

The Torah Revolution

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This week, the Torah world celebrated a historic milestone. At a time when everything that happens in our world is described with the adjective "historic," on Sunday night we witnessed and participated in a historic manifestation of the greatness, vitality and permanence of Am Yisroel.

Twenty-five thousand may not sound like a lot to the younger people of our society, but to those who lived through the Holocaust, or were born in DP camps after the war, or grew up in America during and following the war years, 25,000 bnei Torah gathering to honor the study of Torah is nothing short of phenomenal.

It wasn't that long ago that people thought that Torah Yiddishkeit was dead. There were few yeshivos. Both of my parents, who were children of rabbonim, went to public school. Many of their friends and the people they went to shul with were not shomer Shabbos. There were no alternatives outside of New York. Millions of Jews were killed and millions were lost to assimilation. Orthodoxy was unpopular and frum people were small in number. Not only in this country, but in Eretz Yisroel as well. The gedolim who gave birth to the resurgence of the Torah community, such as the Chazon Ish and the Brisker Rov, had a miniscule number of talmidim. The few yeshivos that existed had a few hundred students all together. Yet, it was from these small groups that the burgeoning Torah community emerged.

It is a cliché, but it is true anyway, that in America, there were few homegrown talmidei chachomim and even fewer who remained in learning. Frum bochurim

who obtained semicha and went into the rabbinate chose to lead Conservative and so-called traditional synagogues, because that's where the future was. There was no future in Orthodoxy.

When my grandfather sent my father to New York to learn in Torah Vodaas following his bar mitzvah, the entire town mocked him and derided him for condemning his son to become a shnorrer and a loser. Who went to yeshiva? Continuing in public school for high school was the path everyone else in town chose, followed by college, for without a proper education, they felt that they could not be proper citizens and ever be able to earn a living. That entire generation was lost.

Kollel was unheard of in those days. It didn't exist outside of Bais Medrash Elyon in Monsey, where my father continued after Torah Vodaas, and Bais Medrash Govoah, Rav Aharon Kotler's fledgling yeshiva in Lakewood. By today's measure, those institutions were tiny, but they spawned a revolution and the world we live in today.

As our communities are bursting at the seams, and as housing and places in schools are hard to come by, we take it all for granted, as we do the variety of available kosher food. Back in the day, cholov Yisroel was unavailable and glatt kosher meat was reserved for scrupulous medakdekim. Today, we walk into huge supermarkets where everything is kosher, the meat is all glatt, and the dairy products are all cholov Yisroel.

For the people who grew up in the years of struggle, when everything about being a Torah Jew required much mesirus nefesh, the Adirei HaTorah event this past Sunday night was a historic celebration of the resurgence of Torah, the

vindication of those lonely years of struggle, and a proclamation that the Torah and its people are eternal.

There was an event last year as well, so this year's was not the first, but the fact that it wasn't a one-time shot shows the permanence of the revolution and its hold until Moshiach comes to bring us all home.

It was the largest event produced by and for bnei Torah anywhere. We no longer need to be lectured by educated professional outsiders on what is good for us and what we should be doing. We know, and now the world knows, that bnei Torah are at least as capable and qualified as those who have chosen other paths. The days of being mocked and vilified, the days of being looked at as shleppers and lo yutzlachs, are gone. This week, and since last year's event, every ben Torah has an extra bounce in his step and every yungerman feels more appreciated than ever before. The argument is over. Long live the revolution.

Stadiums are arenas where winners and losers gather, but Sunday night it was different. All the attendees were winners. There was a pervasive energy in the room, a combination of ruchniyus and nitzchiyus, of haromas keren haTorah velomdeha vesomcheha. The spirit that guides and maintains us was tangible in the room. Nothing but Torah was mentioned, nothing but Torah was celebrated, and nothing but Torah mattered.

The speakers were there for their gadlus baTorah and not for any other reason. They are celebrated for their greatness in Torah and dedicating their lives to continuing the revolution Rav Aharon started.

