Are Gedolim Stories Good for Chinuch?[1]

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Rabbi Simcha Feuerman, LCSW-R serves as President of Nefesh International, and is an adjunct professor at the Touro Graduate School of Social Work; In addition, he has a private psychotherapy practice, specializing in high-conflict couples and families.

According to psychoanalytic theory, emotional disconnection can be dangerous. When people deny their innermost negative feelings-- instead of protecting themselves from their impulses, they may be doubly in danger of acting out on them. If powerful feelings are repressed, they may burst out in a less controlled fashion at another time. Although this is a gross oversimplification, it can be understood via a simple metaphor of a boiler that has a safety valve. If the pressure builds up, it can be released in a controlled manner. However, without the safety valve, while the boiler may be able to contain the mounting pressure for an extended period of time, it will eventually blow up. [2]

An additional negative side effect that comes from repressing feelings is a general emotional antipathy and lack of empathy. Feelings are a two-way street. If a person denies his negative feelings, the mind will indiscriminately blunt all his feelings; the ability to sincerely care and respond to another person’s emotions is correspondingly stunted.

As a psychotherapist, it is my impression from the struggles that my clients experience, that certain methodologies of Orthodox Jewish chinuch and culture may inadvertently discourage the validity of emotional life. For example, I have heard people complain about “cookie cutter” biographies of Gedolim, where one gets the sense that their inner struggles and challenges have been sanitized for fear that they will be a bad influence on others. When the struggles are left out of the story it compounds feelings of inadequacy and guilt among the readers, leading some to give up on attaining anything worthwhile in comparison to the

unnaturally saintly lives depicted in these stories.

This kind of approach that eschews discussion of emotional process does not help us or our children develop an accurate and realistic picture of the very human struggle that all of us have with our emotions and our character, from the simplest Jew to the greatest sage. Not only is no one born perfect, but even outstanding people who have achieved superlative levels of righteousness still must struggle with their dark sides. This is a fact of human nature, and is explicitly and repeatedly discussed in the Gemara as we shall see later in this article. Kohelet (7:20) tells us, “Among men, there is no righteous person who does only good without sinning.”

Young adults who naturally stumble and sin in ways that are even frightening to them, need to understand that this is a normal part of human development. Unfortunately, I fear some prevailing chinuch practices do not make that message clear, and in fact undermine it by eliminating discussion of the negative emotions and struggles experienced by great people. Children need real information in order to understand themselves and grow. When people feel there is no room for complex and conflicted feelings, it leads to despair. This despair leads people to give up on themselves and to abandon striving for greatness.

Double Lives

Another side effect that comes from denying the feelings and emotional process inherent in many stories, is that people can become split off from their emotions--allowing them to live double lives. When they are behaving and feeling frum they are one kind of person. But when they have negative and dangerous feelings, they disown them and perhaps disassociate from themselves. This allows them to sin in far worse ways, as they feel as if it is another person doing it.

Is it then any wonder that we sometimes hear disturbing news of a supposedly great rabbi or community pillar being caught committing horrible and reprehensible acts?

Thankfully, these situations are rare. And it is not my point to be outraged or surprised that even great people can stumble and sin. No one is perfect, and temptation is great. Hazal tell us, ein apotropos le’arayot. [3] However, how can we understand the psyche and conscience of a man who can give a moving and inspiring derasha at one moment, and in the next moment commit reprehensible acts? The answer is via this mechanism of emotional disconnect and disassociation. This kind of psychological problem can find fertile soil in a culture

that denies and represses feelings.

I invite the reader to courageously study stories of sages and great people who indeed grappled with complex and conflictual inner emotions. Some succeeded in their struggles while others did not. Fortunately, our Torah is a Torah of truth and does not cover up the flaws and mistakes of its heroes. It is my hope that this study will inspire people to think about themselves in a more accepting manner, and transmit that self-respect to their children.

I do this not to inappropriately assuage the guilty conscience of the sinner, or to poke fun and demote great people from the high esteem they deserve. Instead, I am suggesting that working through and discussing the real challenges, interim failures and ultimate success of great people will help free children and adults from paralyzing shame and self-hatred that does nothing but lead to hopelessness and anguish.

