

From the Pages of Tradition

R. RAPHAEL OF BERSHAD'S COMMITMENT TO TRUTH

R. Raphael of Bershad (d. 1826) was a hasidic master most famous for his commitment to truth.¹ The outstanding disciple of, and successor to, R. Pinhas of Koretz (d. 1791),² he instilled in the hearts of his listeners the teachings he inherited from his teacher. These included the shunning of anything that smacked of arrogance and the unswerving commitment to speak truthfully and never lie. An itinerant preacher in Podolia (today southern Ukraine), his base of operations was Bershad, a *shtetl* southwest of Uman.³

Several accounts of R. Raphael of Bershad's commitment to truth are gathered below. The primary account is drawn from Abraham Baer Gottlober (1810-1899), who would probably turn over in his grave if he knew he was appearing in the pages of *Tradition*. A staunch 19th century advocate of Haskalah, he developed a hostility to Orthodoxy in general and Hasidism in particular. A prolific writer in Yiddish and Hebrew, he wrote poetry, fiction, translated books into Hebrew, and published monographs on the history of the Karaites and on the history of the Kabbalah. His most important work, however, was his autobiographical *Zikbronot mi-Yemei Ne'urai*, originally printed in Warsaw between 1879 and 1886. The passage on R. Raphael of Bershad, drawn from this work, is a sample of the treasures that can sometimes be extracted from the least likely places.⁴

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ACCOUNT 1 (GOTTLOBER):

There was a Jew in Bershad (or in one of the nearby towns) whose business was to smuggle goods into the country, thereby circumventing the need to pay the duty and taxes charged by the governmental authorities. Fearing to smuggle the goods across the border himself, lest he be caught red-handed, he arranged for a member of the Polish nobility to smuggle the goods across the border in his coach, paying him handsomely for his efforts. Outside the country, the Jew would load the noble's coach with his goods. The noble would cross the border safely into Poland, for the border police never searched the coaches of the Polish nobility, as they did not come under the suspicion of being smugglers.

Time and again the Polish noble succeeded in accomplishing the task boldly and fearlessly. At first, the secret went undiscovered. But ultimately the truth of the matter came to the attention of secret agents, who in turn informed the officer in charge of the border patrol. When the Polish noble next attempted to cross the border into Poland, his coach was stopped and searched at the behest of the officer in charge of the border patrol. It was established that the noble was smuggling goods and bypassing customs. Aside from the humiliation suffered by the Polish noble who now turned out to be a smuggler, he was also fined an astronomical sum of money, much more than he could afford to pay. For the smuggled goods had been many. When the noble was brought to trial, he said: "In truth, my sin is greater than what I can bear. I am covered with shame. But I must inform you that the smuggled goods do not belong to me. They belong to a Jew who hired me to smuggle them on his behalf. It is not I who should be fined, but rather the Jew, the owner of the goods."

When the Jew was called in and questioned, he replied: "Nothing of the sort ever happened. I have no idea what the noble is talking about. He is framing me in order to save his own skin." When the Polish noble was informed that the Jew had denied the charge—and realizing that he could adduce no witnesses who could corroborate his claim—he said: "Let the matter be settled in the following manner. Living nearby are two Jewish saints, men of truth and fearers of God, Rabbi Moshe [Tzvi] of Savran⁵ [d. 1838] and Rabbi Raphael of Bershad. Doubtless, they know this Jew personally and they know about his business activity. They will know that the goods discovered in my coach belonged to him and not to me. Let the two saints be forced to swear in court and let them identify the true owner of the goods."

It is said that R. Moshe [Tzvi] of Savran, who was a distinguished rabbinic scholar and could “present 150 proofs that a creeping insect was in fact ritually clean,”⁶ found a dispensation to swear to tell the truth, yet not tell the truth. He did so in order to save the life of the Jew, who was penniless at the time. Not so R. Raphael of Bershad. He buried his face in his hands and cried bitterly. He fell prostrate to the ground and cried out: “Shall I who never pronounced a lie in my entire life, and guarded myself from pronouncing even a word that smacked of a lie, shall I in my old age swear falsely? Heaven forbid! I would rather die than live. O God of Truth, I entreat you: Let me die now!” And so he died.



