

Rabbi Ya'akov Krantz -The Maggid of Dubna. (1,741-1,804)

Yahrzeit date – 17th of Tevet

The title "Maggid" refers to an itinerant preacher, who educated assemblies of Jews via "Derashot", discourses on Biblical topics, or sermons concerning the festivals. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, this vocation was popular amongst Jews in Eastern Europe. Any talented individual who was blessed with a good memory (so to retain in memory the hundreds of Hazzalic sayings, to be used impromptu during the course of a "drasha"), and also blessed with fluid and flowery language (so as to keep his audience rapt), and who also knew how to "reveal" the inner meanings of certain Biblical passages or quotations from the Talmud or the Midrash, and above all he who arouse his listeners unto emotion (joy or fear), had here a fine vocation.

These individuals, with different degrees of success, had a regular route travelling amongst towns within a certain vicinity, appearing possibly twice or thrice a year in any one town. Besides entertaining the listeners with interesting stories or parables, they also had a great educational influence. This was especially important since many times, the local officiating Rabbi was well learned in Talmud itself, but was devoid of rhetoric, or had no training how to discover the inner "point" of any Midrash. So too, the constant familiarity of his congregants with him, day in and day out, blunted and stunted any interest in hearing him again and again.

The abovementioned "Maggidim" earned their livelihood by "passing a hat" amongst the audience, after termination of the Drasha, and according to the success and impact of his words, so he reaped their gratitude by amassing many coins of payment (given voluntarily).

One of the famous "Maggidim" of all time is the subject of our article. There are several good reasons for that. Prime amongst them is the fact of the high regard with which the Gaon of Wilna considered him, and this came to widely known amongst the population. It is well known that the Wilna Gaon was a recluse and it was well nigh impossible to enter his study

room, uninvited. Yet Rabbi Ya'akov was a regular visitor and warmly received (see book "Ha-gaon ha-chasid mi-wilna" of Bezalel Landau, pp. 173, 272, 333).

See the warm words of friendship that the Gaon writes in a letter to the Maggid (ibid. P. 179-200).

The Wilna Gaon, due to his great humility, wished to be chastised, so to improve his actions. He requested of the Maggid of Dubna to find flaw with his actions or mode of life, so he thereby improve himself. The Maggid, who himself was a great Talmid Hacham and knew Halacha well, was hard put to find some flaw of the Wilna Gaon. Nevertheless after concentrating deeply he came up with a remarkable insight. He said: "You think it is a high level of G-d's service to be pure and holy as you now are, when you sit locked up in your room, and the windows are shuttered (**note:** it is told by the Gaon's son R. Abraham, that the Gaon learnt 24 hours a day by candle-light since he didn't want to be distracted by what he could see by looking outside). If you would be in the market place, just like your other brethren Jews, who have dealings with Goyim, who must be careful not to cheat others when being cheated, not to believe evil slander when one's ears perforce hear those words of slander, to guard one's eyesight not to perceive impure sights, if you would be in situations of temptation and nevertheless overcome your evil inclination, this would be truly enviable. But not as you do today, that you are a virtual angel in the heavens above, detached from any physical urges. The story goes that the Ga'on rebutted him. Our duty is to be free of sin, but not to be a circus acrobat and seek obstacles in order to overcome them. It is wiser to elude temptations rather than combat them face to face (ibid. P. 27).

Added to the abovementioned, the Maggid of Dubna had a skill to utilize popular stories or homilies so to stress and emphasize the lesson to be taught. He could "feel" the hearts of his peers in the audience, and like a skilled violinist he knew how to touch the cords of their hearts. From his book "**Mishlei Ya'akov**" we will reproduce (in paraphrase) three parables, so to give the reader a taste of his wisdom and his charm.

In that period, the Maskilim (a sneering euphemism for those who considered themselves "enlightened" by scoffing at our Rabbinical literature) made inroads against implicit faith in our traditional heritage. One of their major weapons was to cite the Rambam, who had a critical attitude and analyzed and sometimes re-interpreted Rabbinical teachings which contradicted rational attitudes. The Maggid, to combat this, told the following:

Once a certain farmer came to the big city of Lemberg. He stood outside of a huge textile center. Looking in via the doorway, he saw a rich merchant who was ordering merchandise, to be sent to his store situated in an other country. This rich client was received with all honors. He ordered "Three hundreds yards of silk!" and the errand boys ran hurriedly to bring the merchandise. "Two hundred yards of plush!" Again a hustle and bustle. Just then, leaning on the glass counter before the clerks, the rich and obese client caused a crack in the glass plate. He was consternated and perturbed. But immediately the store-keeper hushed things up, and said: "No worry! I anyhow had intent to replace it. But come now and have a little mouthful of Schnapps (high alcohol level brandy) and we shall wish each other: "le-Haim". The boor farmer gazing outside was flabbergasted at the behavior of the storekeeper. He immediately collected his thoughts and remarked: if their tradition in Lemberg is to honor a glass-breaker with a minute amount of Schnapps, how much more will I profit if I break the entire front window of that establishment? He at once picked up several large rocks, backed away a few paces, and with all the energy he could amass, threw it at the giant front widows, breaking them all. Immediately the errand boys exited to the street, verified who was the culprit, and thrashed him thoroughly. The desperate farmer protested his innocence: "I don't understand. I myself saw that a few minutes ago a client pierced a small table glass and you rewarded him with a fine schnapps. Why is my situation different?" They responded: "Most foolish idiot. That merchant orders merchandise, and in large quantities, many time a year. We can overlook some trespasses since on the whole he is most

honorable. But from you, empty handed and empty minded, what do we ever profit by you? Besides that, he did it unintentionally. But you did it premeditated!" The Maggid explained the inner lesson of his story. The Rambam is a rich client. We constantly profit from his books. If inadvertently he caused some damage, we can overlook that. But you fool "Maskilim", all year long we have from you only damages, and your twisting of Rabbinical Midrashim is not for the glorious sake of G-d's true service, but only in order to escape it, so why are you to be freed from just punishment?

