

The First Shliach to America

Reb Avraham Elye Akselrod

By: Rabbi Mendy Greenberg

לזכות החיילת בצבאות ה'
ביילא תח"י
לרגל הולדתה ר"ח אלול ה'תשפ"ה

ולזכות הוריה
מנחם מענדל וזוגתו מנוחה לאנא שיחיו

נדפס ע"י זקיניה
הרה"ת ר' יצחק ישראל וזוגתו מרת
רחל בריינא ומשפחתם שיחיו
מאגאלניק

The First Rosh Hashanah

It was the first night of Rosh Hashanah in the Nusach Ari shul in Baltimore, and the congregation was concerned. Despite the *chazan* having concluded the davening, the newly appointed rabbi hadn't moved from his place. He remained at the front of the shul, immobile, completely focused on the siddur in front of him. Tears were streaming down his face.

Something must be weighing heavily on his heart, they concluded. After some deliberation, they hit on the apparent reason: the salary they had offered him wasn't enough to

sustain his family. There was little money to go around in the Russian immigrant community of the 1920s, and rabbanim often earned a pittance. Clearly, the new rabbi was pouring out his heart to Hashem for a year of sustenance.

The good-hearted congregants weren't going to let the rabbi wallow in self-pity. Shortly after Yom Tov, the board called the rabbi to a meeting and informed him that they had decided to give him a raise. To their surprise, the rabbi didn't think he needed a raise at all.

The rabbi in question was Reb Avraham Elye Axelrod, a Tomim in Lubavitch who later immigrated to the United States. Despite moving to the new world, this devout chossid didn't change one iota; it seemed that he simply failed to notice America altogether.¹

The Earliest Rejection

This attitude began early in his life.

When he reached the age of Bar Mitzvah, Reb Avraham Elye came from his hometown of Kabilnik to enroll in Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim in Lubavitch. A short while later, a message came from his parents: they were emigrating to the United States. Young Avraham Elye faced a stark choice—go to America with his parents and give up the *ruchniyus* of Lubavitch, or remain in Lubavitch and potentially never see



REB AVROHOM ELYE
AKSELROD.

his parents again. He chose Lubavitch.

For fourteen years, Reb Avraham Elye remained ensconced in the holy atmosphere of Tomchei Temimim. He was a close pupil of the famed mashpia Reb Shmuel Gronem, and quickly became known as one of the exalted *ovdim* of the Yeshiva. He had an unusual ability for *hasmada*, and was well-liked by his peers for his good heart. “It’s difficult to describe the level of his good-heartedness,” his friend Reb Yisroel Jacobson later wrote. “He would often give his bed away to others, and needed nothing for himself.”

The Very First Shliach

During the Russian Revolution, Reb Avraham Elye married and was looking for a place to settle down, and now, the idea of moving to America appeared again.

In earlier times, the Rabbeim disapproved of Chassidim moving to America; most Chassidishe families who moved to America did so on their own accord. Reb Avraham Elye’s father, Reb Aharon Shlomo Axelrod, actually deeply regretted making the move; he wrote to his father back in Russia about the sorry state of Yiddishkeit in the new world, bemoaning the fact that it was no longer feasible for him to drag his family back to Europe.

But now, after the revolution, Reb Aharon Shlomo wrote to the Frierdiker Rebbe asking whether his son and daughter-in-law should join him in America, and this time, the Frierdiker Rebbe answered in the affirmative. In his will, the Rebbe Rashab had asked the Frierdiker Rebbe to continue the work of sending Shluchim to communities to teach Chassidus and open *chadarim*. Reb Avraham Elye would be the perfect Shliach to America.²

Reb Avraham Elye seems to have been the very first individual to come to the United States by the direct instruction of the Rabbeim. In a letter to the Chassidim in America, the Frierdiker Rebbe informed them of Reb Avraham Elye’s arrival, saying that he was a “*yirei shomayim gadol, v’oved*,” a person with great fear of heaven, who served Hashem diligently.³

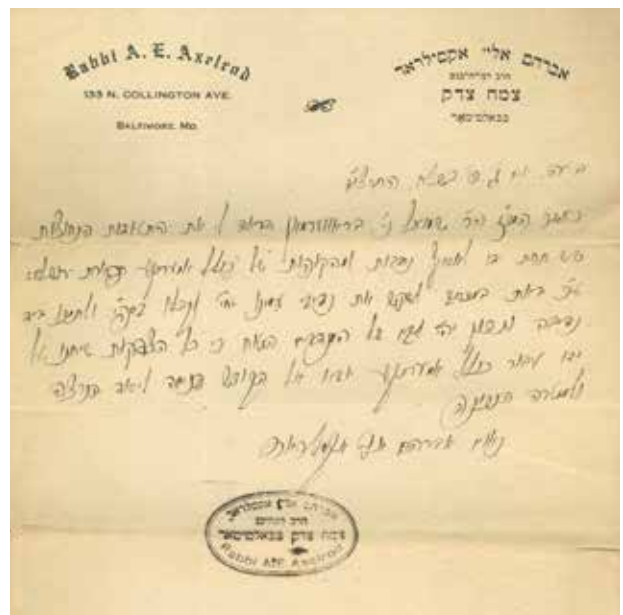
The Magnet

Upon moving to America in 5684, Reb Avraham Elye was appointed as the *rav* of the Tzemach Tzedek (Nusach Ari) shul in Baltimore, Maryland. As expected, his presence in the *goldene medineh* didn’t change him at all. Instead, he tried to bring Lubavitch with him.

