And then by the time I was 17, he really needed the help, he became dependent on me. I started picking him up early, before synagogue, around 8:00 a.m., and he would be angry that I came. Eventually he got used to that too. I didn't bother him — a lot of times he would be davening, he would say Psukei d'Zimra, other times he wanted to be silent. That's how we created a strong bond.

*What a privilege!*

Yes. It was the defining experience of my life. It ratcheted me up, in my early teens, to philosophy, to law, and psychology — all these things I was reading to try to keep up with our conversations.

*Do you think there is a link between understanding that the Rav's anger came from a certain vulnerability, which — while aimed at you, was not really an anger at you — and being able to respond to people's anger in conflict resolution?*

Of course, I knew his anger was with his health and vulnerability. He was a lion of a human being in many ways, and hated weakness. I learned a great deal from him about fearless perseverance, and I also knew immediately

that the anger was not with me. So, yes, I learned early from many people that anger is not always anger, it is frustration with life, with mortality, with limitation. And I respect that.

*How long did you stay in touch with the Rav?*

During my years at Yeshiva University, I was actually taking care of him, I was his secretary, his assistant, his guardian — I played defense against the world in terms of how much was coming at him when he was so sick. For the last ten years of his life, he was too sick to be outside.

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*Did you expect you would become a rabbi?*

I didn't plan to. I went to Columbia, but then I went to study at Yeshiva University a year later and to live there — it was in order to study with the Rav, who was head of YU's rabbinical school. And then it became clear that the way to continue studying was to enter rabbinical school. At the time I was getting my college degree and I wanted to pursue my philosophy studies. In a sense I was following his career — studying rabbinics and studying philosophy. It was more of an intellectual path than a career path. Once I had the rabbinical degree I started thinking about how to make a living with it. But Rabbi Soloveitchik was ambivalent about pulpit rabbis himself.

*How so?*

His basic belief was that a rabbi is a teacher. From an institutional point of view, a halakhic point of view, the whole institution of the rabbinate is a little strange — it's not really a Jewish institution — it's much more a Christian idea to have someone in between who does all the ceremonies. That's not a Jewish concept. A rabbi was either a legal decision maker or a teacher, and of those two, the Soloveitchik tradition was to emphasize the teaching.

You know there's a strain within early rabbinic Judaism that's very anti-hierarchical. If you look at the Talmud many of the rabbis were radically independent, whereas others were looking to create hierarchy. The stories about the Sanhedrin and the resistance to authority — there is a real struggle going on there about hierarchy versus democracy. Not pure democracy in the Western sense, more of an "intellectual-ocracy," based on a certain level of

achievement, and of course it's always male. But I'm suggesting that Rabbi Soloveitchik as a twentieth century figure was always deemphasizing the legal role of the rabbi and emphasizing the teaching role. He didn't want rabbis lording it over other people. He was uncomfortable with the notion of *gedolei ha-dor*, [great religious leaders], *poskim* [legal decisors] writing all this down, imposing on everyone else. So I was uncomfortable too — I was internalizing everything from him.

*Things started to change for you during your years at YU. For the first time, you came face to face with Meir Kahane's supporters.*

Yes, some of his followers were at YU, and of course Kahane came to speak several times in New York. This just wasn't the Judaism that I had grown up with. Now, unfortunately, it's become more commonplace for religious Jews to be violent in the name of Zionism, but at the time it was extremely rare. It was a huge embarrassment. Rabbi Soloveitchik was the kind of person who was extremely uncomfortable and very opposed to lobbying or pushing a Jewish position on the non-Jewish world, in a way that was impolite or could be considered obnoxious, let alone violent. Even though he was staunchly pro-Israel, he was very uncomfortable with any kind of bravado or arrogance from Jewish people. Meir Kahane was exactly the opposite of that.

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*Did you talk about this with the Rav?*

We did talk about it, although it was complicated. He was just horrified by Kahane, as was I, and he agreed with me about many of these things. I think the Rav kept modern Orthodoxy from becoming more militant earlier. Once he left the scene, a lot of his so-called followers completely abandoned the ethical monotheism that he advocated and became highly nationalistic, and as far as I'm concerned, they lost the soul of Orthodoxy.

There's more to it, though. Rabbi Soloveitchik was profoundly influenced by Hermann Cohen's philosophy of Judaism. He wrote his PhD dissertation on Hermann Cohen's use of logic — logic was key to Hermann Cohen's understanding of religion and the place of God. Rabbi Soloveitchik

was an enormous authority on Cohen, who was an anti-Zionist philosopher with an intense neo-Kantian conception of God, of mitzvah, of religious experience — and of moral universal obligation. All of Rabbi Soloveitchik's language in his Saturday night lectures was based on a neo-Kantian kind of language that was right underneath the surface. Everyone today talks about Soloveitchik's existentialism, and it's true that the existentialism was important in his later writings, but you can't really understand the course and length of his thinking without understanding that neo-Kantian universalist base.

