

Reb Shraga Feivel's ability to perceive a need that others did not was a reflection of his unique vision of Jewish life in America. He was at once more optimistic and more pessimistic about the future of American Jewry than were his contemporaries. On the one hand, he defied the conventional wisdom that in America it was impossible to raise children with the fear of Heaven, and without the need to compromise. At the same time, he saw more clearly than most just how far American Jews would sink without any grounding in Torah. The prevalent attitude was to try to save whatever could be saved through a series of strategic retreats and compromises. Reb Shraga Feivel not only rejected such compromises on principle, he saw that they would not work in practice and in the end nothing would be saved.

IT IS EVIDENT THAT REB SHRAGA FEIVEL WAS THINKING ABOUT the creation of a yeshivah for high-school-age boys and beyond al-

**An Idea
Whose Time
Had Come**

most from the first moment he stepped into Torah Vodaath. The schedule for the elementary school was 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. for religious studies, and then an hour break. General studies ran from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. In each of his three years as principal of the yeshivah, Reb Shraga Feivel convinced a number of eighth graders to continue their studies in the yeshivah after graduation. At 2:30 p.m., they would cross the Williamsburg Bridge to the high-school division of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchonon on the Lower East Side for their secular courses.

In September 1923, Reb Shraga Feivel appointed Rabbi Joseph Adler as the eighth-grade Gemara *rebbe*. He was very successful and for the next three years, he advanced with his class. To teach *Chumash*, *Navi*, and halachah after lunch, Reb Shraga Feivel engaged another master teacher, Rabbi Feivel Weiler. In September 1925, Reb Shraga Feivel assigned Rabbi Weiler to a full-time class, and taught the above subjects to the tenth grade himself. His probable motive was to influence the boys to become the forerunners of a mesivta of advanced learning. In addition, he initiated *mishmar* (late-night learning) sessions on Thursday night. The first hour was for Talmud review, followed by a period of free discussion. Reb

A RABBINICAL PROCLAMATION Adar 5695 (February 1935)

We have observed the conditions prevailing in the general Jewish community, where some youth have left the haven of their faith and have assimilated with non-Jews; in certain cases they have made efforts to marry gentiles, sometimes without any effort to convert them, and other times an effort is made for conversion to our faith, an action which is absolutely invalid and worthless in the eyes of the law of our Torah. We have therefore bestirred ourselves to build and establish an iron wall to protect our identity and religious integrity and to bolster the strong foundations of our faith and religious purity which we have maintained for many centuries going back to our country of origin, Syria.

We, the undersigned rabbis, constituting the Religious Court, together with the Executive Committee of the Magen David Congregation and the outstanding laymen of the community, do hereby decree, with the authority of our Holy Torah, that no male or female member of our community has the right to intermarry with non-Jews; this law covers conversions, which we consider to be fictitious and valueless. We further decree that no future rabbinic court of the community should have the right or authority to convert male Or female non-Jews who seek to marry into our community. We have followed the example of the community in Argentina, which maintains a rabbinic ban on any of the marital arrangements enumerated above, an edict which has received the wholehearted and unqualified endorsement of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel. This responsa is discussed in detail in Devar Sha'ul, Yoreh Deah, Part II to Part VI. In the event that any member of our community should ignore our ruling and marry, their issue will have to suffer the consequences. Announcements to this effect will be made advising the community not to allow any marriage with children of such converts. We are confident that the Jewish People are a holy people and they will adhere to the decision of their rabbis and will not conceive of doing otherwise.

Chief Rabbi Haim Tawil
Rabbi Jacob Kassin
Rabbi Murad Masalton
Rabbi Moshe Gindi
Rabbi Moshe Dweck Kassab

Oct. 15, 2007

Letters to the Editor, Magazine
The New York Times
620 Eighth Ave.
New York, NY 10018

To the Editor,

Jakie Kassin is the son and grandson of rabbis and a dynamic do-gooder, but he is neither a rabbi nor a scholar of Judaic studies. The statements attributed to him in "The SY Empire" (Zev Chafets, Oct. 14, 2007) are a gross distortion of Judaism as well as of the 1935 Edict promulgated in the Syrian Jewish community of Brooklyn. That Edict was enacted to discourage community members from intermarrying with non-Jews. It acknowledged the reality of the time that conversions were being employed insincerely and superficially. Accordingly, conversion for marriage to a member of the community was automatically rejected.

However, it is important in this regard to clarify the policy of the community rabbinate and particularly that of the long-time former chief rabbi of the community, Jacob S. Kassin (the originator of the Edict), and his son, the present chief rabbi, Saul J. Kassin. I quote from an official formulation of the Sephardic Rabbinical Council of several years ago that reflects their position: "1. A conversion not associated with marriage that was performed by a recognized Orthodox court – such as for adoption of infants or in the case of an individual sincerely choosing to be Jewish – is accepted in our community. 2. If an individual not born to a member of our community had converted to Judaism under the aegis of an Orthodox court, and was observant of Jewish Law, married a Jew/Jewess who was not and had not been a member of our community, their children are permitted to marry into our community." Based on these standards a goodly number of converts have been accepted into the community. Genetic characteristics play no role whatsoever.

No rabbi considers sincere and proper conversions "fictitious and valueless." (The comma in the English translation cited in the article that gives that impression was the result of a mistranslation by a layman, a matter I made clear to Mr. Chafets when we spoke.)

In addition, the quote claiming that even other Jews are disqualified from marrying into the community "if someone in their line was married by a Reform or Conservative rabbi" is a totally false portrayal of community rabbinical policy. Many Ashkenazim whose parents were married by such rabbis have married into our community.

Sincerely,

Moshe Shamah
Rabbi, Sephardic Synagogue