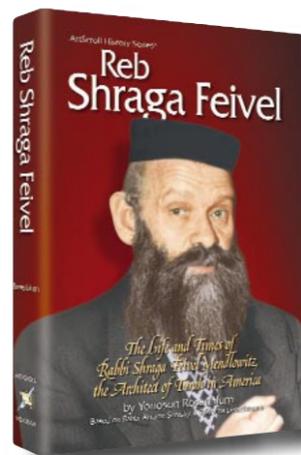


## Reb Shraga Feivel: The Life and Times of Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, the Architect of Torah in America

By Yonoson Rosenblum



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Reviewed by Sidney Greenwald

A few days after the publication of *The Life and Times of Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz*, I found a very respected Torah scholar at my morning *minyan*, in *tallit* and *tefillin*, poring over the book. This proved to me that

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the book was a “*sefer*,” and was to be studied as such.

Though *The Life and Times of Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz* is a masterful portrayal of an extraordinary man, one gains only a partial view (*efes katzehu tireh*) of Reb Shraga Feivel. On the other hand, it is amazing how Yonoson Rosenblum, having never seen or heard Reb Shraga Feivel, was able to so vividly and accurately transmit this multifaceted, complicated and controversial figure.

Reb Shraga Feivel was raised in a rural Hungarian village of simple, pious, hard-working folk. He went on to learn in the great Hungarian yeshivot of Chust, Unsdorf and Pressburg. During his teenage years, he was already master-planning a *chinuch* system for America, one that was radically different from that which existed in Eastern Europe. Having been exposed to a wide range of Jewish thought and philosophy, including the *Tanya*, the *Kuzari*, *Moreh Nevuchim* and *Nefesh HaChaim*, as well as the teachings of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, Reb Shraga Feivel envisioned yeshivot that would incorporate these diverse views into their curriculums. He implemented this vision in Torah Vodaath, the yeshiva he founded in Williamsburg, New York, in 1926. Unfortunately, in time, the direction of the yeshiva changed, yet Reb Shraga Feivel's original students imbibed a broad range of Jewish thought.

When Reb Shraga Feivel first established Mesivta Torah Vodaath, he had to overcome much opposition. There were those who believed that Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan—which is today Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary—sufficed for the fledgling

American Orthodox community. Few felt that the community needed or could support another yeshiva. There were also some vocal Americanized rabbis who feared that creating another yeshiva would mark the beginning of the ghettoization of America. Yeshivot were appropriate for Lithuania and Poland, not New York. Despite the opposition, Reb Shraga Feivel succeeded in establishing Torah Vodaath, which he headed until his passing in 1948.

Reb Shraga Feivel also created Camp Mesivta, which was the first camp to combine Torah learning and camping. More significantly, he founded the Torah day school movement, Torah Umesorah, and paraphrasing Herbert Hoover's “chicken in every pot,” aspired to create a day school in every Jewish community. To this end, he recruited Dr. Joseph Kaminetsky, the principal of both Manhattan Day School and the Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung Jewish Center Talmud Torah. Dr. Kaminetsky first met Reb Shraga Feivel at a wedding. The well-known educator with a doctorate in education from Columbia University came home from the wedding and told his incredulous wife, “I am going to work for Torah Umesorah. I am giving up my present positions in order to establish day schools throughout the United States.” Over the next 30 years, while serving as the national director of Torah Umesorah, Dr. Kaminetsky had to be away from home every other Shabbat. Ultimately, Reb Shraga Feivel and Dr. Kaminetsky were responsible for creating a vast network of Jewish day schools that continues to bring thousands of students closer to *Yiddishkeit*.

Reb Shraga Feivel was an eclectic, in

the best sense of the word, and sought to combine serious learning with the spirit of *chassidut*. Though of Hungarian extraction, he hired *roshei yeshivah* who espoused the Volozhin/Brisk method of learning; at the same time he sought to fuse the learning with the warmth and fire of *chassidut*. He maintained that the Jew of the future needed to combine, in addition to the above, Reb Yisrael Salanter's *musar*, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's *Torah im Derech Eretz* philoso-

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phy and the Chatam Sofer's meticulousness in observing *mitzvot*. He even urged some of his students to learn German in order to be able to study Rav Hirsch in the original.

Today, it is not uncommon to find *roshei yeshivah* taking on the role of *rebbe* and advisor and Chassidic *rebbeim* establishing serious yeshivot that employ first-rate talmudic scholars; this is due, in all likelihood, to the influence of Reb Shraga Feivel.

Rosenblum's characterization of Reb Shraga Feivel as “the architect of Torah in America,” is undoubtedly true; indeed, almost every yeshiva in America was inspired and directly or indirectly funded by him. Parenthetically, it should be noted that Bnei Brak would probably not exist were it not for Reb Shraga Feivel. Reb Yitzchak Gershenkorn, the first mayor of Bnei Brak, writes in his memoirs that after two years of traveling the world over to raise funds for the establishment of the city, he grew despon-

dent at his lack of success. One *erev Shabbat*, someone recommended that he see Reb Shraga Feivel. That very same day, Reb Shraga Feivel raised enough money to begin building Bnei Brak.

The late 1930s and early 1940s was a period in which parents urged their sons to pursue degrees in law, medicine and accounting. Some even encouraged their sons to become pulpit rabbis. As one of the “Mendlowitz boys,” I, similar to my peers, would tell my parents that I was going to go into *chinuch* after hearing a talk by Reb Shraga Feivel; our parents thought we were crazy. In those days, *chinuch* was not regarded as a viable career.

But Reb Shraga Feivel's impact on individuals and communities was profound: In 1944, he inspired two of his quiet, laid-back *talmidim*, Avraham Abba Friedman and Shalom Goldstein, to move to Detroit and establish a day school. The idea was not enthusiastically supported by the community's leaders. But some 50 years later—as a result of these students' efforts—Detroit is an *ir v'eim b'Yisrael*. This same pattern occurred in many other cities throughout the United States.

Reb Shraga Feivel did not only inspire *metivta* students with his radical concept of a day school in every community, he motivated some of the wealthiest philanthropists including Joseph Shapiro, Harry Hershkowitz, Henry Hirsch, Joseph Rosenzweig, and Sam and Moe Feuerstein (162-4.)

Some minor omissions in the book ought to be mentioned. When speaking about the dignitaries who delivered *shiurim* at Torah Vodaath (218, 227), Rosenblum neglects to mention Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog. As I recall (I attended Torah Vodaath from 1940-51), when Rabbi Herzog came to Torah Vodaath, a red carpet was spread out, stretching from his limousine to the third-floor *beit midrash*. Rosenblum also mentions that Reb Shraga Feivel arranged for the singing of Rav Kook's *Shir Haemunah* instead of the *Hatikvah* at the dedication cele-

bration of the *metivta* (227). It should be noted that Reb Shraga Feivel was a great admirer of Rav Kook and an avid student of his writings, frequently quoting him in his *Tanach shiurim*. It was as if their souls were linked. Rav Shraga Feivel died on the third of Elul, the very day of Rav Kook's *yahrtzeit*.

Yonoson Rosenblum's carefully researched volume is a treasure of information. It is indispensable for anyone interested in Jewish education and history in America. It is more than 50 years since the passing of Reb Shraga Feivel. It is now universally recognized that a true Torah education is the single most important factor in Jewish continuity. No individual played a greater role in Torah education in America than Reb Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz. JA

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