

W^A Wonder Among *the* Temimim

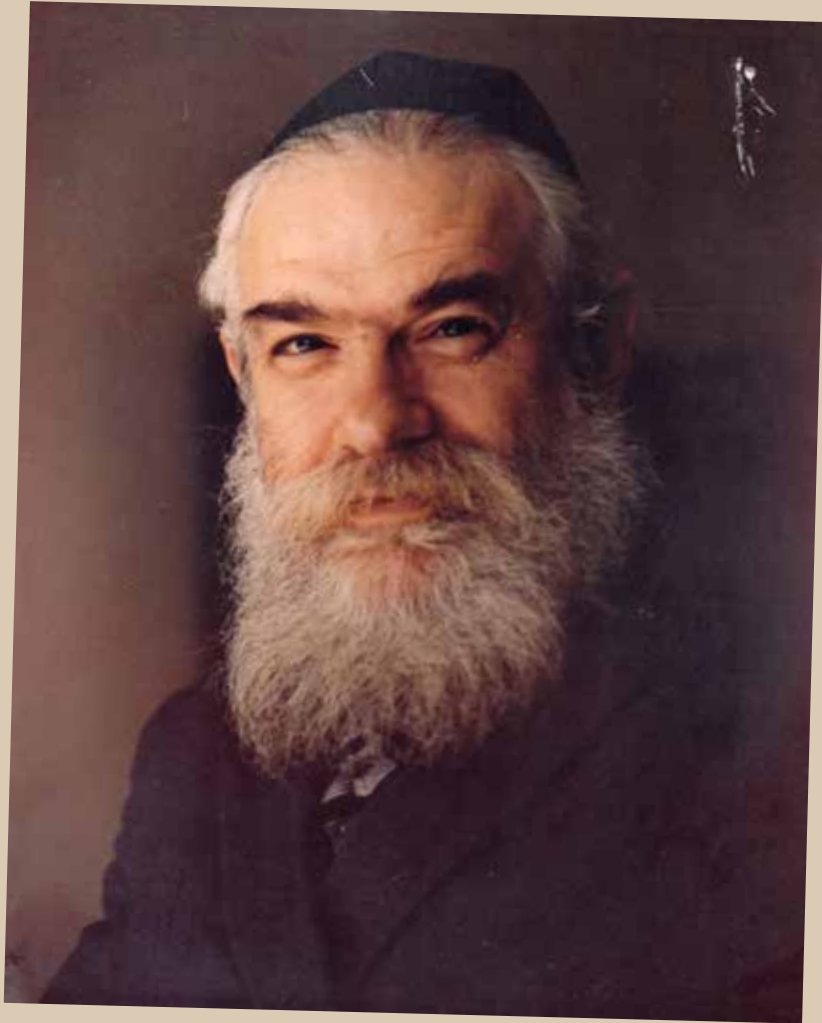
RABBI SHLOMO ZALMAN HECHT

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לזכות
הרה"ת ר' יוסף יעקב שיח' מאראס
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נדפס ע"י משפחתו שיחיו



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In today's day and age, Chabad is most closely associated with the Rebbe's empire of shluchim spread around the globe. In the Jewish world, Chicago is known as an *ir v'em b'yisroel* (great Jewish city), boasting shuls, yeshivos and *mosdos Torah*. However, just a few decades ago, both of these realities were unimaginable. Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Hecht, the first permanent shliach of the Frierdiker Rebbe and the Rebbe to Chicago, served as a pioneer on both of these frontiers, creating a ripple effect that is felt to this day.

Early Life

Born on 17 Shevat, 5677, Shlomo Zalman was raised in a home steeped in Yiddishkeit and Chassidus, a rarity in America of those days. His grandfather, Reb Hersh Meilich, a chossid of the Shinever Rav, had emigrated to the USA only after receiving his Rebbe's approval. There he became a powerhouse of Yiddishkeit. He established *shiurei Torah*, served as a *gabbai tzedakah* for the poor of Europe and *yeshivos* in Eretz Yisroel, and built a *mikvah* in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, reviving the *chassidisher minhag* of *toveling* every morning.

This *mikvah* would play an important role in the life of the Hecht brothers. When the Frierdiker Rebbe visited America in 5689, he asked to use a reliable *mikvah* before Shabbos, and was directed to Reb Hersh Meilich's Brownsville *mikvah*. Preparing for the Frierdiker Rebbe's arrival, Reb Hersh Meilich scrubbed every nook and cranny of the building, laid out new wooden planks, towels and mats, and even prepared two *boros* – hot and cold – for the Frierdiker Rebbe to choose from. Upon seeing his efforts, the Frierdiker Rebbe offered a ten-dollar bill, but Reb Hersh Meilich refused the money.

Instead, the Frierdiker Rebbe gave him a *bracha* – that his grandchildren should be his (the Frierdiker Rebbe's) chasidim, a *bracha* which was manifestly fulfilled with Shlomo Zalman and his younger brothers.

Reb Hersh's passion for Yiddishkeit was inherited by his son Shea Hecht, who was born in 5656. At the tender age of twelve, his parents sent him to *yeshiva* in Yerushalayim; at the time, America did not offer any opportunities for serious *limud haTorah*. He studied in Yerushalayim for six years, then returned to the United States, where a *shidduch* was proposed with Sorah Auster, the daughter of a passionate Galitzianer chossid. A short while later they married, and over a span of ten years, they had six boys, the oldest being Shlomo Zalman.

Like his father before him, young Shlomo Zalman left home at twelve years old to study in a *yeshiva* in Eretz Yisroel. He lived with his grandfather Reb Shea Auster, who had remarried after his wife's passing and emigrated to Eretz Yisroel. Seven years later, in 5695, Shlomo Zalman returned home and began studying in *Yeshiva Torah V'daas* in Williamsburg.



