



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HAGAON HARAV

SHRAGA FEIVEL MENDLOWITZ Z"TL

Founder of Torah Umesorah

DEDICATED BY

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Chapter 13:

HAGAON HARAV

Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zt"l

REB SHRAGA FEIVEL MENDLOWITZ'S EARLY YEARS

Reb Shraga Feivel Mendelowitz was born in 1886 in Vilag, Austria-Hungary, to Reb Moshe Vilager and his wife Bas Sheva, who passed away when he was ten years old. His father remarried and moved to Rimanov, and shortly after that the young Shraga Feivel was sent to learn under Reb Aron of Mezo Labortz for three years. Afterwards he went to study in the yeshiva of Rabbi Moshe Greenwald of Chust, author of "Arugos Habosem," who held him in sufficient esteem to choose Shraga Feivel

He became very enamored of the works of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch... they were clearly written by a man unafraid of the challenges presented by the new sciences and philosophies of the 19th century.

to tutor his own son. At seventeen he moved on to Unzdorf, where he studied under the community Chief Rabbi and renowned educator Rabbi Shmuel Rosenburg, a talmid of the Ksav Sofer, whom Reb Shraga Feivel regarded as his deepest influence, and by whom he was awarded smicha. His next stop was the Pressburg Yeshiva, led by Rabbi Simcha Bunim Schreiber, grandson of the Chasam Sofer, who had set the tone for the coming generations of Hungarian Jewry with his



uncompromising focus on unadulterated halachic practice and unwavering stand against encroachment by the Reform and Neolog camps.

At 22, he married his step-mother's younger sister Bluma and settled in Humenne, where his oldest two children were born. As an antidote to the seething *haskala* and Reform philosophies that were percolating through the frum world, he took up the study of *chassidus*, *kabbalah*, Jewish history, and classical German, the language of much of secular writing. He became very enamored of the works of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch of Frankfurt, whom he found to be aware of the trials of his times and prepared to face them head on. He found in them an intellectual freshness and vigor, and they

were clearly written by a man unafraid of the challenges presented by the new sciences and philosophies of the 19th century. This was anathema to many of Reb Shraga Feivel's Austro-Hungarian peers. The Dayan of Chust was compelled to come to his defense by quoting the *Divrei Chaim* of Sanz, who had said, "What I am to the Jews of this country, Rabbi Hirsch is to the Jews of Germany." This interest in broader fields of knowledge and approaches in no way suggested any diminution of personal fervor; it was a symptom of his desire to understand outside philosophies so as to be able to present countervailing solutions, and was a crucial component of what he was subsequently going to launch in America.



Arguos HaBosem by Rabbi Moshe Greenwald of Chust



Rav Simcha Bunim Schreiber



Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch



The Unzendorf Shul and Yeshiva



JOURNEY TO AMERICA

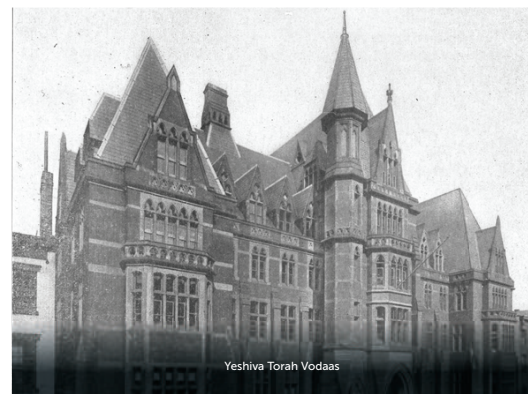
In September of 1913, having left his family in Humenne, he sailed for Philadelphia. From there he made his way to Scranton where he took a job as a teacher and principal in the local Talmud Torah, and where his skills as an educator became apparent. Following the end of the First World War, he brought his family to join him in Scranton. As his family grew in size, he felt the need to move to New York, where he tried his hand unsuccessfully at various business ventures. In 1921, Reb Binyomin Wilhelm, founder of Yeshiva Torah Vodaas, offered him the position of principal. The school had been launched four years prior and had burned through three principals by the time they turned to Reb Shraga Feivel, who was rather different than what they had in mind. Until then, they had preferred modern, maskil-type educators, and the board was wary of a Hungarian, chareidi, Pressburger talmid. Reb Binyomin prevailed; Reb Shraga Feivel was diplomatic, and in short order his pedagogic and administrative skills endeared him to parents, staff, and board. His earlier immersion in Hirschian study allowed him to create a modern framework through which to educate children in classical texts, and all the while, his chassidish tinge created the warmth with which to maximally connect with his talmidim.



