

# A Storied Life

By Emanuel Feldman

**N**o sooner does a leading *rosh yeshivah* or rabbinic luminary pass from the scene than the Orthodox media swings into action with his life story. Articles, reminiscences, appreciations, and book-length treatments—all of them suitably adulatory—begin to appear, so that even relatively obscure *gedolim* become more famous in death than in life.

Most of these life stories—with a few shining exceptions—have common themes: the individual was brilliant, profound, wise, righteous, and kind. He was never angry, never discouraged, never wasted any time, never had any inner conflicts. Thus it comes as no surprise that certain questions—questions that are crucial to our understanding of any major leader—will rarely be addressed.

For example, did Torah study come easily to this particular *gadol*, or was he possessed of only an average mind, learning to master the intricacies of Torah through sheer force of will and diligence? Did he ever have intellectual struggles, crises of faith? Did he ever suffer any personal disappointments or tragedy? Was his path from infancy to world-renowned scholarship and leadership an unimpeded upward trajectory, or were there other paths that beckoned, other byways that tempted him?

We learn all about the *gadol's* dazzling scholarship, but how was he as a father, a husband, a teacher? He was obviously a very angelic person; in what ways was he

human as well? Was he constantly engaged in study and acts of *chesed*, or did other matters occupy him as well? Was he gregarious, or did he live an isolated existence?

We will never know. Firstly, the awe and reverence that are integral elements of this genre preclude any independent research—which explains why many of the life stories we get are not biographies at all but monochromatic, one-dimensional hagiographies of saintly people who were born perfect and remained perfect throughout their perfect lives.

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One often wonders: when young people read about such flawless creatures, are they uplifted or discouraged? One can only imagine the impact upon a bright 15-year-old yeshivah student—who has the intellect and drive to become a great Torah scholar—when he reads that by age 15, this or that great *rav* knew the Talmud by heart and had written two world-recognized *sefarim* on the most recondite subjects in *halachah*.

There is another critical problem endemic to this genre—a stylistic and literary one. These are not so much biographies—even in the loosest sense

of that word as written accounts of a person's life—as they are collections of stories of a person's life.

Stories, both written and verbal, are obviously an integral part of any history. But in today's *gadol* hagiography (one resists the temptation to label it “*gadol*-ography”) one of the common characteristics of these ubiquitous stories is that they are, well, common. More often than not, they shed no new light on character or personality. On the contrary, they tend to trivialize the subject and drag him down to the level of the ordinary. Frequently they illustrate a quality that is hardly extraordinary, and would be considered normal behavior for any decent human being. We are informed that Rav so-and-so always made certain that the woman who asked him a *she'eilah* was treated respectfully. But why is it unusual for a human being, much less someone steeped in Torah ethics, to treat another human being with respect? Or we read that Rav such-and-such was extremely honest, never cheated anyone, and was meticulous about paying all his bills and debts on time. But is this kind of behavior not expected of any decent Jew? Why must it be featured—and literally italicized—as if it were something uniquely found in this *gadol's* character?

**T**hese are not rhetorical questions. In a profound sense, an act of *chesed* performed by a great Torah personality is different in kind from the same act performed by a less saintly person. When Rav Moshe Feinstein is careful not to denigrate even the silliest of halachic inquiries, or when Rav Yosef B. Soloveitchik fol-

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lows a student into the lunchroom to inform the *talmid* that he was on target in his Talmudic analysis while he, Rav Yosef Ber, was mistaken, there is more here than garden-variety decency or intellectual honesty. For a true *gedol*, by virtue of his own inner qualities and spirituality, brings to his deed a certain quality of holiness, a certain state of mind and inwardness that is unique to one living a life of Torah. The identical act of kindness or honesty, performed by someone not steeped in the sanctity of Torah, does not bear the same spiritual resonance and power. These are subtle matters that are worthy of discussion, but unfortunately most of the storytellers do not make the effort, with the inevitable platitudinous results.