Feelings are not Frum

Before we discuss any particular story, it is important to study the root of the problem. Discussions about negative feelings are often squelched because feelings are powerful and dangerous. Feelings are amoral; they are neither immoral nor moral, they just are. We do not choose our feelings initially, although how we handle them and what thoughts we have can definitely influence them. [4] Feelings are powerful and they influence our behavior often in ways we cannot control or recognize. The Torah tells us that a judge is blinded by even the smallest bribe, no matter how much he thinks he can be objective (Shemot 23:8). Therefore, it is easy to understand why recognizing and discussing the intense energy contained within human emotions is frightening to members of a culture that abide by a strict moral and behavioral code such as ours. Negative feelings such as lust, hate, and heretical rebellion are, quite possibly, in the back of many a person’s mind, but of course it is frightening and shameful to acknowledge them. Ignore them, and hopefully they will go away. No, they will not!

Of course indulging in these emotions is not a solution either, however to ignore them and act as if they do not exist puts a person in danger of disconnecting from himself and becoming emotionally stunted. The psychologically healthy approach is to accept and understand one’s inner feelings and drives while finding ways to use them positively instead of being filled with internal thoughts of condemnation or shame. This is also reflected in the words of Bereishith Rabbah (9:7):

“When God described His creation as very good, it implies that even the evil inclination is good. But how can this be? The answer is, if not for the evil inclination man would not build a home, marry a woman, have children, or engage in commerce."

The Fifth Volume of Shulhan Arukh

Another one of the chinuch dangers of disconnection from feelings is an estrangement from our gut instincts in favor of strict adherence to technical ethical principles. This is an abandonment of what is sometimes referred to as “the fifth volume of Shulhan Arukh”. No system can function without using common sense to mediate and moderate between the dictates and principles of the system and how to apply them.

Related to this point, I have noticed a strange phenomenon in regard to certain inspirational stories. Typically, the story will go something like this: So and so, a great sage, despite his high stature did an amazing kindness for someone of lower perceived social status. For example, we have the famous story about Rav Yisrael Salanter who went to hold a crying baby on Yom Kippur eve during Kol Nidre, or the story of how Rav Moshe Feinstein ran after a gentile delivery boy to make sure he received his dollar tip.

Of course these stories model acts of compassion and decency, and deserve recognition. Sadly though, I fear there is a hidden and subtle message of surprise being conveyed along with these stories, as they suggest that basic human compassion and decency is an astounding ethical feat. After all, who would not show the basic decency of giving an expected tip, or who could be cold-hearted enough to ignore the cries of a baby on Kol Nidre night -- or any night for that matter? So what is the real message here? Either we are surprised to see great people behave in a human and kindhearted manner, or we consider it to be an act that only a true tzaddik can achieve.[5] Whichever message you choose, I submit for your consideration that this kind of thinking is a product of a culture that has difficulty embracing the full passion of its emotions when seen through the lens of Torah thought. Because, in the light of stone-cold Torah analysis without being informed by a sense of compassion, one might erroneously decide that praying is more important than responding to the cries of an infant, or that being sensitive to the needs of a poor delivery boy is irrelevant. And indeed, halakha must trump emotions. However no proper conclusion can be reached without consulting with all “five” volumes of Shulhan Arukh. Our chinuch messages must take that into account.

This recalls an incident that occurred when I was a yeshiva student, around the time that the Challenger Space Shuttle tragically blew up during liftoff. The mashgiah overheard one student callously commenting about the disaster, “It’s no big deal, after all, it’s just a bunch of goyim.” This spurred the mashgiah to deliver a fire and brimstone lecture, castigating the students for having so little empathy and regard for other humans who are b’tzelem elokim, in God’s image.

Since I was already one of the older students in the yeshiva at that time, I had the temerity to share with the mashgiah something that was troubling me about his talk. I told him the following: “This mussar is compelling and I certainly intend to heed your wise words. However, I am not sure why those students should be blamed for their attitude because I cannot recall many instances in my yeshiva career that persons in authority said a kind word about goyim.” The idea of basic decency and empathy for those outside our circle was simply not stressed in any of our learning, despite the mashgiah’s outrage and assumption that “we should all know better.” Of course, he was correct, but in fact, we did not know better.

Similarly, this brings to mind a humorous and fictitious story told about two devout yeshiva boys who were walking by a lake. They both noticed a young woman drowning and quickly dove into the water to save her. After they regained their composure, one sheepishly remarked to the other, “Presumably, this was a permissible act. Though we are ordinarily forbidden to have contact with women, of course to save a life takes precedence over other Torah considerations. Then again, perhaps it should be considered abizrayhu d’arayot (related to sexual matters that require martyrdom) and therefore not subject to the normative directive to save a life…” The second boy responded, “What, it was a woman? I had no idea.”

It is not that boy number one was incorrect in his halakhic concerns per se; rather his focus was incorrect. Boy number two upon hearing cries for help reacted out of basic human decency, without even noticing the gender of the person in distress, so he did not have any halakhic questions to answer.