*If the Rav had Hermann Cohen, is it fair to say that you had Samuel David Luzzatto as a major influence? You spent serious time researching him.*

I was searching for an Orthodox philosophy of universal Judaism, going back earlier than the twentieth century, which was basically a catastrophe of wars. So I looked back to the nineteenth century and I saw some amazing things. It certainly was the high point of Reform Judaism's philosophy of ethical monotheism, but what people don't know, and what I was interested in, was universal ethical monotheism in an Orthodox style. Very different from today's world where Orthodoxy has become the repository for ultra-nationalist Judaism. But in the nineteenth century that wasn't the case. There were choices — there were people in Germany and in Italy, and the English chief rabbis as well. I became very interested in the Italian model because the Italians were free of the pain and sorrow of European anti-Semitism.

The Italian model was also interesting because Italy did not have as much of an extreme divide between religion and secularism, or the kind of anti-religious fervor that led to the extremes of communism and fascism. Italy was different because the Renaissance had always been an interesting mixture of spirituality, religion, and progressive liberal humanism.

That's indeed what I found among the Italian Jewish thinkers — they were not as famous, not as rigorous as the Germans, and nobody wanted to study them. And that interested me — I always like the underdog! I thought they were very refreshing — and of course this was a rebellion against Rabbi Soloveitchik, too, who was at the heart of the German and European thinking.

So I went south, and I found Rabbi Elijah Benamozegh — an amazing thinker, a nineteenth century mystic, a true universalist. But I went with Luzzatto who embraced emotion at the core of religion — along the lines of David Hume, or the third Earl of Shaftesbury, and the whole school of moral

sense theory. Because what I felt was missing in Jewish intellectual and religious life was empathy. I felt that since Maimonides, Judaism has been prejudiced toward an excessive rationalism that devastated the human capacity for feeling, for emotions and empathy. I think Luzzatto was critiquing that strongly in his writings, and I wanted to explore that.

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*What was his critique?*

As an authority on biblical literature, Luzzatto was really good at proving that *hesed*, compassion, was at the core of most of Jewish law. In particular, the laws around love of strangers, love of neighbors, love of the widow and orphan — his idea was that all these rituals were designed not for obedience to God but to train you in compassion.

For example, in his commentary on the Torah, he asks an unbelievable question. He asks, what's so bad about idolatry? If you're a fundamentalist you can't ask that question. But for him the purpose of humanity was so much to acculturate people to compassion that he had to entertain the intellectual question, at least, of what's so wrong with believing in many gods. He comes to the conclusion that if people believe in multiple forces in the world, then ultimately this one becomes my god, this one becomes your god, and you're in a perpetual state of war. So he didn't think that polytheism could lead to an ethical system. You can agree or disagree, but you see his priorities.

So I found this ultra modern and, by the way, strongly feminist position, and it had a big impact on my conflict resolution theory. Later on I would discover that conflict resolution theory was also too male-dominated. It was too rationalistic, too focused on the evil of violent emotions, as if emotions were the problem and reason was the answer. It's true that reason is a key part of how people build societies, but there are so many pro-social emotions that are key to building that society too. So Luzzatto was endlessly fascinating.

*How did you come to your critique of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza? It's not like most rabbinic students at Yeshiva University shared your understanding of what was going on.*

I think it was 27 years ago, the first Lebanon War, when I first started to be conscious of how badly the Arabs were being treated. I was coming into my 20's with a full realization of the overwhelming force that Israel was capable of. Which was very different than the acculturation of the rabbis who were twenty years older than me, because their first awareness was of an Israel that could be destroyed at any moment.

The big turning point in my life was Sabra and Shatila. Interestingly, it was the Rav who insisted to Menachem Begin that he investigate the Sabra and Shatila massacres. He found the atrocities in Beirut to be abominable, and he called Begin on Yom Kippur Eve and insisted on the investigation. And this was despite the fact that Rabbi Soloveitchik never liked Begin — Begin was from the same region in Europe as the Soloveitchik family, and they saw him as an extremist and a terrorist.

