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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 Chafetz-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 verse⁹ גם שנאתם גם קנאתם כבר אבדה (Both their [the principals'] enmity and their envy are already bygone)¹⁰ – see p. 792 in this volume. In fact, my father considered the passage of only 50 years – a יובל (which the Torah labels "לעולם" [forever]) – to have enough of a cumulative effect to erase one world and bring a new society in its stead¹¹. In that vein, I saw no need to repress my thoughts; and rather than allowing R' Rephael Hamburger'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 intelligent¹².

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*¹³ 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

⁹ ועין ברש"י ¹⁰ See n. 1 on p. 20 in this volume. ¹¹ ועין הוריות יד. ¹² קדלה ט:ו. ¹³ Lakewood, בראשית (מז:כט) ובמדרש רבה (צו:ה) שיעקב אבינו ביקש שלא יעשו אותו ע"ז.

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.”^v That author’s brother, R’ Mordkhai Schwab, however, had a negative view of “storytelling” when he told me^w, “The Satmarer Rav, R’ Yoilish Teitelbaum, never told ‘stories [מעשיות]’ because he said, ‘You cannot educate through lies [שקר].’” 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 *תולדות ישראל ח"ב* ס' זאב יעבץ’s 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!”^x 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^y 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 ^v 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. ^w January 14, 1988 ^x He refuted thereby the hypothesis of some Jewish historians that the Talmudic Sages invented the story of a failed revolt by the tribe of Ephraim during the Egyptian exile in order to discourage rebellion against the Romans of their own day. See *בתבים נבחרים מאת הרב יהושע יוסף פרייל* (ניו יארק, חרפ"ד), p. 248. ^y November

Menahem-Mendel's ascendancy to the Lubavitch throne and did not recognize him as Rebbe after he assumed the position.) R' Menahem-Mendel responded, "History must be written *אמת לאמתה* [true to its truth]" – and explained his redundancy: "This includes not [even] polishing up any word [ניט צופרצען קיין ווארט]." ^z Also cf. *פולמוס המוסר* (*The Musar Controversy*)^a, 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 (פרשה)"; but "several Musar personalities" including R' Yehiel-Yankev Weinberg^b 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^c. 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

26, 1997 ^z 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 *iluy*, was caught up in the *Haskalah*, 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 *ספר יקאטרינוסלב* – *דנפרופטרובסק* (הוצאת יוצאי יקאטרינוסלב-דנפרופטרובסק בישראל, ירושלים תל-אביב, תשל"ג) p. 119, in an article by the editor, הרב ד"ר צבי הרכבי, titled "שלשה רבנים" ^a Published in *תשל"ב* – pp. 19-20 and n. 5 ^b R' Weinberg wrote to him, "It is proper for a historian-author not to conceal the opposing side, its opinions and outlooks." ^c Also cf. the end of p. 22, below. * See pp. *xxix-xxx*, below, that the "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 realizes 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 consider 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 having a slight failing or imperfection – did not the wisest of men declare with Divine guidance (רוח הקודש): כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה (For there is no saintly man on earth who does good and never fails)^d, a pronouncement upon which the Gemara bases the halakhah that צדיקי צריכי כפרה (saints [too] require atonement)^e? I personally am enamored with all the great Torah figures, and see them as the *Amora* רב זירא was described when he received his ordination^f: "Without mascara and without rouge and without hairdo, yet a graceful gazelle [לא כחל ולא שרק ולא פירכוס ויעלת חן]." If a minor blemish – and on a truly great man it is never more than minor – also exists, it does not ruin the grace of the outstanding personality; he is like a gazelle with a distinctive beauty mark.

In an article in פרופ' זאב לב by *המעין* (תמוז תשנ"ב) I came across a report on my father's attitude toward misrepresenting historical events which validates my approach. It imparts that my father approved the snubbing of "a book on the Gaon of Vilna by an outstanding author" because "the author had purposely omitted chapters 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

סנהדרין קהלת ז"ב, ובתפלתו במלכים א' ח:מו, "כי אין אדם אשר לא יחטא"^d only virtual. Also מו: ועיין שם קא' שרבי עקיבא אמר לרבו רבי אליעזר, "למדחננו רבנו כי אין צדיק וכו' תוד"ה ארבעה בשבת. cf. *ad loc.*, which disagrees with that gemara, and cf. קהלת רבה. סנהדרין יד' / נה: (ואולי זה הספק במס' שבת קיב: אם ראשונים בני מלאכים או בני אנשים.

question of how our protagonist regarded that specific book – it is obviously *הגאון הוהסידר מוילנא* – 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^g, 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 לב פרויט) of “falsifying (מזייף) 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?^h” 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 [יענער] should do an ugly thing [מיאוסע] א זאך.” 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

^g מפעל “תורה מציון” (ירושלים, תשל”ח) ^h 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 (אם נשאח לא תצא); and there is therefore no fear of *breaking up* families as a result of the publication of the Gaon’s

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 *לגאון*, by רב אליאך [מכון “מורשת ישיבות”, ירושלים, תשס”ב], 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 by פרופ’ לב 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 bookⁱ.

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*^j. 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 [צדיקות]; and if his other actions are vicious, he did this out of malice [רישעות].”

R’ Hayyim Shmulevitz brings out the same motif masterfully^k with “definite proof (ראיה גדולה)” from *Massekhet Yoma*^l. 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 [טהור] [not having touched a corpse].” A penetrating discussion regarding the father’s comment follows: Did it reflect a laxity in that

prohibition. ⁱ Also cf. n. 5 in the Prologue of this book, pp. 21-22, which quotes תולדות מנחם. / November 29, 1988 ^j שיתוח מוסד תשל”ג ^k קנב-קנב ^l כג-כג:

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 reveal 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 "failings" 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 faults; 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.^m

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 resolved theirs. To paraphrase the words of the Prophet (ישעיה נה:ח,ט) כי לא מחשבותיהם מחשבותינו ולא דרכיהם דרכינו... כי גבהו שמים מארץ כן גבהו מחשבותיהם ממחשבותינו ומדרכיהם מדרכינו (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.

^m וע' בסוף "מאמר על אגדות הז"ל" לרמח"ל (שמודפס בריש ספר עין יעקב) שכך היה הכלל בידי