Sometimes, the disconnection between emotional realities and Torah study can be quite startling. One studenttold me the following true story:

When I was in yeshiva ketana I told my rebbe I wanted to be a veterinarian when I grow up. He told me, “Why would you want to do something like that? It is not a Yiddishe profession?”

As providence would have it, the next day we learned the Midrash about why Moshe was chosen to lead the Jewish people, as he showed great compassion in caring for his sheep.

“My rebbe completely missed the obvious connection between this Midrash and our conversation the day before. That was the day I lost respect for my rebbe.”

How indeed could the rebbe have missed the clear connection and similarity between the young man’s desire to heal animals and Moshe Rabbeinu’s kindness as a shepherd? The answer is, the rebbe was teaching with his head -- but not with his heart. This underscores the danger of telling over even midrashic stories without paying attention to emotional process.

Even Great People Have Feelings

Passionate emotions can only be felt in the heart of a person who is honest with himself and feels all of his emotions, negative and positive. If we do not share this message with our youth, they may feel that they are expected to be perfect and then give up on themselves. In the words of one young man: “Sometimes I would like to go off the derekh, and then go back on again. This way, people will really accept me for who I am instead of over reacting whenever I don’t do the frummest things.” Dear readers, this is a chilling insight into how at least one young man experiences our chinuch and we must consider his words and think about what messages we give our children, despite our best intentions. Are we focused on adherence to the laws and forgetting about our children’s developmental and emotional needs?

Discussing the emotional lives of our Forefathers in a cavalier fashion would be inappropriate and, of course, we must tread carefully out of respect for their great characters that in many ways are beyond our comprehension. Nevertheless, some reflection on this topic is in order. No amount of tortured pilpul and darshanut can completely eliminate the reality of Yaakov’s emotions. When Yaakov sees Rachel for the first time, he kisses her and cries (Bereishith 29:11). True, it was a chaste kiss, perhaps the kind one gives to a young relative [6] but it was still an emotional embrace. Yaakov’s love for Rachel makes the seven years of labor feel as if it were a mere few days (ibid 29:20). You can call it any kind of love you want, love of her virtue or love out of gratitude that she will be one of the matriarchs-- but it was a strong and powerful emotion. Seforno (ibid) comments on this verse that “Love makes people think in a less than logical manner.”

Of course the point of this is not to suggest that we all become enslaved to our passions and be led around by them. However, we also should be a realistic in accepting our emotions. Love is powerful and real.

Rachel and Rabbi Akiva

One of the greatest stories of love in the history of the Jewish people occurs with another Rachel, the daughter of Calba Savua. Though the yet-to-be-Rabbi-Akiva was a mere lowly shepherd, Rachel recognizes his potential for greatness and offers to marry him on the condition that he study Torah. Rachel's father was very wealthy but disowned them as he did not approve of the marriage. They endured great poverty and the Gemara Nedarim (50a) tells of how Rabbi Akiva expressed a wish that he could buy her a "City of Gold", which was a fashionable item of jewelry at the time. When Rabbi Akiva finally returns after 24 years of study with an entourage of thousands of students, the Gemara Ketuvot (63a) tells of how she ran to kiss his feet in what must have been an emotional reunion. The Gemara Nedarim tells us that the rabbis wanted to push her back, perhaps scandalized by this display of affection. Rabbi Akiva told them, "Leave her be, for my Torah and your Torah all belong to her." And by the way, Rabbi Akiva kept his word, as the Gemara Shabbat (59b) tells us that he indeed bought for her the "City of Gold." Rachel managed for 24 years in crushing poverty, and she did not "need" this item of jewelry any more than any woman does, probably far less. Rabbi Akiva performed an act of gratitude and love.

No doubt, this love felt by our sages and Avot is not the same kind of lust glorified by popular notions of romance; however it still was love and it was passionate -- because that is good and right between a husband and wife. There is so much focus on the negative aspects and dangers of passion, such as the need to be modest and to guard one's thoughts and one's eyes, that it is easy to forget that we need to teach our children about proper forms of love and passion, such as occurs in a loving Jewish home.

Difficult Emotions and Mental Illness

Not every sage was successful in managing his emotions. Learning about this can be a great source of strength and comfort to young people and adults who struggle with this as well. The Gemara Bava Metzia (84a) discusses the great despondency felt by Rabbi Yohanan subsequent to the death of his star student and study partner, Resh Lakish. Rabbi Yohanan felt that he had a hand in causing Resh Lakish's death as there was a disagreement between them involving decorum and respect, which may have incurred a Divine wrath. Rabbi Yohanan

lost his sanity as a result of his intense unresolved grief for Resh Lakish. Despite all the efforts of his colleagues to soothe and comfort him, Rabbi Yohanan would tear his clothes crying, “Where are you, son of Lakish, where are you son of Lakish?” Ultimately, the rabbis prayed that Rabbi Yohanan die, possibly so he no longer suffer or perhaps to limit the disgrace of a talmid hakham. Whatever the reason, this was quite a scene.

