

## **Rabbi Natan Zvi Finkel.**

The Saba (Aged Scholar) of Slobodka (Lithuania)

Yahrzeit date: 29<sup>th</sup> of Sh'vat, 1927-(1849)

During the medieval ages there was no professional capacity fulfilled in Yeshivot by any Mashgiach. There was a Rav (of the city) or Rosh Yeshiva who lectured before his students. But no one had the specialty of talking "mussar" and arousing Yir'at Shomayim. Apparently, before the inroads of the Haskkalah movement, before the massive defections due to general secular influences, there was no major need to talk about those topics. Or possibly due to the more proper methods of study during the days of yore, when a regular student "covered" several complete tractates before he reached age 16, therefore he "absorbed" true Torah hashkofo from his general studies. But in the more recent period when study plans have deteriorated, and the great majority of Yeshiva students "cover" only 20-40 pages of G'marra every school semester ("z'man"), their knowledge is so minimal and scanty that they easily fall prey to their evil inclinations or before heretic thoughts. Therefore in the modern period most Yeshivot have hired specialist educators in Jewish thought, to shed light on important topics by giving weekly "si'chot" (sermons) and these top notch individuals are called "mash-gichim". The Rosh Yeshiva deals specifically with the G'marra texts, but the Mashgiach deals with Sermons and Moral lessons.

The greatest innovator of the Mussar Movement was Rabbi Israel Salanter (died: 1883). He was recognized as a keen Pilpulist and earned high regard by all of the Talmidei Chachomim of his period. He popularized the idea that everyone should dedicate an hour a day (or some other allotment of time) for self introspection and for betterment of traits and thoughts. He had several disciples who spread these thoughts throughout Russia and Lithuania. One of these was Rabbi Simcha Zissel of the city of Kelm. He opened a high school institution, based on the tenets of Mussar. He took as a Mashgiach, **Rabbi Natan Zvi Finkel** (born 1849) who is the subject of our present essay. This personage was a keen psychologist, delving into the innermost recesses of the soul. From even a chance comment by the student, he unraveled many subconscious workings (what Freud called a "paraprax").

Every facial grimace or smile of the student (at hearing certain ideas) revealed positive or negative Mussar levels.

There are two basic books giving us biographical material or personal anecdotes concerning our subject character.

- One is "Tnu'at ha-Mussar" (volume two) by Rabbi Dov Katz.
- The other is "Me'orot ha-Gedolim" by Rabbi Chaim Efraim Zaitchek (pp. 219-272). Our material is culled from there.

**[Story 1]** It is told that when he once during his travels, he prayed at a certain synagogue, and suddenly after Kri'a ha-Torah requested of the Gabba'im to permit him to be the Chazzan for Mussaf. The student accompanying him then was astonished to see his teacher, Rabbi Natan Zvi, stammering and apparently unable to read even one sentence without severe vocal errors; which was not his habit at all. Following the debacle, on the way home, the student inquired "What happened?" (Why the sudden bashfulness from the public recitation?). At first the Rabbi was reluctant to answer and shrugged off the question. But upon the persistent questioning by the student, who added: "It is Torah, and I must learn what will avail me". Then the Rabbi recanted and considered it false humility to "cover up", since this knowledge would serve to educate others. Then he revealed his true intent. He divulged the secret to his student. "Didn't you notice that the person who led the Service of Shacharis had a Yahrzeit, and although not in the habit of reciting his Prayers publicly aloud, did so, and was so overcome with nervousness that he stumbled over uttering several words. Other people present poked fun at him. I knew that at the conclusion of the prayers, he would become a laughing stock, and be the center of derision. Therefore I decided to 'cover up' for him. I followed him, and made such 'a mess' of everything that I am certain that they spoke about me, rather than about him". When the student remonstrated: "But Rebbe, they will dishonor you!" the Rabbi answered "I couldn't care less. If I can save a Jew from embarrassment, it is worth it".

**[Story 2]** The Rabbi was accustomed to delivering Torah sermons to Kollel fellows on Friday mornings, who came to his home to hear. Many a time these dissertations lasted two hours or more. Once a lot of time elapsed, and his wife

the Rebbetzin opened the hour and made the terse comment "They have wives". He immediately understood the criticism and broke off his comments, adjuring them to go home and help out with household chores. Since he was a Master Educator, he gently asked them if they knew for what Mitzva he was breaking off his Torah lecture. They answered quickly "Of course, it is a personal Mitzva to deal directly with preparations for the Shabbat. As written in Tractate Shabbat, page 119a, that the greatest of the sages personally chopped the wood, personally went to the marketplace to purchase foods, personally re-set the household furniture etc." Immediately Rabbi Natan Zvi chided them "I thought it was a mitzva de-Oraita and you leave it as a de-Rabbanan? To prepare for the Shabbat is only Rabbinical. But Ahavat Chesed is de-Oraita" (see Rambam, Hilchot Avelut, chapter 14 paragraph one, it is all a corollary of "Ve'ahavta le-Rea'cha ka-mocha").

