

Favoring History Over Storytelling: MAKING OF A GODOL

By Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff

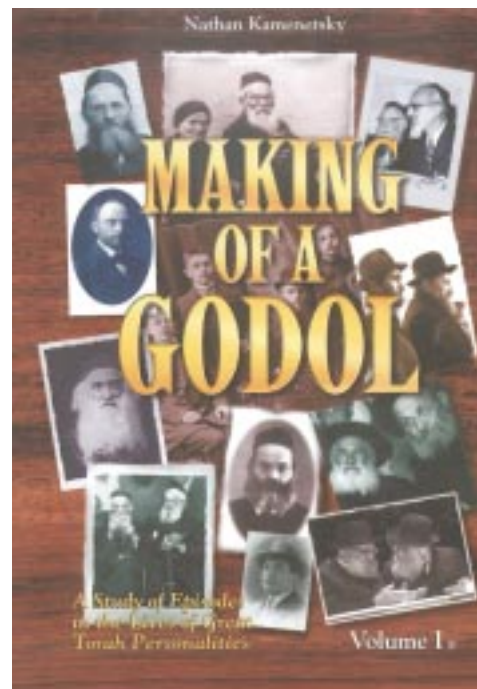
The book under review has provoked a storm of controversy mainly because of its alleged affronts to the memories of some *gedolim*. Individuals of stature have differences of opinion as to whether the book should be condemned. Since the book's accuracy does not seem to be at issue, the crux of the debate revolves around the question of how to treat the lives of *gedolim*. Rabbi Shimon Schwab, *zt"l*, while conceding that history must tell the whole truth, questioned history's value regarding our great leaders. Rabbi Schwab maintained that while stories of *gedolim* that provide inspiration are of value, history, which might reveal facets of their lives not in conformity with contemporary expectations of what an ideal *gadol* should be, serves no ethical purpose. On the other hand, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, *zt"l*, in a much quoted letter, pointed to Proverbs 24:16, "Seven times a *tzaddik* falls but rises up," which he understood to mean that a *tzaddik* is not born full-blown, but precisely because he overcomes failures does he grow and emerge to greatness.

Rav Hutner compared the life of contemporary youth to the "movement of a ship in a stormy sea, rather than the movement of a wagon on solid earth." In the context of the complexity and tension of modern life, it would seem that today's youth can gain strength from awareness of the "falls" and the adversities—both physical and spiritual—*gedolim* faced before they achieved greatness. (This is not to say that Rav Hutner would have endorsed the printing of everything that appears in the book.)

Our reviewer has wisely chosen not to focus on the current controversy. Rather, recognizing the book's value as a comprehensive history of the Lithuanian yeshivah world, he has assessed its long-term contribution to our understanding of that world. The first edition of the book sold out and is currently out of print. It is expected that a second edition will be printed, which will elaborate on a number of passages that are open to misunderstanding —Ed.

Rabbi Nathan Kamenetsky has proven that formal education is a detriment to attaining knowledge. If I am correct, Reb Noson, as he is affectionately known, is not a high school graduate. With the four university degrees that I possess, I had to keep *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* nearby as I pored over his two-volume book, *Making of a Godol* (Jerusalem, 2002). Even more impressive than his vocabulary is his extensive and far-ranging knowledge. He is a master of rabbinic, cognate and general literature, and the range of the

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sources he cites is extraordinary. What makes the book even more attractive to the Talmudic scholar is the style in which it was written. Unlike a trained historian whose reasoning and thought process is only vaguely delineated in his footnotes, Reb Noson reveals his thought process in great detail, and the reader is led through a labyrinth of sources and theories until a conclusion is reached. In this book—which is a veritable *pilpul* in Jewish history—the reader shares in the research and is invited to evaluate the author's theories.

Reb Noson approached his work as if it were a *daf* Gemara. The actual text is 66 pages long; the rest of the 1,398-page book is devoted to footnotes and

excursuses. The text seems to resemble a Talmudic text; the footnotes are Rashi and the excursuses are Tosafot.

The book is the outgrowth of research that Reb Noson began after his father died in 1986 at the age of 95. His research first resulted in the 1993 publication of the book *Reb Yaakov: The Life and Times of HaGaon Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky*, authored by Yonason Rosenblum and published by Mesorah Publications. (The title page notes that the volume is "based on the research of Rabbi Noson Kamenetsky.") *Reb Yaakov* is similar to traditional biographies published by Mesorah Publications as part of the ArtScroll History Series. In *Making of a Godol*, however, the author takes the reader behind the scenes to experience the challenges, tribulations, disappointments and successes of the Torah environment in which his father spent his early years. The self-published book only covers the initial seventeen years of Reb Yaakov's life and concludes with his return home from the Slabodka Yeshiva for Passover in 1908. *Making of a Godol* was to be the first of a multi-volume set.