REB SHLOMO ZALMAN AS A YOUNG BOY WITH HIS MATERNAL GRANDFATHER REB SHEA'LA AUSTER.

Introduction to Chassidus

One of his fellow students, Avrohom Barnetsky, had been introduced to Chassidus through the *shiurim* of Reb Yisroel Jacobson. Avrohom was *mikarev* Shlomo Zalman to the light of Chassidus by encouraging him to join the *shiur*. Shlomo Zalman and his younger brothers Avrohom Dov and Moshe Yitzchok soon became regular visitors at the Jacobson home, where they would study Chassidus and farbreng. Before long, the entire Hecht family were dedicated Chabad Chassidim.

In a letter sent from Reb Yisroel Jacobson to the renowned chossid and *shadar* Reb Mordechai Chefetz, he writes of his joy upon seeing Shlomo Zalman *chazer a maamar Chassidus*. “[He] amazed all the listeners, reciting the *maamar* like one who is an elder and experienced. My joy knew no bounds. It made a strong impression on all the students, fostering a deeper connection and renewed commitment to the study of Chassidus.”

In the spring of 5698, while visiting America as a *shadar* of the Frierdiker Rebbe, Reb Mordechai Chefetz arranged a *shidduch* between Shlomo Zalman and Chaya Sara Jacobson, daughter of the Hechts’ beloved *mashpia* Reb Yisroel. When he got engaged, Shlomo Zalman resolved to grow a beard, something which was virtually unheard of at the time, even amongst *frum bochurim*.

His bold decision made its mark on the fledgling Jewish community of New York. In an autobiography penned by Shlomo Zalman’s brother Rabbi Avraham Dov Hecht, the author recalls people’s reactions.

“Passersby would sadly shake their heads, murmuring with marked sympathy that the ‘Hecht’s oldest son had obviously gone out of his mind.’”¹³ Nonetheless, his action was emulated by a number of fellow *bochurim* who took an example from the new *chosson*.

LETTERS

The Frierdiker Rebbe encouraged Shlomo Zalman to frequently write to his friends back home in the States, and share with them of the goings on in the Frierdiker Rebbe’s court. Shlomo Zalman did so faithfully, and these letters remain a treasure-trove of descriptions of pre-War life in Tomchei Temimim with the Frierdiker Rebbe. Below is an excerpt of these letters:

Tuesday, Parshas Mattos-Massei [5699]

Otwock, in the presence of the [Frierdiker] Rebbe *Shlita*

To my esteemed, dear brothers and friends, the Achei Temimim,
Sholom Uv’racha!

It’s been a while since I’ve last written to you, but my esteemed father-in-law certainly shares with you all the detailed news [which I write to him], of life in the Rebbe’s presence, so I only need to add a few words.

If we only knew how much the Rebbe cares about every detail of the lives of each and every one of us, especially the “Achei Temimim,” we would be *mekushar* in a completely different manner; [much greater] than we are now.

When I was in *yechidus*, [the Rebbe] asked me in great detail about each one of the Achei Temimim; not just about me but about every one of us. The Rebbe asks and wants to know in detail how each of you are doing. The problem is, I didn’t have any information to report about you.

This is a great wonder to the Rebbe *Shlita*: how is it possible that the “Achei Temimim” (who are literally like brothers, for we all have one father) withhold and don’t write often, and in detail?

In Poland, By the Rebbe

On 3 Elul, 5698, Shlomo Zalman and Chaya Sara were married. Shortly afterwards, the *chosson* informed his family that the couple would be traveling to Poland, so he could study in Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim in Otwock, a small suburb near Warsaw where the Frierdiker Rebbe and his yeshiva were located at the time.

“We were shocked by the sheer absurdity of the young couple’s plans for their future, but careful introspection revealed that they were not as unrealistic as previously conceived,” Rabbi Avrohom Dov Hecht recalled decades later.²

The move was made with the approval of the Frierdiker Rebbe, and with the full agreement of Mrs. Hecht, who later recalled that, despite the looming danger of war and the talk of a Nazi invasion, “we knew we would be safe, since we would be with the Frierdiker Rebbe.”³

Ahead of their travels, Reb Yisroel Jacobson wrote to Reb Chatche Feigin, asking him to help the young American couple acclimate to the unfamiliar terrain. Reb Chatche responded, “*Im yirtzeh Hashem*, from my end, all that is possible in terms of bringing [them] closer will not be lacking, and I will strive to influence the *hanhalas hayeshiva* to pay special attention to him.”⁴

After arriving in Otwock, Reb Shlomo Zalman was seen by the Frierdiker Rebbe on a Friday afternoon, and the Frierdiker Rebbe gave him several instructions about his stay there. (Reb Shlomo Zalman would later write that this encounter with the Frierdiker Rebbe was not an actual “*yechidus*” with all the spiritual significance that comes along with it. It was merely a chance for the Frierdiker Rebbe to see him and greet him.)

Reb Shomo Zalman later described the encounter in a letter:

“[The Frierdiker Rebbe] asked: ‘How are your friends, the Achei Temimim? How is your father-in-law?’ I answered, ‘Boruch Hashem’. He asked me, ‘How is your father?’ I answered ‘Boruch Hashem’. I mentioned that my father is in need of a *refuah shleima*, and if I remember correctly, he answered ‘Hashem will help’.

“...Then he said to me: ‘Your coming here, Shlomo Zalman, is an act of *mesirus nefesh*, coming to Poland with a wife,

especially now when times are unsettled. You must greatly value your time here; every moment. Immediately establish a *seder* in *nigleh*, and a *seder* in Chassidus.’