We see here his deep thoughts.

**[Story 3]** Rabbi Natan Zvi was a genius of Chesed. Witnesses have told that many a time he had to go for dental treatment. The practice then was that not every patient was given an appointed time. All sufferers came to the dentist office and awaited their turn for treatment. "First come, first serve". While the group of patients was waiting in the ante-chamber, many a time a groan or a shriek was heard from the treatment room, from a person receiving the dental treatment. At that time there was no knowledge of anesthetic treatment (for dulling pain). Immediately Rabbi Natan Zvi would jump from his seat, approach the closest wall, and fervently stand in prayer to his Father in Heaven so to bring relief to the sufferer. This he did several times, whenever he heard from the other room a wail or cry.

**[Story 4]** His students retell that when giving a Sermon in the Bet Hamidrash of the Yeshiva, it happened that during the hushed session there was a sudden spasm of coughing by one of the students. Rabbi Natan, who in great devotion spoke then with downcast eyes, immediately interrupted his talk and asked for the identity of the person coughing. (At that time, since winters in Russia were severe, and medical preventive treatment was primitive, many a time heavy coughing was a portent of troubles ahead. Rabbi Natan wanted to aid however he could). Seeing the questioning eyes of his audience, Rabbi Natan explained his inquisitiveness. "When one hears someone crying from grief,

doesn't one interrupt whatever he is doing, or even interrupt his Torah study, to see why that person is crying? Why is a cough different? This person is suffering!"

Unlike the habit of many other Yeshivot, Rabbi Natan never banished any student from the Yeshiva, no matter what his sin. If the downfall involved might deleteriously influence for the bad other students, he would arrange for that student separate dormitory facilities (hiring a private household to room that boy) rather than send him home. He never gave up on any Jewish soul. He was wont to tell that Midrash concerning Abraham the Patriarch.

Once an aged wayfarer came to the tent of Abraham in the desert. After that Abraham gave him a royal repast and plentiful drink, Abraham asked his visitor to praise the Lord. That Arab rejected the offer, took out from his vest pocket a small idol, kissed and fondled it, bowed to it and thanked it for his food. Wrathfully Abraham remonstrated with him and after a short period of argumentation, seeing his words to be of no avail, he showed him the exit and asked him to leave his tent. The Arab left. Generally speaking Abraham was in the habit of having Heavenly revelations, of hearing holy thoughts. This time, his mind was a blank. He was distraught. He prayed for G-d's aid. Immediately, as it were, he heard an inner voice; his conscience or was it G-'s agent voicing His will. The gist of it was: "How old do you imagine this Arab traveler to be?" The answer was 50 or 60. G-d answered: "I had the patience to bear up with him for all of those years, awaiting his repentance, or waiting till his common sense will get the upper hand; and you couldn't wait **3 hours**?"

As soon as Abraham recognized his sin, he took his walking staff and struck out on the desert path to search for that wayfarer. It took a day or two, but he found him at a neighboring oasis. He warmly requested him to re-accompany him back to Abraham's tent. Here he hosted him for **3 days**, talking, explaining, teaching. After three days, that obstinate Arab was willing to praise G-d for His favors.

We see from this story that it is wrong to despair ("give up") of anybody.

It is told that the "Hafetz Ha'im" was envious of Rabbi Natan Zvi. He said that many other Yeshivot only perfected "kosher" students who came to perfect their knowledge. But Rabbi Natan took base material and transformed negative thinkers to positive thinkers ("ha-meorot ha-Gedolim", page 272) and in his faculty (of patience) he was unique.

