

# The Life of a Chossid

## Reb Yitzchok Chaim Ber Vilensky

**Born:** Circa 5596\*-8\* in  
Kremenchug, Ukraine.  
**Passed Away:** 26 Kislev  
5653\* in Kremenchug.

Reb Yitzchok Chaim Ber Vilensky was born to Reb Meir and Bracha, poor shopkeepers in Kremenchug. Despite their poverty, they sent him to learn in the best *chadarim* and yeshivos in the city, and his talents stood out even at a young age. As a boy, he once fell seriously ill, and that was when one of his names was added (either Yitzchok or Chaim).

Reb Chaim Ber, as he was known, married at the age of 18 or 19, but his wife tragically passed away while giving birth. He then remarried and had three children with his second wife.<sup>1</sup>

He sold *sefarim* for some time and then went into the wine business.

Reb Chaim Ber was well-known as a tremendous *maskil* in Chassidus. When he hosted a *seudah* for a *bris*, it was well-attended by *anash*, who flocked to hear his words. The farbrengen went on until the wee hours of the morning, fueled by Reb Chaim Ber's ample stock of wine. When the last bottles on the table were finally emptied, Reb Chaim Ber asked his brother-in-law Reb Noach Sheine's to bring up a few more bottles from the wine cellar. Reb Noach

agreed on condition that he would be promised a son. They shook hands on it with the agreement of all those present. The farbrengen continued, reinvigorated, until the morning.

Reb Noach and his wife had been childless for 18 years, but not long after this farbrengen, she became pregnant. Reb Noach immediately travelled to the Rebbe Maharash and told the Rebbe the whole story. The Rebbe's holy face turned red and said, "Since this was during a *seudas mitzvah* and more than a *minyán* of Chassidim were present, I concur that you should have a living child." The son was Reb Binyomin Sheine's, who studied in Tomchei Temimim.<sup>2</sup>

The Frieddiker Rebbe related:

Reb Chaim Ber once travelled to Kishinev<sup>3</sup> to buy wine for his business. He went to the wineseller's house, but he wasn't home. Reb Chaim Ber sat down to wait and became lost in deep contemplation.

The wineseller soon arrived, and greeted Reb Chaim Ber, but received no response. This puzzled the wineseller, who was unfamiliar with the concept of such deep contemplation. The wineseller waited an hour, then two, three, four hours passed and Reb Chaim Ber was still lost in thought. When evening approached, the wineseller again greeted Reb Chaim Ber, and this time he responded. With a surprised look on his face, he asked the wineseller, "When did you come to Kremenchug? What's going on in Kishinev?" Then he asked the wineseller where he could find a drink of water, and the wineseller showed him. Reb Chaim Ber asked in surprise, "Why was it moved from its

usual place?" [Lost in thought, he had forgotten that he wasn't at home...]<sup>4</sup>

Reb Chaim Ber's davening was legendary. His *tefillos* on the *yamim noraim* left a deep impression on anyone that heard them.

Once, when he was in Lubavitch for Yom Kippur, he had to daven sitting down, as his legs weren't well at the time. The Rebbe Rashab said about his *tefillos* then,

"דער טעם פון זיין דאווענען ליגט מיר נאך עד היום אין מאגען. ער  
האט רייך גידאווענט, רייך גידאווענט"

"The savor of his davening is with me until today. He davened richly; davened richly."

When Reb Chaim Ber came to Lubavitch in 5649\* he davened in a small room. The Rebbe Rashab walked past the room in the hallway and stopped to watch him daven.

On the nights of Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah, he would become an entirely different person. Once, a guest from Minsk watched as Reb Chaim Ber danced in the street with great enthusiasm on the way from his home to shul for *hakafos*. The guest was quite taken aback and asked the people walking with Reb Chaim Ber to please stop him, as he was afraid he would be hurt.

Another time on Shemini Atzeres or Simchas Torah, he left the crowd of guests and went into a different room in the house, where he danced alone.<sup>5</sup>

The Frierdiker Rebbe related:

In Kremenchug there were several well known Chabad Chassidim known as the "Berelach," meaning that it happened that they were all named Dov or Ber: Reb Dov ben Reb Moshe—"Berel Moshe's," Reb Dov Masayov, Reb Chaim Ber Vilensky, and another three or four Doves.

They were called the "*Kremenchuker Berelach*." They were great intellectuals and had deep powerful emotions as well. They would daven at length with heart and sweet song, and they would all *chazer* Chassidus. All of the Chassidim in Kremenchug—even the Polish non-Chabad ones—were in awe of them and admired them.<sup>6</sup>

Kremenchug was known for its Chassidisher farbrengens and Reb Chaim Ber's home was always open to the Chassidim. They would gather there every Motzei Shabbos and every *yoma depagra*, as well as when a Chossid would travel through Kremenchug on the way to Lubavitch (and would usually be hosted by Reb Chaim Ber), and on the

way back, when he would *chazer Chassidus* that he had heard in Lubavitch. Of course, they would also gather there on Yom Tov. Reb Chaim Ber himself rarely spoke, but he was nonetheless the source of the lively spirit in his home, because everyone who spoke at the farbrengens would speak facing him. There was never a formal program at these farbrengens—doing so ran contrary to Reb Chaim Ber's mindset. They would discuss all sorts of topics, sing many *niggunim*, and debate concepts in Chassidus. Reb Chaim Ber wouldn't join these debates, even when they were arguing over the meaning of words Reb Chaim Ber himself had said earlier. He would just listen.

The goal of these farbrengens was to create camaraderie among the Chassidim.

When the Mittlerer Rebbe was in Kremenchug, at the time of the Alter Rebbe's passing, he said,

"מאלאראסיעער בלאטע איז קלעפיק"

"The mud in Little Russia<sup>7</sup> is sticky." (This was understood as a reference to the closeness of the Chassidim in Kremenchug.)

The extent to which the Kremenchugers valued these farbrengens can be understood from the story of Reb Nochum Noach the *shochet*. He was one of a few people with whom Reb Chaim Ber would discuss Chassidus on the way to shul on Shabbos morning. Reb Nochum Noach was busy in the butcher shop every Motzei Shabbos until midnight and would return home exhausted from his strenuous labor. But he would only stay at home long enough to change out of his dirty clothes, and then he would head straight to Reb Chaim Ber's house to join the farbrengens, which would still be underway, sometimes lasting until three in the morning.<sup>8</sup> ①

1. *Pardes Chabad* vol. 5 p. 66 and 76. Printed in *Chassidim Harishonim* vol. 2 p. 66.

2. *Migdal Oz, Maasei Avosai* section 157. Printed in *Chassidim Harishonim* vol. 2 p. 66.

3. Chisinau, Moldova.

4. *Sefer Hasichos* 5680-5687 p. 81. Printed in *Chassidim Harishonim* vol. 2 p. 69. *Pardes Chabad* vol. 5 p. 67.

5. *Pardes Chabad* vol. 5 p. 68.

6. *Igros Kodesh Admur Rayatz* vol. 2 p. 365.

7. A historical term for modern-day Belarus and Ukraine, including Kremenchug.

8. *Pardes Chabad* no. 5 p. 70.