“He also told me to write frequently to the Achei Temimim [back home in America], for they very much want to know [about what goes on here].”⁵

Several months after the Hechts’ arrival in Otwock, they were joined by six American *bochurim* who had also come to learn in Tomchei Temimim, accompanied by Reb Yisroel Jacobson.

On their arrival, Reb Shlomo Zalman and the *bochurim* quickly realized that both the manner of *chinuch* and living conditions in “old world” Poland differed greatly from those in the United States. Avrohom Dov Hecht, one of the six *bochurim*, described how he and his friends would frequently go hungry, unwilling to eat the “apples, moldy hard cheese, and rotting vegetables” available for lunch. The *bochurim* also raised eyebrows when they pulled out baseball mitts and boxing gloves, which they had brought from the United States.

But Reb Shlomo Zalman was perturbed by something else entirely.

“My son-in-law, naturally pessimistic, was dissatisfied with his studies, feeling he hadn’t achieved what he should have in both revealed and mystical Torah knowledge,” Reb Yisroel Jacobson wrote in his memoirs.⁶

“My son-in-law later shared with me what the [Frierdiker] Rebbe told him: ‘In Lubavitch, one didn’t touch the neck.’ This is a *chassidische* expression derived from a story about a man in poor health who, on doctor’s orders, began eating nutritious foods. After consuming hearty meals throughout the day, he felt his neck, expecting to already find it thicker from all the food he had eaten.” The Frierdiker Rebbe’s point was that in Lubavitch, they didn’t look for immediate results,



REB SHLOMO ZALMAN BEFORE EMBARKING ON THE SHIP TO POLAND. FROM RIGHT TO LEFT: REB SHEA HECHT, REB SHLOMO ZALMAN HECHT, REB HERSH MEILICH HECHT AND REB YISROEL JACOBSON.



DURING HIS TIME IN OTWOCK. FROM RIGHT TO LEFT: REB CHATCHE FEIGEN, REB MOSHE LEIB RODSHTEIN AND REB SHLOMO ZALMAN HECHT.

but over time, one began to see a transformation.

In Poland, the young couple lived in close proximity to, and developed a close relationship with, *Beis Harav*, including Rebbetzin Shterna Sara. They both were *zoche* to attend the Frierdiker Rebbe's *farbrengens* and to enter *yechidus* on several occasions.

Escape from the Nazis

This spiritual bliss did not last long. In Elul of 5699, the Nazis were preparing to invade Poland, and the United States consulate warned all American citizens to return home immediately. At first, the American Chassidim stayed put, assured by the Frierdiker Rebbe that no harm would befall them. But then, as the Nazis began bombing Poland, laying waste to entire neighborhoods and killing many, the Frierdiker Rebbe gave his consent for them to travel back to the USA.

Prior to the group's departure, which took place on Friday, 17 Elul, the Frierdiker Rebbe received them for *yechidus*. He told them to travel "without confusion or emotional excitement," and gave them warm *brachos* for their travels and for the upcoming new year.

Before they walked out, one of the Americans asked, "Rebbe, what will happen if we have to be *mechalel* Shabbos?"

"The merit of the two great tzaddikim born on Chai Elul – the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe – is powerful enough to ensure you won't need to violate Shabbos," the Frierdiker Rebbe told them.

The group sped to Warsaw, where they faced one challenge after another, including the anti-Semitic American consul, an evening curfew, and hostile Poles. Throughout, even when faced with expulsion from a hotel – a dangerous situation with the Nazi bombings and the threat of Polish imprisonment – Reb Shlomo Zalman steadfastly held to the Rebbe's promise, refusing to be *mechalel* Shabbos, even though the situation could undoubtedly be classified as *pikuach nefesh*. Finally, after midnight, they found a place to stay until the end of Shabbos.

On Motzei Shabbos, the group managed to leave Poland on a train to Lithuania, and from there to Latvia. They remained in Riga until Chol Hamoed Sukkos, when they traveled to Norway, and from there to Sweden, where they spent Simchas Torah. After Yom Tov, they boarded a ship for the two week voyage to the United States.

The boat docked in New York on Friday afternoon, leaving the passengers wondering if they would make it out in time for Shabbos. Unbeknownst to them, Reb Yisroel Jacobson was waiting at the port, and he arranged for them to be in a hotel by the time Shabbos began. The *bracha* and *havtacha* of the Frierdiker Rebbe was realized once again.

Shortly after their arrival, the Frierdiker Rebbe, seeking to



THE FRIERDIKER REBBE AT A FARBRENGEN, CIRCA 5699.

rescue his voluminous library from the hands of the Nazis, registered it under the names of Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson and his son-in-law Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Hecht, both US citizens and members of Agudas Chassidei Chabad. The Frierdiker Rebbe later documented this action in a letter to Jewish historian and librarian Alexander Marx.⁷ Decades later, the Rebbe designated this letter as a crucial piece of evidence in the seforim court case, and it contributed significantly to the '*Didan Notzach*' verdict.

In America, Rabbi Hecht began initiating projects to spread Yiddishkeit to the multitude of Yidden who had made America their home. Two letters in the Frierdiker Rebbe's *Igros Kodesh* shed light on some of his activities: Giving a shiur in Young Israel, authoring a booklet about Tefillin and other *mitzvos ma'asios*⁸, and influencing couples to increase their Torah observance⁹.