From his small corner in Baltimore, he began teaching Shiurei Tanya in various locations, even in Yeshivas Ner Yisrael, which was supposedly a bastion of *misnagdim*. When Reb Avraham Elye spoke, everyone listened. It was hard to ignore the sincerity and *emeskeit* that exuded from him.



THE NUSACH ARI - TZEMACH TZEDEK SHUL IN WHICH REB AVROHOM ELYE SERVED AS RAV FOR CLOSE TO 30 YEARS.



A LETTER OF APPROBATION BY REB AVROHOM ELYE FROM THE YEAR 5691.

Suddenly, the city of Baltimore was sending “*maamad*” funds to the Frierdiker Rebbe in larger sums, and local Jews became part of the effort to release the Frierdiker Rebbe from prison and to retrieve his library from the hands of the Russian government. He seemed like a *batlan*, but when important issues arose, Reb Avraham Elye was very active in *askanus tziburis* as well.

Nonetheless, his personal behavior didn’t change. When the Frierdiker Rebbe arrived in Baltimore during his visit to

America, the Nusach Ari congregation came with a complaint. They loved their rabbi dearly and held him in the highest esteem—but would the Frierdiker Rebbe please tell his chossid to wear a shirt?!

Among Chassidim in the old world, shirts were a modern invention. They were accustomed to wearing the tzitzis out in the open, with a semi-undershirt below it. Reb Avraham Elye would appear in public in his tzitzis, and his congregants felt that it was unbecoming. They were concerned that his being so removed from normal behavior would make it difficult for their children to relate to him.

The Frierdiker Rebbe told them that they should feel lucky to have such a one-of-a-kind *rav*—but also told Reb Avraham Elye that it was time to start wearing a shirt. Of course, the chossid immediately obeyed, but to compensate, he adopted another trend-defying practice: he donned a very large yarmulka that would always peek out from behind his hat. He later explained that although it was a *chitzoniusdik* behavior, one which should have no place in the life of a Chabad Chossid, he felt that his *yetzer hara* would be specifically drawn to fight this behavior *because* it was *chitzoniusdik*—and that’s why he chose to do it.

Back in Russia, at a Simchas Torah farbrengen in Leningrad, the Frierdiker Rebbe told the Chassidim that “I can personally testify that Avraham Elye Kabilniker has never raised his eyes to see the tall buildings of New York!”⁴ On another occasion, after the Frierdiker Rebbe had mentioned a number of the great Chassidim of the time, he said, “They are all my children—but Avraham Elye surpasses them all.”

A Chassidische Farbrengen

When the Frierdiker Rebbe established Igud Hatmimim, the members gathered for a meeting. Reb Avraham Elye’s suggestion to the crowd, as recorded in the protocol, was very simple:

“Reb Avraham Elye Axelrod suggested that once a year, the Temimim should gather for a farbrengen just like the *yomei d’pagra* in Lubavitch... It was determined that the yearly gathering of Temimim would be lengthened by one day, and on that day there would be no speeches or proceedings, just a farbrengen like in Lubavitch.”

By that time, major cities like New York or Baltimore had decent numbers of Chassidim, but—much like the case among Shluchim in most cities today—they were scattered throughout the city, each with their own shlichus and role in their own neighborhood. They didn’t always make the time to get together.

In a beautiful letter published in the “Chabad Bulletin,” Reb Avraham Elye gently chastised his fellow Chassidim.

“I’m not sure what the custom is in other towns, but in

Baltimore, we used to have regular farbrengens among Anash for Melave Malka or other chassidische gatherings. Now, this custom has nearly ceased, and that’s really not good.

“I heard from Reb Gronem that the Mittlerer Rebbe said that a farbrengen of *balebatim* is like reciting Tehillim, and a farbrengen among *chassidisher yungeleit* is like learning Shaarei Teshuvah.

“Reb Gronem explained: When *chassidische balebatim* gather, they speak in praise of Hashem. This is like Tehillim. When *chassidisher yungeleit* gather, they discuss their deficiencies in their *avoda*—that is like studying Shaarei Teshuvah.

“Even if, here in America, Chassidim don’t discuss what Chassidim used to discuss back in the day, it’s still very necessary for Chassidim to meet as frequently as possible.

“Reb Zalman Havlin would share a story he heard from Reb Gershon Ber. He would often travel through a particular town where, at the chassidische shul, people would speak *devarim biteilim*. Davening would be delayed, and it led to several other issues. So, they decided to enact a rule: no more *devarim biteilim* in shul.

