

לזכות  
החיילת בצבאות ה'  
חי' מושקא תחי'  
לרגל יום הולדתה י' תמוז

נדפס ע"י הוריה  
הרה"ת ר' מנחם מענדל וזוגתו  
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טרייטעל

# Reb Mendel 'der Chossid'

The chossid who crowned  
the Friediker Rebbe

By: Rabbi Mendy Greenberg (Twinsburg, OH)

## The Middleman's Son

Reb Menachem Mendel Kaplan was born in the city of Bobruisk in 5629. His father, Reb Yaakov Kaplan, was a devoted Lubavitcher Chossid; he had traveled to the Tzemach Tzedek and the Rebbe Maharash, and would later be a chossid of the Rebbe Rashab as well.

Living in Bobruisk, he also had a close relationship with the scion of another branch of Chabad Chassidim: Reb Shmarya Noach, the son of the Maharil of Kopust. Reb Shmarya Noach was the *rav* of the Chassidim in Bobruisk, and assumed leadership of the Kopuster Chassidim after the passing of his brother, Reb Shlomo Zalman.

The Bobruisker had a large Yeshiva, and Reb Yaakov served as a *maggid shiur*. Every Tishrei, upon Reb Yaakov's return from his visit to Lubavitch, the Bobruisker would ask him, '*vos hertz zich in Lubavitch?*' (What's doing in Lubavitch?) Reb Yaakov would share the Rebbe Rashab's *maamarim* and also the regards he had sent for the Bobruisker.<sup>1</sup>

His son, Reb Mendel, was of a very different character.

Reb Mendel and his wife ran a large store, which occupied most of his day. Nonetheless, he spent hours davening *barichus* and giving *shiurim*—he would teach Ein Yaakov after Mincha and Mishnayos after Maariv. But what exuded most from his personality was “der Chossid.”

Reb Mendel was a fiery chossid, ready to go through fire and water for his Rebbe, the Rebbe Rashab. He would often speak passionately about the importance of *hiskashrus*, and every Tishrei, as guests would start arriving in Bobruisk for Rosh Hashanah with Reb Shmarya Noach, Reb Mendel would take up his tallis and tefillin and announce that he was headed to the real Rebbe, in Lubavitch.

There wasn't, *chas v'shalom*, an element of disrespect towards the Bobruisker. Reb Mendel always maintained a close connection with him; as the local *mara d'asra*, he was even *mesader kiddushin* at his daughter's wedding to Reb Yaakov Yosef Raskin (see below). Nonetheless, to Reb Mendel, “*der Rebbe iz in Lubavitch.*”

At one point, after years of davening in the Bobruisker's shul, he decided that he had had enough; he picked up and



REB SHMARYA NOACH SCHNEERSOHN (5602–5683),  
REBBE OF THE KOPUSTER CHASSIDIM.

ABRAHAM SCHWADRON PORTRAIT COLLECTION AT THE NLI

moved to the shul of the Lubavitcher Chassidim—which was named after Reb Hillel Paritcher—and davened there for his remaining years. This was such an intense part of his identity that he became known in the city as “Reb Mendel der Chossid.”

When Zionism first began to spread, Reb Mendel’s interest was piqued. “But then,” his son Eliyahu recalled, “he decided to wait for the Rebbe’s opinion before forming his own opinion. For Rosh Hashanah 5658, he traveled to the Rebbe and returned with a firm anti-Zionist conviction. He fiercely opposed Zionism, going so far as to throw JNF pushkas out of the shul. This often earned him insults from congregants who were Zionist supporters and would put the boxes back. Yet, despite their ideological differences, even his opponents respected him for his integrity and *frumkeit*.”

Reb Mendel and his wife were known for their *hachnasas orchim*. It was said that no meal was ever eaten in their home without guests—be it a visiting *rav*, *meshulach*, or *bochur* traveling to obtain a reprieve from the military. In the Kotel Chabad records from Eretz Yisroel, Reb Mendel is listed as an “individual” donor, which meant that he made his donations directly, without going through *meshulachim*.

One aspect of his home and family that people found very amusing: His wife, Gitel, came from a wonderful



REB YAAKOV KAPLAN, FATHER OF REB MENDEL  
KAPLAN. PHOTO FROM THE YEAR 5657.

RABBI LEVI MONDSHINE

family in Slutzk—of *misnagdim*! How, people would ask, could Reb Mendel ‘der Chossid,’ the fiery Lubavitcher, have married a daughter of *misnagdim*?

“There is no greater mitzvah,” Reb Mendel would humorously respond, “than to save a *Yiddishe tochter* from the *misnagdim*.”

## The Automatic Approval

Most of the stories we know about Reb Mendel come to us through his son-in-law, Reb Yaakov Yosef Raskin, a Tomim from Lubavitch who was later one of the elder Chassidim in Eretz Yisroel. In his memoirs, Reb Yaakov Yosef recounts how his *shidduch* came to be—a story that encapsulates the character of Reb Mendel.