*When you visited Israel during the Lebanon War, your views on the Middle East changed further. You discovered what people now call another "narrative."*

Yes. Growing up, every year I would watch the movie *Exodus* — that was my narrative; I lived in a very religious Jewish community. But later, in my twenties, I remember walking one day on a ridge in Israel with the first Arab man I ever met as a friend. He knew the name of every herb, he knew the land so well. I said to him, "That's a lovely grove of pine trees over there." He didn't say anything. So I said to him, "Why are you uncomfortable with the pine trees?" He said, "I'll take you for a walk there, I'll show you a well." I said, "What do you mean, a well?" He said, "There was a village there." I said, "I don't see a village; it's just a grove of pine trees." He said, "They put the pine trees there to cover up the village." I said, "Why did they put the pine trees there?" He said, "Because they drove the villagers out in 1948 and they wanted to cover up the evidence. All along this region, you'll see pine trees covering up villages that used to be there."

And that was tough for me. I remember as a child, in first grade, the biggest source of pride was that I got to give a little bit of money to plant a tree in Israel, through the Jewish National Fund. I had that JNF certificate on my wall throughout my childhood. And at 25 I discovered that perhaps my

tree was planted on top of a village where people used to live. And suddenly, I was part of the conquest.

*Did your changing views cause a rift between you and the Rav?*

You know, Rabbi Soloveitchik treaded a fine line. He wasn't a Zionist in the 1940s, but he became one in 1967, and became extremely concerned for Israel's safety all the time.

It's hard to be a student of Jewish culture and Jewish religion and not have an ethnic side to it, because so much of the tradition and the ritual is about the Jewish people. And I believe the Rav in a quiet way was always trying to emphasize the concept of Israel — the House of Israel, Knesset Israel he would call it — rather than the physical entity of the Jewish people, because he was trying to teach this as an idea. Nevertheless, when he struggled with his own journey from anti-Zionism to Zionism — which was very controversial in the Haredi world which is itself anti-Zionist — he was struggling with the notion of sacralizing the state of Israel. But he went on that journey, and I think he made a mistake. The whole idea in Western democracies is to get militaries under civilian control. Militaries are already dangerous enough in a country — you need them in order to stay safe, but they're out of your control. When you sacralize the military — when you make it into a sacred miracle — then it makes it even harder to have an objective critique of its behavior. I think the ethno-national side of us — of any group — is already dangerous enough, it doesn't need religious sacralization of the state or the military.

This is something that Jews didn't see coming, because we hadn't had any experience with the sacralization of military force in 2,000 years. Look at the history of the haggadah and the way the four sons are depicted. If you look back in the last 500 years until the State of Israel, in most haggadahs the evil son is portrayed as a military officer with weapons, while the other three good children have no weapons, no armor, nothing. Suddenly this change occurs because of Zionism which becomes the dominant movement of the organized community.

*This was not, of course, the approach of the ultra-Orthodox.*

No. Haredi Judaism felt that Zionism would become *avodah zarah* [idolatry], that it would substitute the state and the army for religion, and in many ways what they predicted has come true. They also consider the State of Israel a violation of the rabbinic rule prohibiting a war against the gentiles in order to reestablish the Jewish kingdom — there's a text in the Talmud on that.

The rabbis in Israel have gone through somersaults to prove that that rule is no longer in effect. But the irony is that the haredi position, which is so reactionary about women, and reactionary in terms of appreciation of non-Jews, turns out to have been far more prescient about the consequences of sacralizing a state. They turned out to have the original consciousness of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, who understood that Jewish commonwealth and Jewish independence are one thing, but worship of the state destroys a religion.

*What distinguishes him in our tradition?*

According to the ancient text Avot De'Rabbi Natan, the Jewish resisters to Rome in 70 C.E. became so fanatical that they started killing their own, and even burning their own food supply in besieged Jerusalem, in anticipation of the imminent arrival of the Messiah (in their minds an anointed head of an army). It was then that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai personally witnessed the consequences of idolizing war and independence. It is paradoxical, but that idolizing can and does undo your very goal of independence and statehood. This is not a uniquely Jewish outcome, it is a common problem of 'over-reach' in all nationalisms that end up self-destructive.

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Rav Soloveitchik was a transition figure between the two worlds of haredi concern about these matters on the one hand, and Orthodox Zionism on the other. He was very aware of the dangers and mistakes of the Second Jewish Commonwealth and its self-destructive downfall, and spoke of it often. But he felt that the time had come to embrace modern Zionism. I understand that, but I disagree with his writings that sacralize Zionism. War, violence, militaries are never to be sacralized; they are always a tragedy, a failure of creative alternatives, and they are inevitably filled with war crimes that no decent understanding of religious tradition would ever justify. Everyone knows that is true of all major wars, and Israel's have been no exception.

