

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FORTY-FOUR

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

Where do I start? How can I even begin? The loss is so great, yet we seek to find strength in our pain. When the phone rang at one thirty in the morning, I knew instinctively what I was about to hear. For several days, thoughts of him jangled in my mind. I spoke to others, seeking hope where none existed. The passing of the tzaddik Harav Naftali Tzvi Halberstam of Bobov, zy"a, is a loss that has brought sadness to thousands. This frail, slight man was a friend to so many, a source of support to a whole community, and a hero of singular refinement.

It is hard now to remember when Bobov was in its infancy after the Holocaust. The Bobover Rebbe at the time, Harav Shloime, zy"a, started his new yeshiva in America with twelve students. From those very humble beginnings a whole world grew, one with a vibrancy and joy for Hashem's word that amazed any who came into contact with it. The Rebbe was a charismatic figure whose essence glowed with ahavas Yisrael.

Yet none of this growth would have been possible without his devoted son, "mein Naftulche" (my Naftali). As new students were drawn to the Bobover light, the need for more facilities grew ever greater. It was the Rebbe's son, that very humble yet devoted survivor of Hitler's hell, who made this growth possible.

Born into the aristocratic court of his grandfather, the Bobover Rebbe Rav Ben Tzion, zy"a, little Naftulche saw firsthand the grandeur of what chassidic life could be like. He sat on his grandfather's knee and heard Torah from his holy lips. Tragically, this idyllic life was not to last, and at a tender age he was thrown into the inferno that destroyed European Yiddishkeit.

He must have seen so much death and heard so many cries. This was a youngster who would celebrate his bar mitzva in a Nazi work camp. Of those who worked in that place, only he and his father were miraculously spared. Hashem needed him to bring Chassidus back to life in the New World, and so despite all odds he survived. There were times in those dark days when he stood before a firing squad, ready to die with the Shema on his lips. This child never lost his sense of who he was or what he represented.

After the chaos of the postwar period, he came to settle in America to be with his father, and it was there that his greatness would be desperately needed. Creating a Torah institution in the spirit of Chassidus was not a simple task; it took enormous courage and dedication. The Rebbe knew that in his son was the ability to see beyond the impossible odds, to do that which others thought only a

dream.

And so Bobov grew and flourished, and all the while Rav Naftali shouldered the massive burdens with a warm smile. This hero of the spirit was the most unassuming person one could imagine. He was small of build, almost fragile, yet his willpower was a mine of strength. Whenever one visited Bobov, one would see the Rebbe's son, talking, sharing, and caring. A smile was always on his face, he was so kind, and everyone felt comfortable with him. His sweetness was legendary; you never thought of him as someone capable of being angry. His every word spoke of gentle caring, yet his soul was a rod of steel forged by his holy ancestors and refined by the burning furnaces of the Nazis.

I first had the privilege to meet "Rav Naftulche" (so he was known to us all) when I was thirteen, and from that first moment I felt that in this gentle man I had found someone who cared about me. It was this way for hundreds of youngsters, because in truth he did care for every one of the talmidim. Whenever I had a problem I could turn to him, and with his gentle wisdom he would help me see my way forward.

I tremble as I write these words, because I know that no words can even touch on his sweetness. How can one describe his tender laugh, his kindness, or the manner in which he taught by example? He was a walking sefer on how a Yid should be, and yet within his soul he must have carried memories and visions too horrible for words.

I remember the Rebbe at his father's seder, the way he burned with holiness, his face red from spiritual energy. Every Friday night his father asked him to sing "Eishes Chayil" (A Woman of Valor). He did so with such devotion, and one knew that this Jew was speaking of Hashem in terms we could never understand. Yet he wore his holiness so comfortably, and you could easily forget that all you were seeing was just the surface and that underneath was a gadol of Torah and spirituality.

He was hidden from those who could not see, and he felt comfortable just sitting with the yeshiva students talking about their concerns. Here was a man who carried the whole responsibility for Bobov, and yet he would sit and schmooze with a young married man who was trying to find a suitable livelihood.

