

## **“The daughters of Tzafchad drew near...and they stood before Moshe.”**

The *Yalkut Shimoni* gives a powerful insight into the episode with *Bnos Tzafchad*. Every *adam kasheir*, pious individual, who stands up for what is right and true, especially during a time – or in an environment – that is antithetical to Torah, will earn the reward for all the members of his milieu. Noach took a stand during the generation of the Flood: he merited their reward. Lot stood up to the evil citizens of Sodom: he received their reward. Likewise, the righteous daughters of Tzafchad stood up for their beliefs at a time when there were those in *Klal Yisrael* who clamored, “Give us a new leader, and we will return to Egypt!” They rightfully deserved to receive the reward intended for those who had sought to undermine *Klal Yisrael*’s leadership.

What a profound lesson can be derived from the *Yalkut*. *Horav Mordechai Ilan, z.l.*, explains that a person’s actions are not measured only according to their own value, but also in light of when and where they are executed. The generation, the society, the environment, the circumstances under which they take place determines the significance of the action. One’s ability to overcome the winds of apathy, the waves of assimilation and the sea of venom that is leveled against he who stands up for what is right, decides the reward that he will receive.

Throughout Jewish history, individuals have stood their ground and fought for Torah – under the most difficult conditions and backdrop. Yet, they persevered and stood their ground. In their merit, the *Torah* reigns supreme as it grows stronger and greater each day.

*Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, z.l.*, the architect of Torah in America, is a clear example of an individual who stood resolutely against the flood of assimilation that had engulfed America. He came to a land where, to paraphrase him, “*Eretz lo zeruah*,” the *lo/no* was planted.” Everybody said no. We cannot fight. We cannot keep *Shabbos*. Torah has no chance. It was a land where apathy and negativism deluged everyone. It was “*Eretz ocheles yoshvehah*,” a land that devoured its inhabitants. It destroyed their spiritual component, leaving them spiritually sterile.

True, there were many scholars and rabbis of stature that had arrived here before him. Of these individuals, even if they had saved themselves, only a few were successful in saving their children. Unfortunately, most of them were not able to reach out and save others. The self-confidence that the contemporary Orthodox Jew takes for granted was a rarity in those days. *Rav Shraga Feivel* would not accept a no. While others were prepared to accept America’s assimilation, *Rav Shraga Feivel* considered it a challenge that he needed to overcome. He was a revolutionary who battled the status quo of apathy. He made up his mind to do whatever was in his power to save his fellow Jews in America from spiritual demise.

While limited space does not permit for a full appreciation of his accomplishments or the challenges of the times during which his efforts achieved successful fruition, he deserves that a few vignettes

of his achievements for Torah in America be mentioned.

Just to give a perspective of the spiritual panorama of the times, we cite from the famous observations made by *Horav Yaakov David Wilovsky, z.l.*, the *Ridbaz*, one of the great European scholars to come to America. As a consequence of the *halachic* standards of *Kashrus* that he attempted to impose in Chicago, he eventually had to flee for his life. He writes in his introduction to his *Nimukei Ridbaz*: “In America, Jews have gathered from all corners of the globe, and, as a result, no one knows anyone, or what was his position in his native city. Many who were outcasts and derelicts in Europe have become leaders in this country. They give public sermons that any priest, *I’havdil*, could also give in his church. Here, however, they are called rabbis.

“Likewise, many evil-doers in their hometowns have come here and entered the meat business, calling themselves ‘kosher butchers.’ They are neither butchers nor kosher. They have joined forces with the chameleon rabbis, and together they are feeding *treifah*, non-kosher, meat to unsuspecting Jews. Even the *shochet*, ritual slaughterer, spends his *Shabbos kodesh* at the theater.”

*Rav Wilovsky* went on to decry the spineless attitude of those who should do something about the sad state of *Kashrus* in America. America had become a place where the spirit of Judaism had dried up, and the Jews were overcome by a lust for everything that was abominable to their religion.

It was in such a spiritual wasteland that *Rav Shraga Feivel* set forth to make a change. He organized a small group of like-minded individuals to plan a newspaper to combat the filth and vitriol that was spewed out from the contemporary secular *Yiddish* press. He borrowed \$10,000, the equivalent of eight years salary in those days. Together with the renowned *chazzan*, Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt, who contributed \$25,000, he started *Dos Yiddishe Licht*, “the *Light of Israel*.” They struggled for years to recoup their losses – but they made an impact; they created a dent in the spiritual status quo. His scathing editorials were eye openers to many people and inspired many to think about the path they were treading toward spiritual extinction. He neither minced words, nor feared accusing “rabbis” of turning a blind eye to the non-kosher practices of the day. He would say, “I have a burning within my bones; I am weary with containing myself.” He knew that his rabble-rousing tactics might cause people to denounce him, but there was no other way. Regrettably, no one else was doing anything to challenge the establishment.

Yet, the pressure of public censure can destroy a person. How did he do it? How was he able to continue his battle and withstand the pressures of negative public opinion? He viewed himself as a *shelucha d’Rachmana*, an agent of Hashem. On any issue, he could be expected to present his own independent opinion without fear of ridicule or opposition.

Like Pinchas, *Rav Shraga Feivel* did not permit his zealousness to cloud his *ahavas Yisrael*, love for all Jews. Two directors of the *Mesivta Torah Vodaath*, *Rav Shraga*

Feivel's *yeshivah*, approached the *yeshivah*'s president to accept two boys who had been in a catholic orphanage for some time. The president, a fine G-d-fearing man, responded in the negative, claiming that boys who had previously been kissing a crucifix would have a difficult time accepting the Torah and *mitzvos*. In order to circumvent a dispute, both sides agreed to present the problem to *Rav Shraga Feivel* for his final decision. *Rav Shraga Feivel* ruled that the boys should be accepted. He contended "better they should be *poshei Yisrael*, sinful Jews, than *sonei Yisrael*, haters of Jews." The boys were accepted, and at least one of them later became observant.

Perhaps the world "zealot" should be exchanged for "idealist," for a true zealot is an idealist who is committed to his goals and ideals. He does not allow negativism and apathy to stand in his way. He does what must be done, and he acts where action must be taken. He fears only Hashem to whom he has the utmost allegiance. His commitment is unswerving, and his dedication is boundless. In every generation we have idealists who give their lives for the dissemination of true Torah ideals and the upholding of Torah and *mitzvos*. They are self-effacing, never seeking the limelight unless it is absolutely necessary in pursuit of their goals. They have made, and continue to make, the difference in the battle to preserve and spread the sanctity and purity of Torah true Judaism.