In 5702, Rabbi Hecht was appointed *rov* of the Beis Yehuda shul in East Flatbush. The Frierdiker Rebbe wrote a letter to him on the occasion, addressing him as "My dear friend *Harav Hagaon*, most distinguished student, discerning in righteous matters, endowed with exemplary character, diligent *askan* engaged in spreading Torah and *yiras shomayim*, *vosik v'chossid*, *ish yirei Elokim*, *Moreinu Harav Reb Shlomo sheyichye* Hecht."¹⁰ The Frierdiker Rebbe wished him *mazal tov*, and offered his *brachos*, along with instructions to arrange *shiurei Torah*, deliver speeches, and encourage parents to send their children to the shul's Talmud Torah.

Reb Shlomo Zalman would later recount to his son, Rabbi Yossi Hecht, some of the *peulos* he undertook while serving as *rov* of this shul. Among them was walking the streets wearing a "sandwich board" – a two-sided sign – with messages about *shemiras Shabbos*. While such an action might be unthinkable for a *rov* in today's day and age, at that time *shemiras Shabbos* was an enormous challenge, and Rabbi Hecht was willing to

do whatever it took to encourage a fellow Yid to keep Shabbos. He would also take members of his congregation to 770, to see the Frierdiker Rebbe.

In Cheshvan 5703, less than a year later, came the pivotal moment that would define the rest of Rabbi Hecht's life.

Shlichus to Chicago

Before writing about Rabbi Hecht's appointment as a shlich and *rov* in Chicago, we must first describe the general situation of the Jewish community of Chicago at the time.

The city boasted several Chabad shuls, but over time, these remained Chabad mostly in name and *nusach*, while observance levels steadily declined and many moved away from Lubavitch. The last permanent Chabad *rov* at one of these shuls was Rabbi Mordechai Zevin, who served at the Anshei Lubavitch shul until his passing in 5684. After that, the Frierdiker Rebbe made numerous attempts to appoint a new Chabad *rov* for the city, but none succeeded, save for a brief period in 5693.

When the Frierdiker Rebbe arrived in America in 5700, he made it his objective to appoint Lubavitcher *rabbonim* to the Lubavitcher shuls of Chicago. In 5701, Rabbi Moshe Leib Rodshtein, the Frierdiker Rebbe's *mazkir*, arrived in America

after escaping the Nazis. Upon his arrival, he was sent by the Frierdiker Rebbe to Chicago, to lead Agudas Chabad there. Over the coming months, he exchanged letters with Reb Yisroel Jacobson about the Anshei Lubavitch shul and the possibility that Rabbi Hecht would be appointed as *rov*. The discussions continued for a year and a half.

In 5703, Anshei Lubavitch of Chicago celebrated their 50th anniversary. The Frierdiker Rebbe sent Reb Shlomo Zalman as his representative to the celebration, along with a letter introducing him to the community. The introduction was made with the hope that it might lead to Reb Shlomo Zalman's appointment as the congregation's *rov*.

Indeed, the community took a liking to Rabbi Hecht, and appointed him as their *rov*. On Motzei Shabbos, the second night of Chanukah, 5703, the Hechts traveled to Chicago to assume the role.

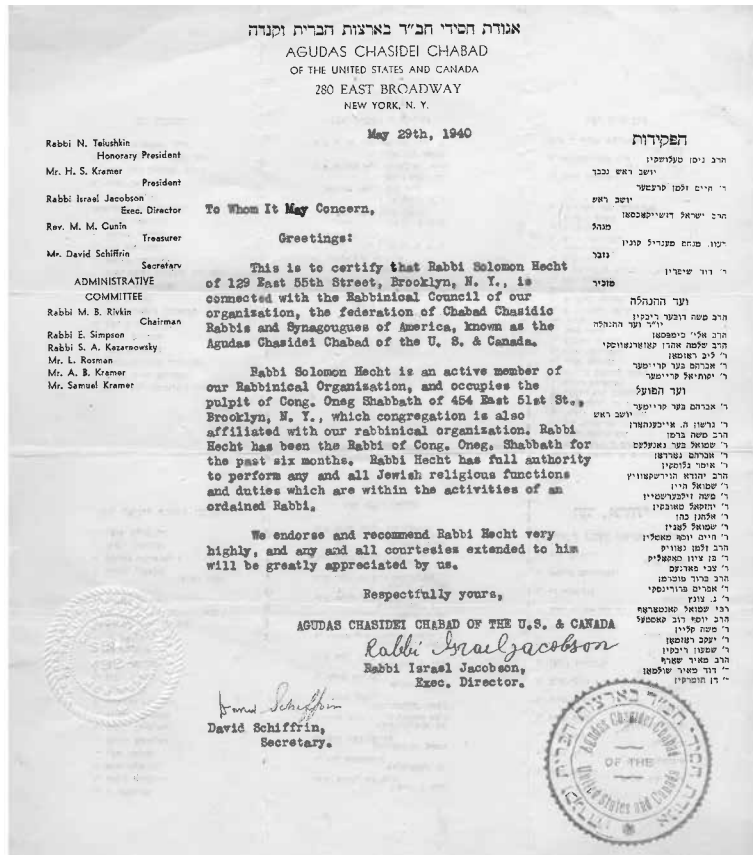
The following day, the Frierdiker Rebbe penned a letter to Rabbi Sholom Posner, who lived in Chicago at the time, asking him to be *mekarev* Rabbi Hecht "with all types of *kiruv*," and honor him "all forms of genuine respect, for he is your brother."

"...He agreed to my request to relocate and accept upon himself the rabbinical position in the aforementioned shul

A LETTER OF ENDORSEMENT FOR REB SHLOMO ZALMAN HECHT BY AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD.



