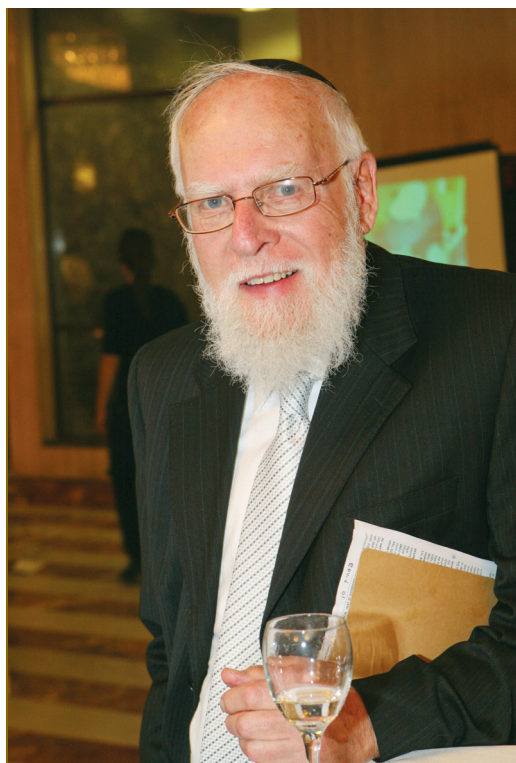


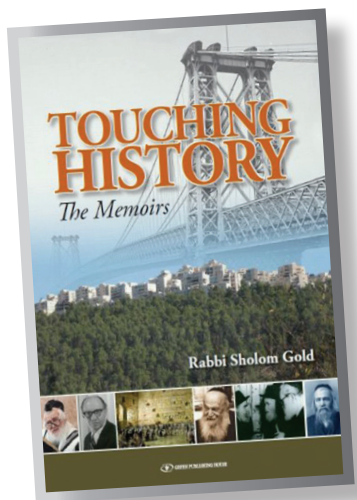
A golden view of history

Rabbi Sholom Gold tells the story of his very active, communally involved life as he swam in the historically exciting waters in which he lived

SINCE SHOLOM Gold made aliya he has served as the spiritual leader of a synagogue in Jerusalem's Har Nof neighborhood, and dean of an adult learning center. (Courtesy Gefen Publishing)



TOUCHING HISTORY
By Rabbi Sholom Gold
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• ARI ZIVOTOFSKY

Today's current events will be tomorrow's history, and while history at times is better understood and appreciated from the perspective of distance, oftentimes it is clearer when conveyed by eyewitnesses who remember it as current events and relate the emotions of the time.

An example is the significance of Jerusalem Day, which commemorates the reunification of the Holy City and the lightning victory of the Six Day War. The comfort that is felt today with the unity of the capital and the naturalness of standing at the Western Wall has erased both the sense of dread felt in the days preceding the war, and the euphoria that resulted from the victory. This has led some to a lack of appreciation of what we have, and a neglect of the celebration.

In *Touching History*, Rabbi Sholom Gold movingly portrays the desperate situation of May 1967 – not with facts and figures, but with a passionate recollection of his experiences; he then retells the stunning victory. This is but one example of the importance of hearing history told by those who experienced it and remember it.

Touching History is an aptly named book. Gold was never an elected official, nor did he

hold positions of great international importance (unless one counts such posts as the president of the Council of Young Israel Rabbis), yet as a senior, internationally respected educator and rabbinic figure, he met and interacted with some of the most important personalities in modern Jewish history, was on scene for important events, and on his own, often played a role in their unfolding.

Born in 1935 in Williamsburg, New York, Gold studied in several leading yeshivot in the US and Israel. In the 1960s, he founded and headed a yeshiva and a synagogue in Toronto; in the '70s he was the pulpit rabbi of the Young Israel of West Hempstead, New York, where during his tenure it went from a sleepy town Jewishly, to a vibrant, active community.

The Gold family made aliya in 1982 and since then, Gold has served as the spiritual leader of a synagogue in Jerusalem's Har Nof neighborhood, and dean of an adult learning center – both of which he founded – as well as being involved in multiple

other organizations and endeavors.

