

The World As It Actually Was

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Introduction

Most of us would agree that knowledge of the past is important. Indeed, without an understanding of the roots and development of our traditions, it is virtually impossible to put our lives as Orthodox Jews in true perspective. The Chazon Ish wrote that one who does not learn history is doomed to repeat the failures of his people. He quotes the *pasuk* שאל אביר ויגדך זקניך ויאמרו לך (Deut.32:7) (*Sefer Emunah u-Betachon I: 8*). Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch believes 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.” (Commentary on Deuteronomy, translated by I. Levy, [London, 1962], pages 69-70 on *Devarim* 4:32.)

Of course, there are dangers in reading history written by secular writers, since their writings often based on assumptions that are not in consonance with a Torah view of the world. As a result, 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. However, this is apparently 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] pages 200-276):

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.” He is sympathetic towards the sentiment expressed by “a certain woman who, after having read a few of these stylized stories, remarked in all seriousness, ‘How interesting to note that all *gedolim* lived identical lives.’” 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?”

Thus, even “frum” history books may reflect an agenda that slants or even covers up events. The reader simply must be aware of this possibility and read everything with care and a critical eye.

The World That Was: America

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. This large 456 page book was published in May 2004 by the Living Memorial in conjunction with the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland and is distributed by Mesorah Publications, LTD. It was most certainly was a considerable and important undertaking. 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 Twentieth 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. I have spoken personally with Rabbi Scheinbaum and there is no question he did his best to remain true to the approach he outlined.

This book is divided into several parts, and it begins with a Foreword entitled “The Spiritual Landscape of America.” This is followed by “The American Jewish Community at the Turn of the Century.” Here the author traces the development of the Orthodox Union, the Young Israel movement and Zeirei Agudath Israel. When I asked Rabbi Scheinbaum why he had not written about the Mizrachi movement, he explained that he chose movements whose activities were focused on strengthening Judaism in America. He said that the activities of Mizrachi were focused on developing Eretz Yisroel, and hence this movement was “not a power” for Yiddishkeit in this country.

The next section, "Torah Chinuch in America – 1900~1945," traces the history of Eitz Chaim Yeshiva and RIETS (Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary), Rabbi Jacob Joseph Yeshiva, Mesivta Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin, Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem, Mesivta Torah Vodaath, Bais Medrash LeRabbonim, the Hebrew Theological College of Chicago, Yeshivas Ner Yisroel, the Rabbinical Seminary of America – Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim, the Telshe Yeshiva, and Beth Medrash Govoha. Here the reader is briefly introduced to personalities who played key roles in the establishment and maintenance of these Torah institutions. It is also pointed out that short biographies of some of these pioneers are to be found later in the text. The book then deals with the founding of the Bais Yaakov Movement and concludes this section by a recounting how Torah Umesorah came to be and its primary activities.

"Relief and Rescue from the European Inferno" traces the activities of the Vaad Hatzala during and after World War II. The author writes in his Preface, "The Vaad Hatzala (Rescue Committee) and its notable accomplishments are studied in depth. This organization was instrumental in rescuing Jews from the Holocaust inferno, many of whom became the spiritual lay leaders and *roshei yeshiva* in America." One cannot help but be impressed by the efforts of a small group of dedicated individuals who worked against overwhelming difficulties to save precious Jewish lives in a race against time and an evil whose magnitude is unparalleled in world history.

Next the book presents fifty-two biographical sketches under the heading "Transmitting the Legacy – Torah Visionaries." "These individuals, many of them Holocaust survivors, were foremost advocates in transmitting the legacy and building Torah in America." (Preface) No doubt many readers will wonder why so and so was included and why this or that Torah personality was not. Rabbi Scheinbaum told me that he agonized over each decision to include or not to include a given individual. He also pointed out that a key ingredient in deciding to include someone was if he or she had "broken new ground."

"Following the biographical sketches are three first person accounts of Torah visionaries in America during the 1940s. They represent a cross-section of Torah activists. All were students together in the same class in Mesivta Torah Vodaath, where they imbibed from their *rebbeim* the *hashgafah* that would shape their lives." (Preface) Rabbis Nochum Zev Dessler, Binyomin Goldenberg and Raphael Pelcovitz are the personages discussed.

The last section of the book, "Torah Vanguard," deals with the activities of Irving M. Bunim, Stephen Klein, and Irving I. Stone. "These gentlemen were primary lay leaders and champions for Orthodoxy and Torah education in America. Their priorities and values were shaped by the Holocaust era." (Preface)

A Revolutionary Approach to Education for Girls

Several weeks ago I had the privilege of speaking to Mrs. Etel Miller, the widow of Rav Avigdor Miller, Z"TL. She told me that her father sent her to study in two Yavne Schools, first in Telz and then in Kovno. "We learned in Ivrit b'Ivrit," she told me. "I studied algebra, geometry and trigonometry in Hebrew, something that is not even done today!" On page 57 Rabbi Scheinbaum writes about this revolutionary educational approach. "Yavne, originally established in Telshe, Lithuania after World War I, was an innovator in the field of education for girls. Not only did teachers and students speak Hebrew in all classes – including secular courses such as physics and algebra – they even corresponded with each other in Hebrew. The students were exposed to the full gamut of Jewish religious studies on the highest level, plus five languages and such secular subjects as mathematics, science, geography, history, crafts, singing, and exercise."

The Pictures Tell a Story Too

(Before proceeding I would like to make it clear that none of the comments below is 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 judge individuals 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.)

This book contains a goodly number of pictures, and I found them of great interest. However, in order to explain part of my interest, let me relate an incident that happened to a friend of mine. He and another fellow were standing in a Seforim store in Boro Park talking about their days at Yeshiva University. One of them mentioned something about an interaction that he had with Rabbi Mendel Zaks (1898-1974), who married a daughter of the Chofetz Chaim in 1922. A fellow who happened to overhear their conversation got all excited and said that Rav Zaks never taught at YU. He maintained that a son-in-law of the Chofetz Chaim would never be associated with YU. When he was told that in 1946 Rav Zaks was appointed a Rosh Yeshiva and *bochen* at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, he still refused to believe. Since this fact did not fit with the view that this man had of the world, he refused to accept it!

Unfortunately 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 that the pictures in this book are just as important as the text. Unfortunately, not all of the pictures are dated. Nonetheless, they also tell the story of Orthodoxy in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Also, since a number of the pictures are from

Europe, these pictures reveal much about the yeshiva world in Europe before World War II.

The first thing that is striking is the fact that the yeshiva bochur of those times did not look or dress anything like the yeshiva bochur of today. On page 44 there is a picture of the New Haven Yeshiva showing its “Roshei Yeshiva and student body.” The text on this page 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. His goal was to build a yeshiva whose principles would follow the Volozhiner *Derech*, (approach) – of *Torah lishmah*, Torah study for its own sake, and the *mussar*, ethical behavioral approach to Torah of his alma mater, the Slobodka Yeshiva.”

What does the picture indeed show? First, 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 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 boys in the well-known picture shown on page 183 of the *Mirrer Yeshiva* in Shanghai, China are dressed in a similar fashion. Also, 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” 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 know personally of instances in which 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 his midos were excellent, he was known as a “good learner,” and his commitment to Yiddishkeit was exemplary. I guess if it were possible in some magical way to transport one of the best boys in the Telz Yeshiva in 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?

Things to be Learned

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 World As It Actually Was” is that trivial externalities should not be the basis of our judgments.