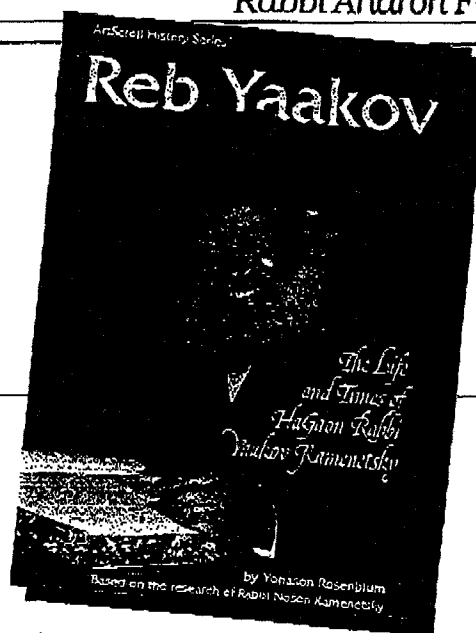


GEDOLIM BOOKS

And The Biography of Reb Yaakov Kamenetzky



I. VITAL COMPONENTS IN OUR SPIRITUAL REJUVENATION

The genre of "gedolim books"—biographies of great Torah personalities—has truly enriched English Judaic literature during the past three decades. A *gedol* is someone who is an embodiment of all the values, the attitudes and the behavior that the Torah demands from a Jew. He is someone who has spent a lifetime devoted to the study of Torah, the performance of its *mitzvos* and the perfection of his character, and who has achieved a level of accomplishment in these areas far beyond that of almost all his contemporaries.

The loss during the Holocaust of hundreds of such outstanding Torah figures meant for the surviving generations not merely a diminution in their collective level of Torah learning and piety, but also a diminution of their spiritual aspirations. As the embodiment of the teachings of the Torah, a *gedol* is the ultimate model against which his generation measures itself. Without living examples, we are not inspired to use our full potential, and we unwittingly settle for mediocrity for ourselves, our children and our schools. (How many yeshiva students nowadays are driven by an

Rabbi Feldman, who heads Yeshivas Be'er HaTorah in Jerusalem, is the author of the books, *The River, the Kettle and the Bird* and *The Juggler and the King*, both published by Feldheim.

ambition to know *Shas* with *Rishonim* and all four sections of the *Shulchan Aruch*?) Given the premise that the Jewish people cannot exist without Torah, the loss of *gedolim* during the Holocaust was no less a serious blow to the nation than was its physical decimation.

To some degree, biographies of *gedolim* fill this gap. When we read how a Reb Chaim Ozer, a Reb Shimon Shkop, or a Reb Moshe Feinstein lived, we are moved to demand more from ourselves and to rise beyond the least common denominators of our times, so sadly "least" and so pitifully "common." Such books are vital components in the rejuvenation of the Torah life of post-Holocaust Jewry.

Great Works, Two Flaws

In spite of the major role these "gedolim books" play in our national consciousness, they often possess two major flaws. The first stems from the stereotyping of their subjects. Too often the books begin with the saintliness of the *gedol*'s parents. Then follows a *de rigueur* description of the *gedol* as child prodigy and *tzaddik* who, as everyone could tell, was destined to become "a Torah great." He continues his development into precocious adolescence, ultimately marries an equally saintly woman and finally emerges as the towering Torah giant. It is not difficult

to understand a certain woman who, after having read a few of these stylized stories, remarked in all seriousness, "How interesting to note that all *gedolim* lived identical lives."

Although there is no reason to disbelieve these stories, these portrayals do not always demonstrate the unique contribution each *gedol* made to his times, and how he was different from other *gedolim*. With notable exceptions, they frequently ignore the self-sacrifice and dedication which of necessity must have gone into the development of every *gedol*. They often overlook the fact that certainly these men must have surely had their moments of self-doubt, error, and human frailty, and that each had times when he needed encouragement, love and friendship. Great men are, of course, humans as well; on the contrary, they are great because they overcame their human shortcomings. Because attention is focused on the general picture and not on the details, these biographies can emerge unreal and difficult to identify with, thus undermining their educational impact.

The second flaw of the *gedolim* genre is the usual emphasis on the extraordinary intellectual gifts of these *gedolim*—their lightning grasp, brilliance of conception and total recall; i.e., their genius aspect. There is undoubtedly value in pointing out the superior intellectual talents of many

of our Torah leaders. If such geniuses could spend a lifetime studying Torah, how awesomely vast must Torah wisdom be! Furthermore, if these are the minds from which emanated the rulings of Jewish law, how respectfully are these rulings to be treated!

Nevertheless, despite these benefits, it would serve the reader better to emphasize the hard work, sweat and tears that went into making them *gedolim*. Portraying *gedolim* as geniuses tends to make their accomplishments appear unattainable: how can anyone not born with such extraordinary gifts ever expect to emulate them? More seriously, they create the distorted image in the mind of the reader that to become a *gadol* one must have been born with prodigious mental gifts. This is not true.