“It all unfolded after Rosh Hashanah 5679. As my father [Reb Bentzion Raskin] waited in line for *yechidus*, my *shidduch* was on his mind, and he voiced his concern to the Chassidim around him, asking if anyone had a suggestion.

“Standing nearby was our dear friend, Reb Yankel Maskalik ‘Zhuravitser’.<sup>2</sup> He told my father that there was a visiting chossid from Bobruisk named Reb Mendel Kaplan who had a daughter of marriageable age. My father had never met him, although they both traveled to Lubavitch for Rosh Hashanah each year. With so many guests, it was impossible to know everyone.

“Without hesitation, my father jotted down Reb Mendel’s name on the *tzetel* he had prepared for his *yechidus*. When he presented the idea to the Rebbe Rashab, the Rebbe approved and gave his *bracha*.

“When my father left *yechidus*, he ran into Reb Yankel Zhuravitser, and shared the Rebbe’s approval and *bracha*. My father asked him, ‘Where is this Reb Mendel Kaplan from Bobruisk? I’d like to meet him.’ Reb Yankel immediately introduced the two *mechutanim*.

“My father told Reb Mendel that the Rebbe had given his agreement for the *shidduch* between their children, and suggested that since Reb Mendel was already there, he should go in for *yechidus* and receive the Rebbe’s approval for his side as well. But my future father-in-law declined. ‘You already received the Rebbe’s approval. That’s enough for me. I don’t want to disturb the Rebbe with unnecessary questions.’

“Then he shook my father’s hand and said, ‘*Mazel tov, mechutan!*’”

## Changing Worlds

On Beis Nissan 5680, the Rebbe Rashab was *nistalek*. Russia was in the throes of a bloody civil war, and communication was slow and sparse. The news only reached Bobruisk in the middle of the summer.

When Reb Mendel and the Chassidim in Bobruisk heard the devastating news, everyone sat *shiva* and mourned terribly. But for Reb Mendel, that wasn’t enough. He decided that he needed to travel to Rostov, to the Friediker Rebbe.

It was a perilous decision. Jews were being attacked left and right. The anti-communists of the White Army attacked Jews for supporting communism, Ukrainian nationalists killed Jews for supporting the Soviets, the Red Army was officially against antisemitism but didn’t always manage to control its soldiers, and random criminals enjoyed the lawlessness to give free rein to their antisemitism. There weren’t even normal trains; people traveled on



REB YAAKOV YOSEF RASKIN.

trains made for cargo or animals, on irregular schedules.

Still, Reb Mendel was firm in his decision; he was determined to head to Rostov. After securing a travel permit, he bid farewell to his family and set out in the month of Elul on the twelve-hundred-kilometer journey.

The trouble started almost immediately. In the next big city, Zhlobin, Reb Mendel was searched and detained by the authorities. Why and on what cause? Nobody bothered to tell him. Somehow, news got to the Chassidim in the city, and through the efforts of the *rav*, Reb Moshe Akselrod, he was freed and allowed to continue on his journey.

About two hundred kilometers outside of Rostov, in an area controlled by Cossacks, trouble began brewing again. A group got onto the train and began harassing the Jewish passengers. They attacked them, stole all their belongings, and even killed some of them. Then, for sport, they began throwing Jews off the moving train. They grabbed Reb Mendel, dragged him to the door, and threw him out.

Reb Mendel landed on the ground with several broken ribs, unable to move. He later related that as he lay there that night, he began to feel certain signs of *gesisah* (throes of death) which he had learned in Shulchan Aruch... But in the morning, railway workers found him lying near the tracks and mercifully brought him to the nearby clinic.

At the time, the Communists had announced that letters would no longer need postage



REB MENDEL KAPLAN.

stamps. Any paper with a letter on one side and an address on the other side would be sent to its destination, albeit after many delays. Reb Mendel was able to send several letters to his family from the clinic, describing his experiences.

He wrote that the attackers weren't even Cossacks; they were college students, attacking Jews with the claim that "all Jews are communists, and if they aren't, their children are." In the clinic, despite his severe wounds and complex medical condition, the only medical attention he got was a bit of iodine spread over his wounds.

He was soon transferred to a larger hospital, and over the course of Tishrei, he miraculously began to regain his strength. Before Sukkos, he decided to finish his journey, finally arriving in Rostov for Yom Tov.

## “Rebbe”

It was a period of uncertainty regarding the *nesius*. While the Rebbe Rashab had explicitly stated in his *tza-va'ah* that the Frierdiker Rebbe should say *maamarim*, lead *Tomchei Tmimim*, and strengthen Yiddishkeit throughout Russia, the Frierdiker Rebbe refused to formally accept the *nesius*.

Throughout the entire year of *aveilus*, the Frierdiker Rebbe secluded himself in his room and, aside from de-

livering *maamarim*, refrained from acting as the Rebbe. Although the Chassidim had accepted the Frierdiker Rebbe as Rebbe, they were hesitant to say so openly in his presence. It had already been half a year since the Rebbe Rashab's *histalkus*, but nobody had ever said "Rebbe" to the Frierdiker Rebbe.

