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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

A REVIEW OF WITH MIGHT AND STRENGTH: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY By Rabbi Shlomo Goren, Edited by Avi Rath, Translated by Miryam Blum Review by Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

In the spirit of the Rabbim Beyad Me'atim of Chanukkah, we are pleased to share a review of the autobiography of Rav Shlomo Goren, who experienced the Rabbim Beyad Me'atim of the founding of the modern State of Israel.

“With Might and Strength” reads like an old-fashioned adventure movie – simply enormous fun. Rav Goren comes across as a combination of Zelig and Patton, present at every important event in Israel’s history and a vital actor in many. The photographs are fascinating. This is the Religious Zionist answer to Exodus (the Leon Uris version).

The photographs are important, as without supporting visual evidence it would be hard to believe someone like Rav Goren ever existed. But we have pictures! Rav Goren rode horses and camels, fired machine guns, rappelled into caves, crossed minefields by jumping from rock to rock, qualified as a paratrooper, and of course blew shofar at the Kotel just after it was liberated. Many of these activities were done in order to recover the bodies of Israeli soldiers, and without regard for the risks to his own life.

There are many other incredible things that, at least in this book, we know only from Rav Goren’s own words. He was the messenger that brought out a horde of Yeshiva students to dig trenches on Friday night during the War of Independence, and thus stopped the Jordanians from taking the New City. He was the only rabbi to support Ben Gurion’s desire to integrate religious soldiers into the IDF rather than segregating

them into discrete units, and thus was able to establish the army policy of institutional Shabbat and kashrut observance. He convinced NRP leaders to authorize war in 1967, enabling Israel’s preemptive attack just in time. He prevented Moshe Dayan from putting the Cave of the Patriarchs under the jurisdiction of the Waqf. He singlehandedly wrote the responsum that allowed the widows of the lost submarine Dakar to remarry.

Among the joys of the book are reading about how Rav Goren was influenced by his father, who was both a Gerer Chasid and a committed Zionist; by the Zionist luminaries Rav Avraham Kook and his disciple the Nazir; and by the anti-Zionist Chazon Ish. Rav Goren’s capacity to draw from and remain in dialogue with a broad spectrum of Israeli Orthodoxy was part of what enabled his heroism, which found frequent expression in his halakhic decisions, particularly in the area of agunot.

Everyone who identifies as Tziyoni Dati should read this book, and more importantly, have their children read it. But while reading it, I was put in mind of a very differently wonderful book, Yossi Klein Halevi’s Like Dreamers, Halevi’s book, built around recent interviews with the soldiers who first reached the Kotel, finds them in a very different mood than Rav Goren, reflective rather than ebullient.

Halevi demythologizes where Rav Goren mythologizes, often about the very same things, such as the capture

of the Kotel. One gets the clear sense that Rav Goren would have lent a very different cast had he been included in HaLevi's book.

With Might and Strength essentially ends before the Yom Kippur War, and even before Rav Goren assumes the post of Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi in 1972. A somewhat discordant appendix by Dr. Tzvi Tzamaret apologizes for what he regards as Rav Goren's later extremism, particularly his call for soldier to refuse orders to evacuate settlers from their homes, and asks that his accomplishments before then be judged without reference to the future. Rav Goren the Chief Rabbi was physically assaulted by Charedim, vilified by religious Zionist rabbis, and ignored by almost everyone as a halakhist, despite his acknowledged creativity, courage, and extraordinary intellectual breadth in Torah and generally.

Here is how I see it. Rav Goren was perhaps the greatest hero of Religious Zionism's heroic age. That heroic age was inextricably intertwined with the sense that the State was the *atbalta d'genulah*, the beginning of the Messianic redemption, and that the redemption was inevitable, progressive, and near. This sense has been undermined by events since 1967, most recently and perhaps permanently by the *hitnatkut* from Gaza. Swashbuckling insubordination is always present and necessary in revolutionary times, and rarely outlives them successfully. I don't think Rav Goren changed so much as the country around him did.

Nothing illustrates the issue more clearly than the sad state of the Chief Rabbinate and the much worse state of the Rabbinic Court system. Rav Goren ran roughshod over systems when he felt they were failing. He relied on minority positions, and on original interpretations of minority opinions. In his tenure as chief rabbi of the IDF, which lasted virtually from its inception until 1972, army agunot were always freed,

and possible army mamzerim always ended up able to marry.

In an army-centered culture, that was enough, and the rabbinate's failure to do the same for civilians was tolerable. It is no longer tolerable.

Religious Zionism has not yet found a post-heroic vision to inspire it. After several bitter experiences, it may be realizing that postmodern charismatics without substantive real-world accomplishments are no substitute for genuine heroes. Heroes can make up for the failings of a system; in their absence, one has to develop systems that enable ordinary men to produce justice.

In this regard, it is perhaps thematically appropriate that the book's halakhic sections work better as narrative than as rigorous legal argument. Significant errors seem to have crept in at several levels, from the transcription of Rav Goren's tapes for the original Hebrew edition to the English translation of primary halakhic sources. For example, a line from Rashba's Avodat HaKodesh which correctly reads "not from the Torah, but rather from the words of the Scribes" was transcribed as "not from the Torah or the words of the Scribes", reversing its meaning, and partly as a result, the entire citation is translated incoherently. In the same chapter, a crucial halakhic distinction between temporary outposts and permanent bases is also lost.

My thanks to Maggid books for arranging for the publication of this very readable translation, which should play a role in religious Zionist education in this country. At the same time, we do not have the luxury of pretending that the Zionist endeavor froze in 1973, and our students need a sense of purpose and mission that can acknowledge Lebanon, Oslo, Gaza etc. We can no longer be like dreamers.

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