*These ideas must have put you quite at odds with the modern Orthodox world.*

Yes, and the sense of abandonment and alienation and loss, really of loss, of an ideal vision was made even more intense by my growing distance

from the Orthodox world. You have to understand, I grew up learning that Judaism was about social justice, about creating a society of peace and justice. I was taught that way, in the book of Bereishis and the prophets, by Soloveitchik's hermeneutic of Judaism as the good society, based on the ideas of Hermann Cohen. And to come out and see it from the vantage point of Palestinians and Arabs and to realize that the Jews who really did understand the problem and did see the pain of the other were Reform rabbis, Reconstructionist rabbis — that too was a deep shock, an assault on the system. Because those rabbis were the one who were supposed to know the least about Judaism and practice the least. Objectively, they did practice less than I, and yet they were the ones who were standing for those values, who were standing with African Americans, and against the Vietnam War.

*Why didn't you become a Reform rabbi?*

I wasn't prepared to do that, because I was deeply committed to significant traditional observances like Shabbat and kashrut. I wasn't prepared to drive on Saturdays, for example. But the result was that it put me in a very isolating place, especially back then. Surprisingly, though, I found something of a home in Havurat Shalom in Boston. The people there were so different from me, but they were far more accepting than anyone else. We developed a kinship that was really eye-opening. I started taking more and more positions opposed to Orthodoxy in terms of politics but I still didn't shift identities. I didn't officially become post-denominational until later.

*You were a congregational rabbi, once.*

Yes, at three different shuls. I was a rabbi at Tremont Street in Cambridge, then in downtown Boston and in Berkeley for a few years. For all the reasons you can see, it was not the right fit. If I had it to do over again, and I had the wisdom I have now, I would have been a much better rabbi. I would have been far more tolerant, patient, and I would have been much more of a coalition builder. I was pretty good — almost every time I left, people didn't want me to leave. It wasn't like I was kicked out on a regular basis, it was more that I couldn't cope with it emotionally given my values.

But the real issue is that life is short, and I didn't have two lives, and I needed to do other things on a global scale, and a pulpit is really not a good place to do that, because even if you master the ability of being extremely tolerant of political views you consider nuts, it's still a question of time. And pastoral care is extremely labor intensive. People don't want you to be the

next theologian; they want you to take care of the next bar mitzvah. They want you to be there as soon as they call.

Would it be good if Americans had a different conception of the rabbinate? Yes. In Europe, especially in England, rabbis are considered much less pastoral caretakers than intellectual leaders. It would be better to have that as a model — for our rabbis to be leaders, thinkers, and speakers, and then shuls could also have social workers and others to take care of congregants' needs.

*I notice you don't wear a kippah much anymore. At what point did that come off?*

I loved the yarmulke all my young life; it was fundamental to my identity. In a photo of my great-grandfather, a huge black square kippah covers his whole head. Somewhere in the 80's I started to realize that the *kippah serugah* [knitted kippah] with a colored rim and white body that was seen by many as the mark of the settlers had become a symbol of conquest. So I stopped wearing one. I switched to a black crocheted kippah which was the mark of a small, select group of Orthodox moderates in Jerusalem, mostly professors. Somewhere in the 90's as the oppression of Palestinians got even worse after the '87 Intifada, I found myself wearing a beret, no longer comfortable being identified with conquest and oppression.

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I'm not fond of symbols on people's bodies  
that claim ownership of them.

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But then something unexpected happened in the first half of the 2000's. Head coverings as a whole became a symbol of oppression. Bin Laden, and a thousand little Bin Ladens began to occupy our everyday consciousness, and then there were the ubiquitous and ever increasing women's veils that often did not appear to me to be voluntary. I think the 2000's taught me a lot about the excessive attachment to religious symbols. I'm not fond of symbols on people's bodies that claim ownership of them. I'm not fond of the wars over women's veils — women have the right to wear veils if they want to, but I also know that women are subject to billions of dollars of harassment to convince them or pressure them to wear the veil.

So, surrounded by all the head gear, especially in Jerusalem where I was going more and more, I found myself wearing headgear strictly to please

others, and more and more revolted by external pieties. Piety in general became less and less attractive, especially the kind worn on the sleeve or head. To see the settlers and Jews who were beating up Arabs wearing big, big yarmulkes and to realize how fearful the Arabs are of people like that, made me determine that I couldn't be identified with that.

*And yet, wouldn't your wearing a kippah send the opposite signal?*

That is a good point, and I have friends who do that with this logic in mind. But I have found that globally speaking, most people are distracted by headgear, they judge you, fear you, and this distracts from the opportunity of deeper engagement. And the higher halakhic goal was saving lives, the supreme mitzvah, and I was perfectly happy to suppress this headgear in favor of maximizing the opportunity to save lives. My work in Syria would have been impossible with a kippah, for example, because I have been working with rather secular people who do not take kindly to most religious symbols of piety.