Rabbi Binyomin Wilhelm

SUCCESS AS A MECHANECH

He impacted his students both in school and out, inviting groups of them to his house in the evenings and on Shabbos for intense discussions in hashkafa, mussar and chassidus, and instilling in them knowledge and warmth for their Judaism. In 1931, he opened the first Yeshiva camp in Mountaintale, NY, in which a fully immersive and informal two-month-long program would allow him to impact his talmidim to a far greater extent than when they were in the city with all its distractions. Another innovation was when Reb Shraga Feivel overruled the objections of his baalei batim and the community at large to establishing a Mesivta, or high-school, which was headed in its early years by Rabbi Dovid Leibowitz, a great nephew of the Chofetz Chaim and alumnus of the famed Kovno Kollel, who later founded the Chofetz Chaim Yeshiva, which in many ways still carries Reb Shraga Feivel's torch of setting up mesivot and yeshivos in far-flung communities. Reb Shraga Feivel had observed the trials inherent in an uneducated lay body, and realized the importance of creating not only scholars, but also of committed, knowledgeable baalei batim. His ability to connect with those around him - students, colleagues and laity - allowed him to nurture and mold them using the warmth of his personality, his obvious dedication, and his approach of using modern methods while being unmoving in his adherence to tradition.



Yeshiva Torah Vodaas



A group of Talmidim in the Mesivta in the 1930s.



Rav Dovid Leibowitz



THE IDEA IS BORN

In 1931, Reb Shraga Feivel was sent to Liberty, NY for an extended period to recuperate from tuberculosis, which allowed him the forced luxury of contemplation on the future of Orthodoxy, and on what could be done to bend the trajectory upwards. It dawned on him that there would have to be a tidal wave of day school creation washing over communities in America for them to survive and thrive, and that they would have to incorporate high standards in both

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Jewish and secular studies departments to ensure that their roots were deep. For this to happen would require a generation of well trained and knowledgeable educators and administrators who could act as the spearhead, which in turn led him to the formation of the Aish Dos program in Monsey, NY in 1941. This laid the groundwork for much of what would soon be done in the soon-to-be formed Torah Umesorah, by producing a cadre of motivated and trained educators who were imbued with mussar and passion for the cause of education. Rabbi Simcha

THE PLAN UNFOLDS



*Establishment of Hebrew Day Schools
and Kindergartens for boys and girls*

Subsidies
Canvassing
Placement Services
Department of Publications
Consultation Service
Released Time
Educators Institute

Rabbi Ephraim Wolf

[illegible]

Rabbi Bernard Goldenberg, Rabbi Sender Gross, Dr. Joe Kamenetzky



Rabbi Simcha Wasserman with the first Aish Dos class.



