

IN THE FOOTSTEPS
OF CHASSIDIM

The Rising Star

REB MENDEL CHEIN

BY: RABBI MENDY GREENBERG

לע"נ
ר' משה חיים בן ר' ר' מאיר הערץ ע"ה
נפ' ר"ח תמוז ה'תשפ"ד
תנ"צ ב"ה

ולזכות הורינו
ר' אברהם שמואל זוגתו מרת
רבקה מירל שיחיו שפאלטר
מרת שרה תח' גיפען
לאריכות ימים ושנים טובות
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נדפס ע"י הרה"ת ר' יצחק מאיר
וזוגתו מרת לאה ומשפחתם שיחיו
שפאלטר

The Conference of 5670

It was finally the moment of truth. After years of slow and painstaking work, the Czarist government had granted permission for the conference of all conferences; the leading Rabbonim of Russia would gather to discuss the critical questions facing Russian Jewry.

Forty-two of Russia's most famous Jewish figures gathered in Petersburg, from *maskilim* like Baron Ginzburg and Yitzchok Schneersohn to some of Russian Jewry's most venerable figures, like Reb Chaim Brisker and the Rebbe of Babroisk.

There was one whose presence electrified the entire conference. "Above all," wrote the conference's secretary Yitzchok Shneerson, "was the unearthly magnetism of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's eminent presence. He was a genuine leader—he set the tone, and was the de-facto leader of the conference."

But the rules of the conference dictated that the formal proceedings be held in Russian, a language the Rebbe Rashab preferred not to use.

How would the Rebbe Rashab speak? How would he battle the ambitions of the *maskilim* at the conference?

Not to worry—the Rebbe Rashab came armed with a secret weapon: Reb Mendel Chein.¹

The Rising Star

Reb Mendel Chein was an up-and-coming star, barely thirty years old, but he was already the Rebbe Rashab's right-hand man in the public sphere.

"Reb Mendel Chein was a Gaon in both Nigleh and Chassidus," writes Yitzchok Schneersohn. "He was so rhetorically talented that even the simplest people understood him. He was a genuine Yirei Shomayim, a kind person, and unusually humble. He was esteemed by all, Chassidim and non-Chassidim. He was the Lubavitcher Rebbe's spokesman; the Rebbe would be *mishtashe'a* with him—he practically raised him and he loved him dearly."

Reb Mendel made an indelible impression on the conference. A dynamic speaker, he used his skills well in confrontations and clashes with the *maskilim*. In Reshimos HaRabash, written by the Rebbe's grandfather Reb Boruch Shneur, we get a glimpse of the Rebbe Rashab's pride in Reb Mendel. During a *seudah*, the conversation dwelled on the fact that the Czar had listened to a speech from a certain Rov. The Rebbe Rashab commented, "The Czar should have stopped off in Niezhin—Mendel Chein would have already shown him how to give a speech."²



A GROUP PHOTO OF SOME OF THE PARTICIPANTS
AT THE CONFERENCE OF RABBONIM IN 5670.

Who Was Reb Mendel

The Chein family was one of the most respected families among Chabad Chassidim. Reb Peretz Chein was among the eminent Chassidim of the Tzemach Tzedek, and his son, Reb Dovid Tzvi (known as the Radatz) was a distinguished chossid of the Rebbe Maharash and Rebbe Rashab. He had a holy visage and regal bearing; people would repeat miracle stories in his name and cherish the moments they spent in his presence.

Reb Mendel was born to Radatz and his wife on Chol Hamoed Sukkos 5640. By six years of age, he knew Tanach by heart and was well-versed in the names, authors, and details of every sefer in his father's library. By eighteen, he was a *baki* in Shas and Rambam. His father would quip that he (Radatz) was better than his father, Reb Peretz—because “he had a son like me, but I have a son like Mendel.”

At a meeting with the Rogatchover Gaon as a young man, the Rogatchover explained a *lishitasei* (showing the through-line logic in the opinions) of two Tannaim in several *sugyos*. Reb Mendel asked, “That’s it? There’s nothing more?” The Rogatchover (known for his sharp tongue) thought for a moment and said, “*sheiget, du bist gerecht!*” Another Mishnah, in Maseches Keilim, made a similar point.³

When Radatz would come to Lubavitch from Chernigov, where he served as Rov, he would bring Reb Mendel and his brothers along. They quickly stood out; the Rebbe Rashab was *mekarev* them, and Reb Mendel would spend a lot of time with the Frieddiker Rebbe, who was the same age.