It turns out there are a lot of people who can't stand religion at all, who are friends of mine, students who are damaged by religion, many Islamic students, women in particular. I think if I were still wearing symbols of religiosity, they wouldn't have come to me. They don't like any clerics, they don't want anything to do with them. I'm amazed at how many young women have been damaged by religion — by Judaism, by Islam. I'm absolutely convinced that women's creativity is a key to the future, in the Middle East, in India and Pakistan.

In my own home, I wear a kippah much more, for the children, but also for my great-grandfather, whom I love, whom I never met, whom I am named after, who is named after Ezekiel the prophet, who fought for justice against all odds.

*In your own life, do you still find Jewish ritual and practice meaningful?*

Yeah, I do. Wearing a kippah isn't the same as lighting a fire on Shabbat or eating milk and meat together. I know enough to know the vast differences of priorities — and I think about those priorities all the time. Saving life is at the top, and pursuing justice and pursuing peace are up at the top, and from a ritual point of view, Shabbat is at the top.

I don't want my children to drive on Shabbat. I actually think Conservative and Reform Judaism made a mistake allowing driving on Shabbat. I know it's terribly inconvenient with the whole suburban evolution

of the United States — it has made it very inconvenient for people to be observant. And I appreciate that. Personally, if I were a very creative halakhic authority for non-Orthodox movements, I would have talked about bikes or taxis, something to get away from people using fire on Shabbat, because it's really a big biblical barrier. I can't bring myself to break that barrier. That puts a lot of constraints in terms of spiritual community that I would be most comfortable with.

*I'm sensing equal parts love and anguish in your relationship to Israel.*

You know, when the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70, they burned it. How do you burn a building of stone? They used the wood in the Temple itself — the holiest wood, the *atzei shitim* — the wood that was used for sacrifices, and they piled it up in mounds around the Temple. So the holiest thing can also be used for destruction. When they opened the tunnels underneath the Temple Mount a few years ago, and they excavated, they found mounds of ashes with some of the wood still intact, 2000 years later. And I kept some of the wood that I found there, in a box. I keep it with me all the time. But I don't visit the Kotel anymore, because instead of it being a place of reconciliation, it has become a place of violence.

*You bring a strong psychological sensitivity to your work, particularly in terms of how people cope with trauma and extreme circumstances. Where did that psychology piece come from?*

Since I was a child I was thinking about psychology. I was in a family of conflict and I was a peacemaker. So the psychology of wounds and violence and conflict and hurt, and understanding the deeper nature of motivations — as a kid I was reading Maslow, Rollo May, and Erich Fromm. Freud, Jung, and Victor Frankl were very important to me in high school.

The more proximate cause is that I was influenced by Joe Montville [American diplomat, political psychologist, and chair of the Center for Religion, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution] and a whole series of people in political psychology who came to the issue of peacemaking through psychology. I have internalized that completely, it's at the core of what I do. Psychologists have a tendency to localize things; their ideal spot is with one person in a therapy setting. Moving out to a family is a little dicier, you have social work for that. But thinking about healing civilizations, or stopping wars through psychology is so

daunting that people stop there and say, I can't do that, let's just get people into a problem-solving workshop.

But after a time we realized that the problem with such workshops and the models that Harvard and others came up with was that they were only sensitive to the psychology of very elite groups — highly literate, highly privileged people, precisely the kind you would invite to Harvard or Hebrew University. But the kind of people you'd invite to Hebrew University weren't at the front lines of the battle. They weren't the most militant, or the most injured; they were doing well. For them to talk and work out their feelings was great, but it didn't get you very far.

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What is the social contract between the old man in the shuk  
and the haredi kid who's passing by?

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So I would come to Israel and there would be all these fancy talks about peace, fancy seminars, but I would go to the shuk, and there would be an old withered Arab man in front of his stall, with half his teeth, no ability to communicate with me, just trying to sell something and live in peace. And walking by him is a haredi kid. What would make peace between him and the haredi kid? What is the social contract between the old man in the shuk and the haredi kid who's passing by, who might ignore him, might spit on him — there's a lot of spitting going on — but also, what's the old guy really thinking and is he telling his son to go kill the Jews? All there is right now is the barest minimum of coexistence; there's no social contract, there's no vision of a community together at the level of the vast majority of both Israeli and Palestinian societies. And that's because of all the layers of social damage, all the fear, the suspicion, and false understandings of the person who's a foot away from you passing by. That's what intrigues me — how to bridge that gap — not how to have a fancy discussion in the university.