REB SHLOMO ZALMAN HECHT, CIRCA EARLY 5700'S



l'mazal tov. It was a *mesiras nefesh* on his part, to leave his parents, and his wife's parents, only because we see in this, *bézas Hashem*, a great benefit for the public. For he is a wonder even among the senior *Temimim*, all the more so as someone born in this country. For this reason alone, it is appropriate to strengthen, support, and assist him.¹¹

According to family tradition, related by Rabbi Yossi Hecht, before his parents' move, some family members opposed the idea, wanting the couple to stay in New York. When a relative approached the Frieddiker Rebbe, he responded, "The first time I set my eyes upon him, I decided that he is going to be my shliach to Chicago."

Prior to their departure, the Hechts entered *yechidus*. The Frieddiker Rebbe gave Mrs. Hecht three special directives. To have household help; to teach; and to be very active in the community.¹²

Rabbi Hecht's *hachtarah* took place the day after their arrival. In a letter to his father-in-law, Reb Yisroel Jacobson, he described the event.

"Monday night there was a meeting at the shul. I was invited and I waited in the Talmud Torah building as instructed. After a while, two of the members came and led me into the shul for the meeting. There were several dozen people present, and when I entered, everyone stood up and offered *mazal tov*. Afterwards, the Rama"l [Reb Moshe Leib Rodshtein] read the *ksav harabanus*.

"On Shabbos afternoon I spoke; there were about 400 people, *rabbonim*, *shochtim*, etc. It was probably a straight miracle. A Lubavitch shul hasn't had a *rov* for 8 years, and all *rabbonim* have already tried, and it's such a fortress that no one can conquer them, but they do accept the Rebbe's *yungerman*."

The move wasn't easy. Besides for the *mesiras nefesh* mentioned by the Frieddiker Rebbe, living conditions for frum Yidden were also very different from their native New York. In an interview given decades later, Mrs. Hecht recalled that when they came to Chicago, "it was a spiritual desert."

"There was no kosher bakery or *cholon Yisroel* milk. There was a man who would go to a farm and bring back milk for us. I pasteurized it and boiled it, and the milk had to be enough for at least a week.¹³"

"Quite a Stir"

Immediately after their arrival, Rabbi Hecht embarked on his mission to strengthen Yiddishkeit in the entire Chicago. His arrival created "quite a stir," says the book 'Chicago's Rabbis,' a collection featuring brief biographies of 99 rabbis who served the city between 1847 and 1950:

"At a time when most Chicago Rabbanim were European-born and educated, Rabbi Hecht's regal appearance, full



REB SHLOMO ZALMAN HECHT WITH MR. EPHRAIM MOSCOWITZ.

red beard, and attire of a long kapota belied his American origin.

"People were pleasantly surprised when they heard Rabbi Hecht speak. Blessed with brilliant oratory talent, his beautiful speeches in both English and Yiddish brought him fame as a sought-after speaker.¹⁴"

In a 5775 interview, Ephraim Moscowitz, who was influenced by Rabbi Hecht to study in Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim in New York, and later became a pillar of Chicago's Chabad community, recalled the strong impression Rabbi Hecht made.

"Rabbi Hecht's arrival stirred much interest," he recalled. "With a full beard, wearing a long frock coat and speaking perfect Yiddish, people were surprised to learn that he was American-born. With his charisma and regal appearance, he attracted a following of young adults into his Torah classes.¹⁵"

A quick search for Rabbi Hecht's name in the Frieddiker Rebbe's *Igros Kodesh* gives us a glimpse at some of the many activities he was involved with at the time, and the *hora'os* he was given at each step.

These activities included establishing *Mesibos Shabbos* and programs for children, distributing Chabad publications, delivering speeches in shul, teaching *shiurim* in Nigleh and Chassidus, providing kosher food for Jewish soldiers, raising money for Colel Chabad in Eretz Yisroel, creating a *vaad hachinuch*, convincing the community to build a new *mikvah*, saving Yidden from missionaries, ensuring *brissin* were held at the proper time, and many others.

The Frieddiker Rebbe encouraged Rabbi Hecht to write him every week; based on the volume of letters to him in *Igros Kodesh*, we can safely assume that this instruction was kept faithfully. Many of the letters contain unique instructions and expressions about his role and how to influence American youth.

Rabbi Hecht was appointed secretary of the Chicago Merkaz Harabbonim and used his position to strengthen *kashrus* standards across the city. He was also a member of the Hebrew Parochial School's board of education and of the Vaad Hatzalah, which provided assistance to Jewish war refugees. In each position, he used his role as a springboard to enhance the observance of Torah and mitzvos.

Another project of his was the creation of the Milah Foundation of Chicago, which was founded to ensure babies received a *bris milah* at the proper time, on the eighth day from their birth. When Rabbi Hecht arrived in Chicago, many mothers opted to have their sons' *brissin* performed at their convenience, and not necessarily with proper *mohalim*; the new organization set out to change that, and saw much success.

Along with his well-attended *shiurim*, Rabbi Hecht began another, revolutionary initiative – Jewish programs on the radio. These programs were able to reach a far wider audience than a traditional shiur, and they brought many Yidden closer to Yiddishkeit.

“Rabbi Hecht had a wonderful commanding voice, and he was very inspiring. When he spoke, you listened,” Mrs. Tzivia Moscowitz recalled some six decades later. “His programs were very popular with all kinds of Jews and even non-Jews. I remember my principal telling me that his mother would listen regularly to the Yiddish programs—and she was by no means religious.”¹⁶

Additionally, Rabbi Hecht was known as an extremely principled person, unwilling to bend even on a minute detail of Halacha. “Rabbi Hecht hardly had a penny to his name, but he had a drawer full of checks that he never cashed, because they came from individuals whose businesses were open on Shabbos,” says Rabbi Meir Shimon Moscowitz, today the Regional Director of Lubavitch Chabad of Illinois.

