

The Derashah



For many who found their way to the city of Vienna, culture was uppermost in their minds. Some of these were men and women who treasured art for art's sake and placed artists and their work on a pedestal. Others were less interested in art and directed all their latent passions toward the study, development, and appreciation of music, opera, or the theater. These were the people whose carriages glided up to the magnificent opera house and who were written about in the society papers of the day. They were the trendsetters in fashion-conscious Vienna.

There were many others for whom Vienna was no different from any other city. For people of limited means and no distinguished pedigree, the arts were of little consequence. They had no time to pursue them, and no inclination to stand around, a glass of fine wine in hand, exchanging observations about the inner meaning of one painting or another.

There were many individuals who would have been perfectly

satisfied if they'd never set eyes on the Schonbrunn Palace, the Vienna State Opera, or the Museumsquartier. No doubt the Viennese cuisine was delectable, but they would have been just as happy to have never been tempted by a weiner schnitzel or a perfectly prepared slice of Sacher torte. For these people, Vienna would never be home. They made no attempt to plant roots. War creates refugees, you see, and refugees long for home and hearth, no matter how pleasant a temporary lodging may be.

The European continent is no stranger to the displacement of its population. Having seen more than its fair share of war throughout the ages, it has grown accustomed to watching various nationalities pick up their walking sticks and take to the roads, dispersing into the wind ahead of yet another approaching army.

The Jews of Europe tended to sigh with resignation as they packed their bags before burying their valuables and heading out into the night for yet another foray into a neighboring country. This was especially true in times of war, when people fled before marauding armies and watched their homes go up in smoke.

Needless to say, the people who fled for their lives would have gladly passed on the privilege of touring Vienna if that would have meant being able to stay home. So it was for many during World War I, and so it was for one particular family who left their home in Poland and relocated to Vienna in search of safety. Though there was no denying Vienna's aesthetically pleasing architecture, lovely parks, and commitment to beauty, they would still have rather been home.



The average refugee wasn't able to afford the price of housing in the city center, near most of the Jewish community. For a poor family from Poland, the rents were prohibitive, and they were forced to search for an alternative in neighborhoods that were off the beaten track and that offered fewer options in the way of schools and shuls. For one particular refugee family, where they ended up living would prove extremely important — and not only to them.

It was *erev Shabbos*, and the family's teenage daughter was preparing for the upcoming holy day. Though she would have preferred to daven at Vienna's famous Schiff Shul, it was located much too far from her home to be a viable option. After some investigation, the family discovered another, closer shul with an Orthodox *rav* that seemed to fit their needs. The only question was whether the shul had sufficient *Chumashim* for everyone who came to daven there. Wanting to make sure this wouldn't be a problem, the teenager set off for the local shul, *Chumash* in hand. When she arrived and entered the simple building, she ran into the *shamash*, who asked her why she'd come.

"To leave a *Chumash* for myself," she replied.

He looked at her for a second.

"*Mammale*," he said, "we have enough *Chumashim* in this shul for everyone who comes. No need to bring your own."

I don't know what expectations that girl had when she returned for Shabbos davening the next morning. Perhaps she was merely hoping for a *chazzan* with a beautiful voice or a *ba'al korei* who made no mistakes. At any rate, when the *rav* of the shul rose to address the congregation on that Shabbos Chanukah, little did that girl or anyone else in shul know that they were standing poised on the brink of making history.

The *rav* delivered a fascinating *derashah* that Shabbos morning. Though the majority of *darshanim* did not devote their sermons to extolling the women in Jewish history, this rabbi did just that. He offered his congregants a passionate look into the challenges and dilemmas facing Yehudis during the daunting days of the Greek empire. He outlined the dire situation she faced, and how she took action over and above anything that could have been expected of her.

It wasn't only the content of his speech that kept the teenager spellbound. The *rav* had style, charisma, and an incredible breadth of knowledge. From the first moment it was obvious to the young girl that here stood a man of erudition who truly knew how to learn.

The *rav* spoke for a while, his words filled with quiet humor and poignancy and his message coming across with unabashed sincerity. He laced his words with a plethora of Torah sources. It was obvious that here stood a man who had researched his topic.

Then he took his speech in an entirely unexpected direction.

"If Yehudis was able to help her people and stand up for her nation thousands of years ago, then surely the Jewish women of today can and should be doing the same thing! How is it possible that we can find many wonderful and learned yeshivah students across the continent, but when it comes to young women and Jewish learning, the outcome is completely different? How have we arrived at a state where so few Jewish women have been taught anything worthwhile? This type of ignorance is an utter catastrophe and needs to be remedied immediately *by a woman* who will rise and say to her fellow coreligionists that she is ready and willing to accept the passing of the torch from Yehudis to herself.

"This woman, whoever she will be, will have to work hard to implement her dream and turn that dream into a reality. For if everything I am discussing here remains at the dream stage and is never taken further, it will not be long before there won't be anyone left to save."

The young girl sat riveted. Every word emanating from the *rav's* lips entered her heart and lodged there. No one spoke this way back home. It would have been unheard of for a rabbi to deliver such a message in the town where she'd grown up. Back home, it was only men who were chosen to carry the torch and pass on the tradition to the next generation.