Another account of the story circulated orally until it was reduced to writing and published in 1930 by Benjamin Mintz. Less elaborate and less dramatic than Gottlober’s account, it differs considerably in detail as well. It reads:⁷

ACCOUNT 2 (MINTZ):

What were the circumstances surrounding the death of R. Raphael of Bershad? Near Bershad there lived a Jewish informer who wreaked havoc with the lives of the Jews. So much so, that eventually a Jew rose up against him, slew him in a fit of anger, and secretly buried him. The informer’s widow decided to avenge his death by plotting against her fellow Jews. She made believe she was seeking permission to remarry, and managed to get a certificate to remarry signed by R. Raphael of Bershad and R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran. She then took the certificate and presented it to the governmental authorities, thereby endangering the lives of all the members of the Jewish community in that area.⁸ Only after much intervention did the governmental authorities issue a ruling that if the two *tsaddikim* would swear that the signatures on the certificate were not really theirs they would drop all the charges against the Jewish community. The Rabbi of Savran did what he had to do in order to save Jewish lives. But R. Raphael cried out and protested from the moment he was informed of the ruling. Ultimately, he let it be known that he found a solution for his problem.

He travelled to nearby Tarashtche⁹ and summoned the members of

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the burial society. He stretched out on the ground and said: "O Master of the Universe, shall I who never uttered a false word in my life swear falsely in my old age? It shall not come to pass. I would rather die than live under such circumstances. God of Truth, take my soul!" God heard his prayer and took his soul on high.



Still another account of the story circulated orally until it was reduced to writing and published for the first time in 1933 by R. Yekutiel Kamelhar. Its opening is similar to Gottlober's account (and so we omit the opening here), but it presents a much more elaborate account of R. Raphael's agonizing over his decision, as well as a somewhat different ending. Whereas in the first two accounts, R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran is presented as swearing falsely, in the 1933 account this is no longer the case. The account reads in part:¹⁰

ACCOUNT 3 (KAMELHAR):

The guilty Jew's wife and children gave R. Raphael no rest. Day after day they urged him to find a dispensation to swear falsely. Yet this merciful man, who never turned down a request for aid and would do anything in order to prevent even one Jewish tear from being shed, hardened his heart and refused to listen to them. Even on the last day before the swearing ceremony, they tearfully entreated him all day at his home to no avail.

Night fell and R. Raphael sat in his room in total isolation. He knew full well that the next morning would be judgment day for the Jew, his wife, and his children. It was entirely in his hands to save the life of the Jew, his wife, and his children. He knew that saving life takes precedence over all else, and that "whoever sustains a single Jewish life it is as if he sustains the entire world."¹¹ Proof of the matter was the fact that the great *tsaddik*, R. Moshe [Tzvi] of Savran, announced that he would swear falsely, and surely he would act only as the Torah requires. Thus, he too should prepare himself to swear falsely. But how could he do such an abominable thing, he who his entire life distanced himself from falsehood? He who all his life disparaged falsehood before his students, could he now swear falsely? Could he pronounce the opposite of truth? He had expended effort unceasingly in order to cleanse himself

of falsehood! He never said “Yes” even when “Yes” was the appropriate response, and he never said “No” even when “No” was the appropriate response, lest it be discovered that he said something that wasn’t entirely true. He never said “I heard” or “I saw” even regarding matters he heard and saw, lest it turn out that he simply imagined so. He never wore dyed clothing, for it too smacked of falsehood. He held that falsehood was the essence of all impurity and the source of all sin, whereas truth was the source of all that is holy and the foundation of the entire universe. It all boiled down to one point: the truth, the signature of the Holy One Blessed be He, the foundation of all foundations, the principle of all principles. Throughout his lifetime he was prepared to lay down his life for the sake of truth, and now he will go and swear falsely? Never! He will not be guilty of such an abomination! But, then, won’t he be held accountable for shedding the blood of a Jew, his wife, and his children?