*So how do you bridge that gap?*

I had an experience when I was just starting out. Even back then I was already experimenting with what I call “positive increments of change,” but also non-verbal forms of peacemaking, because it's the nonverbal that anyone on the planet can do, whereas the verbal is much more privileged. So I was walking in the shuk in Jerusalem, and I stopped at an old Arab's stall. We didn't have a

common language, he couldn't speak anything I spoke, I couldn't speak what he spoke, but his business was making money and showing off his olive wood. I was very upset that day, because a few days before Meir Kahane's men had come through and turned over the stalls and attacked the stall owners, just as an act of conquest of the Arabs. When I went to the shuk I was feeling it very deeply. My eyes caught this man's eyes and he could see I was Jewish, he pointed out a statue of Moses to me. I looked deeply in his eyes, and somehow he could tell I was sad, upset, and treating him very kindly; there was something remorseful in the way I was looking at him. So he looks at me and he raises his index finger. And I knew what he meant — he meant one God for all of us. So I went like that (made same gesture). I bowed to him and we parted.

*Does psychology help in conflict resolution when you are trying to engage the other side but only one of you has good intentions?*

Well, we know how to deal with that sort of situation in conflict resolution. You begin with people like Roger Fisher [from the Harvard Negotiation Project], you begin with an analysis of face-saving. Basically, you get people to the table based on what their interests are. You focus on understanding the vital interests of each, and if there's a stalemate, why they might want to be there. But there are conditions that limit your options. If one side can see itself going on in perpetuity, or if it is gaining from the conflict, it won't come to the table.

You have to be clever about it too. For example, Ami Ayalon who was a former head of the Shin Bet, Israel's secret service, and commander-in-chief of the Navy, said he wanted to speak to Hamas — not because he's anti-Zionist, but because he figured that as soon as he brought them to the table they would split apart. And the most important thing you can do in a conflict — and this is where you have to study Sun Tzu's *Art of War* and the philosophy of how you achieve victory — is to split the enemy. You want to bring people to the table because there's always a right and a left. We know for a fact that there is a right and a left to Hamas. There are people prepared to sign hundred-year treaties and who actually don't believe in a violent approach to resistance, whose idea of a caliphate or realm of Islam is a non-violent notion, but they are stuck with their leadership. And Syria and Iran have radicalized the leadership for their own state reasons. So then what do you do?

On the one hand you invite them to the table so half of them will split. On the other hand you have to invite Syria to the table — which is what

I've spent five years of my work on — because Syria will not allow a Palestinian deal to go through unless it gets the Golan back. So it's a very high stakes game that the Syrians are playing of keeping Hezbollah on Israel's case and keeping Hamas on Israel's case — proxy warfare — to get back the Golan. It's all a clever game, but once you know what people's interests are, you can start to bargain. The hard part is for anybody to be neutral here, and how difficult the Jews and Palestinians and Arabs in general have made it for anyone to intervene. The price is so, so high and there are so many other easier things to do in life.

*Going back to your Syria trips, how do you respond to those who say, 'Sure, why wouldn't the Syrian government be happy to have an American come and publicly apologize? And a rabbi too? Noch besser! [Even better!] They don't have to budge an inch, and here you come and grovel!'*

That's absolutely the case, and we knew that. The best metaphor for everything we're doing when you're dealing with hardened warriors — and we're talking about hardened warriors on all sides — is chess moves. When you make a gesture like that, it puts great pressure on a system that was closed and that was very convinced of its own righteousness. Inside Syrian culture, the Baathist way is to never apologize for anything. The truth is, it's the Zionist way too. When you come and apologize, you create a crack in the system. What happened after I apologized in front of three thousand people was that all kinds of debates started up within Syria that I didn't know about — about why can this man apologize but we can never apologize for what we did.

The second thing is that by apologizing I strengthened the hand of the Mufti against the jihadis who said that the only thing Americans understand is force.

*That's what we Jews sometimes say about Arabs!*

Exactly. So when you make a gesture, it's very powerful. But let me give you an opposite gesture. What's the impact on the Jewish community when Palestinians express regrets for the Holocaust or visit Auschwitz? What halakhically is happening when a group of Arab Israelis go to Auschwitz? They are mourning with us, they are expressing *avelus*, they are visiting our dead. That's a mitzvah. And when somebody does a mitzvah whom you didn't expect to do a mitzvah — you have to reassess who you thought they

were, and you're tempted to do another mitzvah yourself. Our rabbis understood this very well — *mitzvah goreret mitzvah* — one mitzvah leads to another. And *aveirah goreret aveirah* — one sin leads to another sin.

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When somebody does a mitzvah  
whom you didn't expect to do a mitzvah —  
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Another way to think about this is the concept of reframing. When you enter into a different framework — one that includes the other's experience — you're meeting in a whole new place. In my courses I teach Hans-Georg Gadamer's writings on hermeneutics, and he talks about horizons. You come with a certain type of knowledge or understanding, but then your horizon expands and you create a new universe between your horizon and someone else's horizon.