THE SECRETS OF SUCCESS

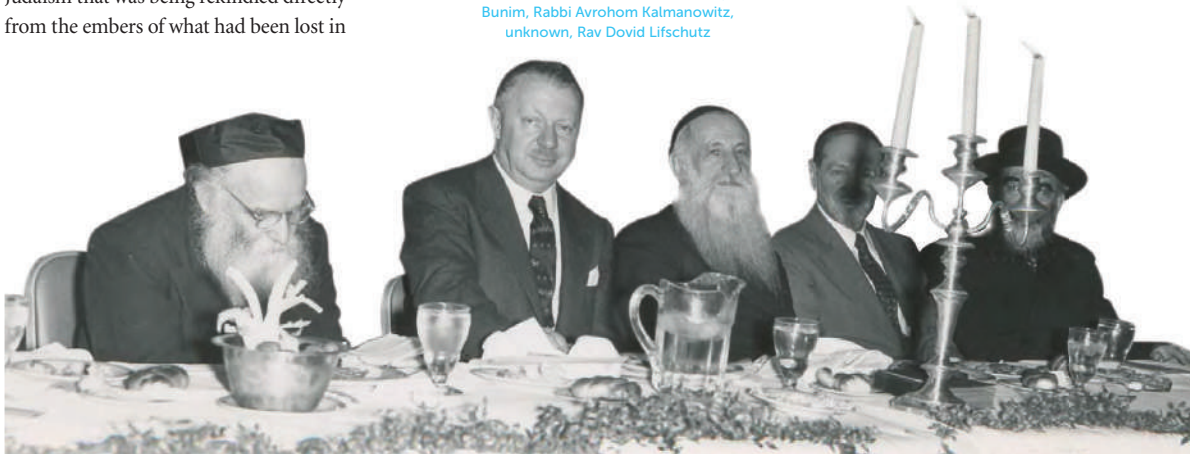
The added ingredient that was put into the mix was their understanding that they would not graft themselves to the existing synagogues and religious bodies, but would create their own structure in parallel, which would be led not by lay-leaders or their contracted (and thus emasculated) Rabbonim, but by Roshei Yeshivos arrived or arriving from Europe, who would brook no tinkering with the Judaism that was being rekindled directly from the embers of what had been lost in

the flames of the Holocaust. It was this independence from the establishment, and from the control of baalei batim, that set the new paradigm apart from what had been the norm in the USA until then. The ability of the Roshei Hayeshivos, under the fiery leadership of Rav Aharon Kotler, to dictate the agenda and then bring it to fruition using those baalei batim who understood that this was the way to build a viable tzibbur, facilitated the broad reemergence of vibrant Torah Orthodoxy in America. This independent structure was the secret – until then the Klei Kodesh could be cowed into submission by the threat of being fired, but no lay leader could fire the Roshei Yeshivos. They might choose to withhold funding, but they couldn't dictate the agenda.

Reb Shraga Feivel had felt all these currents, and had acted as the catalyst that bound them all together into an

unstoppable force. He had noticed how some second- and third-generation baalei batim had realized that the only way forward was to look back and take note of what had lost or jettisoned. He had worked with the Gedolim of the old world who had arrived in America over the previous twenty years, and understood that by creating a Vaad Roshei Hayeshivos he would enable the frum world to once again have a lodestar which it could follow. He had put into place an ecosystem that would produce motivated mechanchim and baalei batim that understood the challenges and were prepared to face them, while at the same time adhering to the instructions of Daas Torah. He had assisted anyone who wished to create Mosdos HaTorah to produce future Bnei Torah and Klei Kodesh, appreciating that even if it was at a cost to his yeshiva, there would be a vast net gain to Klal Yisroel. And he had done all this while staying in the background. At the first Torah Umesorah

L to R: Rav Aharon Kotler, Mr. Irving Bunim, Rabbi Avrohom Kalmanowitz, unknown, Rav Dovid Lifschutz





At the first Torah Umesorah Conference in Cleveland, 1947:
Rav Elya Meir Bloch, Rav Kagan, Alexander Gross, Rav Dovid Lifshitz, Rav Mendel
Zaks, Rav Reuven Grozovsky, Rav Shraga Feivel



Torah Umesorah Dinner 1948 (L to R): Sam Feuerstein, Rabbi Leo Jung,
Rav Samson Raphael Weiss

Conference on Yeshiva Education held April 25th-27th in Cleveland, OH, the list of speakers contains Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Rabbi Dovid Lipschitz, Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Katz, Rabbi Reuven Grozovsky, Rabbi Elya Meir Bloch, Rabbi Mendel Zaks, Rabbi Yaakov Lessin, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, and Rabbi Avigdor Miller, as well as Dr. Joseph Kaminetzky and a host of prominent educators and lay leaders, but there is one prominent omission: the man who had started it all and made it happen. He was present, as we can see from the photos of the event (and even in them he is in the background), but clearly he felt no need to impose himself in any way on the proceedings. He chaired no sessions and gave no addresses because he had empowered a host of forces, and evidently that seemed to be plenty for him.