He cried out in a voice: “Master of the Universe! You chose us from among all the nations and You gave us Your holy Torah. In Your Torah it says: ‘You shall not lie.’¹² You know and can testify how I used to flee from falsehood and how I have laid down my life for truth. Now that I have reached old age, You are putting me to the test. O God I beseech You, take my soul from me! Take me away from this lowly world. Let me not witness my own downfall! So did he cry out profusely until his soul departed as he was speaking.

Early the next morning, messengers came [to Bershad] to inform the Jewish community that the Jew admitted his guilt before the court, so as not to incur guilt for causing two great and righteous Jews to swear falsely.¹³ R. Raphael’s students hurried to inform him of the good news. But it was too late. They found his outstretched body; his soul had departed for the heavenly spheres.



Yet another account, first published in 1935, tells a different story of how R. Raphael met his death. It too presents an account of R. Raphael of Bershad’s commitment to truth, but in an entirely different context. The 1935 version by Jacob Roven appeared in a memorial volume to Tarashtche, a Ukrainian *shtetl* between Kiev and Uman, not far from Bershad. It reads, in part, as follows:¹⁴

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ACCOUNT 4 (ROVEN):

In the old cemetery of Tarashtche, as all the members of its Jewish community know, rests the tsaddik R. Raphael of Bershad. Regarding him the hasidic world states that he never told a lie. One day he came to visit Tarashtche. He recited various prayers at the very place where he would later be buried. Indeed, the Chernobyler Rebbe, R. Motele (d. 1837)—who had served as Maggid of Tarashtche—stood at the very same place several decades prior to R. Raphael’s death.¹⁵ Legend has it that when R. Motele stood at that place, he asked whether or not R. Raphael of Bershad visits Tarashtche. The reply was that he visits on occasion but not often. R. Motele was holding a small twig in his hand, which he implanted in the earth at the place where he was standing. The twig took, and from it grew what would later become the famous tree in the cemetery. It is called “the Rebbe’s tree.” There is yet another account regarding the legendary tree and R. Raphael of Bershad.

R. Raphael of Bershad came for a visit to Tarashtche. He went with a group of hasidim to the cemetery and recited various prayers at the very place where, several decades earlier, R. Motele of Chernobyl had prayed. R. Raphael came on a Thursday. After the prayers, he returned to his quarters and parted with the community officials in order to be on his way to the next town on his itinerary. The members of the Jewish community urged him to remain in Tarashtche for Shabbos. He replied that he had already decided earlier to spend Shabbos in a neighboring *shtetl*; nonetheless, on another occasion he would return for a Shabbos in Tarashtche. He then left Tarashtche with his horse and wagon, as well as with his secretary (*gabnai*) who also served as his *shames*, i.e., as the driver of his wagon. This was how the Rebbes used to travel. On the way, R. Raphael began thinking to himself: “How could I possibly have told the Jews in Tarashtche that I would return for a Shabbos on another occasion?”

Who knows whether I will long enough to do so? Worse yet, I even forgot to say ‘God willing!’” So he ordered the driver to turn the horse and wagon around and return to Tarashtche. They came back on Friday, spent Shabbos in Tarashtche, and R. Raphael died on that very same Shabbos day! This was in 1826, some 100 years ago. The Rebbe was buried at the very place where he had prayed, which was also the place where years earlier R. Motele of Chernobyl has prayed. At that time (in 1826) an epidemic had broken out in the *shtetl*. Many Jews died from the epidemic. Legend has it that R. Raphael was the last vic-

tim of the epidemic. At the place where R. Raphael of Bershad was buried, a twig was growing out of the earth. It continued to grow slowly over the years. The community built an *obel* over the Rebbe's grave. The twig grew alongside the wall of the *obel* until it became a tree. To this very day, the tree's huge and thick branches cast a shadow over the *obel* and the nearby graves.