“After a few months, they noticed that they had become strangers to one another. Previously, when they’d gather in shul, each would share with the other how business was going and what was happening in his family. Everyone felt closely connected. But after the rule was enacted, they became shockingly distant.

“So, they canceled the rule.

“Here in America, where the few Anash in each city are scattered across town and don’t even daven together in the



THE FRIERDIKER REBBE ARRIVING AT THE TRAIN STATION IN BALTIMORE, MARYLAND.

RABBI AXELROD DIES IN HOME

Was Spiritual Leader Of Zemach Zedek Synagogue

Rabbi Abraham E. Axelrod, spiritual leader of the Zemach Zedek synagogue of Baltimore for the last twenty years, died at 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon at the Hebrew Convalescent Home after an illness of several weeks.

One of the most respected of Baltimore rabbis, Rabbi Axelrod was the only representative of the Chabad philosophy of Judaism in the city.

Born in Lithuania almost 60 years ago, he was a disciple of Rabbi Schneierson, of Lubavitz, and trained for the ministry in Europe. In Baltimore he was a widely known scholar of Judaism and conducted weekly study classes in the Tanya course of Hebrew mysticism.

Rabbi Axelrod was a past president of the Baltimore Council of Rabbis and at the time of his death was serving as a member of the board of education of the Talmudical Academy.

Daughter Survives*

He leaves one survivor, his daughter, Mrs. Ruth Gruzovski, wife of Rabbi Samson A. Gruzovski, of Brooklyn, N.Y. His wife, Hannah, died last July.

Funeral services will be conducted at 3 o'clock this afternoon from the Zemach Zedek synagogue, 2120 Fairmount avenue.

A New York city delegation of rabbis of the Chabad school will join in the services, to be attended by all rabbis of the Baltimore area.

same shul, meeting each other only rarely—it's all the more essential that they gather frequently.

“First of all, it will then become inevitable that they will *derher* a *chassidisher vort* now and then which will inspire them to good behavior. Secondly, it's crucial to maintain friendships and remain connected—that we shouldn't become strangers, Heaven forbid, from one another.”

Back in the Rebbe's Home

When the Friediker Rebbe arrived in America on Tes Adar 5700, Reb Avraham Elye was once again able to do what he loved: spend time in Lubavitch, near the Rebbe. Whenever circumstances allowed, he would come to 770, always only after receiving express permission from the Friediker Rebbe. After Yud Shevat 5710, he continued to come to the Rebbe on special occasions until his passing on 4 Adar 5712.

Whenever he would come to 770, the *bochurim* would ask him to *farbreng*, but he would rarely agree. “I came to

A CHASSIDISHE GENEIVAH

One year, the Merkos Shluchim returning from Baltimore brought the Rebbe a gift: a *bichel Chassidus*, a handwritten collection of *maamarim* which they had stolen (!) from the home of Reb Avraham Elye.

The Rebbe wasn't pleased. The Rebbe told the *bochurim* that he had known about the *bichel*; he had actually asked Reb Avraham Elye if he would gift it to the Rebbe's library (as part of the Rebbe's efforts to collect, categorize and publish *Sifrei Chassidus*) but Reb Avraham Elye had declined, saying that “you have so many *bichlach*, yet this is my only one.”

The Rebbe instructed the *bochurim* to ensure that the *bichel* was replaced in Reb Avraham Elye's home, without him noticing that it was taken and returned.

After Reb Avraham's passing, the *bichel* was gifted to the Rebbe's library.

receive, not to give,” he would tell them.

Throughout those years, he held extensive correspondence with the Rebbe (then known as Ramash) on *nigleh*, *Chassidus*, *minhagim*, and *hafatzas hamaayanos*. In those early years, when the Rebbe would write to *lomdim* even on mundane issues, the letters would always end with a few paragraphs of profound Torah, written somewhat in shorthand, with a long list of references. It was as if the Rebbe couldn't withstand the urge to share an idea in learning when the opportunity arose. The letters to Reb Avraham Elye are a very good example, replete with numerous references to all parts of the Torah.

In one letter, the Rebbe offers a beautiful explanation of Reb Avraham Elye's name. He explains that Avraham represents the highest levels of *Elokus* which are concealed, *chachma stima'ah*, while Eliyahu represents *Yesod*, which is revealed to the lower levels.⁵

It was an apt description of Reb Avraham Elye's character—a person who lived on the highest levels, but was sent down to elevate the lowest. **1**

1. This article is based on the collection about Reb Avraham Elye published in *Heichal HaBaal Shem Tov* issues 7–8, unless otherwise noted.

2. *Igros Kodesh Admur Harayatz* vol. 11, p. 17.

3. *Igros Kodesh Admur Harayatz* vol. 1, p. 306.

4. *Lubavitch V'Chayoleha* p. 170.

5. *Igros Kodesh* vol. 1, p. 45.