Rav Aryeh Malkiel Kotler, the Bais Medrash Govoah rosh yeshiva under whose leadership the yeshiva experienced its tremendous growth along the trajectory that began under his father, Rav Shneur, set the tone of the event with his sparkling message of the life-giving qualities of Torah. What was left unsaid, but not unfelt, was that he is third in line playing a leadership role in the transformation of the world of Torah. The revolution that his grandfather began and laid the foundations for took off under his father, and under him it has blossomed to qualitative and quantitative heights unprecedented in our history.

There were two special guests from Eretz Yisroel on the dais, both men in their nineties, gedolim in Torah and harbotzas Torah, who were set upon their trajectory to greatness in their young years when they fell under the spell of the Chazon Ish.

Rav Meir Tzvi Bergman, under difficult circumstances, addressed the gathering. He is famed for his gaonus in Torah and renowned as the son-in-law of Maran Rav Elazar Menachem Man Shach. Watching him speaking and delivering his message was a lesson unto itself, as he epitomized all that he spoke of, a giant in Torah who dedicates his life to learning Torah. His words were poetic, as he discussed how a person who learns Torah becomes a yedid Hashem, as does his wife, who makes it possible.

He spoke without pretention, with heart and humility. These qualities were most evident when, while addressing the large crowd and those listening at home, he switched from the language he is most comfortable in, Yiddish, to English. He struggled as he explained that he wanted those who are suffering to know that he cared, and that others care, about the single girls who wait to find their zivugim. He wanted to be clear and he wanted them to know that their situation

is important to him, as he offered words of hope and the idea that they should recite Birkas Hamazon by reading it, instead of by heart.

The older people in the crowd closed their eyes and imagined what the world was like as they were growing up, while the younger people were pumped with pride as they glanced around the stadium, taking it all in and letting it sink in that they are part of something great.

The music blasted throughout the stadium and the crowd danced in joyful ecstasy, celebrating the present and the eternal, as well as the words of Abaye and Rava, Rashi, the Rashba, and the Ramban. They live their lives according to the Mesillas Yeshorim and the Mishnah Berurah, and demonstrated their happiness that they were born at this time, in this age, when a gathering such as this, and yeshivos such as Bais Medrash Govoah, are possible.

Contrast that celebration with the secular world, where truth does not seem to be important. Arrogance and blind ambition are the prime motivators. A lust for power emanates from the faces of leaders. It is hard to believe anyone in the public sphere.

Especially now, as the election season gets underway, we see politicians and business leaders practice the art of rhetoric. Everything that is spoken is skin deep, at most. There is no attempt to really understand an issue and analyze solutions. Everyone is looking to create the great sound-bite or tweet or pithy comment that can go viral. It's all about the momentary fleeting pop and rush that come with it.

So much of life in the big world out there is about talk. It's not about explanations or answers, firm positions or the truth, just about making impressions and trying to convince people that they are something which they are not.

Accomplishment, decency, experience and reliability matter little. It's about style and spin. The people are as superficial as their leaders and don't seem to care about much.

Torah must continue to be our guide. We need to banish those who rise to positions of influence through rhetoric and sound-bites, and strengthen those with real ideas and genuine accomplishments. We have to be intelligent enough to judge people by what they do, not by what they say they will do.

We are to be committed to a life of Torah, probing the depth of pesukim and dissecting the words of the Gemara, Rishonim, Acharonim and baalei machshovah, and becoming better people, with depth and greatness. Talmidei chachomim are not about empty words and cute sound-bites. They are real. The more we cleave to them and learn from them, the more immune we become to the falsity and vacuousness of the world.

In Parshas Beha'aloscha, which we shall read this week outside of Eretz Yisroel, the posuk (11:1) describes the sin of the misonenim: "Vayehi ha'am kemisonenim ra be'einei Hashem - The people were misonenim and Hashem was angered and caused a fire to burn that devoured the edges of the camp."

Rashi explains that the word misonenim means excuse. The people were looking for an excuse to depart from the way of Hashem. They complained that they

were traveling for three days straight and it was too difficult for them. "Vayichar apo," Hashem became angry, because the trek was for their ultimate good, so that they would enter Eretz Yisroel quicker.

