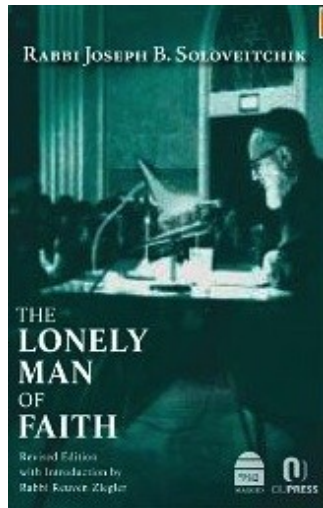


## The Daily Rabbi, an online pluralistic Jewish magazine



### The Lonely Man of Faith

Posted by [Cantor Jonathan L. Friedmann](#) on Tuesday, January 3, 2012 · [Leave a Comment](#)

*The Lonely Man of Faith*, by Joseph B. Soloveitchik, New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2011. 79 pp.

Reviewed by Cantor Jonathan L. Friedmann

Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was one of the most important Jewish philosophers and religious leaders of the twentieth century. Expert in both Talmud study and modern philosophical discourse (he received a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin), Soloveitchik advocated a synthesis of Torah learning and secular scholarship that laid the groundwork for Modern Orthodoxy. As head of Yeshiva University for nearly half a century, he was almost singularly responsible for the resurgence of Orthodox Judaism in America. Known affectionately as “the Rav,” Soloveitchik altered the Jewish intellectual landscape with his unique pairing of Neo-Kantian existentialism and Jewish thought, particularly in the area of *halakha*. However, as often happens with monumental figures, generalities about his thought and contributions are more widely encountered than his actual words.

Perhaps the best introduction to Soloveitchik’s penetrating mind is his classic essay, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, which has just been rereleased in handsome hardback. First published in the journal *Tradition* in 1965, the essay examines the modern religious person’s struggle to balance spiritual existence with scientific materialism. One of the outstanding features of the newly revised edition is a lucid introduction by Rabbi Reuven Zeigler, which summarizes key arguments, outlines central topics, and offers a section-by-section guide. This detailed overview is especially valuable in light of the density of Soloveitchik’s writing and the occasional obscurity of his philosophical language. At the foundation of *The Lonely Man of Faith* is the biblical story of creation. The Book of Genesis offers two accounts of this primordial event. In the first (chapter 1), God creates the world in six days, culminating with the creation of humanity “in His own image” and with the mission to “fill the earth and master it” (Gen. 1:27-28). In the second (chapter 2), Adam is formed from dust, placed in the Garden of Eden, and is introduced to Eve, a woman fashioned from his own rib. Soloveitchik understands these chapters as portraying two human ideals: Adam the first (or Adam I)

and Adam the second (or Adam II). Adam I, endowed with creativity and given dominion over the earth, is practical, achievement-oriented, and “seeks dignity and glory, through his majestic posture vis-à-vis his environment” (p. 10). Adam II, who yearns for intimate connection with the divine, is humble, redemption-oriented, and concerned with existential (rather than functional) questions, like “Why did the world in its totality come into existence?” and “What is the purpose of all this?” (p. 15).

In Soloveitchik’s assessment, Adam I is the dominant personality in the contemporary developed world. He strives for the essentially secular goals of material success, technological advancement, and social standing. His worldview is incapable of reconciling the aspirations and inward-focus of Adam II, the man of faith, who favors the life of the soul. This is why Adam II is lonely: “He looks upon himself as a stranger in modern society, which is technically minded, self-centered, and self-loving. . . . [W]hat can such a man [of faith] say to a functional, utilitarian society which is saeculum-oriented and whose practical reasons of the mind have long ago supplanted the sensitive reasons of the heart?” (p. 5). And although both Adams were divinely ordained, Soloveitchik argues that God does not desire humanity to be consumed with this-worldly pursuits and empirical “how”-categories. We must also be aware of the *mysterium magnum* that surrounds us, and humbly seek a covenantal relationship with our Creator.

The rich discussions found in *The Lonely Man of Faith* are not specific to Judaism, but can apply to all Western faiths. The essay’s tone and subject matter are universal, with references to Judaism and Jewish texts mostly confined to the footnotes. And it has recently come to light that many of its ideas were originally formulated in lectures given to Catholic seminarians. It is, then, fitting that the essay centers on Adam and Eve, the parents of all humanity.

Even with its universal thrust and appeal, *The Lonely Man of Faith* remains highly personal. As Soloveitchik explains in the opening paragraph: “Instead of talking theology, in the didactic sense, eloquently and in balanced sentences, I would like, hesitantly and haltingly, to confide in you, and to share with you some concerns which weigh heavily on my mind . . .” Whether or not one fully agrees with Soloveitchik’s view of creation, diagnosis of the modern crisis of faith, or negative view of secularism, his refreshing honesty and provocative propositions make for thoroughly stimulating reading.