There is much I cannot speak of, things I witnessed that I know he would never want to be made known. Suffice it to say that I saw how he was ready to give up everything for others and that this was something he did with a whole heart. There are people who aren't even aware of what this tzaddik had done for them, and he would have been embarrassed if they were to find out. The Bobover Rebbe Rav Naftali rebuilt Bobov with his very life, paying for it with tragic results.

It wasn't only this that denoted who he was. He lived a life of kiddush Hashem. He taught lessons about derech eretz, respect for others, and shalom bayis, peace in the home, through his very real example.

When I last visited him, he was very weak, and his illness made it almost impossible for him to speak.

As I entered his room, I could see him struggling to smile, and then he took my hand and asked that I forgive him because he wasn't well and couldn't speak. Hashem! You gave us such a gift. This trembling Yiddel asked forgiveness for not being able to talk; the gentleness was there even in his desperate condition. I walked out, and tears ran down my face. He had been so good to me, and yet I could not offer him anything.

When I heard the tragic news, I was numb. Hashem does that to us so that we can slowly come to accept what is so difficult to live with. The next day I walked around in a bit of a daze. I went through the paces, yet I wasn't really connected. That afternoon I had to drive to the other side of town, and as I did so, my mind kept fluttering with images of the Rebbe. Then it happened, and a flood of tears sprang from my eyes. It hit me solidly Rav Naftulche, my special, loving mentor, was no more. He had paid the ultimate price for creating a new Klal Yisrael, and he had done so with a gentle and wondrous manner.

When I got home, I opened up my Tehillim'le and saw in this kapitel the Rebbe's life story. Let me share my thoughts.

May Hashem, my rock of strength, be blessed. He is the One Who trains my hands for battle, my fingers for waging war. The Rebbe saw Hashem as the One rock upon which the world could be rebuilt. He realized that this task would need special training. Things never before asked of from a Rebbishe child would be needed now. He requested that Hashem teach his pure fingers and hands to do what was needed in creating a new world.

He is the Source of the kindness I experience; He is my fortress, my tower and my refuge. He is my shield and I trust in him. He is the One Who smashes nations beneath me. This towering figure lived with the acceptance that everything is in Hashem's hands and that nothing can be done without Him. After the war, he sought safety in the one zone that would never change, the Torah. It was with this understanding that he was able to bring so many others closer and help them find the ability to share in his holy dreams.

Hashem, what is man that You recognize him, [or] a person that You accord him importance? A man is comparable to a wisp of steam. His days pass by like a shadow. Having witnessed the cruelty of man at its worst, the Rebbe knew how fragile and superficial this life can be. He strove to bring out the kedusha of others through making them aware of the need to share and to give. Many were taught the need to give of oneself through his noble example, and he did this at great cost to himself.

Hashem, stretch out Your heavens and descend. Touch the mountains and they will billow smoke. When Bobov was struggling in those early days, it seemed that there were mountains of obstacles that cut off any hope for its survival. But through the devoted leadership of first the Rebbe Rav Shloime and then Rav Naftali, every obstacle vanished. They taught us to believe in our tefillos and to trust that they were being heard. How else can one explain the growth we saw?

God, I will sing to You a new song; I will play to You with a ten-stringed lyre. The world after the Holocaust needed a new song with which to praise Hashem. The desolation was so great that only a brilliant renewal could take the Yidden out of their darkness. This new song was sung by the Bobover Rebbe, Rav Naftali, and he sang it with such simple love that it opened all our hearts.

This neshama never sought the easy path in life; his was a road strewn with difficulty and heart-wrenching pain, yet he gave us everything we now hold dear and cherish.

As we wipe the tears from our eyes, let us remember what we had. This hero gave his all for Klal Yisrael, and to repay him with true chessed we must try to emulate his holiness. His was a path of shalom, harmony, and peace, laid down by his holy father, and it was this arduous path he kept to in this world of deceit and anger. It is one we must keep to if we are to be found worthy of his teachings.

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