



BY F.H. EINHORN

The phrase “*Lag Ba’omer* in Meron” has been seared into *Klal Yisroel’s* heart for centuries. Thousands stream from all corners of the globe to spend the day in Meron at the gravesite of Rav Shimon bar Yochai.

For nearly a decade, another phrase has been conjoined with this one, a phrase that remains mystifying despite the thousands who have proven its veracity.

Lag Ba’omer in New Jersey.

Lag Ba’omer at the *tziyun* of Rav Naftali Tzvi *zt”l*.

It started as a mere wisp of hope, a phrase that was whispered from father to son, from friend to friend. It didn’t take long for that whisper to reach a virtual crescendo of hope, promise and salvation. The number of visitors at the *ohel* in New Jersey grew exponentially each year. The cars and buses that pull into Floral Park Cemetery each *Lag Ba’omer* feature a magnificent tapestry of all sectors of *Klal Yisroel* from the tri-state area and beyond. Last year, on *Lag Ba’omer* 5777/2017, there were approximately 10,000 visitors at the *ohel*. Ten thousand *Yidden* converged, pulling up in a stream of cars and aboard 40 chartered buses.

There, at the *kever* of Rav Naftali Tzvi Halberstam *zt”l* of Bobov, they all find a listening ear.

How did Rav Naftali Tzvi of Bobov, who shunned the spotlight every day of his life, become the central figure in this marking of *Lag Ba’omer* on American shores?

AN IDYLIC CHILDHOOD

The young Naftulche, as he was affectionately known even in his later years, spent his childhood years in the presence of his saintly grandfather, Rav Bentzion Halberstam *Hy”d*, known as the *Kedushas Tzion*. As a beloved grandson, he was privileged to spend much time with his *zaide*, who recog-

nized the little boy’s greatness even in those early years.

In fact, the *Kedushas Tzion* once fondly commented, “Naftulche will grow up to be a *tzaddik nistar* [hidden *tzaddik*] like the Ropshitzer *zaide* [for whom he was named].”

The Holocaust cut Naftulche’s carefree childhood short and catapulted him into a world where death and horror were his constant companions. His mother and two younger siblings perished during the war, while he and his father, Rav Shlomo, survived via a long chain of miraculous events.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

One night in particular stands out as a night of extreme terror – and, incongruously, a night of remarkable inspiration.

Rav Shlomo and his young son Naftulche had been apprehended in Neimark near the Czechoslovakian border, and the Nazis summarily arrested them. The charges were dire and it seemed that death was inevitable. Brutally, the chief instructed that father and son be separated on what would probably be the last night of their lives.

“*Dze pana biyagam*,” Naftulche pleaded in Polish. “Please, let me stay with my father.”

The chief refused.

“Have you got a son of your own?” the young boy persevered. “If your son would beg to stay with you, wouldn’t you agree? I’m just a young child!”

The chief relented. The boy’s innocent

request had broken down barriers.

That night was *Shabbos Kodesh Parshas Behaaloscha* 5703/1943. Rav Shlomo and his son sang *Shalom Aleichem*. The words “for the last time” hung in the air, though no one said it aloud. Rav Shlomo was a prince among men. His inner strength and majestic bearing were entwined with a deep and far-reaching love for every member of *Klal Yisroel*.

Rav Shlomo did not waver, even when the specter of death loomed before his eyes.

“I want you to promise me something,” Rav Shlomo told his son, his voice as strong as ever. “I want you to remember that a *Yid* cannot be killed! A *Yid* has a *neshamah* and that is forever. Today, I am your father and you are my son. But tomorrow - tomorrow we will be two *neshamos* giving our lives *al kiddush Hashem*.”

And then father and son traveled back to better times, times when the world as they knew it had not yet crumbled.

“Remember, Naftulche, the *Yomim Tovim* back home in Bobov. Remember how we danced with the *Sifrei Torah* on *Simchas Torah*. Remember how we sang and danced when we drew water for the *matzos*, and how the *zaide* gave out pieces of dough for everyone participating in the baking of those *matzos*...”

What a moving *Shabbos* night that was. Young Naftulche followed his father back in time, rejoicing at the memories of a beautiful world. And when his father said, “Promise me, Naftulche, that when they torture us, you will cry out together with me *Shema Yisroel*,” Naftulche nodded. Finally, his father urged him, “It’s a *mitzvah* to give our lives *al kiddush Hashem*. Naftulche, I beg of you, don’t cry. We will do this *mitzvah* with *simcha*!”

