YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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Special Sicha

Hesped for Prof. Yaakov Neeman z"l (1939-2017)

Parting from Prof. Yaakov Neeman, *z"l*

By Moshko (Moshe Moskovic)

[On Jan. 1, 2017, Prof. Yaakov Neeman, the former Minister of Justice and Minister of Finance, passed away. Neeman was a professor of law, a lawyer and a jurist, and he served as a cabinet minister in two terms of Binyamin Netanyahu's premiership. In addition to his public services, Neeman was a close friend of Moshko and a supporter of the Yeshiva.[[1]](#footnote-1) Moshko delivered this eulogy for his time-honored friend and spoke of his work on behalf of the Jewish community and his deep connection to the world of Torah and the Yeshiva.]

My meetings with Yaakov Neeman were conducted out of deep friendship and many years of familiarity. At first, they were carried out primarily on a personal level. Later, with the opening of his law firm, I consulted with him both on matters connected to my own public work, including Yeshivat Har Etzion, and on other matters in which he was involved, mainly political issues in Israel. While formally not connected to any particular political party, he was very close to us in his views and outlook.

Yaakov Neeman was an observant Jew, an exceedingly precious Jew in every way. A Jew who studied the *daf yomi* every day, even in the most difficult conditions. In addition to all his public and private work, he invested greatly in Torah study. He educated his children to appreciate Torah and to delve deeply in Torah study.

**Saving 142 Torah scrolls belonging to the Jewish community in Budapest**

Not long ago I related that we made an agreement with the Jewish community in Budapest while it was under Communist rule. We were promised that we would receive Torah scrolls from them, and in return we would give them a donation in the amount of a hundred thousand dollars for the purpose of renovating their cemetery. After signing an agreement with their representatives in Israel, we received a message that read: "Arrive on such-and-such date to take the Torah scrolls." I went there with another friend. For some reason I suspected that something was wrong; I did not know what would be, and so I spoke with Yaakov Neeman and asked him to join us for the meeting. He told me that he was then in London, and that he would make a special trip for me to Budapest. When we arrived in Budapest, we met with the Vice President of the Jewish community, who suddenly said: "I am sorry, but we are not prepared to give you the Torah scrolls." We said to him: 'But surely we signed an agreement with you when you were in Israel!" And he answered that it was noted in the agreement at the bottom that everything is subject to the approval of the Communist government. We told him that it was clear to us that they could not have come from Communist Hungary to Israel without government approval, and that we were convinced that they had something definite. He said: "That's the way it is. At this time we have no authorization and that is a problem." All of this happened after they had taken advantage of us, and we fully financed the advance meeting in Israel, including their hotel stay.

Yaakov Neeman heard the story and offered a unique proposal. He telephoned a Jew by the name of Maxwell, a multi-millionaire from London, who at the time wielded great influence in London and around the world. Yaakov called him at about three in the afternoon, and Maxwell said to him: "Let me take care of this; don't worry." In the meantime, we waited at the hotel, and at nine that evening, the Vice President of the community arrived in a depressed mood. "What have you done to me? Gevalt! I told you that everything is fine, and that we only needed an authorization which we would get. Why then did you go to the Prime Minister?" It turns out that Yaakov Neeman, with his English friend, turned to Communist Hungary's Prime Minister, and he issued a direct order to the President of the Jewish community. In terms of the time, this was an unbelievable act. Were it not for this conversation, we would not have acquired the scrolls – 142 Torah scrolls – almost all of which could be treated and repaired.

That evening, Yaakov Neeman made a call to Israel. It must be emphasized that under Communist rule there was constant monitoring of incoming and outgoing calls, and at first he was unable to place the call, because the person in charge of checking calls conducted in Hebrew was not available. In the end Yaakov managed to call his son, who was then about six years old, and he learned Mishna with him over the phone. He explained to me that he had promised his son that he would study Mishna with him every evening, and that being in Budapest doesn't change anything. Today that son is an officer in the Israel Defense Forces and a doctor, an observant Jew. This was the greatness of the man.