CREATING THE FUTURE

Reb Shraga Feivel realized that with the destruction of Yahadus Europa, America contained the largest reserves of Jews in the world, and that if they couldn't hold the line, the fort that is the Mesorah, which

not just the large established communities, but in every community, which he defined as containing upwards of five thousand nefoshos. He realized that very few of them would contain large numbers of card-carrying shomrei mitzvos, that much

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had withstood thousands of years of attack, might yet crumble. His strategy to ensure the future was to ensure that every Jewish child should have a proper chinuch, and his tactic was the creation of the components that would enable it. He realized that given the right impetus, this could become the norm not just in New York, but in every community - not just some communities,

of the potential parent body had only tenuous connection to active Judaism, and that the tightrope that needed to be navigated would be to ensure their comfort level without compromising on standards. It took immense reserves of subtlety, and at this point, his training in the teachings of Rabbi Hirsch came into their own: he realized that much would

be safeguarded by ensuring buy-in from the rabbis and by listening to the fears of the lay-leadership, so that they felt invested in the process. To this end he hired Dr. Joseph Kaminetzky to assume the national directorship of Torah Umesorah (Rabbi Dr. Weiss had left the organization in 1945 to assume the leadership of the Young Israel movement). He was a graduate of Yeshivas Rabbi Chaim Berlin and then Talmudical Academy Mesivta, was a

member of Yeshiva College's founding year, and had gone on from there to acquire a doctorate at Columbia University's School of Education. These factors made him an inspired choice to head Torah Umesorah, as he had a deep, ingrained respect for Jewish education and for Gedolei Torah, and at the same time he had the credentials to convince wavering rabbis in communities around the country that this wasn't some non-viable and irrelevant idea that would

crumble the moment it made contact with reality. Once again Reb Shraga Feivel made a deep impression, and proceeded to lead by inspiration, not domination, allowing Dr. Kaminetzky to blossom into a leader in his own right, who would in turn inspire those around him with his mesiras nefesh and drive.

Rav Mordechai Gifter, Rav Mendel Zaks,
Rav Yitzchok Hutner, Rav Aharon Kotler, Rav Eliezer Silver





The parade for the Chanukas HaBayis of the Mesivta Torah Vodaas building. Rav Shraga Feivel is in the foreground.
In the background (R to L): Rav Baruch Kaplan, Rav Shachne Zohn, Rav Gedaliah Schorr, Rav Nesanel Quinn.



Rav Leo Jung, Sam Feuerstein, Rav H Goldstein, Rav Samson Raphael Weiss, Unknown, Dr. Joe Kamenetzky

FROM SMALL SEEDS SPROUT LARGE SAPLINGS

It took time for the movement to gain traction, and decades to achieve visibility and then prominence. For a generation or so, the wider Jewish world smugly ignored what was happening to the nascent chareidi world, as the bulk of second- and third-generation American Jews moved out of the urban areas into suburbia and beyond, to their new shuls, temples and professions, and eventually off the map completely. The indifference was short-lived, as within two decades, the Conservative movement was building Solomon Schechter Day Schools, as they awoke to the reality of their difficulties in keeping their pews filled with their future generations. It was little and it was late, but imitation is such sweet flattery!