The people cried out to Moshe, who davened on their behalf to Hashem, and the fire sank into the ground.

Immediately thereafter, the posuk relates that the asafsuf (the eirev rav - Rashi), followed by the Bnei Yisroel, began bemoaning the lack of meat for them to eat. Rashi points out that they had left Mitzrayim with plenty of sheep and cattle, but they were once again searching for something to complain about. The facts didn't matter.

They complained about the manna that fell every day to sustain them in the desert and spoke about the free fish the Mitzriyim fed them when they were slaves. Instead of being thankful for their freedom and bounty, they grumbled.

Shortly thereafter, the Torah tells of Eldod and Meidod, who prophesized in their tent regarding Moshe. A young man heard them and became upset with what they were saying. He rushed to Moshe to inform on them. Upon hearing their prophecy, Yehoshua advised Moshe to lock them up and force them to desist from prophesying. Moshe refused, admonishing his assistant not to be zealous on his behalf. He declared, "If only the whole nation could be prophets!"

Moshe learned the lesson of the misonenim and the asafsuf, and although he couldn't have been happy with the subject of Eldod's and Meidod's prophecy, he wouldn't lock them up. He only wished that more of the Jewish people would be

worthy of prophecy. He saw the entirety of the situation and prayed for more holiness in his camp, ignoring any personal, selfish desires.

As we celebrate the Adirei HaTorah event and learn the parsha, we need to say: Enough of complaining, grumbling, and seeking to find fault. Enough of cynicism, pessimism, and negativity. Let us commemorate how far we have come, how much better off this generation is than the ones that came before it, and recognize the visionaries and philanthropists who made it possible.

The parsha concludes with the story of Miriam and Aharon speaking disparagingly of Moshe. Hashem admonished them, "Lomah lo yireisem ledaber b'avdi b'Moshe? Why did you seek to find fault in My eved, Moshe? You know that he is the leader of the people. You know that I speak to him regularly. You know of his greatness. Yet, instead of praising him, you mock him."

The parsha opens with the commandment to Aharon to light the neiros of the menorah in the Mishkon. The lights were not for Hashem's benefit, but rather for ours. The ability to achieve perfection in middos and to be people of substance, who examine an entire issue and seek to separate the bad from the good and support the good, is caused by the light of the neiros of the menorah. Those who are worthy see with that light, ki ner mitzvah v'Torah ohr, living lives of greatness.

That is the depth of the promise made to Aharon when he was upset that he had no role in the chanukas hanesi'im. Hashem told him, "Shelecha gedolah mishelohem," meaning that his act of lighting the menorah will live on for eternity, while that of the nesi'im would not (see Ramban ad loc.). The nesi'im's

act was a one-timer. Aharon's avodah set into motion an avodah that can be performed every day, for eternity.

The light that Aharon lit in the Mishkon is found in our day as well. Those who dedicate themselves to Torah can raise themselves and not only see and benefit from the light of Torah, but also help light it and keep it lit.

Our world is aflame, illuminated by Torah and the lomdei and tomchei Torah. Let us do what we can, each in our own way, to keep that torch lit for our own benefit and for the benefit of our families, our communities, and the world.

The Mishnah in Maseches Rosh Hashanah describes how bais din would let all of Eretz Yisroel and those in the golah (exile) at that time know that the new month had been proclaimed. They would light a torch on one mountain and people on the next mountain would see the flame lit. Those people would then light a torch on that mountain and so on, until the entire exile was lit up "kemahaduras aish, like a huge fire."

We do the same in our day, the great yeshiva in Lakewood, founded by Rav Aharon, keeping his torch lit. Many other yeshivos in Lakewood and the New York area are lit by that light, and in yeshivos across the country, lomdei and chovevei Torah dedicate their lives to Torah, lighting torches of kedusha.

May the golah that Rav Chaim Volozhiner foretold would be the final outpost before Moshiach's arrival be aflame with Torah in communities small and large across the fruited plane, raising our lives and the lives of those among us, until all of Klal Yisroel is appreciating and learning Torah, preparing the world for Moshiach's arrival.