So these gestures are about stimulating the chess moves, about contradicting the images that people expect to have about each other that perpetuate a system of war. It actually has very practical intentions.

Now is it the only thing that should be done? No! My goal is to model these gestures, with the hope that politicians, like George Mitchell, will see the virtue of negotiating gestures. Till now they've done this badly. At one point the State Department had Arafat go visit the Holocaust Museum — it was a disaster, of course, because it was the wrong gesture from the wrong person. You have a school teacher from Arab Israel go to Auschwitz, you don't have someone who killed Jewish schoolchildren go to Auschwitz. It's an insult.

The Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, do not accept the idea that people can change policies, and they don't want to make gestures that appear weak, for the same reason the Likudniks or the neocons say we shouldn't make gestures that make us look weak.

But people don't change because of offers, they change as a result of gestures.

*In Israel there's a high value placed on not being a sucker, a "fryer."*

Exactly. But again, they're not reading Sun Tzo's *Art of War* or learning the lessons of history, which are that strength comes from appearing to be the

most generous and the most pliable and the most diplomatic. You don't win by being a bully; bullies always end up falling. You win by gaining friends. What was that book that sold 100 million copies? *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. It's an indigenous American book, and it just works. It's not about being self-sacrificing or giving up your interests. The damaging part is the old Stalinist philosophy of winning by overwhelming force and brutality. I just hope that over time this will become apparent.

*Do you ever worry that you might be wrong? Can it be as simple as old-fashioned values like respect, honoring the other, developing friendships? Is that naive?*

I don't have to worry about whether I'm wrong, I've seen it happen a hundred times, and it's been proven a thousand times, that this is the way that people get along, this is the way that people reconcile, this is the way that people change history. Gandhi proved it, and King proved it — loving your enemy is very practical. Or in Jewish terms, as the Book of Exodus instructs us — caring for your enemies. It's a Jewish mitzvah to help your enemies. When you see your enemy struggling, the Torah says you should help him up.

*Yet peace still seems so far away. Do you get annoyed when people ask you, "Have you made peace yet?"*

It's a mystery to me why people put down peacemaking that way. No one asks a doctor, "Did you save everyone's life yet? Did you cure all your patients' diseases today?" We look at all kinds of interventions — from therapy to teaching to international aid work — in terms of how well a particular intervention worked and whether it played a constructive role in the larger goal of social transformation. Perhaps we need to start calling it "incremental conflict resolution" to moderate people's expectations. Conflicts involving millions of people take a long time to heal, and it's almost never a linear process.

*Will it take 50 or 100 years?*

It's possible. Because there are so many other factors, and none of us have control over a thousand different things that are going on at the same time that can undo peacemaking. There are tsunamis, disasters, and global depression and nuclear weapons, all sorts of things that shift things in such large ways. But it doesn't have to take that long — absolutely not. Anwar Sadat figured out a gesture that changed people in a matter of days. It's not rocket science, it just takes courage to make the gesture.

*And yet he lost his life.*

He lost his life later, in large part because the deal was only an Egypt-Israel deal, not a comprehensive deal. If he had actually created a Palestinian state, he would have been a hero to most Arabs. I have a different take on this — yes, it's dangerous work. Yitzchak Rabin also lost his life — but again because his gestures were partial — it was Oslo, it was sitting with Arafat, it wasn't the whole package. If you don't deliver the whole package of safety, you're considered a traitor.

*You've been somewhat controversial — or should I say isolated — in the conflict resolution world. Why is that?*

It's true, and for a couple of reasons, although it's changing all the time and especially in the last five years. When I first started out, religion was considered a dirty topic. Nobody respected religion and still most of my colleagues are secular and consider religion to be part of the problem. It's a difficult path to follow because if you consider religion to be potentially part of conflict resolution, who are your peers? It's not necessarily religious people, because many of them are embedded in extremism. I have a lot of colleagues who think they are allies of mine when what they're trying to do is get religion back in the public space. I'm not interested in religion being in the public space. I'm interested in peace. It's my experience that religion should be a part of getting that peace, but it's not because I want to surrender the public space to religion. You have to bring people to the table, either directly or indirectly, but it doesn't mean that you let them take over the table! That's where it's a lonely path.

The other reason for my isolation is that nobody wants to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All the best peacemakers I know, the Christian peacemakers, won't touch it. I'm working with progressive Evangelicals now, trying to get them to come to Israel and Palestine. But just like Jews, when they see the complexity of it, or when they see Jews doing something wrong, their answer is simply to stay away — liberal Jews stay away, liberal evangelicals stay away. Everyone leaves the conflict to violent people.