In 5706, Reb Moshe Leib Rodshtein, who until that point had headed Agudas Chabad of Chicago, returned to New York to resume his role as the Friediker Rebbe's *mazkir*. Rabbi Hecht then assumed the role, and from that point until his passing in 5739, all Chabad activities in Chicago were under his purview, as the Rebbe made clear in a number of written and oral *ma'anos*. In one example, when an individual wrote to the Rebbe regarding establishing a Chabad House in Chicago, and requested to meet with Rabbi Hodakov on the topic, the Rebbe responded “Refer him – and likewise all who inquire similarly – to Rabbi S.Z. Hecht, with the explanation that all responsibility [for Chabad activities in Chicago] is [Rabbi Hecht's].”¹⁷

In another *ma'aneh*, written to Rabbi Daniel Moscowitz – later Head Shlichus of Illinois – in response to his letter about traveling on *shlichus* to Chicago to establish a Chabad House and expand Chabad activities in the city, the Rebbe wrote:

“As is known regarding the situation in Chicago, this depends solely on Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Hecht...”¹⁸

Forty Years of Rabbanus

Rabbi Hecht's leadership of Anshei Lubavitch was no honorary position; he actively guided the shul and the congregation to greater heights. When needed, he would roll up his sleeves and personally do what was necessary.

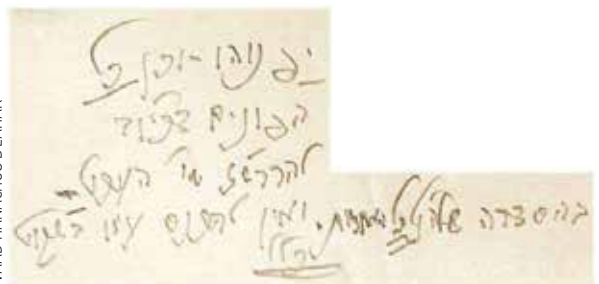
In addition to establishing shiurim and teaching Torah, Rabbi Hecht organized the delivery of crates of kosher food to those in need and to many Jewish servicemen in the U.S. Armed Forces. Before Pesach, he would personally boil vats of hot water to help people kasher their dishes and cutlery.

Once a month, on Motzei Shabbos Mevorchim, Rabbi Hecht would hold a *farbrengen*, hosted at a different home each month. These *farbrengens*, renowned for their warmth and unique style, brought many young men back to Yiddishkeit.

One humorous anecdote about these *farbrengens* was related by Roy Pinchot, a young man who lived in Skokie at the time, and was a close disciple of Rabbi Hecht.

“After a few years, all the old timers had hosted the *farbrengens*, and I felt it was our turn. I asked Rabbi Hecht if I could do something different than the usual herring with bones (which I never did learn to eat) and potatoes. Always one to go for the novel idea (as long as he trusted you) the Rabbi said, ‘Go ahead!’ That *farbrengen* at our house in Skokie featured pizza, peanuts in their shells, beer on tap, and other novelties that had never been seen at a *farbrengen*. My children filled the steins with the beer and waited on the long tables. It was an experience the Lubavitchers truly enjoyed and said they could not wait for our turn to come again. The Rabbi was exceptionally pleased – but it was really a credit to his creative and ever-young spirit.”

A notable yearly event was the Purim *farbengen* in Rabbi



THE REBBE'S MA'ANEH REFERRING THE DECISION ABOUT OPENING A CHABAD HOUSE IN CHICAGO TO REB SHLOMO ZALMAN HECHT:

יפנהו - וכן כל הפונים בכיוצא בזה להרב ר' שלמה זלמן העכט - בהסברה שלהנ"ל כל האחריות. ואין להכנס עמו בשקלא וטריא כלל.

Hecht's home. Started in 5703 by Mrs. Hecht, when her husband was in New York to spend Purim with the Friediker Rebbe, the farbrengen became an annual highlight, with large crowds showing up to participate.

"Harvey Lang...used to say that he lived a whole year from the Purim farbrengen because it was so full of *chayus*," Mrs. Hecht said in her 5754 interview.¹⁹

"Rebbetzin Hecht would prepare for the open house months in advance," recalled Mrs. Harriet Turner. "Everyone was welcome and I even remember her moving out the furniture to the backyard to make room."

As the city's demographics shifted, and the Jewish community moved away from the city center, Anshei Lubavitch relocated a number of times. In the mid-5720s, Rabbi Hecht was offered the position of *rov* at another shul, the Warsaw Bikur Cholim Congregation, and he accepted it. Nevertheless, the Rebbe instructed him to stay in touch with his former shul, and Rabbi Hecht would regularly check in on developments at Anshei Lubavitch.

Mivtzoim Pioneer

When the Rebbe initiated the early *mivtzoim* campaigns, Rabbi Hecht enthusiastically threw himself into implementing them. In the 5720s, he began encouraging young Chicago men to bring *shofar* and *Arba Minim* to local hospitals.

"I remember a hospital room with an elderly woman and her childhood friends from Eastern Europe," Roy Pinchot, one of the first men to join the initiative, said. "She looked at me carrying the *lulav* and *esrog* in my hands, her eyes opened wide, tears came to her eyes, and she said to her friends, 'Look, they still do this in America!' I knew it was all worth it."

Another *mivtza* he brought to Chicago was *Neshek*. As he did with the other *mivtzoim*, he not only participated

personally but also inspired others to help their fellow Yidden.