When many of the generation asked why is it that that Jews are so persecuted; and the Gentiles to the contrary enjoy life "to the hilt". He answered with a parable.

Once there was a king who had the problem of a brewing rebellion against him, fomenting in the provinces. He knew that he had to nip this problem in the bud, before it burgeoned. Wishing not to lose time, and also to take advise unobtrusively without any unnecessary ears in his courtyard hearing of his preplanning, he traveled to the homes of two confidants, two different military officers who knew well military strategy. The first personality received the visit of the King with great hospitality, offering him warm food, and the best of his guest rooms. However the second received him with cold aloofness and distant hospitality, with a glass of water and no more. The king was surprised, but did not react to the affront on the spot. Both went out to attack the rebels, in different sections of the country. The war was protracted, and there was even a period that there was severe doubt if the king would overcome the insurrection. At that time, the first officer abovementioned decided to switch sides, and he with his forces joined the rebels, so to overthrow the king's reign. Eventually, however, the second officer along with those yet loyal to the king, prevailed and conquered the rebel forces. Following the termination of the war, the king decided to hang the first officer abovementioned. Nevertheless, before the execution he ordered to have

him served with the best and tastiest foods available; also to dress him up with the most glorious raiment available. And then, after one day of joy, to hang him as high as Haman. But the other officer, who was the major agent to the king's victory, was to be advanced to be the chief vizier, the assistant to the King (so to speak). Nevertheless, for one day of 24 hours he was to be thrown into the dungeon, to be fed dry crusts of bread, and to be given only brackish water for drink. Only afterwards was he to be advanced to his high office.

Of course all asked concerning the great oddity. But the King explained himself. Certainly that the first officer, who had aided and abetted the rebel forces, was to be executed. But it would be unjust not to remember his grace of proper hospitality. Therefore for the sake of Pure Truth, he must receive some reward, even though all in all he was to be executed. So too, the second officer who was of great help to the king; nevertheless true Justice would be impugned if no attention was paid to his original improper behavior. Therefore he must at least suffer somewhat before receiving his everlasting reward.

So too, the Rabbi concludes, the parable "king" is the Almighty. The first officer who joins the rebels is he who joins the satanically forces of the world. However, if for some brief period he did do some good deeds, can he go unrewarded? These are the wicked Gentiles of the world who must receive joy and prosperity in this temporal world, before receiving their eternal retribution. But on the other hand, the righteous ones (the Jews), although in a general way they loyally serve the king, there are some Mitzvot that they comply with in a most cold manner, without love or emotion. For this they must suffer somewhat before going on to receive their eternal reward.

We see from the above that the Maggid was similar to an expert archer that always shot his arrows directly to the center of the target, always impressing his point sharply, accurately and convincingly.

- We have his book "**O'hel Ya'akov**" (five volumes. 1830). This book was not written by him, but by his disciple Rabbi Abraham Dov Ber Flaum, who collected together all what he heard disseminated in his name. Since he was an expert in phraseology, these books are most interesting. Most of the time they are interlarded with stories.
- So too we have "**Kol Ya'akov**" (1,909) – lessons from the five Megillot.
- We have another wonderful work called "**Sefer Ha-Middot**" (Wilna, 1860) also collected by Rabbi Flaum. This book was constructed so to be similar to "Hovot ha-Levovot" (Sha'ar ha-Yirah, Sha'ar Ahava, Sha'ar Avodat elokim, Sha'ar ha-Bitochon, Sha'ar ha-Ga'ava, Sha'ar ha-Sin'oh, Sha'ar ha-Tefilloh). We don't have the space here to deliver samples of the wonderful pearls of wisdom to be found there.
- Another interesting book, published by a different compiler (R. Moshe Nissenbaum), is "**Mishlei Ya'akov**", a collection of 449 parables, collected from all of the abovenamed works, first printed in Cracow, Poland (1887).
- So too we have his explanation to the **Haggada of Pesach** (1836),
- And his commentaries to the Haftarot of the weekly Communal Readings of the Synagogue, called "**Kochav mi-Ya'akov**" and edited by Rabbi Flaum (Warsaw, 1872).

[A] The general tendency of these works is great optimism, an implicit faith that G-d rules over all and that all is intended for the eventual "Tikkun".

[B] Another great quality of these Derashot is the utilization of common, daily occurrences and to use them as a fulcrum to understand better the workings of Divine Providence, Reward and Punishment. Also many biblical passages are explained properly.

[C] Another great value of these books is that they were the precursor of the great Mussar Movement which was publicized by the Gaon Rabbi Israel Salanter (Second half of the 19th century). The Jewish population were more and more in the mood for Mussar improvements, and Rabbi Ya'akov the Maggid paved the way.

May his great merit stand to our stead.