The more she heard, the more excited she became. Her heart had become inflamed by his message, and she longed to do her part. The only question was exactly what to do. The sermon came to an end six minutes later, but for the teen it was over far too quickly. She wanted to hear more. Already she was counting the days until the next Shabbos, so she could hear another *derashah*.



The weeks passed quickly, with the young refugee making sure to never miss a *derashah*. She discovered that the rabbi she so admired was Rabbi Dr. Moshe Dovid Flesch. He was a student of Rabbi Solomon Breuer and an ardent protégé and disseminator of the school of Torah thought of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch. Every *derashah* was a lesson for life, every teaching a nugget of gold. Yet the crown jewel of them all remained the original speech that she had heard that first Shabbos morning.

The *rav's* Shabbos *shiur* was not enough for her. She was therefore happy to learn that Rav Flesch delivered a daily *shiur* for his congregants as well. Now she was in her element. The fact that the classes took place on weekdays gave her the ability to write down every word: to be studied, reviewed, and internalized again and again, until their every hidden nuance and message had become inscribed on the very walls of her heart.

This continued for about one year.

As she listened and recorded the *rav's* words, the girl's eyes sparkled, and her pen flowed with richness. It seemed she had come all the way to Vienna to find a rebbi. Crazy as it may sound, though the outcome of World War I was almost universally negative, this fateful encounter would prove to be a cause for celebration.



And then, one day, it was time to leave. The family was returning to Poland. The young girl packed her belongings and prepared to take her departure from Vienna. She didn't have a difficult time saying good-bye to the opera house or the many other landmarks of European culture. Far more difficult was the knowledge that she would no longer be hearing Shabbos-morning *derashos* from Rav Flesch or adding any more practical-life Torah *shiurim* to her notebooks.

The family left the way they had come, without making any waves. And then it was time for their teenage daughter to begin to put into practice the ideas that she'd heard and internalized over the previous year.

More than anything, she had come to understand that although people had a certain picture in their minds about what they considered to be the norm, that didn't necessarily mean they were right. There was an entire world out there, filled with many ideas and concepts that the people at home had never heard of and with which they were not familiar.

Having listened to the Viennese rabbi's *shiurim* for a year, the young girl was unfazed by the opposition that was sure to come. If Yehudis was able to stand firm and defeat a Greek general, then she could bring salvation to Jewish girls everywhere who were thirsty for authenticity and the opportunity to use their minds to learn their holy Torah.

And so, young Sarah Schenirer, having obtained the blessing of many of the most important Torah figures of her day, embarked on her plan to save her nation.

There were people who tried to get in the way: people who disagreed with the need for what she was doing, people who felt they could do it better, people who thought she was making a mistake. But the words of Rav Flesch's first *derashah* rang in her mind, and she didn't waver. She didn't back down or lose faith in herself.

If anything, opposition made her stronger.

Her passion and belief in her mission served as a magnet to draw other, like-minded girls to her side. She taught and trained them and handed her writings over to them. She taught them how to respond when they were taunted, as she knew they inevitably would be. And eventually the dream sprouted wings of its own. It developed roots powerful enough to withstand the most persistent of winds.

One day, young Sarah sat down and wrote a letter to the man who had influenced the course of her life and, by doing so, put his own stamp on Jewish history.

To the esteemed Rav Flesch,

Baruch Hashem, things have been coming along here in Poland. Since my return to my hometown, I've been working very hard to turn my dream of opening a school for religious

girls into a reality, and, with the help of Hashem, we have seen tremendous success.

*The reason I decided to write you with this update is because I wanted to tell you that it was your **shiurim** and classes, and especially the first **derashah** that I heard from you on the Chanukah after we'd arrived from Poland, that influenced me to do my part in the battle of reclaiming the pure **neshamos** of Klal Yisrael's girls.*

*It was your words extolling the courage and **mesirus nefesh** of Yehudis that conveyed to me how important it is to try against all odds. When you decried the terrible situation befalling the women of our nation, I understood that you were talking to me and that every single one of us is charged with the task of doing our utmost to stand against the tide and recapture our youth.*

*With the help of Hashem, we have established a school for religious girls here in Poland, and we have many students, all thirsting to fill their souls with Torah and **hashkafah**. But the truth needs telling. It was you, Rav Flesch, whose words inspired me to reach for the sky. The fledgling Bais Yaakov system is your creation and baby just as much as it is mine.*

I thereby invite you to please come visit our school so you can see for yourself, firsthand, what has been accomplished through the messages you instilled in me.

Sarah Schenirer



Rabbi Dr. Moshe Dovid Flesch did indeed accept Sarah Schenirer's invitation and made sure to pay a visit to the Bais Yaakov she had established in Poland. I can only imagine the impact that seeing all those vibrant *talmidos* must have had on the Viennese rabbi. I think it's safe to write that Rav Flesch never imagined the future outcome of his words when he stood up to speak on that fateful Shabbos Chanukah during World War I. But the fact remains that the message he imparted, and the way he imparted it, made

an indelible impression on Sarah Schenirer. She credited him with giving the *derashah* that changed her life and, by extension, the lives of millions of Jewish girls.

Because sometimes one *derashah* is all a rebbi needs to change lives.

As heard from Rav Flesch's grandson, Rav Moshe Loewenthal