Then there's the isolation of other Arab peacemakers who don't come to Israel, because their governments won't let them. I have Syrian partners, Saudi partners, Jordanian partners. None of their governments

allow them to be true peacemakers. They want to be — believe me, they would be right in there. So the number of people doing effective work on the ground is practically nothing. That’s partly why it’s so predictable that the conflict is continuing — because there are so few people in the middle.

*Your constant travel and the difficulties of the work itself must be taking a toll on you, not to mention on your family. Have things gotten any easier?*

My time with my family I’ve managed pretty well, in large part because my wife Robyn home schools our children, which allows me to spend a lot of time with them even though I travel a lot. I think I’ve escaped certain death which was coming a few years ago. I totally changed my diet, and changed my life enough so that I stepped back from all the diseases we Gopins are prone to. But emotionally, the work is hard. You can’t protect all the people you enter into relationship with, and you must constantly weigh potential benefits against very severe risks.

I just returned from Damascus where I led a group of twenty American graduate students for the first ever graduate course in citizen diplomacy. It was a pathbreaking trip for the students but it was still quite a tough trip. You’re constantly under surveillance and there are things that go on that I don’t agree with but I can’t say anything, because I can’t put at risk any of my partners. The Mufti and I have a bond, a very emotional reaction to each other. He’s in a very delicate position in Syria, but we managed to arrange that he would meet with the whole class. For better or for worse, it became a huge media event, with Iranian television, Al-Arabiya, and Al-Jazeera.

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We’re all clergy sitting there, powerless to heal  
what’s going on around us, and yet feeling responsible. . .

This is the work.

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I’m sitting with the Grand Mufti and the head of the sharia courts and others, and the Grand Mufti starts recounting the story about what happened with the man from Abu Ghraib back in 2005. Now I don’t know what possessed me, but the night before I had an almost mystical experience. I was walking alone around midnight on the cobblestone streets of Damascus in the Old City, and out of nowhere a boy comes up to me and says in

English (and most of the kids don't speak English), "Please, sir, I don't have a mother, I don't have a father, I'm from Fallujah." In Syria now there are thousands of kids on the streets from Iraq. So I told this story in front of the Mufti, and we all burst out crying. Right there on national television, mourning over the Iraqi losses. You understand, we're all clergy sitting there, powerless to heal what's going on around us, and yet feeling responsible for them as a flock. It was a beautiful moment — Jewish, Christian, and Muslim clergy sitting together. This is the work. It changed my Syrian students, it changed people, I'll never forget it.

*On your first peacemaking trip to Syria, you wrote that you felt like a twentysomething thrill seeker jumping off a cliff with a flimsy bungee cord. And yet, you have also said that "in your heart of hearts, I am terrified of the Arab world." Is that still the case?*

I'm terrified every time I go.

*How are you able to handle the fear?*

There is a picture in my office that has been a big part of my life for a long time. It was taken in the middle of the war, 1944 or 1945. In the background is an old rabbi in Chelsea, Massachusetts, holding a Torah rescued from the Holocaust. I don't even know his name, but I can see the fear in his eyes. On the right is my grandfather. He was pretty mild mannered, but what a look of determination! He was like a bull, my grandfather. People were terrified of him, because nothing would stand in his way. So I have a strain in my family like that.

*Did you know him?*

He died when I was four or five, but his sense of determination was always with me. So I'm a funny combination of being wracked by fear, plagued by it really... but I've never met anybody that people considered to be really courageous who wasn't gripped by bouts of fear. The difference between people who do this sort of thing and people who don't is not the difference between having fear or not. It's people who are gripped by fear and push through anyway based on other drives. I've seen that among artists and others who are gripped by stage fright; it's amazing how many people combine that.

Between Rabbi Soloveitchik and his courage and the often unbelievable strength of character that he often exhibited, and my grandfather, it was a powerful legacy of what it means to be a strong man. I don't remember hearing of my grandfather being afraid of anything. But Rabbi Soloveitchik I knew up

close, and I knew his fears and his problems. So I knew that he was a combination of courage and fear. I've been asked a lot, especially by women: With all these fears and sicknesses, what keeps you going? Christians ask me, Is it your faith?

*Well, it is!*

Yes, but I don't like that word, it's not a Jewish word, and it's not a Jewish way of thinking about things. I can't explain it, but I don't think that way. I think about what drives me every morning when I get up. It's just a cycle of nighttime and daytime. Somehow the night is awful, the night is filled with all the fears and regrets and sense of futility, and then I wake up and I'm at it again.

*Do you think about how the Rav would view your work?*

Yeah, I've thought about it my whole life. I don't know what he would say. But I know that it was his teaching and his existentialism that have fueled my work. He had such a flair for the intensity of life on earth, for the unfolding of history, and the power of a single person to express God's presence on earth. He helped me understand that everything matters — every place, every person, every moment in time. And the moral imperative of acting.