By the time he reached marriageable age, his fame had spread far and wide. Reb Chaim Brisker, searching for a hus-

band for his daughter, sent scouts to meet with the young Reb Mendel.

Many versions of the story are told. According to a common account, Reb Mendel first presented the visitors with a *pilpul*, and when they agreed with his point, he proceeded to refute (*shlog op*) the entire thing. Then he refuted the refutation, and again refuted the refutation of his refutation.

Their minds spinning, they returned to Brisk to report on their mission. When Reb Chaim saw them, he said, “*Nu*, does he know how to learn?” They enthusiastically reported that he did. “He can learn like my Velevele [later the Brisker Rov]?” Reb Chaim continued.

“Much more!” came the response.

In addition to his brilliance, he was known for his refined character. During a conversation at the Asifas Harabanim, Reb Mendel disagreed with Reb Chaim on the precise wording of a specific Rambam. As someone went to fetch a Rambam, Reb Mendel quietly excused himself to make a cup of tea. The sefer was soon opened and Reb Chaim saw that Reb Mendel was correct—but was nowhere to be found to enjoy his victory. Reb Chaim Brisker later noted that he was jealous of the Rebbe Rashab, not merely because of the brilliance of his *talmid*, but because of his refined character.

The shidduch with Reb Chaim didn’t pan out. When he was twenty-four years old, Reb Mendel married Pessia, the daughter of Reb Shabsi Berman, a wealthy chossid from Bessarabia. At the wedding, the attendees expected a memorable *drasha*, but the chosson apologized and said he was tired—would they mind postponing the *drasha* to the next day’s sheva brachos? Those present agreed on one condition: he would give a speech on a random topic, determined on

the spot by opening a sefer.

He agreed. The next day, a sefer was opened to the story of David Hamelech's passing on Shabbos. Reb Mendel immediately gave an elaborate speech on the Halachic topic of taking care of the deceased on Shabbos, and everyone listened attentively.

The Beloved Leader

The town of Niezhin was home to many wealthy Jews who owned large tobacco and pickle factories, but it was also a place of terrible poverty. When Reb Mendel arrived as Rav in 5667, he immediately began to make rounds of the wealthy homes, insisting that contributions be increased ten or sometimes twenty-fold. The donors were begrudging at first, but they ultimately came around; something about the young Rov's determination earned their respect.

Reb Mendel soon became very sought after for *dinei Torah* and *teshuvos*, especially regarding Agunos. One story reflects his *ge'onus* alongside his *Yiras Shomayim*:

A Tomim from Lubavitch happened to stay in the same room as Reb Mendel during their travels. Late at night, he saw Reb Mendel sitting on his bed murmuring for hours. He finally asked about it, and Reb Mendel quietly explained that it was his custom to review the entire Choshen Mishpat the night before he sat in a Din Torah.

Reb Mendel's daughter later related that on a regular day in Niezhin, Reb Mendel didn't have a moment's peace, but after nightfall, when the last visitors finally left, Reb Mendel would retire to his beloved Seforim. "How much he loved learning! The sweet sound of his Gemara would waft through the quiet rooms." There were notebooks filled with *teshuvos* and *chiddushei Torah* that he wrote on those long nights, but they were all ultimately lost.

On Shabbos, he would daven for hours, long after the minyan concluded. During the Asifas Harabonim, Reb Chaim Brisker noticed his lengthy davening on Shabbos morning and was puzzled that a *gaon* of his caliber would spend so much time davening instead of learning. "Why do you let him daven for so long?" he asked the Rebbe Rashab.

Can We Have Our Rav Back?

After ten years of Rabbanus, the locals wrote to the Rebbe Rashab with a complaint.

They were blessed with a Rav with incredible gifts—but he was never in town! As the Rebbe Rashab's right-hand man in public affairs, Reb Mendel was constantly traveling on the Rebbe's behalf, leaving the community bereft.