**Yaakov Neeman's connection to the Yeshiva**

With regard to Yeshivat Har Etzion, I arrived one day at his law firm, one of the largest in the country, seeking advice on how to build the Yeshiva without incurring unnecessary tax liabilities. He gave advice that saved the Yeshiva millions of shekels. He also connected us to the family of Marcos Katz, *z"l*. Just two months ago we sat down with the son of Marcos Katz here in the Yeshiva. We held a symposium during the Ten Days of Repentance in memory of his deceased brother. In fact, it was Yaakov Neeman who saw to it at the beginning that he would give the Yeshiva a generous contribution. Yaakov extended a helping hand to the Yeshiva and also to me personally, both in complicated legal matters connected to the Yeshiva, and to my work on behalf of Gush Etzion. With his good words, he also helped us find distinguished donors.

Yaakov Neeman was a man of high stature – Minister of Finance, Minister of Justice, and founder of one of Israel's leading law firms – but he was always modest and humble. He would always walk me out of his office in a spirit of true friendship. He did everything quietly, without publicity, without personal honor. He was an exemplary figure of a man of character, who combined Torah and humility in one place, and whose vast knowledge concerning legal matters provided him with unique abilities.

**Stolen Jewish property in Europe**

I wish to relate another story about Torah scrolls. The Jewish Museum in Prague was established by the local Jewish community before World War II. During the war years, the Nazis had a plan to turn the museum into a "Museum of an Extinct Race," to show the world whom they destroyed. They collected Jewish artifacts from all corners of the territories that they occupied in Europe, and brought them to the museum in Prague. This museum contains more than 50,000 items. I will give an example just to illustrate its size: We negotiated with the Communist government, and the director of the museum said that while the Israel Museum has 8 *parochets* (ark covers), his museum has over 2,000*.* Returning to our story, when the Czech authorities ceased to be Communist and the struggle began to divide the country into two, we fought for the Jewish property in this museum. During my talks with the authorities, it was agreed that we would come to them with a summary of what it was that we wanted from them. So I asked Yaakov Neeman to accompany me. We sat in a meeting with their Minister of Culture and Minister of Religions, I as the representative of Heichal Shlomo, Yaakov Neeman and Reuven Merchav, the newly appointed Israeli ambassador to the Czech Republic. The meeting was held in one of their luxurious palaces, and we presented our claim. The Czechs argued in their defense that it is not true that the museum was in possession of Jewish artifacts from all of Europe; it was exclusively the property of the Czech Republic. What is more, they made it clear that they had no intention of restoring the property. The Israeli ambassador announced that he was removing his diplomatic garb, and then lashed out in anger: "Have you murdered and also inherited? This is Jewish property, not yours; you cannot keep it for yourselves." Yaakov Neeman sat next to me, not knowing what to do. On the one hand, the ambassador was right, but on the other hand, nothing good would come out of what he said. One of the Czech officials responded that just as England removed antiquities from Egypt, and now they belong to England, so too the property in the museum now belongs to the Czech Republic. Yaakov Neeman stood up and began to explain: "How can you possibly compare this to what happened in Egypt? This is the property of Jews who were exterminated by the Nazis. The Nazis took over your country without your consent and against your will, and now you want to take advantage of this fact?" He spoke gently, in an attempt to secure their cooperation. Unfortunately this did not help, and the Czechs acted in a contemptible manner. They returned all of the property to the Jewish community of Prague (who were not local Jews, but Jews who had recently arrived from all different places and settled there by chance), and now they are arguing that this is their property and that they were not prepared to transfer it to Israel. Even now we continue to fight for the restoration of Jewish property that was stolen from Jews all across Europe. Unlike the previous story, this story did not end successfully. However, even here, I was witness to Yaakov Neeman's pleasant manner, his wisdom, and his willingness to help and support the Jewish people to the best of his ability.

Yaakov Neeman's virtues were intertwined. His public work was intimately connected to his love of Torah and his pleasant demeanor. He revered Torah study, and therefore always looked for what he could do on behalf of the Yeshiva. Some years he would come to study in the Yeshiva during the Ten Days of Repentance, and two of his granddaughters have studied at Migdol Oz. Yaakov Neeman was a precious, God-fearing man, someone whom you could rely on one hundred per cent, a modest and humble man, with great Jewish wisdom and tremendous respect for Torah and Torah study.

Translated by David Strauss. The original Hebrew text appears in Daf Kesher vol. 1498.

1. Prof. Neeman z"l's grandson Nitzan Roi is an alumnus of the yeshiva, Hesder Machzor 42 (2009). His granddaughter Shoham Yelineck is an alumna of Migdal Oz, Machzor 18 (2014), and his granddaughter Gal Yelineck is a current student at Migdal Oz, Machzor 20 (2016). May his family be comforted among the mourners of Tzion veYerushalayim. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)