Nathan Kamenetsky

MAKING OF A GODOL

A Study of Episodes in the Lives of Great Torah Personalities

IMPROVED EDITION

Volume 1
carry out into the public domain”. I suppose that the reason for being selective in what to publish stems from the concern lest someone’s feelings be hurt by uncensored revelations. The Chaletz-Chaim’s son likely alluded to this concern when he wrote that certain stories are impossible to publish. With regard to my book, however, I must say that insofar as this first volume, which deals in matters that transpired a century ago, I did not give much consideration to concealing then-sensitive matters for the reason that when my father talked about these long-past episodes he specifically applied the verse "Both their [the principals’] enmity and their envy are already bygone" – see p. 792 in this volume. In fact, my father considered the passage of only 50 years – a נ蚌埠 (which the Torah labels "forever") – to have enough of a cumulative effect to erase one world and bring a new society in its stead. In that vein, I saw no need to repress my thoughts; and rather than allowing R’ Rephael Hamburg-er’s slogan to block my path, I utilized the Biblical verse to clear the way for interesting, learned and educational disclosures about a world gone-by. Undoubtedly the readership of this book includes some descendants of those greats of yore, of blessed memory, mentioned herein. I pray that they are intelligent enough to appreciate their progenitors’ human frailty along with their greatness: stemming from great ancestors, they should be intelligent.

I came across a striking disagreement between two famous brothers on the subject of stories about great men of previous generations. R’ Shimon Schwab in his Selected Writings defines the difference between history and “storytelling” in that the first must be “truthful, and unsparing of even the failings of the righteous”. R’ Schwab asserts eloquently that “a realistic historic picture” will reveal “inadequacies” which will “rightfully make a lot of people angry” and that “no ethical purpose is served by preserving” such a picture; he continues: “It is far more beautiful (emphasis added)” over “history”. R’ Mordkhai Schwab in his essay “only a proper story is”, when he wrote: “the Yiddish in reference to while dehumanizing Yehoshua-Yoseph P. 5656 (1896) review of earlier in Warsaw. R’ Schwab in his Selected Writings states that stories that serve the sake of teaching must not be brittle a fundament of tellers who are more their leaders from a distance himself to from fiction. I was 3, Talmudic Sages of the Egyptian era, p. 175.

See n. 1 on p. 20 in this volume.
"Lakewood, 1988 – pp. 239-238 – an essay. "Only a proper story is...
"Rav Shimon"

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, when writing about Yoseph-Yitzhak Said that R’ Yoseph-Yitzhak arrested and release...
a picture; he contends that we must “put a veil over the human failings of our forebears and glorify all the rest which is great and beautiful (emphasis added)”. In other words, he favors “storytelling” over “history”. He coins an adage: “We do not need realism: we need inspiration from our forefathers.” That author’s brother, R’ Mordkhai Schwab, however, had a negative view of “storytelling” when he told me, “The Satmarer Rav, R’ Yoilish Teitelbaum, never told ‘stories [נarratives]’ because he said, ‘You cannot educate through lies [מרשים].’” R’ Mordkhai agreed with R’ Yoilish in reference to stories intended to glorify their principals while dehumanizing them. R’ Yoilish echoed a statement by R’ Yehoshua-Yoseph Preil, Rav of the Lithuanian town of Krok. In a 5656 (1896) review of דעיהות משלים תשע חכמים, published a year earlier in Warsaw, R’ Preil set down the following ethic: “To create stories that never happened and present them as facts for the sake of teaching morals – woe is to the musar precept built on as brittle a foundation as a lie!” Even hasidim, the celebrated storytellers who are more suspect than others in creating legends about their leaders (from whom the Satmarer Rav was evidently trying to distance himself by his statement), are careful in separating fact from fiction. I was told by R’ Shimon Deutch that he had asked the Lubavitcher Rebbe, R’ Menahem-Mendel Schneerson, whether when writing about the arrest and release of his father-in-law, R’ Yoseph-Yitzhaq Schneerson, he should mention or omit the fact that R’ Yoseph-Yitzhaq’s secretary, R’ Hayyim Lieberman, was arrested and released with him. (R’ Lieberman was opposed to R’

