

Photo Credit: Rabbi Irwin Albert



Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

When one thinks of Modern Orthodoxy, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l* soon comes to mind for [his leadership thereof](#). In our time, however, Modern Orthodoxy has become a vague term with problematic tendencies. As Rabbi Steven Pruzansky—who has [numerous shiurim](#) on Yeshiva University's Torah website—[recently wrote](#), “Too often, one finds in the Modern Orthodox world grievances of one sort or another against this or that aspect of Torah, as if Jews get to sit in judgment of God and His Torah.”

No issue might better crystallize the dissonance between Rav Soloveitchik's Modern Orthodoxy and today's than abortion. Let us consider the great man's views.

During a shiur [on Parashat Bo in 1975](#), Rav Soloveitchik stated that "to me it is something vulgar, this clamor of the liberals that abortion be permitted," adding:

"I consider the society of today as insane...I read from the press that in *Eretz Yisrael* they permit abortions now! Sapir [probably [Pinchas Sapir](#)] comes to the US and asks that 60,000 boys and girls should leave the US and settle in *Eretz Yisrael*. When a child is born, it's also immigration to *Eretz Yisrael*, and yet you murder the children."

Rav Soloveitchik then predicted:

"And if you kill the fetus, a time will come when even infants will be killed...The mother will get frightened after the baby will be born...and the doctor will say her life depends upon the murder of the baby. And you have a word, mental hygiene, whatever you want you can subsume under mental hygiene...And there is now a tendency for rabbis in the US to march along with society, otherwise they'll be looked upon as reactionaries."

Similar remarks [appear](#) in *Reflections of the Rav*:

"If the dominant principle governing the *logos* ["thinking capacity"] is that abortion is morally permissible because only a mother has a right to decide whether she wishes to be a mother, then infants may similarly have their lives terminated after birth. What if the child interferes with the promising brilliant career of the mother?"

These words might be jarring for those who view Rav Soloveitchik as the mild-mannered author of philosophically oriented books like *The Lonely Man of Faith*. Equally if not more jarring might be Rav Soloveitchik's statements on sexual morality, which I discussed [a few months ago](#).

Specific to abortion, one might counter that Rav Soloveitchik permitted an unborn child with Tay-Sachs disease to be aborted [through the sixth month](#), but this proves just the opposite, namely: 1) What does this narrow, tragic case indicate about Rav Soloveitchik's *general* view of abortion? 2) What does it indicate about Rav Soloveitchik's view of abortion after the sixth month even in the case of Tay-Sachs? And vis-à-vis those who claim a woman's absolute right to "terminate a pregnancy" at any point, I doubt such an attempt to (mis)represent Rav Soloveitchik as a "moderate" on abortion would be received agreeably. In this regard, one of Rav Soloveitchik's sons-in-law, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, *shlita*, has [observed in the context of abortion](#):

"Even if we were to accept that indeed it is the woman's own body, we totally reject the conception that she then can do with it as she pleases. *This is a completely anti-halakhic perception* [emphasis added]. It rests on a secular assumption that, as it were, 'My Nile is my own; I made it for myself' (Yechezkel 29:3), as if we are the source of our own existence and therefore the masters of our own being. This is assuredly not the case."

Rav Lichtenstein summarizes the worldview of that anti-halakhic perception as follows:

"The essence of modern secular culture is the notion of human sovereignty; individual man is master over himself, and collective man is master over his collective... From a religious point of view, of course, *eilu va-eilu divrei avoda zara*—both

approaches are idolatrous. Here one establishes individual man as an idol, and the one idolizes, in humanistic terms, humanity as a whole. The basis of any religious perception of human existence is the sense that man is not a master: neither a master over the world around him, nor a master over himself."

Yes, Rav Soloveitchik earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Berlin (as likewise Rav Lichtenstein earned a Ph.D. in English literature from Harvard). Yes, Rav Soloveitchik enjoyed classical music ([especially Bach](#)). And first and foremost, Rav Soloveitchik was a Torah Jew for whom Halachah was not some intellectual game or cultural style, rather an all-encompassing conviction with profound social implications. Thus his denunciations of abortion, which derived from the same worldview as [these remarks in 1953](#):

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Menachem Ben-Mordechai

Menachem Ben-Mordechai has written for numerous publications on subjects ranging from Israel and Latin America to the sport of powerlifting and life insurance. He has also coached [elite powerlifters as well as beginners](#). Menachem's other writing can be found under the name Myles Kantor.

Printed from: <https://jewishpress.com/blogs/a-banner-raised-high/you-murder-the-children-rav-soloveitchik-on-abortion/2013/09/23/>

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