



ONCE FELT, NEVER FORGOTTEN

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS - AVOS 3:15

Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita

“A picture is a poem without words” goes an old saying. Pictures speak to the deepest recesses of our souls and they bring to the fore much that words could never express. Each picture tells its story and in most cases, the casual observer would never guess what lies beyond the surface. Allow me to share just such a story and ask that you try to conjure up the vision in your mind’s eye.

The photo is of the Bobover Rebbe, Rav Shloma ztl and in truth it is more of a portrait. The Rebbe looks straight into the camera, his warm eyes alight with sweet concern. It must be some kind of minor Yom Tov because he is wearing a shtreimel and a Shabbos coat. The mono image is old and the Rav’s beard is still dark. How was such a rare image captured, and what story lies beyond its surface?

The picture was taken on Chol Hamoed Pesach 5718-1958 in the Rav’s Seforim shtieb. Bobov was then centred in Crown Heights, Brooklyn and on most such occasions the Rav’s tisch took place on the main floor of his residence. Next to the large tisch room was his office where he would meet Chasidim who would come to seek his blessings. Things were so much more intimate in those days: the community was small and everything seemed less complicated. On that Chol Hamoed way back then, the Rav held a tisch to which came a number of yeshivah day school youngsters from ‘out of town.’ To them this was a unique experience; they were not used to chassidic rebbes and their customs. As the Rav spoke his eyes surveyed the various people in attendance. Most were his Chasidim, many of whom were Holocaust survivors who were taking their first steps in this new land. The out of towners were entranced and the nigun the Rebbe was singing soon had them humming along. At the end of benching the Rav asked that a particular boy come into his office for a word. The young fellow, just bar mitzvah, was taken by surprise. What could this Sage want from him? The Rebbe asked him to sit down. “What is your name?”, asked the Tzadik in his halting English, The boy answered and just

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then something astounding happened. Into the room crashed another out of town bochur. In his hands was a 'box camera' with a flash attachment. The boy, with a brashness only an American yingel could muster, asked if he could take the Rebbe's picture. The Rav smiled warmly and said "yes" but with one condition: that the picture be given to the young fellow sitting across the table. "I want him to look at the picture and remember the words I want to share with him." With this the Rav took off his reading glasses and straightened out his silver peyos. The flashbulb popped with its instant blinding blast, and in a moment the photographer was gone, savouring his unique good fortune. The Rav then turned to his guest and with his illuminating smile said, "Please be my guest for the rest of Yom Tov, I want you to be my friend and not necessarily a chassid." The youngster was astounded. This holy sage was looking into his eyes, smiling and, more than anything else, inviting his friendship.

The Mishnah tells us:

Where there is no Torah there is no proper behaviour, where there is no proper behaviour there is no Torah. Where there is no wisdom there is no fear of Hashem, where there is no fear of Hashem there is no wisdom. Where there is no understanding there is no knowledge, where there is no knowledge there is no understanding.

In Bobov one could see this Mishnah as it was meant to be lived. The Rav gave living lessons of proper behaviour, true wisdom, and deep understanding with each nuance of every day. Everything was Torah and each act was enveloped with wisdom. He spoke of every part of life, how to behave, how to eat, everything was part of the service to Hashem; nothing was ever left out.

He would pluck a youngster from a crowd and with a few words give that youngster such warmth that he would always yearn to touch the wellspring of such Torah love. He never sought to create new Chassidim for himself, just Torah Jews who would thrive with warmth and vibrancy.

Those who were blessed to cross his threshold knew he would be there for them at all levels because to the Rav all levels were one.

I am typing these words as we honour the twenty first yahrzeit of the Rebbe, and still can't begin to fathom the enormous love he had for Yidden and Yiddishkeit. He was so vibrant, his service to Hashem was done with such grace and fire, that one could never imagine such a force would be taken from us. Yet we can grasp that Hashem's plans are unique and we must cherish the time with which we have been blessed. We still have the eternal spirit that we basked in and the memories shared.

So as I try to evoke words to describe that which can't be described, I look up and gaze at that picture which was taken especially for a young bochur from out of town more than a half a century ago. I have tried to give others that friendship he offered me as I sat in that small office in awe. I do try to remember his words and more so his actions and yes, that Yom Tov spent so long ago as his personal guest still reverberates in my soul.

We of the Golus of Covid have lived through a difficult time, and much of the debris still lays strewn in our hearts. The Tzadikim who recreated the Torah World after the Churban did so with astounding love and care. It is now our turn to live with their lessons and share with our young that warmth and support. May their merit bring us all strength, and may we all soon be blessed to dance in the streets of Yerusholiyim with the coming of the Moshiach.

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