Out of the Depths I Have Called Thee: The Vow of Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Falk

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In an interesting footnote to Jewish History, we find the triumph of the human spirit.

Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Falk (1680-1756) was born in Krakow, the scion of a rabbinic family. Newly married and working as the inspector of the local school, Rabbi Falk became a respected community leader in Lemberg, Poland. But in 1702, the trajectory of his life was irrevocably altered. A powder keg explosion took the life of his wife, daughter, mother-in-law and her father. Trapped under debris, Rabbi Falk narrowly escaped himself. While still threatened by the specter of death, he vowed to compose an original commentary on the Talmud. He swore to find meaning and purpose in this tragedy.

Rabbi Falk published his novellae on the Talmud as P'nei Yehoshua, a title that bears the same name as a work of responsa by his illustrious grandfather, Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel, for whom he was named. In Meginei Shlomo, Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel defends Rashi against the challenges posed by the Ba'alei HaTosafot. His grandson, Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Falk, would continue the tradition, and do the same in his own work.
P'nei Yehoshua was first published in Amsterdam in 1739. In his Introduction, Rabbi Falk writes:

Behold, I accepted upon myself an obligation and vowed this vow at the moment of my anguish, on the day of Hashem's wrath – 3 Kislev, 5463 - in the holy

community of Levov [Lemberg]. ‘I was tranquil in my home and invigorated in my sanctuary,’ together with my friends and students who were listening to my voice, when suddenly the city was turned into a heap: ‘Overturned in a moment, though no hands were laid on her.’ The sound of a cry was not heard. But the sound of a blaze was singled out, together with the appearance of a great flame that rose through our palace and windows, due to some large and frightful kegs filled with gunpowder. They were the cause of a fire that destroyed the homes, making them uninhabitable. A number of large and very tall, walled homes were lowered to the dust, razed to their very foundations, and thirty-six holy souls of Israel were killed. Among the casualties were also members of my household – my first wife (her soul in Eden), her mother, and her mother’s father. The tragedy reached my young daughter, her mother’s only child. She was beloved to me - ‘foremost in rank.’ I too was among the fallen of this ‘lofty place into a deep pit.’ I came to the deepest depths of the ground underneath, just like under a press, because of the heavy burden of the heaps and heaps that fell upon me – pillars of our home – more than the pillars in a mill. ‘He did not allow me to refresh my spirit.’ My hands and limbs were not under my control. ‘I said, I am doomed,’ ‘with my days cut short… deprived of the rest of my years… I will not again behold a man with the inhabitants of the earth.’

…Therefore, I said, when I was still under the heap, ‘if the Lord be with me and take me out from this place to peace, and build for me a faithful house to increase its boundaries with students – then I will not remove myself from the walls of the Beit Midrash and I will be diligent in the doors of study of topics in Shas and Poskim, and I will lodge in the depths of Halakha, even spending many nights on one issue.’

At the tender age of twenty-two, Rabbi Falk’s life was forever changed. Yet he possessed the strength and courage to execute what would be his life’s mission: To carry on in the tradition of his grandfather and commit himself completely to Torah study. In doing so, he created one of the most original and important commentaries to the Talmud of the Modern Era.

Rabbi Falk became renown for his great diligence and piety. It is told that before he began writing his P’nei Yehoshua, Rabbi Falk studied the entire Talmud thirty-six times, corresponding to the thirty-six lives that were lost in the explosion. Describing an encounter with Rabbi Falk, Rabbi Hayyim Yosef Dovid Azulai wrote, “I, the youth, merited to receive the face of the Shekhina in those days. And his appearance was that of an Angel of the Lord.”

But Rabbi Falk was also famous for his stubbornness. His unwillingness to compromise forced him to move from community to community. He served as rabbi in Lemberg, Tarlow, Kurow, Lesko, Berlin, Metz and, at the height of his career, was appointed Chief Rabbi of Frankfurt am Main. There he would become embroiled in the famous Emden-Eybeschutz controversy. Due to his vociferous support of Rabbi Yaakov Emden, Rabbi Falk was forced to leave Frankfurt in 1751. When he was invited back to Frankfurt several years later, his opponents prevented him from teaching publicly, causing him to flee once again. Rabbi Falk lived in Worms and Offenbach until his death in 1756. And although he requested no eulogy, Rabbi Falk was eulogized by Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, the famed Noda B'Yehudah. Rabbi Falk was buried in Frankfurt, where his grave remains until today.

Since time immemorial, man has tried to comprehend suffering. One may never find an answer to the question of theodicy, but he may find meaning in his pain. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik wrote:

Suffering comes to elevate man, to purify his spirit and sanctify him, to cleanse his mind and purify it from the chaff of superficiality and the dross of crudeness; to sensitize his soul and expand his horizons.

By transcending his personal tragedy and authoring P'nei Yehoshua, Rabbi Ya'akov Yehoshua Falk would expand his horizons and ours too, as students of the Talmud.