Rabbi Moshe Grylak

A Jewish Hero in Budapest

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A few weeks ago, in beautiful Budapest on the banks of the Danube, I met a Jewish hero. His name is Rabbi David Keleti.

This special man has declared a war against a holocaust that has threatening to wipe out the remnants of Hungarian Jewry. A one-man army, he is consumed by an unquenchable, blazing sense of mission that his quiet temperament cannot conceal. He is like a lone seaman, plying his oars with relentless determination to reach his destination as winds and waves batter his little boat.

Indeed, in the past few years many have left the borders of Eretz Yisrael and the US to spread the word of Torah, to inject new life into far-flung, sleeping Jewish communities. These people, however, take their families with them when they set out to make these deserts bloom. And then there are the many single people who travel abroad to learn Torah, but they usually enter an existing framework, such as a seminary or a yeshivah. In Budapest, too, there are institutions trying to accomplish something Jewish. But Rabbi David Keleti is different. He is a soloist without a band. Far from his family, who live in Israel, he doesn't even get a stipend to support his work; his wife's paycheck from her job in Israel supports him as well as the family back home.

On his own in Budapest, he lives in a roomy apartment, surrounded by non-Jewish neighbors. All day he seeks out young Jews who might show a spark of interest in their roots, talks with them and teaches them, and in the evening he comes home to the silent walls of his apartment. No wife or child is there to greet him. There is no one with whom to share the day's experiences, no one with whom to talk out the problems that crop up like mushrooms after a rain. Only an empty refuge in the middle of a foreign city. He keeps house in a minimalist fashion, learns and prepares the next day's *shiurim*, and makes phone calls to wealthy men around the world who might extend him some aid. Every dollar provides another chance to save a Jew from the grave of assimilation. And when he's finished for the day, there's no one to say goodnight to. And so it goes, day after day. On his own.

These were my perceptions when I spent two days in his house in Budapest. Late at night, when we could converse at last, filling up the vacuum in that apartment, I asked him directly, "What do you need this for? And how can you bear living this way?"

"I know Hungarian," was his laconic reply.

"Just because you know Hungarian, you have to be here alone? You're not the only Hungarian Jew on the planet."

"What can I tell you? The fact that I know the language makes me feel obligated."

As we spoke, late into that warm Hungarian night, I learned that this isolated man, a close *talmid* of the *gaon* Rav Nachum Partzowitz, *ztz"l*, of Yeshivas Mir, enjoyed a peaceful life teaching in a yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael, immersed in Torah and *avodah*. But he had a nagging sense that Heaven was calling to him. The fact that he could speak Hungarian was a reminder of the land he had left behind when he made aliyah as a young boy. He couldn't forget Hungary, and the more Torah he learned in the Holy Land, the more that voice seemed to whisper to him the words of Queen Esther: "How can I bear to look upon the evil that is overtaking my people, and how can I bear to see the destruction of my kin?"

"Deep in my soul, I felt that Hungary was calling out to me. Something within me whispered, 'You know Hungarian. You've been *zocheh* to learn Torah. Don't you feel an obligation towards them?' I found no peace for myself in my peaceful life in the Holy Land. 'In Hungary,' said this inner voice, 'there are 90,000 Jews. Jews who are even further from Torah than east is far from west. And here I am, enjoying my life. Is this right?' my conscience badgered me. These nagging thoughts brought me to Rav Elyashiv, *shlita*, who gave me a *psak* on the spot: 'This is a matter of saving an entire *tzibbur*, a very great thing. It cannot be shirked.' And I heard the same answer from Rav Steinman, *shlita*, and from other *gedolei hador*. And that, you see, is where I get this sense of *chiyuv*, why I have to be here no matter what."

"But how can you live here for such a long time in such isolation?" I probed. "Without your family … without any large organization behind you?"

"I just told you how. I can because I must. I have a *chiyuv*. It can't be shirked."

I realized at that moment that this man is a hero. *Giborei cho'ach, osei devaro*.

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For Shabbos, we traveled out to Tokay, where the famous vineyards are. A group of young families, Rav Keleti's protégés, joined us for a Shabbaton. We had a pleasant time, spending a Jewish Sabbath with these young Jews who'd never tasted much of it before. I also did my share of talking with them, and I gave two lectures. But this was where the contrast between Rav Keleti and the other participants really stood out: many of those who took part came with their families, while he was on his own. He made Kiddush, but not for his family in Jerusalem. He cut the *lechem mishneh*, but handed out no *hamotzi* morsels to his household. His "aloneness" shone with the light of the mission he has taken upon himself.

On our return trip, my feelings of astonishment at this man's long solo performance were accompanied by wonder and vague reproof, which grew stronger when we stopped in a small town, once a Jewish *shtetl*, now *Judenrein*. The beautiful synagogue there had been restored, however, for the sake of … of what? The non-Jewish caretaker who keeps the place locked day and night opened the door for us. Much money had been spent on restoring it to its former, prewar splendor.

Outside this lovely, well-maintained building, I voice my thoughts. "Who is it for?" I say to Rav Keleti. His answer is, "For no one. Only for people like us who happen to pass through the town, people who might want to gaze at its beauty, sigh over the past that is gone, and perhaps daven Minchah here. That's all."

"No *kehillah* will ever return to this shul," I went on, the voice in my heart still clamoring to be heard. "Jews will never come to live here again. And it was nothing but nostalgia that made Jews spill money out of their pockets to bring the glory of old times back to this synagogue. It's a lifeless memorial, nothing more."

Rav David Keleti listened, and said nothing.

"I've heard that this kind of situation is found in many small villages in Hungary," I went on. "What's even more surprising is that there are wealthy Jews from Hungary who spend millions restoring dilapidated cemeteries where their forebears are buried. And with all due regard for the importance of gathering Jewish remains and bringing them to proper burial, it's much more important to gather the dried-up remains of Jews buried in the graveyard of assimilation, as you are doing, and revive them with the 'dew of Torah.' Don't you think so?"

Rav David Keleti nodded.

"And do other Jews from Hungary help you with this sacred work?"

Rav David Keleti didn't answer. The loneliness of his mission shone out all the more clearly. He merely spread out his hands in a gesture that said more than words.

I understood. We spoke no more of it, but I got the painful message. I don't want to be overly critical. It does seem, though, that Hungarian Jews around the world may not be aware of the magnitude of this last-chance opportunity, and of the *chiyuv* that rests upon them as natives of this country. Not just to take the opportunity that has fallen across their path, not just to restore the splendor of old-world synagogues, not just to preserve the dead in their graves — but to revive Jews who are spiritually dead, to build new Jewish lives out of the dry bones scattered around Budapest and other Hungarian cities. To dig the remnants of Hungarian Jewry out of their graves.

What a *zchus* this could be for them! The holy *Zohar* says that anyone who raises a Jew from a state of demerit to a state of merit, no heavenly judgment can harm him. And now, the month of *rachamim* and the Yamim Noraim are fast approaching, and we're all looking for merits to earn us a favorable judgment. Here is a special opportunity, held out on a silver platter.

No, I'm not a *schnorrer*. I don't get any percentages, *chalilah*. These are simply the painful thoughts that pass through my mind as I remember those young Jews I met, for whom Rav Keleti has managed to forge a tenuous link with Yiddishkeit, and as I think of how many more might join them… the thoughts that passed through my mind as I bade farewell to Rav David Keleti, and watched him through the window of my taxi, walking back to his apartment all alone.■

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A person who isn't becoming better is becoming worse

(Rebbe Aharon of Karlin)