REB DOVID TZVI
CHEIN

There was always a new crisis that demanded attention. After the Asifas Harabanim, for example, when Reb Mendel was in Petersburg working on the expected presentation to the government, news came of the arrest of Mendel Beilis on the charges of a blood libel. The Rebbe Rashab immediately brought Reb Mendel into the fray. At the trial, the defense was represented by a famous lawyer along with Rabbi Yaakov Maze of Moscow, an eloquent Jewish defender, but behind the scenes was Reb Mendel, preparing the extensive sources and arguments proving the charges utterly baseless.

The letter of complaint reached the Rebbe Rashab in 5677, following the end of World War I, when it seemed that Russia would become a democracy. Reb Mendel led the Rebbe Rashab's efforts to unite the Jewish community as a coherent political group for representation in the future government.

However, the Rebbe Rashab wasn't willing to part with his prized pupil. In his letter to Niezhin, the Rebbe Rashab asks them to forgive their Rav for his absences and be supportive of his holy work on behalf of the entire Jewish people, thereby earning a participation in his critical work.

The tremendous value the Rebbe Rashab placed on Reb Mendel's work is evident in a letter written by the Friediker Rebbe to Reb Shmuel Gurary before the Asifas Harabanim, listing the potential participants and grading them according to their ability to perform in such circumstances. Some are listed as "good," some as "average," and some, "bad." The Rogatchover Gaon, Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk and Radatz, are listed as "*mefursam*, famous." But only one person — Reb Mendel Chein — is listed as "*me'od tov*, very good."



REB CHAIM
BRISKER



REB MENDEL
CHEIN

Father and Son

Reb Sender Yudasin (a *bochur* from Lubavitch) once stayed with Radatz when Reb Mendel was visiting. “Reb Mendel sat surrounded by leading Rabbonim from among the refugees,” he described. “They asked him questions from throughout Shas and Poskim, and Reb Mendel responded with a sharp and brilliant *pilpul* on the topic. A hush fell over the room, everyone hanging on to his words.

“As this was happening, Radatz approached and said, ‘There is a Midrash which states that *milchamta shel Torah* nullifies the wars of the world.’ This was in the midst of World War I. He continued: ‘But I don’t know if these *pilpulim* will end the war.’

“In mid-sentence, his son Reb Mendel fell silent. Standing there, I saw the *gaon’s* incredible *bitul hayesh* and *kibud av*. It was truly remarkable.”⁴

The Final Wish

After World War I, the Russian Civil War broke out; the Jewish community of Ukraine was decimated by vicious pogroms committed by the various armies vying for control of the region.

When one such group arrived in Niezhin thirsty for Jewish blood, Reb Mendel (accompanied by the local priest) went to beg the regional police chief to protect the Jews. Protection was not forthcoming, and the delegation left disappointed.

The pogrom began as they were returning. Seeing the danger, the priest begged Reb Mendel to hide inside the nearby

church, but Reb Mendel refused, turning instead to a Jewish hotel that was teeming with terrified townspeople.

Realizing that these might be his final moments, Reb Mendel turned to the townspeople and recited *vidui* with them, exhorting any survivors to strengthen each other in Yiddishkeit. Moments later, the soldiers entered and killed everyone in sight. It was Rosh Chodesh Elul 5679.



The news arrived in Rostov along with other tragic news: Reb Shilem, the famed Mashpia and Chozer, had also passed away. “*Shilem un Mendel*,” the Rebbe Rashab said, “*iz a klap far di velt* (a blow to the whole world).”

Chassidim relate that the Rebbe Rashab would speak of his three prized *talmidim*, saying that he would take pride in them “in this world and in the next.” The first was the Rebbe’s father, Harav Levi Yitzchok; the second was Reb Zalman Schneerson of Lodz, and the third was Reb Mendel Chein.

During the Rebbe Rashab’s final illness, he was heard asking, “Is he still here?”

The attendant asked, “Who?”

“Mendel.”

“Which Mendel?”

“Mendel *der Rov*,” came the reply.

1. This article is based on Chapter 27 of Avnei Chein, unless otherwise noted.

2. Reshimos Harabash pg. 127.

3. Oholei Lubavitch issue 1 pg. 273.

4. Halekach V’Halibuv pg. 215.