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Collected Essays, Volume 1 (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization)

Haym Soloveitchik

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Written at different times and for different audiences - some for scholars of rabbinic literature, others for readers with a less specialist interest - the essays gathered in this volume nevertheless have an inner coherence, reflecting author Haym Soloveitchik's lifelong interest in the history of halakhah and the unfolding of halakhic ideas. What was it that stimulated change, and why? What happened when strong forces impinged on halakhic observance, and both the scholarly elite and the community as a whole had to grapple with upholding observance while adapting to a new set of circumstances? Soloveitchik shows that the line between adaptation and deviance is a fine one, and that where a society draws that line is revelatory of both its values and its self-perception. The book opens with a brief description and characterization of the dramatis personae who figure in all these essays: Rashi and the Tosafists. It covers the halakhic commentaries and their authors, the creativity of Ashkenaz, and the halakhic isolation of the Ashkenazic community. A second section focuses on usury, moneylending, and pawnbroking - widespread practices that shaped the image of the Jew in Europe for centuries. The third section deals with the ban on Gentile wine and how that is connected to the development of moneylending. The final section presents general conclusions in the form of four studies of the communal self-image of Ashkenaz and its attitude to deviation and change. Many of the essays have been published before and are well known in the field, although some were published only in Hebrew and two are completely new. Most of those previously published have been updated; in particular, the major essay on pawnbroking has been significantly expanded. *** "Soloveitchik is one of the most influential scholars of medieval Jewry in our generation. The essays are not only models of meticulous scholarship, they are also beautifully written, thought provoking, and very often passionate. This is one of the most important books on medieval Jewry published recently but it is no less significant as a study on the nature of Jewish law and how it developed. The power of Soloveitchik's prose and the clarity of his presentation will make this a book that is not only cited but also read, over and over." - Religious Studies Review, Vol. 40, No. 4, December 2014 *** "The leading contemporary practitioner of the discipline of 'History of Halacha' . . . Over the past four decades, he has enriched Jewish scholarship and historiography immeasurably with groundbreaking monographs and books on a broad range of topics . . . [here] the author has updated and significantly expanded his previously published articles . . . should find pride of place on many bookshelves." - Jeffrey R. Woolf, Jewish Action *** "In our generation the premier practitioner of history of, and through, halacha is Haym Soloveitchik . . . [he], in addition to his many other merits, is an elegant stylist . . . Part of the pleasure of reading him is that there is more learning and illumination to be found in his remarks dropped along the way than in the pages of a lesser scholar . . . profound, poignant essays." - David Wolpe, Tablet Magazine [Subject: Jewish Studies, History]Ëœ

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