"He told me one day, 'the Rebbe has a campaign for Jewish women to light Shabbat candles. The Jewish patients in the local hospital also need to perform this mitzvah. You and your wife should see that they have what they need.' And thus, our Or Torah 'Shabbat Candle Program' was born at what was then called Skokie Valley Hospital," Pinchot recalls.

After the Rebbe launched *Mivtza Mezuzah*, Rabbi Hecht initiated a campaign to bring *mezuzos* to as many homes as possible. Hundreds of kosher *mezuzos* were placed on Chicago homes and defective *mezuzos* were replaced – staggering numbers for the time. When the Rebbe launched *Mivtza Tefillin*, in addition to taking part himself, Rabbi Hecht raised money for it and sent it to the Rebbe.

"We Tried to Book Him For Ten Years"

Blessed with a powerful speaking ability, Rabbi Hecht was renowned world-wide for his speeches and talks. Fluent in English, Yiddish, and Hebrew, he could reach diverse crowds, and his delivery pulled in anyone who was listening.

At the earliest Lag B'Omer parades, Reb Shlomo Zalman was the one who translated the Rebbe's words for the children into English, a job later taken over by his brother Reb Yaakov Yehuda.

Rabbi Hecht's reputation as a compelling speaker is illustrated in a personal account. The author describes her journey to Yiddishkeit, pinpointing a pivotal moment, a speech by Rabbi Hecht at her local shul.

"The rabbi whom everyone had gathered to hear, Rabbi Solomon S. Hecht, lived in Chicago. He was known as an unusually talented speaker, and the small Chassidic community of St. Paul, Minnesota, had been trying to book him for a solid ten years."²⁰



THE NORTHSIDE LOCATION OF ANSHEI LUBAVITCH IN CHICAGO.



LOCATION OF THE WARSAW BIKUR CHOLIM CONGREGATION.

The speech, delivered a few months before Rabbi Hecht's passing, set her on a path to becoming fully frum and a proud Lubavitcher.

"He was a phenomenal speaker. His *ko'ach hasbara* was just unbelievable," recalls Reb Meyer Silber, a member of Anash in Chicago.

In 1978, America was celebrating its Bicentennial, two hundred years since its declaration of independence. While visiting Philadelphia, Rabbi Hecht was approached by Rabbi Avrohom Shemtov and unceremoniously informed that he would be the main speaker at an official event marking the occasion. Despite his protest over the lack of notice, Rabbi Hecht was able to deliver a speech just a short while later. The speech, presented with hardly any preparation, was so impactful that former Vice-President and then-Senator Hubert Humphrey declared that he had never in his life heard such a good speech.

The Rebbe strongly encouraged his speaking, on occasion referring *mosdos* to him, suggesting they book him as a speaker.

"Once, before we went to Israel for a visit, the Rebbe [Shlit"a] instructed my husband to speak in every school that he could. He spoke a beautiful Hebrew," Mrs. Hecht recalled.²¹

Another such occasion was when Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim Montreal held its first *Chag Hasemicha*. "A huge event was arranged for the occasion, which was a significant milestone for the Yeshiva and community," Rabbi Yossi Hecht says. "The Rebbe asked Rabbi Leibel Kramer who they were bringing to speak at the event. Rabbi Kramer responded that they planned on bringing Rabbi Eliezer Silver, one of the leading *rabbonim* in America at the time, and a renowned speaker. The Rebbe told him, 'I have a better speaker for you: Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Hecht...'"

"On the day of the event, inclement weather significantly



REB SHLOMO ZALMAN WITH THE MAYOR OF CHICAGO MR. MICHAEL A. BILANDIC. ON THE RIGHT STANDS REB SHLOMO ZALMAN'S SUCCESSOR, REB DANIEL MOSCOWITZ.

delayed his travels. Despite arriving only towards the end of the event, he delivered a speech that left a lasting impression on everyone present for years to come."

Generosity Beyond His Means

Despite his own financial struggles, Rabbi Hecht was known as an incredible *ba'al tzedakah*, donating his own funds and raising money for *tzedakos* as well.

"At the end of his life, his financial situation was precarious, as the shul didn't have the money to pay him a salary. At times, the gas and phone companies sent him letters threatening to cut off service. Yet, after his passing, we found numerous envelopes showing he supported *mosdos* and families in Eretz Yisroel," Reb Shabsi Turner, a *mekurav* of Rabbi Hecht, recalls.

Rabbi Sholom Duchman, director of Colel Chabad, testifies that Rabbi Hecht was one of the biggest supporters of Colel Chabad in his time.

"We didn't have any money growing up, and any money my father would receive went straight to Colel Chabad," Rabbi Yossi Hecht recalls. "My father used to say, don't plan for rainy days, and you won't need to save money."

Unique Kiruv from the Rabbeim

As mentioned earlier, both the Frierdiker Rebbe and Rebbe gave personal *hora'os* to Rabbi Hecht, guiding him in his role. In addition, he was *zoche* to special *kiruvim* from both Rabbeim, with guidance in personal matters.

When Mrs. Hecht went to the hospital to give birth to Sima, her father Reb Yisroel Jacobson notified the Frierdiker Rebbe. The next morning, he updated the Frierdiker Rebbe that she had given birth earlier in the night. The Frierdiker Rebbe asked him why he hadn't informed him earlier, saying that he couldn't sleep all night... He then expressed his joy by saying, "A new grandchild was born to me!"

As noted by his father-in-law decades earlier, Rabbi Hecht had a nature of *marah shechorah*, being overly hard on himself. In addition, his life was not an easy one, with *tzaros* from his *baalei batim*, a child who was sick, another who passed away young, and severe financial constraints. The Rebbe encouraged him, telling him to rise out of his *marah shechorah*.

