

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-EIGHT

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

There are giants whose impact is such that they change the entire worldview for thousands. This impact is not just for their own generation, but it reverberates for all future generations as well. These special souls take what was, and through their very uniqueness, make it new and vital for the future. Torah adherence thrives throughout the generations because of how these rare leaders shape the landscape of our Torah lifestyle.

One such luminary was the Sfas Emes whose one hundredth yahrtzeit we observe this year. The Rebbe, zy"a, built on Peshischa, Kotzk and his own holy grandfather, the Chiddushei HaRim, and created a spiritual kingdom that would bring light into the darkness that is our galus. It is impossible for us to conjure up the source of such divine insight, yet we bask in his holy illumination until this very day. To understand just a little bit of how this was accomplished, we first must examine the world into which the Rebbe was placed.

Poland, or more correctly, Congress Poland was a place where Torah lived together with dire poverty. Those chassidim of the early leaders, such as the Peshischa and the Kotzker, were men who were often giants in their own right. Yet, they sought to be led by these luminaries, and reached out for and hung onto their every word and action. To be a leader of such men one needed to be a scholar of enormous accomplishment and even more, he needed to be a guide that was ready to give of his own life for the benefit of others. The Polische world of those times was a place of pain and poverty and it was through that crucible that a Yiddishe world evolved that glowed in the murkiness and shined out despite the surrounding hostilities. We are pygmies compared to those Yidden, and all we can hope to do is imitate with a view of somehow connecting with their holy energy. One major point that epitomized the Rebbe was his great humility, and this was a defining ingredient that was shared with all the holy leaders that he had learned from.

In Peshischa one was taught: "Every Jew must have two spiritual outlooks at his disposal. One outlook tells him, I am dust and ashes.' This means that when a man has risen to a spiritual height and the evil inclination then coaxes him towards arrogance, he should recall what he is - from where you come and where you are going.' This will humble and bow his evil inclination.

"The second outlook we must maintain is that each man is obligated to say, for me the world was created. ' This is necessary when the evil inclination wants to coax us into depression. He shows us our lowliness and tries to convince us that our Torah and worship are worth nothing, so that we seem to lose all hope for ourselves. At such a time a man should strengthen himself and repeat the

words of the sages: For me the world was created.' These two outlooks are important, each in its own time, for great and small alike."

So from here we learned that humility was not a simple act of dismissing oneself as worthless. That would be self defeating, a trap set by the forces of evil. Instead we learn from the next generation of Polische Rebbes, the Kotzker, that one must never confuse lowliness, low degradation, with the blessed light of humility. Spiritual self-effacement does not mean spiritual emptiness. It is the wicked man who wallows in his own worthlessness. Reb Mendel said, "Not only one who hates his fellow man is called a wicked person ... one who hates himself is also called wicked."

What then was Polische humility? It was a life long voyage to subjugate one's ego as a spiritual anecdote to the dangers of self-infatuation. The Kotzker was once asked, "Where does G-d dwell?" To which he sharply answered, "Wherever we allow Him to enter!" Humility was the act of understanding that we are a holy vessel, but only when we allow ourselves to be just that and not become swollen with arrogance and pride.

And so into this cauldron of spiritual fire came the soul of the Sfas Emes, born to the son of the Chiddushei HaRim, his genius apparent even as a child. Being orphaned at a young age, he was raised by his holy grandfather. It transpired once that the Chiddushei HaRim was visited by the Divrei Chaim of Sanz. When he was about leave, his host said to him: "I would like to honor you with something."

"Haven't you honored me enough already?" protested the guest.

The Chaddushei HaRim knew that his guest was a giant in Torah and so he said, "I want to show you a true chiddush (an original Torah thought)." With that he opened the door to his grandson's room where the child lay sleeping in his crib. He turned to the Sanzer and said, "This is my grandson, and he is quite something special ... a real chiddush." The uniqueness was that this child would become a giant in Torah learning and in humility. He would epitomize what the Kotzker/Peshischa schools had been all about. In him the world would see everything that had been percolating all that time, and his leadership would ignite into a flame that shines until this day.

Although when his grandfather passed away he was only nineteen years old, the chassidim begged him to become their leader. He was adamant in his refusal, to the point where he told the entire community, "I am not a Rebbe!" Ultimately the chassidim went to the Rebbe, Reb Chanoch Heinrich of Alexander, and the future Sfas Emes went with them as well. For four years he sat at the table of this tzaddik, a chassid, one that himself could have been a Rebbe of thousands.

Only with the passing of the Reb Chanoch Heinrich did he finally accept the burden of leading such a mass of Yidden. He did so with the following words: "I see you are persisting in coming to me, and there is nothing I can do about it. So let us stay together. Each of us will learn from the other, and together we will serve Hashem." His heartfelt humility, spoken to the thousands who would come to grasp his every word, never changed. His was a kingdom of joint effort where the chassidim and the

Rebbe fed each other the manna of spiritual wonder.

In kapitel 138 of Tehillim we see the wondrous spirit of joy that will be ours with the advent of the Moshiach. The words sing out with bliss and heartfelt thanksgiving. At this most wonderful moment the Psalmist tells us how it will come that we will share in this moment.

Ki Ram Hashem ... "For though Hashem is exalted, *veshafal yireh*, He notes the humble."

Comes the Rebbe, Reb Bunim of Peshischa and says, "Only the humble are able to comprehend the highness of Hashem;" and to prove this, he explains this passage in his special fashion. "The L-rd is high, *veshafal yireh*, and only the humble will see Him from close by. And then the passuk concludes, whereas, *vegavoha*, the arrogant, - *mimerchak yeyeida* - will only know Him from afar."

So the circle is completed, the Sfas Emes lived his life with Peshischa humility and brought us all to see Hashem's greatness. His words illuminate our world until this day, and hopefully will lead us forth to that time when the entire world will exalt in Hashem's Truth.

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