Bonds were forged that night that transcended time and place. It wasn’t just a father and a son; it was two *neshamos* bound for eternity. They did what Hashem wanted





The Bobover Rebbe, Rav Naftulche Halberstam zt"l.

them to do at that particular moment, irrespective of emotion, circumstance, and human understanding. His father's strong message would be the guiding force in the life of young Naftulche.

Their lives were saved literally at the last moment, and father and son survived the war. They were the scions of the Bobover dynasty, and it was through them that the empire of yesteryear reinstated itself on American shores.

THE DAY AFTER

After the war, Rav Shlomo reestablished

Bobov in New York. Starting with a mere handful of survivors, he harbored a vision for the future that few could imagine, let alone accept as an actual possibility.

But Rav Shlomo was not deterred. With tremendous warmth and perception, he took the embers, the wavering remnants of the Nazi inferno, and coaxed them into magnificent flames. Where others saw desolation, Rav Shlomo saw hope. And where others grappled with loss, Rav Shlomo planted the seeds of the future.

Meanwhile, his young son remained in Eretz Yisroel to learn and grow in the courts

of the *gedolim* of Yerushalayim. His greatness was shrouded in humility and, despite his youth, he left a strong impression upon all who knew him. Then, after just three years, Naftulche was summoned back home. His father wanted him at his side as Bobov made its first tentative strides in a journey that would lead it back to its former greatness.

The young Naftulche soon became a *marbitz Torah* in the Bobover Yeshiva, but it didn't take long for him to take note of Rav Shlomo's worries. The financial concerns of the many Bobover institutions were taking

a tremendous toll. His father was struggling beneath the burden and Rav Naftuli Tzvi volunteered to take the entire burden upon his own shoulders.

Thus began a new chapter in his life; a chapter revolving around fiscal responsibilities and the onus of keeping the many Bobov institutions on solid financial ground. Here, too, the humility and inner depth of Rav Naftulche's personage made a vast impression. He shunned the spotlight. He preferred to remain on the sidelines, where he could pretend to be just one of the crowd.

And for the most part, he succeeded.

THE YEARS MOVE ON

Those who saw Rav Naftulche going about his daily affairs saw a man who dedicated his life to others. Those families who were privileged to spend the summer months in the Bobover Mesivta camp in the Poconos, where Rav Naftulche spent his summers, saw more of the same. Children often glimpsed the beloved figure strolling along the winding country paths, often unaccompanied and always with a benign, unassuming smile. They saw him sitting on the porch of his bungalow, learning, always learning, yet with the same humility and gentleness that characterized all his actions.

And then there were the whispers, mostly untold and unheard, about tremendous self-sacrifice. There were hints about great things happening in that home on 49th Street in Boro Park, but that's all they were. Hints. Nothing was discussed. It was done quietly, par for the course. People knew where to go when they needed help, but this address was not listed in the community pages and it didn't receive any public accolades.

The door was always open, bearing the same unassuming stamp as its humble inhabitants.

FROM A BANK MANAGER'S PERSPECTIVE

One of the fascinating stories that recently came to light involves neither miracles nor mysteries. It tells of Rav Naftulche's unwavering dedication to truth and *ahavas Yisroel*.

"I was working at the bank where I'm currently still employed," a bank manager relates. "We all knew Rav Naftulche, the son of the Bobover Rebbe, Rav Shlomo. He often came down to the bank to deal with pressing financial matters connected with the Bobover institutions.

"What a noble person he was! He would walk in quietly, without fanfare, and approach my desk. If I was sitting with a client, Rav Naftulche always gestured that I should take my time. Many times, I hurriedly brought our consultations to a close so that Rav Naftulche shouldn't be kept waiting, but he didn't allow it.

"He urged me to complete the conferences as planned, for he didn't consider his time more valuable than that of anyone else. Once, I extended a loan to a *Yid* who promised that he would repay it precisely on time. It was a big loan, especially in those days, to the tune of fifty thousand dollars. I really put myself on the line for him, convincing the manager to approve this loan.

