

Moreinu Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz zt"l

5464/1886 – 5708/1948

With Torah Vodaath from 1920-1948

“It is difficult for me to explain to others the essence of such a multi-faceted personality as our master. However, Rav Reuvain Grozovsky zt"l presented it in one point: “*A Gaon in Ruach.*” These words were penned by Rav Avrohom Pam zt"l when he was asked to explain why Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz zt"l merited to be of the greatest builders of Torah in America.

No less than the Gadol HaDor, Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l, declared, “We are obligated to proclaim on Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz what the Gemara in Bava Basra (21a) says about Rav Yehoshua ben Gamla; ‘May this person be remembered for good’, for if not for Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, there would be no Limud HaTorah or fear of heaven in America at all. He was the ‘father’ of all Bnei Torah in America, both in this generation and in all the generations to come.”

The Satmar Rebbe zt"l was said to have stated, “He plowed, and thus we were able to seed and plant.” The Ponovezher Rav, Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman zt"l, described him as “Nistar Mendlowitz”, a play on words alluding to the fact that Rav Shraga Feivel, despite his stature, insisted on being called “Mister” instead of “Rav”.

Rav Meir Shapiro zt"l, the Rav and Rosh Yeshiva of Lublin, while collecting in America to build Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, insisted that Rav Shraga Feivel join him at the front of a parlor meeting designed to raise funds for the project. In response to why he deserved such honor, Rav Meir announced, “For me to build a yeshiva in Lublin, Poland, in a city which is full of a rich heritage of Yiddishkeit and teeming with Chassidic young men, is no exceptional *kuntz* (trick). But for Rav Shraga Feivel to build a yeshiva like he has here in America, where the stones are *treif*, that is a *kuntz*. *Halevai*, I should be seated next to him in Gan Eden.”

Difficult as it may be to transmit to this generation what Rav Shraga Feivel achieved beginning nearly a century ago, it behooves us to try to portray to those living in this century a bit of his background and the challenges he faced, so we may all appreciate his sacrifices for our sake and the sake of Hashem and His Torah.

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Rav Shraga Feivel was born in Vilag, on the Hungarian-Polish Border, in 1886, to Reb Moshe and Sima Tcheba Mendlowitz. At age ten, he was tragically orphaned when his mother perished in a fire on Yom Kippur. Reb Moshe remarried Toibe, who showered the family with love. The family then moved to Humenne. At age twelve, the Rav Shraga Feivel outgrew the Cheder in Humenne, and he left to learn in some of the great yeshivos of the time: in Mezo-Laboretz, under the local Dayan, Rav Aharon; in Chust, under the guidance of Rav Moshe Greenwald, known as the Arugas HaBosem, and in Unsdorf, where the Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Shmuel Rosenberg, known as the Be'er Shmuel, was known as the ‘Rebbe of Roshei Yeshivos’. After receiving semicha at age eighteen, he travelled to Pressburg to learn from the Shevet Soifer, Rav Simcha Bunim Schreiber, in the ‘mother of all Hungarian yeshivos’.

From a young age, Rav Shraga Feivel aspired to spread Torah, and in 1913, he set out for America to accomplish his dreams. He planned to build a yeshiva in America, and then continue on to Eretz Yisroel. After teaching for a while in Scranton, he decided that in order to mold a Yeshiva according to his standards, he would need financial independence. In 1921, he moved his family to the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where he borrowed the exorbitant sum of \$10,000, and began publishing *Dos Yiddishe Licht*, a newspaper designed to appeal to the mind, and was aimed at arousing the American Jew from his apathetic slumber. By 1923, Rav Shraga Feivel realized the difficulty in building a Yeshiva on his own, and agreed to become a Rebbe at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, where he began teaching eighth grade.

Within weeks of his commencement of employment, the position of Menahel was vacated, and Rav Shraga Feivel was selected to assume the mantle of leadership. He infused the Rebbes with a spark of enthusiasm, and before long they recognized him for the natural pedagogue that he was. He envisioned that the success of the elementary school would be expanded, and this set the stage for creating his dream; a Mesivta and Bais Medrash, where true Bnei Torah would be developed.

Although he faced much opposition to this idea, before long the Mesivta was a fact on the ground. He pushed the boys to excel in their secular studies as well, so as not to give the parents an excuse to remove them on the grounds that they were doing poorly in that area. Before long, Rav Shraga Feivel pushed forward with his dream of starting a Bais Medrash. His choice of Rebbeim, of the foremost talmidei chachamim in the area, gave notice to all involved; Torah would not only survive in America, it would thrive!