Bava Metzia is a staple for any aspiring Torah scholar; so this illuminating aggada is not some obscure medrash pelia hiding in a rarely studied tome. Why is it then that this story is so rarely discussed? Is it threatening that a great sage could suffer from mental illness? Perhaps it is even more threatening to consider that this was not an illness brought on by some hidden disease or a “chemical imbalance”. Rather, it was due to no more and no less than the passionate longing and powerful emotions that beat within Rabbi Yohanan’s heart.

Of course, as Rabbi Yohanan was a great man, his passion and longing for his study partner came from a love of Torah. The Gemara tells of how no one could replace Resh Lakish in his ability to challenge Rabbi Yohanan with piercing questions and analysis. But whatever you want to call it, it was passion. And this passion was beyond reason and Rabbi Yohanan’s ability to manage, which eventually made Rabbi Yohanan insane with grief.

A frum person suffering from depression and mental illness could find much comfort in knowing that even the greatest of sages struggled with his emotions, and dare we say it, ultimately failed.

The Greater you are, the Greater Your Temptation

Abaye [7] warns that the temptation to sin is strongest among the talmidei hakhamim. This statement was not a mere intellectual abstraction, but came from personal knowledge as a result of a disturbing event in Abaye’s life. One time, Abaye surreptitiously followed a man and woman into an unpopulated area, thinking that they were up to no good. Abaye’s plan was that if they were to begin any immoral behavior, he would intervene and stop them. At a point when they believed themselves to be completely alone, they parted company in a chaste manner with a verbal farewell that was heartfelt and loving. Abaye marveled to himself, “Had I been in their place, I would not have been able to restrain myself!”

Abaye became depressed, and slumped gloomily against a doorpost, apparently feeling hopeless about his own spiritual state of affairs. The Gemara then tells of

a “Certain Wise Old Man” (possibly Eliyahu HaNavi) who helped Abaye recover by offering the encouraging perspective of “The Greater you are, the Greater Your Temptation.” In Tzidkat HaTzaddik, Rav Tzadok develops this theme in great detail, tying the creative and powerful force of a great person’s character and mind directly to his heightened capacity for sin.

This story is instructive both in its recognition of the very real temptations that Abaye acknowledged, as well as his inability to cope with his feelings of despair. What would have happened to Abaye if he had not been comforted by the “Certain Wise Old Man”? Would he have given up hope on himself? We cannot know for sure, but this story unequivocally suggests that even a great sage is quite vulnerable to temptation as well as to feelings of hopelessness. [8]

This is information that people need to know in order to understand in a real way what our sages’ temptations and struggles were and how they coped with them. The chinuch message should be uplifting and inspiring: If they faced their struggles successfully, so can we! [9]

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this essay is to sensitize and encourage readers to treat their emotions and their children’s emotions with due respect and acceptance. Certainly, we must cultivate in ourselves and our children positive feelings such as empathy and kindness, while discouraging hate, greed and a whole host of other thoughts that can lead to sin. Yet, the chinuch process must also help our children internalize the character traits of love and patience and help them avoid loathing themselves for their human errors. This is done by walking the tightrope of providing instruction and guidance, while still conveying love and care for the person as he or she is “right now b’asher hu sham”. [10] Talking about feelings, and showing that everyone has them, is part of this process. When a person is alone with his thoughts, he is vulnerable to feeling shame. Humans have all kinds of negative and unseemly feelings, but many people feel they are depraved monsters for having these feelings and are filled with self-loathing and disgust. The Gemara Yoma (75a) tells us, “If one has worry in his heart, he should speak of it to others.” Not feeling alone is an important strategy in managing troubling emotions.

When we learn about the struggles of those who are far greater than we are, this lessens our shame and despair, for we realize that we are not alone. Our tradition has an enormous storehouse of collected wisdom about emotions and the very human nature of our struggles with them. There is temptation to either run away

in fear when we encounter these frank and disturbing aggadot, or explain them away quickly and forget about them. However, we also can study them and share them with our children, helping them to become more confident and accepting of their own turbulent emotions as they grow into mature human beings.