"Well, the *Yid* didn't come through as promised. My job was dangling by a thread. When Rav Naftulche heard about the threat to my employment, he marched into the bank the very next day. He didn't send messages or messengers. He came in person, strode right into the manager's office, and insisted that he reinstate my job immediately.

"I don't know exactly what Rav Naftulche told him, but my job was secured. If you think that's astounding, just listen to what happened the next day. A man, whom I recognized as Rav Naftulche's companion,

walked into the bank and put a check onto the manager's table. He didn't say anything. He didn't explain or ask for appreciation or even discuss this transaction with me.

"Only later did I discover that Rav Naftulche had sent a check for the entire sum – fifty thousand dollars! He couldn't allow a *Yid* – even one who was completely unknown to him – to make such a *chillul Hashem*. When my job was on the line, he marched in like a lion to save me from ruin. And when he wanted to preserve the honor of Hashem, he did so in complete silence and humility, as was his wont."

GREATNESS REVEALED

But Rav Naftulche could not evade the limelight forever. After his father's *petirah* during the summer of 2000, he assumed the position as Bobover Rov and his greatness could no longer remain concealed. Pushing aside his inclination to remain in the shadows, Rav Naftali Tzvi addressed the needs of an ever-growing crowd. No one will ever know why he allowed his greatness to seep through tiny crevices, but slowly, word leaked out. Great things were happening at the home of the Bobover Rov, and *Yidden* the world over came to pour out their hearts.

Alas, the years of leadership didn't last long. Less than five years after assuming his position, Rav Naftuli Tzvi was summoned On High, leaving thousands mourning and bereft. His *matzeivah* is stark in its lack of pretention, mirroring a life lived in the evasion of honor.

Rav Naftuli Tzvi clearly demanded in his *tzava'ah* that no titles or descriptions be appended to his name. And he added, "Before my name, you can write 'Reb,' as is written by everyone, and you should write the names of my parents and the date of my *petirah*. But you should not write that this inscription was written as per my *tzava'ah*."

His humility would not be sullied.

A TZADDIK'S IMPRINT

The glimmers of greatness that seeped out during his lifetime gained momentum specifically after his *petirah*. Suddenly, stories that had never been shared came to light. Tremendous acts of self-sacrifice were revealed, causing many to wonder how they had remained oblivious to the greatness in their midst.

But more was yet to come.

R' Elimelech Miller, longtime *menahel* at the Bobover Yeshiva and presently *menahel* in the Lelov Yeshiva, watched his three married children suffering and he felt helpless. He had married off two daughters and one son, yet none of them had been blessed with children.

In 2010, several years after Rav Naftuli Tzvi's *petirah*, he remembered a cryptic remark that the Rov had told him many years prior. When he had gone in to receive a blessing for his family, the Rov had read the names of these three children and then stopped short.

"Rav Shimon bar Yochai will be by me on *Lag Ba'omer*," Rav Naftuli Tzvi said.

That was it. Silence reigned, but R' Elimelech could not fathom the meaning of this strange remark. It was right after *Chanukah* 5762/2001, deep in the heart of winter. Why was the Rov mentioning *Lag Ba'omer*, and what did it mean that Rav Shimon would be by him then?

Months and years passed before the cryptic words resurfaced, and R' Elimelech suddenly knew. He had to be at the Rov's *tziyun* that *Lag Ba'omer*, come what may.

True to his word, he was there in New Jersey with his wife and daughter that fateful *Lag Ba'omer* of 5770/2010. There were no crowds. There were no honking cars or streams of buses. It was just R' Elimelech,



Rav Naftulche with his father, Rav Shlomo.

his pain, and the father-figure who had always been there for him as he had been there for so many others. R' Elimelech poured out his heart at the *tziyun*, crying aloud, "Rav Naftulche! You promised that Rav Shimon bar Yochai would be by you on *Lag Ba'omer*!"

And the following year, *Lag Ba'omer* of 5771/2011, R' Elimelech was there again. This time, he came to express his gratitude for the two beautiful grandchildren who had been born that year and for the one who was on the way.

HEARTBEATS

The news spread quickly, but in relative silence, much as the Rov had lived his life. It was whispered from one to another, without fanfare and without any gimmicks.

In a world where many things have become glitzy and glamorous, *Lag Ba'omer* in New Jersey remains a notable exception. There is no catch. There is no prize or free giveaways or catchy buzzwords. It is not a fundraising project or a quest for fame and grandeur.