THE PHYSICAL DECLINE WHILE THE VISION GROWS

By this time Reb Shraga Feivel's chronically frail heart no longer allowed him to spend half his time in New York at

Mesivta Torah Vodaas and the other half in Monsey at his recently inaugurated Bais Medrash Elyon, one of the earliest yeshivos and kollelim in America. He moved to Monsey having made it understood that he would not likely be returning to New York, and his health started to fail in earnest. He was given an emotional fillip by the announcement of the creation of the State of Israel, which he saw as a potentially positive step on the road to Moshiach, despite his misgivings at the secular nature of the State and its leaders. Pragmatic and yet unbending in his beliefs as always, he saw that the way forward was to create as much Torah infrastructure in Israel as possible, to ensure its longevity as an entity.

He was niftar on Elul 3rd 5708 (September 7th 1948) and was buried in Monsey, and some two years later he was reinterred in the terra sancta of Eretz



Yeshiva and Mesivta Torah Vodaas



Rav Shraga Feivel with Rav Aharon Kotler at the founding Torah Umesorah Conference in Cleveland, 1947

Yisroel, in accordance with his wishes. At his passing his roster of achievements was staggering. He had taken a fledgling day school from a 200-pupil elementary school to an institution with over 1000 talmidim, comprising an elementary school, mesivta, bais medrash and kollel. He had written the blueprint and then constructed from scratch the organization that would anchor Torah education and thus the future of America. He had welded it onto the structure of the Vaad Roshei Hayeshivos that would ensure that its message would not get diluted over time. He had inspired its core staff and baalei batim and given them the momentum that would carry them forward in often choppy seas. And lastly, he had achieved the dream of over fifty day schools being founded on his watch. This most humble of men had not just watched history happen; he had formed it with his own hands.



They Are All My Children!

Establishing Torah Chinuch Lishmah

A definitive quote in Dr Kamenetzky and Rabbi Gross's biographic monograph of Reb Shraga Feivel is from Rabbi Harold Leiman, one of his early pupils, who tells of a Chol Hamo'ed trip to Prospect Park that Reb Shraga Feivel took with his students. As they boarded the trolley-car, the bemused conductor asked "They're not all your children, are they?" to which he responded without hesitation: "Yes they are!"

In keeping with his bird's-eye view of the picture of Klal Yisroel, he encouraged his bochurim to help get other fledgling yeshivos launched – Rabbi Bernard Goldenberg recounted how Reb Shraga Feivel sent him to be one of the founding talmidim of the new Telsher Yeshiva of Cleveland in 1943 over the objections of his parents and of his rebbe Rabbi Shloime Heiman because he felt that the birth of a new yeshiva overrode all other considerations. He was to do the same for Rabbi Aharon Kotler's Beis Medrash Govoha, Rabbi Avrohom Jofen's Yeshivas Bais Yoseph and had in the past refused entry to his mesivta for applicants coming from Yeshiva Cham Berlin elementary school as he felt he couldn't do something that would be detrimental to Rabbi Yitchok Hutner's new mesivta.

When the first Torah Umesorah advertisements appeared in the Yiddish newspapers in 1944 drumming up interest in the nascent concept of Day Schools, they triggered a letter of response from a layman in Minneapolis. Reb Shraga Feivel wanted to investigate the level of interest and he left the TU office in the City accompanied by one of his talmidim who he requested during the subway ride to Brooklyn to take a trip to Minnesota. The talmid was very reluctant to consider it as he feared that Reb Shraga Feivel would then try to convince him to stay there if interest was sufficient. Upon arrival in Brooklyn, the talmid made his way to the bus stop to finish his trip home. Reb Shraga Feivel walked him to the bus stop and relentlessly kept up the pressure as busses came and went, not allowing him to board. After the sixth bus had gone, Reb Shraga Feivel told him that clearly the posuk "lechtech acharei bamidbar" wasn't describing him. The talmid folded, the seventh bus arrived and he was allowed to board it and make his way home!

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky is quoted as having said that while every rosh yeshiva is convinced that their mossad is the finest, Reb Shraga Feivel took a position of neutrality about his own institution and was therefore able to send his best talmidim to help start other Yeshivos.