Reb Noson uses his father's early years to serve as a launching pad to re-create a good deal of Torah history of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. The author very ably creates a living tradition through citations from memoir literature, his father's recorded reminiscences and no less than 357 interviews. The spiritual quests of Reb Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Musar Movement in Lithuania, and those of his disciples are recorded and scrutinized. Reb Noson also exerted much effort to ascertain exactly what year Reb Itzele Blaser attempted to introduce *musar* into the Volozhin Yeshiva curriculum. My *rebbe*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, already publicized this incident in his philosophic magnum opus, *Halakic Man*, when he recorded the dialogue between his grandfather Rav Hayyim Brisker and Rabbi Blaser:

R. Hayyim of Brisk's reply to R. Isaac Blaser, when the latter came to Volozhin in an attempt to persuade the heads of the yeshivah to introduce the study of Musar in their academy is well known. R. Blaser, in support of his position, cited the statement of the sages: "A man should always incite the good impulse to fight against the evil impulse... If he subdues it, well and good; if not, let him study the Torah... If he subdues it, well and good; if not, let him... remind himself of the day of death" [Berakhot 5a]. Evidently, R. Blaser emphasized, the sages preferred the effectiveness of the remembrance of the day of death to the study of the Torah, for do we not have here stated that at times occupying oneself with Torah will not subdue the evil impulse while the remembrance of the day of death will vanquish it? R. Hayyim replied: If a person is sick we prescribe castor oil for him. However, it is certain that if a healthy person ingests castor oil he will become very sick. If that vile wretch [the evil impulse] meets you, and if you are sound in spirit and soul, if your consciousness and character are still whole and intact, occupy yourself with the Torah, drag him to the study house [see Sukkah 52b; Kiddushin 30b]. This is the most effective and tried remedy in man's ongoing battle with his evil impulse. However, if you are spiritually sick, if a fit of madness has seized hold of you, if some psychic anomaly has put forth its diseased tendrils in your inner world, then you must use more powerful drugs, those that are designed for the very ill—the remembrance of the day of death. We in Volozhin, thank God, are healthy in spirit and body, are whole in our Torah; there is no need here of castor oil. If the scholars of Kelm and Kovno feel compelled to drink bitter drugs—let them drink to their heart's content, but let them not invite others to dine with them [translated from the Hebrew by Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia, 1983), 75-76.]

Thanks to Reb Noson's innovative pen, we now have a more detailed account of this fascinating moment in Lithuanian lore.

Rabbi Noson Zvi Finkel, popularly

known as the Alter, is perhaps the focal figure in *Making of a Godol*. Rav Noson enables us to be party to Rav Finkel's mindset and temperament, to gain new insight into his achievements and to suffer through his setbacks. Rav Finkel was a student of Reb Yisrael's disciples, and he became the leading educator and *mashgiach ruchani* in the Lithuanian yeshivah world. The founder of the Slabodka Yeshiva, Rav Finkel greatly inspired and influenced both Reb Yaakov Kamenetsky and his childhood friend and study partner, Arele Sislovitzer, a young orphan who was named after the city of his birth. The latter would subsequently gain renown as Rabbi Aharon Kotler, the Kletsker *rosh yeshivah* and founder of Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey.

Most revelatory and enlightening for the contemporary student is the description of the poverty, which was endemic to the Lithuanian yeshivah world. Obtaining food, clothing and lodging was an ongoing challenge for newcomers to Torah institutions. Even more difficult than the physical challenges were the spiritual confrontations. The "isms" impacting the general European community were also creating havoc within the Jewish world. Concepts of social justice that spawned Socialism, Communism and various subdivisions of secular Zionism all had their adherents among the Jewish masses. It was an era in which "...she has felled many victims, the number of her slain is huge" (Proverbs 7:26). The yeshivah world was not spared these challenges. Many future rabbinic luminaries had siblings and friends who left the fold and embraced non-Torah lifestyles. Nowadays we live during a time when many are returning to their Torah heritage. At the turn of the last century, however, the trend was to break away from family and tradition. Many wished to imbibe the liberal and supposedly refined ideas of the world beyond the synagogue and *beit midrash*.