1988 – pp. 233-234 He is consistent when stating in an earlier paragraph of his essay, “Only a prophet mandated by his Divine calling has the ability to report history as it really happened, unbiased and without prejudice”; he thus recommends that our non-prophetic writing of “history” be biased and prejudiced. January 14, 1988 He refuted thereby the hypothesis of some Jewish historians that the Talmudic Sages invented the story of a failed revolt by the tribe of Epirrain during the Egyptian exile in order to discourage rebellion against the Romans of their own day. See עהבד תומרי מתאמה Animated תומרי יושב יוספ מולם (זכור, תומרי, p. 248. November
Menahem-Mendel’s ascendance to the Lubavitch throne and did not recognize him as Rebbe after he assumed the position.) R’ Menahem-Mendel responded, “History must be written [true to its truth]” – and explained his redundancy: “This includes not [even] polishing up any word [קצרות].” Also cf. The Musar Controversy, a book about the dispute in the late 5650s (1890s) in which most of the great Torah figures came out publicly against the Musar movement. The author, Musar adherent R’ Dov Katz, tells how “many opinions were heard” by him “that we should avoid the entire affair (תיקון);” but “several Musar personalities” including R’ Yehiel-Yankev Weinberg and R’ Hatzqel Sarna insisted not only that he should write about the controversy, but – as R’ Sarna put it – “that he set down in writing the full affair without omitting any detail, be what it may.”

I concede humbly that I have followed not R’ Shimon Schwab’s prescription but R’ Mordkhai’s and R’ Sarna’s, and have portrayed events and people fully and honestly. It goes without saying that R’ Mordkhai Schwab did not approve of revealing faults in any man without constructive purpose: and neither do I. But there is constructive purpose in describing the great Torah scholars honestly – even if the true portraits seem to include humane blemishes – for it encourages the reader, who has the potential, to strive for greatness in spite of knowing that he is possessed by

some negative traits.

R’ Deutch offered a poignant example of how the Rebbe himself followed this guideline when he funded the publication of the memorial book for the city of Yekaterinoslav-Dnepropetrovsk where his father had been rav – in spite of the book’s divulging that one of the Rebbe’s brothers “the youngest, Yisrael-Aryeh-Laib, a ‘ הלם, was caught up in the Haskalat, Marxism and Trotskyism, and then moved to Palestine while far from Torah and Habad”, and the other, Dober, was confined in an insane asylum, “and, unmarried, died in his depression in Kazakhstan” – see סמי חב’לה – see הספונסורים, לוח שנה תפ_radius, ссыл, חקיקות לתפ_radius, p. 119, in an article by the editor. "Also cf. the end of p. 22, below. Published by "Published by pp. 19-20 and n. 5 R’ Weinberg wrote to him, “It is proper for a historian-author not to conceal the opposing side, its opinions and outlooks.” Also cf. the end of p. 22, below. See pp. xxix-xxx, below, that the “faults” are seeing some negative traits.
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“faults” are

some negative character trait too difficult to alter. Furthermore, by 

knowing the truth about gedolim of yore, a reader who idolizes a 

Torah leader of his own generation and then observes in him some 

imperfection, will not suffer the fallen hero syndrome, for he real-

izes that even the leaders of earlier generations were human. I cannot 

subscribe to R’ Shimon’s assignation to anyone of a “right” to 

become “angry” with my revelations, because in no way do I con-

sider the stature of the great rabbanim and rashei yeshiva of yore 

diminished by describing them as they were. If, due to my untinted 

description, some reader views some great man or another as hav-

ing a slight failing or imperfection – did not the wisest of men de-

clare with Divine guidance (מאתם בパーיעה ההקרנים): “If a wise 

righteous man who is by nature a saintly and perfect person 

there is no saintly man on earth who does good and never fails)”

a pronouncement upon which the Gemara bases 

the halakhah that (saints [too] require atonement)? I 

personally am enamored with all the great Torah figures, and see 

them as the Amora 

was described when he received his 

ordination/:

“Without mascara and without rouge and without 

hairdo, yet a graceful gazelle” (In 

ם"ע הפסוק). If a 

minor blemish and on a truly great man it is never more than mi-

nor – also exists, it does not ruin the grace of the outstanding per-

sonality; he is like a gazelle with a distinctive beauty mark.