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[2] While psychoanalysis has been largely discredited as a cost-effective effective form of treatment, conceptually, psychodynamic related theories are still often used to explain behavior. For example, many therapists would find it plausible to explain that a person who behaves in a passive-aggressive manner is acting out unconscious repressed impulses, although the treatment may take forms other than interpreting the underlying psychodynamic conflict. Furthermore, there are similar ideas in Hazal which also suggest that excessive repression is harmful. For example, Rashi (Gittin 90a “Papus”) warns that a husband who is too controlling will lead his wife to rebel. While this is not unconscious repression, it is nonetheless a warning about the dangers of repression. Perhaps more clearly stated, we find the Gemara Shabbat (156a) that advises persons who were born with various tendencies to channel them toward constructive purposes instead of repressing them (such as a bloodthirsty person becoming a mohel instead of murderer). In psychoanalytic terms, when an instinct or drive is diverted for positive use, it is known as sublimation. Another possible source comes from the Gemara Yoma (78b) which tells us Rabbah bought cheap vessels for his children to break, apparently to allow them to vent off steam in a healthy way. This suggests that it would be unhealthy to try to repress a child’s natural exuberance and force him to “sit still and behave.”

[3] Ketuvot 13b. Also see Rambam Mishne Torah, at the end of Hilkhot Isurei Biah, where he stresses that when it comes to sexual matters, there will always be some in every community who succumb to temptation.

[4] See Ezer Mikodesh, Even Haezer 23:3 where he discusses at length the difference between a random thought which cannot be controlled, and purposefully dwelling on a fantasy.

[5] Echoes of this sentiment can be found in R. Kook's words in Shemonah Kevatzim 1:463, (translation mine):

"The folk who live according to their instincts, and are not learned, are actually superior in many respects to the learned folk. In particular, their instinctive common sense decency and morality was not corrupted by the intricate, wearying and too-clever burdens of scholarship." (I thank Marc B. Shapiro and the Seforim Blog for this reference.)

[6] Ramban on Bereishith 29:9. Related to seeing Biblical figures as human, I personally heard an interesting piece of Torah Sheb'al Peh from Rabbi Avigdor Miller, ZT'L, who was my wife's great uncle, affording me the privilege of an occasional meeting. According to my memory, here is what Rav Miller said: "Without being disrespectful, I would like you to understand that when Moshe Rabbeinu ate a sandwich, he experienced hunger, desire to eat, and enjoyment of eating. It is a scientific impossibility to eat a sandwich unless you enjoy it because the food goes down the throat and is digested as a result of the salivary glands. A person does not produce saliva unless he feels desire for the food. If Moshe Rabbeinu tried to eat a sandwich without desiring it, the food would go down into his stomach like a bunch of rocks."

[7] Succah 52a

[8]Not limiting ourselves to Amoraim who are susceptible to feelings of despair, in more recent times there is a historical account of the Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe seeking a consultation from Dr. Sigmund Freud for a bout of depression:

In the winter of 1902-1903, Rabbi Shalom Dov-Ber Schneersohn, the 5th Lubavitcher Rebbe1 (known by the acronym RaSHaB), from a scion of Chassidic Rabbis, travelled from Russia to Vienna to consult with 'the famous Professor Sigmund Freud.' He was accompanied by his son, Rabbi Josef Yitzchak Schneersohn (known by the acronym RaYaTZ). At that time the Rebbe RaSHaB was forty two years old his son was twenty two years old.

While various details of this visit to Vienna had been known in Lubavitch circles for some years, the name of the famous doctor was not revealed in print until 1997 when the private Diaries (R'Shimos) of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson were published. The diary for the period spring 1932 relates a conversation that Rabbi Menachem Mendel (the 7th Rabbi in the dynasty known as Lubavitch Chassidim) had with his predecessor in Riga, Latvia, about the three month visit (6 January - 5 April 1903) that he had made with his

father (the RaSHaB, the 5th Lubavitcher Rabbi) to Vienna. In this conversation the name of the famous professor is specifically identified. 2After a further unspecified exchange between Freud and the Rebbe, his son recalls that Freud made the following 'diagnosis:' "The head grasps what the heart is unable to contain, and the heart cannot tolerate." (SIGMUND FREUD AND THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE, STANLEY SCHNEIDER, Jerusalem & JOSEPH H. BERKE, London.

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[9] Rav Yitzchak Hutner, ZT’L, in a letter to a talmid who was depressed from his failures, was highly critical of gedolim stories that only spoke of their great stature, without relating any of their personal struggles and missteps on their way to greatness. See Pahad Yitzhak, Igrot U'khtavim, #128.

[10] Treating our children as Hashem treats his, see Bereishith 21:17 and Bereishith Rabbah 53 quoted by Rashi, Op. Cit.