It was particularly informative for this reader to learn that Yaakov Moshe Kapolyer was a member of the wel-

coming committee that greeted the young Reb Yaakov when he arrived at Slabodka. Reb Noson tells us that this individual “also helped his father with acquiring *havruthoth* (study partners) for *Qiddushin*, the spring-term *massekhet*” (60). I eagerly studied all the information about the Kapolyer, who went on to become Rabbi Yaakov Moshe haKohain Lesin, my revered and beloved *mashgiach ruchani* at Yeshiva University in New York. During the two decades that I spent at YU as both a student and teacher, the *mashgiach* was a constant beacon of light and inspiration in my own spiritual development.

Reb Noson vividly depicts many of the leading rabbis and *roshei yeshivah* of the earlier generations. Notable figures such as Rabbis Dovid Friedman, Baruch Ber Leibowitz and Hayyim Soloveichik are brought to life. Reb Noson wrote:

For Shabbath Rosh Hodesh, R' Hayyim was a guest at the home of the Kovner Rav, R' Zvi-Hirsh Rabinowitz. A blizzard was raging but a group of students, craving another word with the eminent R' Hayyim, crossed over from Slabodka to attend Services at the main Kovno Synagogue, where the Kovner Rav davent.... The bahurim waited for the Rav to get to his home after the davenen was over and followed him there. They were covered with snow by the time they trudged into the house—but a rav's home was never locked to people. They were greeted by an irritated host with a German-Yiddish challenge, "Warum bringen sie herein den schnee (Why are you bringing in the snow)?" They replied directly, "We came to see the Brisker Rav." The guest had heard the commotion and the exchange from the inner room and came out saying, "Gut Shabbos, gut Shabbos. Nu, you came to see, so you see: a poshuter mentsh (plain human being), a poshuter mentsh." They mustered the courage to ask him to tell them a dvar Torah. The kindly Rav of Brisk complied and said something short, lucid and incisive, and they left (88-89).


Reb Noson is well versed in much of my own published scholarship. At times he agrees with my conclusions, and at times he takes issue with them. Nonetheless, in one instance I feel I must fervently defend my perspective. Reb Noson writes about Reb Mendalleh Epstein who initiated his student, Reb Hayyim Soloveichik, into the thought process that later became known as the “Brisker Method.” This approach was characterized by its insistence on incisive analysis, exact classification, critical independence and emphasis on Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* as the central point of rabbinic research. On page 745, footnote X, Reb Noson quotes a reference I made to Reb Mendalleh in my book, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*.

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Soloveitchik.* Reb Noson writes: “The Rav plays down Reb Mendalleh’s stature without justification by declaring him as ‘a *melamed* in Slutzk.’” *Melamed* is the title that both Rabbi Hershel Schachter [*Nefesh ha-Rav* (Brooklyn, New York, 1994), 238-239] and I use when referring to this unique scholar. However, we did not coin this appellation. It was the way our revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, referred to Reb Mendalleh. For the Rav, there was no higher or more elegant designation than that of *melamed*. [See Hershel Reichman, “A *Posheter Melamed*,” *Jewish Action* (spring 2003):10] The Rav would often cite the blessing in which we designate the Almighty as a *melamed*: “Who teaches the Torah to Thy People Israel.” Indeed, I stand guilty as charged. I described Reb

Mendalleh as a *melamed*, the teacher of Reb Hayyim, who later became the prime mover in engendering the Brisker Method.

Making of a Godol is not light reading. The difficulty is compounded by the author’s unique method of listing citations, referencing material and transliterating Hebrew words. Reb Noson has created what I would term the “Kamenetsky historiography method.” Nevertheless, reading the book is worth the effort since the material is fascinating. It makes us realize how in debt we are to the *melamdin* of the earlier generations. They rose above material and spiritual vicissitudes to become the Torah leaders of their generations. They were truly the “remnant of their sages” of yesteryear. Only because of their example and inspiration has our generation succeeded in bringing forth “righteous, saintly and learned individuals” (from the daily Amidah).

I am fully aware of the criticisms of *Making of a Godol* by some in the Torah community. I do not wish to enter into polemics with them because we approach the writing of Torah history from different vantage points. Reb Noson already discussed this issue in detail in his foreword where he acknowledges that there are those who favor “storytelling” over “history.” Indeed, there were *gedolei Yisrael* who stressed the need for absolute accuracy in attempting to recreate their past. The Satmar Rav, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, for example, never told stories because he said, “You cannot educate through lies.” As a result of Reb Noson’s allegiance to truth, *Making of a Godol* has opened our eyes to a world of triumph and frustration, achievement and setbacks, but above all, inspiration and guidance. If *gedolim* eventuated during such difficult times, then we certainly should be even more successful today in raising Torah personalities “to render the Torah great and glorious” (Isaiah 42:21). 

*(New Jersey, 1999).