In an article in (the name) by , I came across a 

report on my father’s attitude toward misrepresenting historical 

events which validates my approach. It imprints that my father ap-

proved the snubbing of “a book on the Gaon of Vilna by an out-

standing author” because “the author had purposely omitted chap-

ters dealing with the Gaon’s opposition to ‘Hasiduth’,” and that he 
said, “It is prohibited to conceal substantive and important issues 
such as these. Such distortion is tantamount to falsehood.” On the
question of how our protagonist regarded that specific book — it is obviously — I submit firstly that its author did not simply ignore the issue of the Gaon’s stance toward the Hasidic movement. In the introduction to the third edition, he declares expressly that he has written chapters dealing with the controversy “which convulsed the House of Israel in those days” and they “are retained” in his archives. I was also present when the venerable author, R’ Bezalel Landau, held a discussion about this matter with my father during the latter’s 5742 (1982) visit to Israel and related that a distinguished rosh yeshiva in Jerusalem had accused him (as did ה”ל הרו”ז) of “falsifying the image of the Gaon” by omitting the issue of the Gaon’s hithnagduth. R’ Landau pleaded with my father, “How can I publicize the Gaon’s prohibition on intermarriage with hasidim and possibly cause families to break up?” My father agreed that the five chapters he had prepared be left unpublished but not be destroyed, saying, “Have them prepared for publication but desist from [publishing them] until such time as may come when events will necessitate their publication.” He explained in veiled terms, “They must be ready in case a certain someone should do an ugly thing.” He was referring to messianic fantasies simmering in a hasidic circle — in Israel, the adherents of that group had fomented a political feud along hasidic-mithnagdic lines — and my father felt that the eventual publication of these chapters would help the general hasidic public shake off the messianics should their fantasy get out of hand. As it turned out, my father’s concerns were well founded: a large segment of that hasidic cult did declare its leader to be the Messiah. (The perverse possibility that a decade after his meeting with R’ Bezalel, many of the sect’s members would formulate the phantasm that its dead rebbe would make a “second coming” — that is likely never a healthy imagination would have been thwarted.)

Vilna Gaon’s failure to specify issue of the Gaon’s specific issue of the Gaon’s prohibition on intermarriage with hasidim and possibly cause families to break up? My father agreed that the five chapters he had prepared be left unpublished but not be destroyed, saying, “Have them prepared for publication but desist from [publishing them] until such time as may come when events will necessitate their publication.” He explained in veiled terms, “They must be ready in case a certain someone should do an ugly thing.” He was referring to messianic fantasies simmering in a hasidic circle — in Israel, the adherents of that group had fomented a political feud along hasidic-mithnagdic lines — and my father felt that the eventual publication of these chapters would help the general hasidic public shake off the messianics should their fantasy get out of hand. As it turned out, my father’s concerns were well founded: a large segment of that hasidic cult did declare its leader to be the Messiah. (The perverse possibility that a decade after his meeting with R’ Bezalel, many of the sect’s members would formulate the phantasm that its dead rebbe would make a “second coming” — that is likely never a healthy imagination would have been thwarted.)

On this specific argument, my father remarked — seriously, it seemed — that even among forbidden marriages there are some that, ex post facto, are not required to be dissolved and there is therefore no fear of breaking up families as a result of the publication of the Gaon’s prohibition. — and the latter of the murdered rebbe by the murderer, who was intent on avenging the father.
coming” – this is what they believe and are propagating in our day – likely never even entered the realm of our protagonist’s normal, healthy imagination. We may therefore conjecture that my father would have enthusiastically approved the recent publication of יאנס, by [בפוקס וحضתרה ציונית, זילספל, תשרי], wherein the Vilna Gaon’s battle against Hasidism is bared.) So much for the specific issue of R’ Landau’s book which, as that conversation disclosed, pertained to a situation with current consequences. But my father’s statement as reported byJoshua that concealment of issues is “tantamount to falsehood” is certainly valid when passing on information about historical issues that have no bearing on contemporary affairs, as does this book.