"I remember several times at farbrengens when the Rebbe told Reb Shlomo Zalman to stop being *marah shechorah*," *mashpia* Rabbi Shlomo Zarchi recalls.

Rabbi Yossi Hecht recalls how, after his father wrote a

despondent letter to the Rebbe, the Rebbe responded with a passage from the Zohar about positivity. Rabbi Hecht typed the quote onto an index card and displayed it where he could see it constantly.

Rabbi Yossi Shanowitz related that once, when Rabbi Hecht complained to the Rebbe about the heartache he received from some of his *baalei batim*, the Rebbe told him how his father, Harav Levi Yitzchok Schneerson, also suffered heartache from his congregants, saying, “[Your troubles] don’t compare to the troubles of my father.”

Reb Shabsi Turner recalls that on another occasion, when Rabbi Hecht expressed concern, the Rebbe reassured him by saying that nothing should be difficult in a city visited twice by the Frieddiker Rebbe.

His Final Journey

On Friday, 24 Menachem-Av, 5739, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Hecht passed away. The first thing his wife did was call 770 to notify the Rebbe, and it was later discovered that in his *tzava'ah*, Rabbi Hecht had instructed that the Rebbe be immediately informed of his passing.

With the *aron* traveling from Chicago to New York, it seemed at first that the *levaya* would not be able to take place before Shabbos. Rabbi Leibel Groner wrote a note to the Rebbe on behalf of Rabbi Y.Y. Hecht, informing the Rebbe of the development.

On this note, the Rebbe marked “?!” He then wrote to see Kesubos 103b, and Rashi’s commentary there. The Gemara states that one who passes away on Erev Shabbos “is a good sign for him.” Rashi explains that this is because the *neschama* can immediately enter into rest. The Rebbe thus expressed that the *levaya* should take place that very day.

In the end, arrangements were made to hold the *levaya* before Shabbos, although it would not have time to pass 770. The Rebbe told Rabbi Leibel Groner to tell the *hanhala* of Tomchei Temimim that it would be proper that the bochorim join the *levaya*, and to tell the *Chevra Kadisha* to request

anash in his name to do whatever they could to join as well. Later, the Rebbe told him that if they would be able to return to Crown Heights before *licht bentchen*, he would also join the *levaya*. In general, the Rebbe rarely traveled to the *beis hachaim* for a *levaya*, and after the heart attack on Shemini Atzeres a year and a half earlier the Rebbe stopped coming to almost all *levayos*, but to this *levaya*, the Rebbe went, even with Shabbos quickly approaching.

At 5:50 p.m., the Rebbe traveled to the Montefiore *beis hachaim* for the *levaya*, arriving before the *aron*. The Rebbe did not enter the *bais hachaim*, presumably not wanting to be near the Frieddiker Rebbe’s *Ohel*, as he had not planned and not prepared to be there that day.

Rabbi Nochum Kaplan, who was standing near the Rebbe, recalls the Rebbe pacing back and forth as they waited for the *aron* to arrive. “It was the only time I saw the Rebbe pacing,” he says.

When the *aron* arrived, the Rebbe sent the *mazkirim* inside the *beis hachaim* while he waited outside, watching the proceedings from outside the gate.

On his *matzeiva*, the following words are inscribed:

“Here lays *Harav Hachossid Hatomim* Reb Shlomo Zalman ben Reb Yehoshua z”l. He served in *rabbanus* for forty years. Spoke with supernal eloquence, *v’rabim heshiv ma’avon* – he brought back many from iniquity [a term generally reserved for the Rebbeim -ed]²². He provided sustenance to the needy. Devoted and loyal to *Beis Chayenu*. He passed away on Erev Shabbos Kodesh, 24 Menachem Av, 5739, and was laid to rest the same day.

“*T’hay nafsho tzrurah b’tzror hachaim.*”



SCAN THE BARCODE TO VIEW THE FULL LETTERS BY REB SHLOMO ZALMAN DESCRIBING THE GOINGS ON IN OTWOCK WITH THE FRIEDDIKER REBBE.

1. Avraham B. Hecht, *My Spiritual Journey* (Brooklyn, NY: Self-published, 2006), 42.
2. *Ibid.*, 43.
3. *Above and Beyond: An Oral History of Rebbetzin Chaya Sarah Hecht*. Lubavitch Girls High School, 5754.
4. *Zikaron L'vnei Yisroel* (Brooklyn: Kehos, 5756), 217n371.
5. Based on the letters Reb Shlomo Zalman wrote in accordance with the Frieddiker Rebbe’s instructions, published here for the first time, graciously provided by Rabbi Boruch Hertz. Scan barcode at the end for the full original letters.
6. *Zikaron L'vnei Yisroel*, 221.
7. *Igros Kodesh Admur Harayatz* volume 9, pg. 93
8. *Ibid.*, volume 5, pg. 278.
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 454.
10. *Ibid.*, vol 6, pg. 119.
11. *Ibid.*, vol 7, pg. 45.
12. *Above and Beyond.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Moshe Kushner et al., eds., *Chicago Rabbis: Visionaries, Pioneers, and Leaders 1847-1950*, (Chicago, IL: Chicago Rabbinical Council, 2014), 66.
15. Menachem Posner, “Rabbi Takes to the Radio, Offering Insight Through the Generations,” *Chabad.org*, April 13, 2015.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ma’aneh* dated 9 Iyar, 5736.
18. *Igros Kodesh* vol 31, pg. 337.
19. *Above and Beyond.*
20. Shifra Hendrie, “The Other Side of the Tapestry,” *Chabad.org*, accessed 07/26/2024.
21. *Above and Beyond.*
22. According to family tradition, the Rebbe instructed to add this phrase.