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THE WORLD AS IT ACTUALLY WAS

Dr. Yitzchok Levine

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Most of us would agree that knowledge of the past is important. The Chazon Ish wrote that one who does not learn history is doomed to repeat the failures of his people. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch believed that in history, especially Jewish history, one can "draw the right conclusions of the Jewish position in the world in the whole of its speciality."

There are, however, dangers in reading history written by secular writers, since their writings are often based on assumptions that are not in consonance with a Torah view. Within the past two decades a number of historical and biographical books written from an "Orthodox perspective" have been published. One would think that such books would adhere to the strictest standards of truth and present an accurate portrayal of events and individuals. This apparently is not always the case. Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter writes in his article "Facing the Truths of History" (The Torah u-Madda Journal 8 [1998] page 213, www.riets.edu/riets/iData/torah_riets/torah_rietsvPosProc.asp?tlID=1059):

A few years ago, Rabbi Aharon Feldman published a critique of what he referred to as "gedolim books" - biographies of great Torah personalities." (A. Feldman, "Gedolim Books and the Biography of Reb Yaakov Kamenetzky," The Jewish Observer 27:8 (November 1994):32-33.) In his view, these books, while being 'vital components in the rejuvenation of the Torah life of post-Holocaust Jewry,' suffer from two major flaws. First of all, all gedolim are presented in a stereotyped fashion, their lives all following the same trajectory from child prodigy to precocious adolescence to marrying a pious woman and, finally, to Torah greatness. Such presentations, argued Rabbi Feldman, "frequently ignore the self-sacrifice and dedication which of necessity must have gone into the development of every gadol. They often overlook the fact that certainly these men must have surely had their moments of self-doubt, error and human frailty Great men are, of course, humans as well; on the contrary, they are great because they overcame their human shortcomings." ... Secondly, continued Rabbi Feldman, these works mistakenly highlight the brilliance and genius of their subjects. He writes that "it would serve the reader better to emphasize the hard work, sweat and tears that went into making them gedolim. Portraying gedolim as geniuses tends to make their accomplishments appear unattainable: how can anyone not born with such extraordinary gifts ever expect to emulate them?"< BR>

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Thus, even "frum" history books may reflect an agenda that slants or even covers up events.

I had this in mind when I recently began to read *The World That Was: America 1900-1945* (Transmitting the Torah Legacy to America) by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum (Shaar Press, distributed by Mesorah Publications). The book is not only a very interesting read for adults, but parts or all of it can easily be used as a text in yeshiva high schools to teach youngsters the history of Judaism in the United States during the first half of the 20th century.

In the preface Rabbi Scheinbaum writes, "We must not view history myopically. Our view of the events of the past should and must be seen through the prism of the past. We should not permit ourselves to rewrite history to fit our present image. Rather, we must ratify history by remaining true to the facts - both positive and negative." Clearly he did not set out to write another "gedolim" book, and this is most refreshing.

The book is divided into sections which detail the development of the Orthodox Union, Young Israel and Zeirei Agudath Israel; trace the history of major yeshivas and rabbinical seminaries as well as Torah Umesorah and the Bais Yaakov movement; and explore the work of the Vaad Hatzala during and after World War II.

The book presents fifty-two biographical sketches under the heading "Transmitting the Legacy

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- Torah Visionaries." Rabbi Scheinbaum told me he agonized over each decision whether or not to include a given individual.

In addition to the biographical sketches there are three first-person accounts of Torah visionaries in America during the 1940's - Rabbis Nochum Zev Dessler, Binyomin Goldenberg and Raphael Pelcovitz. The closing section of the book, "Torah Vanguard's," deals with the activities of Irving M. Bunim, Stephen Klein, and Irving I. Stone.

(Before proceeding I should make it clear that the comments below are not meant to disparage the individuals referred to. They lived in a different time than we do, and hence by somewhat different standards than those presently in vogue. The point is that many of the externalities by which some choose to judge their fellow Jews today were not adhered to by the Orthodox world of the past. This should send a powerful message to those who tend to make externalities a litmus test by which they judge commitment to Hashem.)

Today we find in certain Orthodox circles those who take the approach, "My mind is made up, do not confuse me with the facts." Such people will deny and rewrite history in order to maintain a view of the past that they feel must be true. However, it is hard to deny a picture, and that is why I feel the pictures in this book are just as important as the text. They tell the story of Orthodoxy in the first half of the 20th century and reveal much about the yeshiva world before World War II.

A glance at the photos shows that the yeshiva bochur of those times did not look or dress anything like the yeshiva bochur of today. On page 44 a picture of the New Haven Yeshiva shows its "Roshei Yeshiva and student body." The text tells us, "The first yeshiva founded in America which was completely patterned after the European yeshivos was Beis Medrash LeRabbonim. Under the direction of Rabbi Yehuda Levenberg, it was first established in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1923.

What does the picture show? There are only two men wearing beards, and only one is a long, full beard. Most of the students in the picture are wearing light colored suits. Many are not wearing hats. The hats worn are light colored; no one is wearing a black hat; no one has peyos. In short, if one of these boys were to walk into a bais medrash today dressed as he is in the picture, he would cause some raised eyebrows. Yet, these were the students in the first yeshiva patterned after the European yeshivos. Lest one think that this is an anomaly, the picture on page 115 taken in Telz in 1933 of students from the Telzer Yeshiva "bidding farewell to Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Bloch on his journey to America" also shows yeshiva boys who do not look yeshivish by today's standards.

To me these pictures say worlds about the externalities which some value so highly today. I personally know of instances where young women of marriageable age refused to go out with boys due to what I consider trivial considerations. In one case the girl asked, "Does he wear only black suits?" When told the young man wore suits of other dark colors, she refused to consider the shidduch, despite the fact that he was known as a "top-notch" yeshiva man.

I guess if it were possible in some magical way to transport one of the best boys in the Telz Yeshiva of 1933 to the present, she would not go out with him either, since he surely would not look yeshivish enough for her. What kind of upbringing are we giving our young people when they judge another person simply by the color of a suit or shirt?

There are many things to be learned from reading The World That Was: America 1900-1945. Not all of them are historical in nature. Perhaps the most important lesson to learn from the book is that trivial externalities should not be the basis of our judgments.

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