The Other Factors of Gadlus

Unusual intellectual gifts are not what make a *gadol*, nor are all *gedolim* necessarily geniuses. Torah greatness requires no extraordinary inborn talents and is therefore within the reach of everyone. As Rabbi Yisroel Salanter is reported to have said, "Not everyone can be a genius (*gaon*), but everyone can be a *gadol*"; or in another version, "Not everyone can be a Malbim but everyone can be a Reb Nochum'ke Grodner" (the teacher of the Chofetz Chayim). Anyone with a deep enough commitment to Torah to refuse to be swayed by the seductions of wealth, prestige, and materialism; carry out with single-minded dedication his obligations as a Jew; work incessantly at perfecting his character; invest in the constant study and review necessary to acquire "the crown of Torah"— anyone like this will surely become a *gadol* beYisroel, even with average talents. In fact, some of the greatest leaders of Jewish history were not noted for any extraordinary intellectual powers.

When some forty years ago the Ponevezher Rav, Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman, decided to found a *kollel* in Bnei Brak with the express purpose of producing *gedolim*, his initial idea was to admit to this *kollel* only young men blessed with brilliant intellectual faculties. When he

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presented his plan to the revered Chazon Ish, the latter expressed his reservations. "Shouldn't there be a *kollel* where a future Reb Yitzchak Elchanan can develop?" he tersely asked. The Chazon Ish was implying that Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, the fabled *Rav* of Kovno, author of major halachic works and recognized as the undisputed leader of European Jewry at the turn of the century, was not a natural genius. By restricting his *kollel* to gifted


minds, the Chazon Ish was saying, the Ponevezher Rav might be denying the next generation of leaders of this caliber.

True, many *gedolim* in Jewish history were blessed with prodigious mental gifts, but this was not why they grew to be *gedolim*. Reb Aharon Kotler, founder of Bais Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, N.J., and a full-fledged genius if there ever was one, used to cherish Edison's adage (which one of his students once cited before him) that "genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." Obviously he held that his own accomplishments were not the result of his instantaneous grasp and his phenomenal memory but rather of his hard work.

Of Genius and its Pitfalls

Special talents do not ensure greatness; on the contrary, they often create some of the greatest pitfalls to greatness. Possessors of bright minds who have been in the limelight since childhood become addicted to a need for acclaim. Unless they have learned to temper this addiction, they might find it hard to sit at the feet of those more learned than they are and to absorb their wisdom.

Without character refinement, such individuals often succumb to a temptation to present dazzling solu-



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tions to problems which advance their reputations but which pervert the truth.

Their talents for self-advancement are at their best a waste of talent and at their worst a public hazard. If, as the *Rambam* writes, one cannot strive to acquire honor (*kavod*) and Torah excellence at the same time, their very brilliance might be the greatest barrier to their pretensions to greatness.

Brilliance is acquired genetically; greatness must be acquired by relentless struggle—a struggle which no mental acrobatics can help win. The potential *gadol* must choose unequivocally between the pursuit of prestige or money, and the quest for truth, and then must tenaciously refuse to lose sight of his choice. He must be ready for the many inevitable failures that await him, and to be prepared to pick up the pieces and begin all over again. His life must be filled

with *emuna* in G-d, in Torah, in the destiny of the Jewish people—as well as in himself as a member of that people.

II. A NOTABLE EXCEPTION

Reb Yaakov: *the Life and Times of Hagaon Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky*,* by Yonason Rosenblum, based on the research of Reb Yaakov's illustrious son, Rabbi Noson Kamenetzky, is a refreshing exception to the standard *gedolim* biography genre.

First of all, it is free of stereotypy. The hero of the book has real, human dimensions, and we clearly distinguish his uniqueness among other *gedolim*. We find Reb Yaakov struggling with poverty, maintaining his own integrity as a Jew despite the

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pressures of the alien American culture, coping with and influencing the rampant Jewish ignorance of his times, and rising above the ordinary, petty considerations which motivate most mortals.

Although Reb Yaakov was clearly a genius, this aspect is not emphasized in this book as much as his *gadol* aspect. To paraphrase Rabbi Rosenblum's excellent introduction, Reb Yaakov was a person whose behavior was a perfect reflection of the dictates of his intelligence; whose intelligence, in turn, reflected total submission to the Divine intelligence of the Torah; whose every action, emotion and thought was filtered through *Shas* and *Poskim*. Rabbi Rosenblum presents vividly Reb Yaakov's commitment to truth, his care for the lowliest Jew, his total lack of concern for personal gain or prestige—all of which are the materials from which *gadlus* is fashioned.

One of the best features of this biography is its recreation of the Jewish Eastern European civilization and the Jewish *shtetl*. By virtue of Rabbi Noson Kamenetzky's careful research, the reader gains a good feel for the Yeshiva and Rabbinic world of pre-World War I and II times, together with the difficulties that faced it. Equally fascinating are the book's fresh insights into American Jewish history of the thirties and forties.

There are a few shortcomings. The translations of Hebrew words do not follow any clear pattern. For example, on the first page, *gadlus baTorah* is left untranslated, while *chiddushim* is translated (by "novellae"—in itself a non-word). In the same sentence on page 21, "Shas" is translated but "poskim" is not. Although nearly all the anecdotes are carefully attributed and highly interesting, the reader often feels that the proportion of anecdotes to commentary is too high.

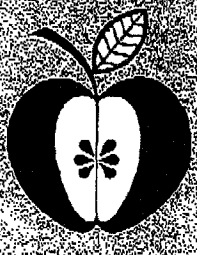
But these are minor complaints. Rabbi Rosenblum deserves the gratitude of all his readers for having created a remarkable book, which genuinely evokes the spirit of Reb Yaakov. By providing us with a glimpse of the inner workings of a true *gadol beYisroel*, he has created a legacy for our times.

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