Further, what are we to make of a literary genre that contains more stories than life? Is it because, there being no depth in the writing, no new perceptions or insights into the personality under review, we are left only with a string of loosely connected, generic, interchangeable Lego-like anecdotes that are by and large unimpressive?

**A**genda-driven stories that are devoid of content, combined with biographies that are short on objectivity and long on reverential awe, combine to create a new genre that cannot be taken seriously by anyone but the most naive and credulous.

There are stories and there are stories. The story of Joseph and his brothers—the longest sustained narrative in the entire Torah—is obviously more than a mere story. As part of Torah, it is more than narrative, and its multi-layered structure illuminates and instructs in ways that we cannot fathom. But at the very least it contains critical lessons for living, and it does this by painting a full picture of its protagonists. To view it merely as good literature would be to denigrate it, but even on the most elementary level, the narrative—with its lights and shadows, positives and negatives—is uplifting precisely because it is multi-hued, uncompromising and

unrelenting in its honesty.

One shudders to think how it would be written today. Would any contemporary religious writer dare mention that Joseph, in his youth, was concerned with his physical appearance (Rashi on Gen. 37:2)? As for Jacob's favoring one son over another—would not our writer gloss over that inconvenient fact? Would Joseph's talebearing be omitted, as well as the jealousy of the brothers? Would not the story of Judah and Tamar be excised because it might offend—as would the story of Joseph and the wife of Potifar? And the slaughter of the inhabitants of Shechem is so unbecoming the sons of Jacob that it might best be elided. The actual hurling of Joseph into the pit and his subsequent sale into slavery—would not this

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cast an unflattering and cruel light on the brothers, and be expurgated from the story?

In today's *gedol*-ography (the term is irresistible) we would be treated only to the bare-bones information that Joseph, whom Jacob loved very much, mysteriously disappeared, causing Jacob great anguish, and did not appear until 22 years later as viceroy of Egypt. Jacob, we would be told, never lost hope, since he was a great *tzaddik*; and Joseph, also a great *tzaddik* like his father, always knew that some day he would see his father again. And when because of the great famine Jacob went down to Egypt, he finally was reunited with his son, and lived happily ever after in Goshen until he died at the ripe old age of 147.

What is striking about the real Joseph

narrative is that we emerge from it not only deeply stirred but also with a keener understanding of human nature, of ourselves, and—most significantly—of our own relationship to man and God.

Perhaps these ought to be the criteria by which a "*gedol* story" is to be judged: Is it unique or is it ordinary? Does it impart a crucial lesson? Does it flesh out the personality of the subject, giving us a deeper understanding of who he really was? Does it energize the mind and uplift the soul? Does it display the Torah in action? A story is a means to an end, not an end in itself. A life story should reveal, first of all, a life. Anecdotes, though important, are secondary to that life.

**G***edolei Yisrael* are the true leaders of the Jewish people. Their integrity, scholarship, piety and vision, their abiding faith in the eternity of the Jewish people and in the promises of God, are the stars by which the people Israel navigate through the dark night of the *Galut*. Their inner passion and spiritual vitality help the masses of Jews cope with the crises that continually beset us.

It is precisely because *gedolim* and *posekim* are so crucial to Jewish existence that searching biographies, grounded in life and in truth, are so indispensable. The masses of Jews thirst for uplift and inspiration. Puerile, cookie-cutter life stories are no tribute to the *gedolim* and no help to us.

That incisive biographies do appear from time to time only underscores the fact that it can be done. Such writing requires not only objectivity and careful research, but also a recognition of the reader's intelligence and his ability to absorb ideas and subtleties. When a reader senses that he is being condescended to, that instead of an account of a meaningful life he is being offered bedtime stories, that reader, if he has any self-respect, will turn away.

Which is a pity, because he is turning away not only from the story of a significant life, but also from the ideals which that life represents. **JA**