Reb Mendel could not bear the situation. During the *farbrengen* on Simchas Torah, he repeatedly addressed the Frierdiker Rebbe as "Rebbe." The Frierdiker Rebbe was visibly uncomfortable and responded, "Why are you spilling my blood?" But Reb Mendel was undeterred. Chassidim would later relate that he had 'broken the ice,' and from then on, the Frierdiker Rebbe was always addressed as Rebbe.

During that same *farbrengen*, the Frierdiker Rebbe spoke in the *sichos* with great intensity about a chossid who had sent *Panim* to him, asking for a *bracha* to "be brought to *kever Yisroel*" (to be buried as a Jew).

The Frierdiker Rebbe didn't identify him by name, but it was clear that he was speaking about Reb Mendel, who had sent several *Panim* to the Frierdiker Rebbe from the hospital, with that exact request. The severity of his wounds had made recovery seem impossible; he had asked for the Rebbe's blessing to at least merit a Jewish burial. But the Frierdiker Rebbe was very distressed by the request.

"How can a Yid write a *pidyon* asking for mercy that he merit a proper Jewish burial? A Jew should ask for life, not for burial!"

## The Shelf that Fell

One night, back in Bobruisk, something dramatic happened in Reb Mendel's home: out of nowhere, his bookshelf of *seforim* collapsed and all the *seforim* fell to the ground. It was an ominous sign. The next day, his son, Reb Chaim, in Minsk, had a dream in which his father came to him and said, "Why is no one saying *kaddish* for me?" The dream recurred three times, on three consecutive nights.

A few weeks later, the news arrived. In his weakened state, Reb Mendel had fallen ill with pneumonia and had passed away on 6 Cheshvan, just weeks after reaching the Frierdiker Rebbe for Sukkos and Simchas Torah. Rebbetzin Shterna Sarah gave an article of the Rebbe Rashab's clothing to be buried with Reb Mendel, and he was laid to rest right near the *Tziyon* of the Rebbe Rashab. Twenty

years later, when the Rebbe Rashab's Ohel was moved to the new cemetery, Reb Mendel was moved alongside him.<sup>3</sup>

## A Hidden Debt of Gratitude

In the book *Bobruisk*, Reb Mendel's son Eliyahu related the following story:

"In 1921, just a few months after my father passed away, a Jewish commissar came to our home and warned my mother that the authorities were planning to conduct a thorough search of our house. Thanks to his tip, we managed to quickly hide our valuables before the officials arrived. Ultimately, they confiscated only a few minor items.

"I knew this commissar as a hardened Communist, fiercely loyal to the regime. His unexpected act of kindness puzzled me. My curiosity got the better of me, and after much effort, I managed to arrange a meeting with him. When I pressed him to explain his actions, he revealed his secret.

"Back in 1919, when Poland controlled our city, he had been part of the underground Communist movement and was arrested. He knew that as a Communist, his fate was sealed, so he staunchly denied any association with the group. When the authorities asked if any prominent townspeople could vouch for him, he gave them my father's name.

"The authorities summoned my father and asked him if he knew the prisoner. 'Yes,' he replied. Then they asked, 'Can you confirm that he is not a Communist?' Without hesitation, my father answered, 'Yes.'

"The officer demanded that my father swear an oath, but my father explained that religious Jews do not take oaths. Instead, he was asked to sign a written statement. The officer warned him: *If it turns out you are lying, not only will he be hanged, but so will you—as a false witness.* Without hesitation, my father signed his name.

"After the Soviets took over, that same Jew—now a commissar—came to my father in his full military uniform. 'Reb Mendel,' he said, 'I will never forget what you did for me.' My father was shocked to see him in communist uniform, and responded, 'I ask only one thing from you: *bleibt a Yid*' (remain a Jew). Years later, this same man risked his own safety to warn our family of the coming raid.

"Where did my father find the courage to sign his



FINAL PHOTOGRAPH OF REB MENDEL KAPLAN, TAKEN A FEW MONTHS BEFORE HIS UNTIMELY PASSING.

name and risk his life for someone else? He later explained his reasoning: 'A true *maamin* can never deny his faith. If this person could deny his 'faith'—his Communist ideology—then clearly, he wasn't truly a Communist to begin with.'" **T**

*This article is based on "Hachossid Shelo Viter," Kfar Chabad Magazine issue 1882 by Rabbi Levi Mondshine, and "Beis Hachassidim" by Eliyahu Kaplan in Bobruisk. The memoirs of Reb Yaakov Yosef Raskin are available in the Gourarie-Reitzes Teshura, Adar 5779. Special thanks to the great-great-grandchildren of Reb Mendel, Rabbi Levi Mondshine and Rabbi Bentzion Pearson.*

1. Reb Yaakov is mentioned in Reshimos Hayoman pp. 298–9, as an eyewitness to the events surrounding the Rebbe Maharash's appointment of Reb Shmarya Noach as the *rav* of Chassidim in Bobruisk.
2. See "If I Had Twenty Yankelach," *Derher Tammuz* 5784.
3. See "Moving the Ohel," *Derher Cheshvan* 5785.