It's just...a heartbeat.

The heartbeat of a *tzaddik* who dedicated his life for others.

It's the heartbeat of a father who viewed every member of *Klal Yisroel* as his own child.

It's the vibrant yet gentle heartbeat that doesn't take no for an answer; combining the power of giving with the warmth of caring.

And this heartbeat has done so much in just eight short years. Eight *Lag Ba'omer* expeditions to New Jersey have resulted in thousands of stories that defy nature and defy statistics.

Most of the stories remain undocumented, and for every *yeshuah*, there are certainly several more that are known only to the families involved. But the thousands that have been shared create a tapestry woven across the globe and across the spectrum of Jewish society.

It's not confined to Bobov. It's not centered in Brooklyn, or in New York, or even

in the US. Rav Naftuli Tzvi never made any distinction between one *Yid* and another. That universal caring becomes ever more manifest as *Yidden* converge upon the humble *matzeivah* in Floral Park Cemetery each year, coming to the heartbeat that continues to echo the pain and desperation of *Klal Yisroel*.

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

Mentioning just a few personal stories seems almost irreverent, much as one can't confine an ocean in a basin of water.

In the past year alone, so many childless couples have been blessed after spending *Lag Ba'omer* of 2017 in New Jersey. There's the couple in Monsey who waited in silence for many long years, while the homes of their younger siblings resounded with joy. Last year, Mrs. W. joined a neighbor who was traveling to Floral Park Cemetery on *Lag Ba'omer*, pouring out years of angst at the *tziyun*. A few months ago – in February 5778/2018 - they were blessed with a beautiful set of twins.

That same week in February, a couple in Kiryas Yoel who had been waiting for children for more than five years were blessed with a baby boy. The new father recounted that he had been at the *tziyun* for the first time on *Lag Ba'omer* of 5777/2017. He had even marked down the contact information listed at the large tent near the *ohel*, so certain was he that he would have good news to share in the ensuing months.

The stories touch every area in which *Yidden* need *yeshuos*. A middle-aged man in Antwerp, Belgium, was horrified when he was accused of severe tax-evasion. The government assumed that he'd been receiving illegal monies for many decades, though in actuality it had been Holocaust reparation funds from Holland. Despite providing proof and legal documents, the government continued to press charges. The sum demanded was astronomical.

The accused asked his son – a New York resident – to visit the *tziyun* of Rav Naftali Tzvi *zt"l* on *Lag Ba'omer*. His son traveled to New Jersey on Sunday, *Lag Ba'omer* of

2017. He mentioned his father's plight and pleaded for a *yeshuah*. The next day, Monday, was a legal holiday in Antwerp. On Tuesday, his father's attorney received a shocking telephone call informing him that all charges had been dropped.

What about the hundreds of *shidduchim* that came to fruition after *Lag Ba'omer* in New Jersey? One remarkable story involves a family in which three children – a son and two daughters – were in *shidduchim* for many years, without tangible progress. Shortly before *Lag Ba'omer* last year, their mother heard about the goings-on at Floral Park Cemetery and she went with her two daughters. They arrived early on Sunday morning, shocked at the crowds that had preceded them by many hours. In short order, all three children had found their *zivugim*. Now, just one year later, the exhilarated parents are preparing for the third *chasunah* which will take place – most appropriately – on *Lag Ba'omer*.

IN CONCLUSION

Rav Naftulche was always known for his cryptic remarks. His words were short, precise, and often mysterious.

"Rav Shimon bar Yochai will be by me on *Lag Ba'omer*," he had said.

The miracles and *yeshuos* pouring forth each *Lag Ba'omer* in New Jersey are reminiscent of those cryptic comments.

But the answer remains shrouded in mystery, as Rav Naftulche always wanted.

Refreshments and amenities are provided near the ohel throughout the night and day of Lag Ba'omer free of charge. The ohel is located at the corner of the cemetery with a separate entrance and pathway providing access for kohanim, and it is open 24 hours a day, year-round.

GPS info: Floral Park Cemetery, 104 Deans Rhode Hall Rd., Monmouth Junction, NJ, 08852.

To send a kvittel to be read at the ohel on Lag Ba'omer, or for any inquires, email Rabbi Moshe Shimon Reichberg at lag-baomernj@gmail.com or send a fax to 732.647.1326.