**[Story 5]** Another anecdote to show us his superb power of self-command is recorded (ibid, 240-241). He had a middle aged son called Rabbi Moshe, who taught in Yeshivat Hebron (Jerusalem). In 1926 that son was taken seriously ill. Rabbi Natan came especially to Jerusalem during Hol ha-mo'ed Sukkot so to visit his son in the hospital. But being at that time 77 years old, he needed the aid of his accompanying students to get to the hospital. When of a sudden the son died, the students shied off from notifying the father. When he saw them hushing talk, he immediately understood the bitter tidings. He asked an accompanying student (Dr. Borstein), who was also a doctor, if it was permitted to cry on Hol ha-mo'ed. The problem was that concerning Shabbat it is decided (Shulchan Oruch, Orach Haim, 307) that he who has psychic relief from a good cry, is permitted to cry on the Shabbat. What Rabbi Natan could not verify, in his tense and tragic condition, was whether this relaxation was unique to Shabbat alone since there is there a regulation of physical "Oneg" (and the release of tears will remove the mental block so to allow the way to physical Oneg). But this mitzva is not to be found on Yom Tov which belongs to the category of Simcha, which is an absolute contradiction to tears. Dr. Borstein checked his pulse, and answered that the Halacha being as is, but medically speaking expressed grief might aggravate his health, and he advised not to cry. Rabbi Natan went to the funeral, with dry eyes. He returned to his yeshiva, continued the yom tov process. At the end of Simchat Torah he requested of all the Yeshiva students to dance and sing as routine annually. When the sun set, he started checking his watch to count the time till the appearance of three stars. As soon as that calculated time arrived, he broke out in a prolonged period of crying, which had been blocked off by sheer will power for already several days. This story shows us of tremendous spiritual powers.



Let us return to record several historical points.

Rabbi Natan set up the famous Yeshiva of Telz (1877) and so too the first Kollel (the experimental model, backed by Rabbi Isaac Elchanan) in the city of Kovno. Following which he organized the establishment of the world famous yeshiva of Slobodka, which blended Gmarra acumen with a rigorous Mussar study. Beyond that, behind the scenes he sent many young Rabbis to open up Mussar yeshivot in western Russia (such as Yeshivat Breinsk and Grodno).

At the outbreak of hostilities of the First World War, he and his yeshiva wandered to Minsk and from there to Kremensok. At the post-war period there was a certain reaction to the Mussar Movement. Many youngsters rebelled against any yoke, and along with the general malaise of the Gentile community, wished freedom to do any whim or urge. This caused a great split in his Yeshiva, with the majority of the young students rejecting any kind of introspection and remodeling of the Inner Soul. The other Maggidei Shi'ur in the yeshiva took the stand that Mussar should be minimized, just like in most other yeshivot (See the book on this subject by Rabbi Dov Katz, In "Pulmus ha-Mussar").

In order to keep the peace, Rabbi Natan took the brave decision to abdicate his authority. He forsook the yeshiva that he himself established (!), and with a distinct minority of students made Aliyah to the Holy Land (1924) opening up a new yeshiva in the city of Hebron. This continued till the day of the terrible massacre. In his old age he removed to Tel Aviv, where he continued to deliver public sermons.

His students collected a small collection of his words (copied by his hearers) called "**Or ha-Zafon**" (three volumes). We will conclude his article by citing two items.

**1.** He said that many people are well mannered and polite unto fellow citizens, since one must observe the common weal and preserve correct social behavior. But this in itself is not enough according to the Torah or Mussar way. The truth of the matter is that we must imitate G-d (Rambam, Hilchot Da'ot, chapter one, end of paragraph five) G-d wishes that all of humanity should feel well. So we must do our all so that all feel honored and in good spirits. Therefore we are commanded to be polite and well mannered. ("Or ha-Zafon", book one p. 8).

**2.** Rabbi Natan also taught that when we recite Kri'at Sh'ma, we must first ponder upon the wonders of Nature. The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 28, 5 "Lo yavinu el p'eulot hashem") teaches that this verse precedes the Kri'at Sh'ma. For a fact, this is the reason why the second benediction (of the Sh'ma, morning service) tells of the moon and the heavenly firmament, "Yotzer ha-meorot", so that we recognize His handiwork, marvel thereby, and feel awe.

This point is hinted at by Rabbi Maharal (in his book "Netivot O'lam", avoda, chapter seven).

This is the proper understanding of the Shulchan Oruch's words (chapter 61) - that one must read the Shema with "Eima ve-yirah". When one fully appreciates this physical marvel, then he receives proper perspective what is the unestimable difference between Creator and the created.

Actually this is what the Rambam said in Hilchot Yesodei h-Torah (chapter 2 paragraph 2). This idea ("Or haZafon", book 3 page 14-15) gives us a new and deeper approach towards this mitzva of "kri'at she'ma".

May his merit stand to our stead.