Rav Shraga Feivel chose mainly products of Lithuanian yeshivos to say shiur in the Bais Medrash. He felt that exposing them to the analytical rigors of Rav Chaim Brisker would help them withstand the lure of the secular fields where strides were being made in the precision of thoughts. Yet although the learning style was Lithuanian, the spirit of the yeshiva was Chassidic. Rav Shraga Feivel captured the hearts of his students through singing and dancing, encouraging their Yiddishkeit to penetrate not only their minds, but also their hearts. Indeed, when in the last year of his life, a group of talmidim sang V'al kein nikaveh with him, he commented, "With this niggun, I built Torah Vodaath."

The highlight of the week was the Seuda Shlishis, where Rav Shraga Feivel, deep in thought, would lead the talmidim in singing haunting melodies. This had the greatest influence on the talmidim. When Rav Shlomo Heiman was asked why he did not institute a Mussar Seder as was common in the Litvishe yeshivos, he replied that the Seuda Shlishis of Rav Shraga Feivel was all the bachurim needed, as it had the ability to remove from their neshomos all the impurities and instill in them Ahavas Hashem.

In 1936, Rav Shraga Feivel opened Camp Mesivta which enabled the boys to enjoy the fresh air while they continued their spiritual growth during the summer months. Yet as much as

Rav Shraga Feivel felt bound to his talmidim and the Yeshiva, he nonetheless was at the forefront of building other Mosdos of Torah. He would often send his best and brightest students to help establish yeshivos for other Roshei Yeshiva, to the consternation of the Board of Directors. This attitude prevailed on him to envision spreading Torah to every community across the United States, and with this in mind, he founded Torah Umesorah. The mission of this organization was to establish day schools to teach Torah in each and every community. Through the work of Torah Umesorah, thousands of Jewish children learn about Hashem and His Torah daily, and today there are approximately 300,000 children in its network of schools.

In 1943, in order to help train rebbes for these schools, Rav Shraga Feivel established Aish Dos in Monsey, NY, where he hoped to prepare them with the skills needed to educate Jewish children nationwide. Although the program came to an end after one year, the success of the program is evident in the quality of Mechanchim it produced. A veritable “Who’s Who” of master educators came from this program, including Rav Moshe Wolfson, Mashgiach of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, Rav Mannes Mandel zt”l, Menahel of Yeshiva of Brooklyn, Rav Berel Greenbaum and Rav Hershel Mashinsky of Yeshiva of Spring Valley, amongst others.

With Aish Dos not being renewed, Rav Shraga Feivel decided to use the campus in Monsey to start a Bais Medrash for bochurim who would dedicate themselves exclusively to Torah learning. He realized that after the devastation of the holocaust, they could no longer count on Europe for Torah scholars, and they must now dedicate themselves to creating these scholars in the United States. To this end, he established Bais Medrash Elyon. He sent eighteen young bochurim to Monsey for this purpose. Rav Shraga Feivel spent his time in Monsey, and gave special attention to this elite group, nurturing and guiding them. His goal was not just to produce Talmidei Chachamim, but to create Anshei Ruach, people of spirit.

Besides his accomplishments for the Jews of America, Rav Shraga Feivel never lost sight of his beloved Eretz Yisroel. During the late 1920's, he assisted Reb Itche Gershtenkorn in funding the new city of Bnei Brak. Indeed, he expressed the desire to be buried beside Rav Shraga Feivel, which eventually came to fruition.

In late 1947, while saying the words of Racheim na Hashem Elokeinu in bentching, Rav Shraga Feivel broke out in heavy sobbing, and suffered a massive heart attack. In his parting words to Rav Nesanel Quinn, the Menahel of the Mesivta, he asked that he guard two things in the Mesivta: “*Dos huhr vahr un dos pintelev Chassidus* – the hairbreadth of truth and the bit of Chassidus.

On the third day of Elul, 5708 (1948), Rav Shraga Feivel was niftar just after saying Birchas HaTorah. He was interred in the Tzelemer Chelka, and two years later, his remains were brought to Eretz Yisroel to be buried in the Shomrei Shabbos cemetery in Bnei Brak. When his aron was brought to its final resting place, the Chazon Ish and Rav Chatzkel Levenstein (Mashgiach of Ponevezh) accompanied it.

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Certainly, we can understand why it is difficult to describe Rav Shraga Feivel. We have a but a glimpse of the Gaon in Spirit that he was; He was able to do a *kuntz* and build Torah in America, thereby plowing the ground and readying it for the future generations to reap its fruits. Yet with all that we know, there is so much more that we will never know. Mister Mendlowitz will forever be a great Nistar.