This last version (account 4) and the first three accounts of R. Raphael's death are mutually exclusive. In account 4, unlike the first three accounts, R. Raphael of Bershad was not threatened by the need to swear falsely, did not pray for death, and died either naturally or due to an epidemic. The precise circumstances that led to the death of R. Raphael of Bershad will probably never be recovered. Where he died, when he died, and the precise circumstances of his death will remain matters of scholarly dispute. But R. Raphael's lifelong commitment to truth is hardly a matter of dispute—here all the accounts are in accord with each other. His lifelong commitment to truth can only serve to inspire those of us who too often find it difficult to tell “the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

NOTES

1. On R. Raphael of Bershad, see T.M. Rabinowicz, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1996), p. 399. He left no writings, but excerpts from his teaching can be found in *Midrash Pinhas* (Ashdod: Yashlim, 2001), pp. 135-145, and in the sources cited in notes 3 and 4 below.
2. On R. Pinhas of Koretz, see T.M. Rabinowicz, ed., op. cit., pp. 267-268.
3. On Bershad, see N. Huberman, *Bershad: Be-Tsel Ayyara* (Jerusalem: Encyclopedia shel Galuyot, 1956).
4. On Abraham Baer Gottlober, see the entry in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 7, columns 827-829. Cf. Reuven Goldberg's introduction to Gottlober's *Zikbronot u-Masa'ot* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1976), vol. 1, pp. 7-50. The passage translated here is taken from *Zikbronot u-Masa'ot*, vol. 1, pp. 287-288. It is perhaps worth noting here that Gottlober actually met R. Raphael of Bershad. See *Zikbronot u-Masa'ot*, vol. 1, p. 285.
5. On R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran, see T.M. Rabinowicz, ed., op. cit., p. 426.
6. See b. *Eruvin* 13b. Cf. b. *Sanhedrin* 17a.
7. Benjamin Mintz, *Sefer Ha-Histalkut* (Tel Aviv: Ketubim, 1930), p. 23-24.

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- Mintz first published the passage in the Hebrew periodical *Ketubim*.
8. Presumably, the certificate indicated that because her husband had “cooperated” with the governmental authorities, he had been secretly murdered by a fellow Jew.
 9. Tarashtsche was, in all probability, the *shtetl* where R. Raphael of Bershad died and was buried. See below in the introductory comment to account 4 and note 13. Cf., however, *Midrash Pinhas* (see above, note 1), p. 142.
 10. R. Yekutiel Kamelhar, *Dor De’ah* (Bilgoray, 1933), vol. 1, p. 90.
 11. Mishna *Sanhedrin* 4:5.
 12. Leviticus 19:11.
 13. Yet another account needs to be mentioned here. It first appeared in Y.L. Maimon, *Sarei ha-Me’ah*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1944), [in recent printings, it appears in vol. 3, pp. 102-103]. Maimon’s account—the latest of all the accounts—is largely a reworking of accounts 1 and 3 and, except for the introduction of a citation from R. Israel of Ruzhin (see below), is not an independent witness. In common with account 3, it denies that R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran swore falsely. But it does so in a slightly different way. We translate the closing paragraphs of Maimon’s account:

R. Raphael of Bershad broke into tears and cried out in pain and suffering: “Master of the Universe, in Your holy Torah it is written (Lev. 19:11) *You shall not deal falsely, nor lie, nor swear falsely by My Name*. You know full well that for my entire life I have distanced myself from anything that smacked of falsehood. Now that I am old, you are putting me to the test. I beseech you O God, take my soul from me, I would rather die than live.”

So he lowered his head between his knees and broke out in tears. His heart was broken, he was overcome by a stroke, and his soul departed in purity. The next day—it was the day of the court proceeding—the lawyers informed the judges about R. Raphael’s death. The accused Jew was stunned and admitted his guilt.

When the matter was reported to R. Israel of Ruzhin (d. 1851), he said: “I apply to both R. Raphael and R. Moshe Tzvi the verse (Prov. 12:21): *No harm befalls the righteous*.”

14. J. Roven, *Tarashtche* (New York, 1935), vol. 1, pp. 39-41.
15. On R. Mordechai (Motele) Twersky of Chernobyl, see T.M. Rabinowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 507.