There is a more recondite understanding of what seems to be criticism of great Torah figures. R’ Yehiel Perr told me of a question he once had asked his father, R’ Menahem, a peer of my father’s in the Slabodka Yeshiva. A young lady was about to become engaged when someone divulged to her parents that her intended groom had once been institutionalized in an asylum. A fierce dispute ensued within the community as to whether the tattler was a tzaddiq or a rasha. R’ Perr asked his father how to view this act, and the latter replied, “From this episode, you cannot tell. If his other actions are kindly, he did this out of piety [תורה; and if his other actions are vicious, he did this out of malice [חרא].”

R’ Hayyim Shmulevitz brings out the same motif masterfully with “definite proof (תעודות וראיה)” from Massekhet Yoma. The gemara relates that two kohen were racing up the altar ramp, when one stabbed the other to death with a Temple knife, and the father of the murdered youth, finding his son in the throes of death, remarked, “My son is yet gasping, so the knife remains undefiled [חרא] [not having touched a corpse].” A penetrating discussion regarding the father’s comment follows: Did it reflect a laxity in that prohibition.

1 Also cf. n. 5 in the Prologue of this book, pp. 21-22, which quotes 
2 מנה: הינשים פעמים וטעם ד"וי, נובמבר 29, 1988
3 REFERENCES
Making of a Godol

generation's concern with murder while its concern with purity 
was normal, or was it an expression of how meticulous that 
generation was with the purity of Temple utensils while its concern with 
bloodshed was at the normative level? R' Hayyim points out that 
we have an example here of how a single act or statement can re-
veal two diametrically opposed characteristics. That father might 
have personified the epitome of evil, callous even with regard to 
the life of his own child, or he might have been so saintly that in 
his moment of extreme anguish he still had the sanctity of the 
Beth haMiqdash in mind. Likewise, when we speak about "fail­
ings" of great Torah figures, can we state definitely that their ac­tions indicate character deficiencies rather than manifestations of 
other traits, uncommon yet positive? When presenting facts about 
great Torah personalities, unusual as they may be, we never can 
determine that they demonstrate unequivocal weaknesses and 
failures; being that they may be an expression either of unusual pos­i­tive qualities or of common human weaknesses, we opt for the 
former when representing great personalities."

In summary, we cannot judge and evaluate the individual acts of 
Torah personages of former generations — nor, for the same rea­son, can we resolve our problems in the particular ways they re-
solved theirs. To paraphrase the words of the Prophet (ע"ה): 
כי אל נשבעותה מהם מהנחותו אול רוחותיו ורוחותיו... "כ科研院所 סביר קא בהק
ודרבך ודרכי נפשיך ודרך שינון הלכותיך" (For their thoughts are not our 
thoughts, nor their ways our ways; for as the heavens are higher 
than the earth, so are their ways higher than our ways, and their 
thoughts than our thoughts). Yet there is much we may learn about 
them: not their perfection — for which we need no model and 
which everyone must try to achieve in accordance with his own 
personality — but their motives and ideals, their truthfulness and 
wholesomeness, their charity and love of Torah. These may serve 
as beacons on the paths of our lives.

A. The text of the book is divided into a number of parts: The Text, 
the Notes, and the Excursus. The identification marks which 
are relevant to the beginning of the text, the repetition of the 
notes and excursuses in the text, and the note/excursus are 
the notes and excursuses in the text in The Text. To turn back and find 
the repetition of the notes and excursuses in the text in The Text. 
excursuses are as follows: 
I must explain that the notes are subdivided for ease: 
When the notes are subdivided for ease: 
the upper part of each chapter, or as the notes must