His work is not a history book in the classic sense; there are no references to archives and few citations of scholarly works. Although the author clearly verified his facts and included a thorough index, this book is intended to be one man's retelling of his very active, communally involved life as he swam in the historically exciting waters in which he lived.

And it makes for a great read. It includes personal details, historical recollections, a smattering of original interpretations of biblical and talmudic sources (even if they were sometimes based on a word his scholarly brother insisted was a typo) and a heavy dose of good old-fashioned Zionism, such that the reader will come away feeling good about his beliefs.

The tome does not get bogged down with too many details, and thus does not lose its flow. While names of people he interacted with are often included, it is noticeable that a conscious effort was clearly made to omit the names and details of anyone who might have been portrayed in a negative light.

Twice, we are cautioned that one gets only a single chance to make a first impression. Gold reminisces that he “arrived in Toronto... in May 1959. You only get one chance to make a first impression...” And 42 pages later he tells us, “Our first Shabbos in West Hempstead... This was my one and only opportunity to make a first impression, and I wanted to make it memorable.” In this book, no matter to where one opens it, the first impression will be positive.

The book is loaded with poignant, humorous and historical anecdotes. These include the story of Gold's visit behind the Iron Curtain, when he was separated from his travel partner and was interrogated “for the longest three-quarters of an hour of my life”; his officiating at his grandson's wedding while the groom's brother was fighting in Gaza; how he was almost thrown out of Ner Israel seminary; and how it was the aliya of a neighbor's dog that gave him the final push for his own. The many stories often involve leading personalities, political and religious, and as they are told by a master storyteller, are simply fun to read.

Mixed in with tales of historical significance, such as the building of the West Hempstead *eruv*, are personal anecdotes such as marrying off his children in pairs, with the proud father regaling the reader with tales of his wonderful kids, and changing a tire on a blistering cold and snowy night in New Jersey.

While by no means a Chabadnik, Gold had tremendous respect for the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Thus, when interviewing for rabbinic pulpits on opposite

coasts, he sent a two-page letter to the rebbe in which his leaning was clearly evident. The rebbe responded that Gold's preference was backwards and he should reconsider – advice the author followed and later realized was sage, almost prophetic.

On the other hand, when Gold was ready to actualize his life-long dream and move with his family to Israel, he wrote to the rebbe requesting his blessing. To his utter shock, the rebbe wrote back that “anybody serving in the rabbinate or as an educator who leaves the States in order to go on aliya, is a deserter from the front lines for the struggle of the survival of *Klal Yisrael* [the Nation of Israel].” Details of how Rabbi Gold worked around this and did make aliya are educational and entertaining.

The author was privileged to have interacted with many of the great religious and political leaders of recent history, and he shares vignettes of these events. For example, he describes his magical year studying in Israel in 1955-1956, well before it was the norm for Americans. He was fortunate to be invited to a Purim meal at the home of chief rabbi Yitzhak Halevi Herzog. In the middle of the meal, the chief rabbi's son, Chaim – a future president and an imposing presence in his full battle dress – entered the room. Herzog, in a warm and fatherly voice, called his son to the front of the table, and pointing at the young Gold, said, “*Chaim'l*, this young man came here from across the ocean because he wanted to learn Torah in *Eretz Yisrael*.”

Gold describes what he sensed as the love the father felt for the son, the pride in his accomplishments and at the same time, the sorrow at his having drifted from his religious roots.

In another encounter with a historical figure, he describes prime minister Menachem Begin's first official visit to the United States; Gold managed to get his entire family into the ballroom reception. He then describes how Begin caught sight of his seven-year-old son, “lifted him up in the air” and proceeded to proclaim “A Yiddish *boychickel*, a Yiddishe *yingle!*” Begin then gave him a big kiss on the cheek, like a loving grandfather.

And this, really, is how the work is written – like a grandfather warmly telling over recent Jewish history from a first-person perspective to the younger generation; it is a light read with a heavy message.

The book is an enjoyable read and difficult to put down, but it is also of crucial importance for the younger generation to hear the retelling of history from one who witnessed it, was involved in it and touched it. ■