

THE BOBOVER REBBE ZT"L

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The Bobover Rebbe Zt"l Zechuso Yagen Aleinu (5668-5760; 1908-2000)

"And she said, 'Glory has been taken from Israel - for the Ark of G-d has been captured.'" [I Shmuel 4:22]

It is with tears swelling in my eyes that I write these lines. It is difficult to put into words, to try and capture in a few lines, the tremendous loss the world suffered early this Wednesday morning, at around 2:00 am, when "the Ark of G-d was captured," and our Rebbe, Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam of Bobov zt"l, was taken from us.

The Holy Zohar writes that there are tzaddikim so great that their neshama (soul) contains within it elements of all the souls of Israel. This is referred to as "neshama kolleles," a neshama which encompasses all other neshamos.

What is the need for this idea of an all-encompassing neshama? Perhaps it is in order that the tzaddik will be able to relate to and understand all those who draw themselves near to him. The tzaddik is given a "piece" of everyone's neshama so that everyone who meets that tzaddik, who observes him, listens to him and hears him speak, will feel as the tzaddik was speaking to him alone. So that everyone will be able to find through the tzaddik encouragement, strength, purity and joy; each person in his own specific way.

How true this was about our Rebbe! He meant something completely different to each and every person who ever had the merit of being in his presence. For some, he was a great Torah scholar. The Steipler Gaon had a subscription to Kerem Shlomo (Bobov's monthly periodical), in which every month several divrei Torah of the Rebbe would appear. It is said that each month he would eagerly await it's arrival. Once, when it didn't arrive on time, he inquired as to what had happened. He explained his impatience by saying, "The Bobover Rebbe is singular in this generation in his ability to explain pesukim, midrashim, etc.!"

Others drew strength from the Rebbe's tefilos (prayers). Who can forget the heart-rending prayers of the Rebbe as he recited Hallel on Rosh Chodesh? Who can forget the look of majestic purity on his face as he turned around Friday night to recite "Bo-e ba-shalom, Come in peace," and greet Shabbos Malkasa, the Shabbos Queen? Or the holiness and sanctity we felt as the Rebbe later entered the Beis HaMidrash to lead the "Tisch," bedecked with his Tallis, and greeted the angels with the words "Shalom Aleichem." We were transported into a different world...

From all over the world, people came to the Rebbe to ask his sage advice on topics so diverse. To all he gave his complete attention and concentration. When one entered the Rebbe's study, one felt as if, for those few cherished moments, the world ceased to exist. After leaving the Rebbe's presence, one would eagerly recount every word the Rebbe had said to him.

Once, just before the Rebbe (we called him "The Ruv") was about to leave his house to attend a major function, a person came to see him. He told the gabbai had a simple question to ask the Rebbe, and promised he would not keep the Rebbe for more than a minute or two. After five minutes had passed, the gabbai began to get edgy. After ten minutes, he politely opened the door, motioning to the Rebbe that it was very late. The Rebbe told him to close the door. This repeated itself numerous times, until finally the Rebbe told the gabbai to please stop opening the door; he would come out when he was ready. After forty-five minutes, the man emerged.

The gabbai was furious! "You promised no more than a minute or two - how could you lie like that?!"

"I promise," he responded, "that I needed no more. It was the Rebbe that held me up!"

When the Rebbe later emerged, he told the gabbai, "He didn't lie. He truly planned to take no more than a minute or two. But how could I answer him so quickly? When someone comes to ask my advice, I can't just answer him off-the-cuff. What if it were my own child - would I answer in such haste? Each person to me is like my own child, and I give them the same attention I would give to my children!"

To those in need, the Rebbe was a tremendous ba'al tzedakah. His commitment to Redifas Shalom (pursuit of peace) was legendary. Everyone was amazed by the appropriateness of Rebbe's passing away on Rosh Chodesh Av, the yohrtzeit of Aaron HaKohen, who, as the Mishnah (Avos 1:12) "Loved peace and pursued peace. Loved all creations, and brought them near to the Torah."

Who can forget the intense concentration with which the Rebbe uttered each and every blessing? The Rebbe taught us how an ehrlicher Yid eats and drinks. To observe the tremendous discipline with which the Rebbe ate was as powerful as learning any mussar sefer! Who can forget passing by the Rebbe Friday night to say "Gut Shabbos" - even as thousands of people passed by, each one felt as if he got his own special greeting!

It is impossible to describe how it seemed the Rebbe's countenance would literally embody the mood of each period on the Jewish calendar. The tremendous sorrow and brokenness of Tisha B'Av, the joy of Sukkos and the Arba Minim, and the seriousness of Yom Kippur. One needed only to gaze at the Rebbe to know how it was a Jew should be feeling at any given time.

Rabbosai, I feel woefully inadequate to give over here, in these few lines, even the slightest inkling of who the Bobover Rebbe was. Volume upon volume could be written, and yet even then we would only have touched the tip of the iceberg. The Rebbe was far, far deeper and greater than anything which could ever be described or written. Perhaps, surely, I would be better off saying

nothing at all rather than to express myself in these pathetically insufficient lines. Yet how can we remain silent?

"With what shall we bear witness for you? To what can we compare you? To what can we liken you, that we may be comforted? Our ruin is as vast as the sea; who can heal us?" (see Eichah/Lamentations 2:13) May the Almighty heal our broken hearts, and may we, during these days set aside for mourning, speedily see the comforting of Zion and Yerushalayim.

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