

IN THE **FOOTSTEPS**  
OF **CHASSIDIM**

# The Honorary Member of Beis Harav

Harav Avraham Chaim Na'eh

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לעילוי נשמת  
הרה"ח הרה"ת  
ר' מרדכי ב"ר מרדכי ע"ה  
רב קהילת חברת ש"ס -  
קראון הייטס כאן צוה ה' את הברכה  
ג' נלב"ע ביום ש"ק פ' ויקרא  
ג' ניסן ה'תש"פ

ולענ"ן  
זוגתו מרת פעסא רחל לאה  
בת ר' שניאור זלמן ע"ה  
ג' נלב"ע ביום הש"ק כ"ח תמוז ה'תשע"ז  
גורארי'  
תנ"צ'בה'

הוקדש ע"י בני משפחתם שיחיו

You encounter his name almost every time you do a mitzvah.

Which haddasim should you buy? You can choose between “*Shiurei Reb Chaim Na'eh*” or “*Shiurei Chazon Ish*.” Is your kiddush cup large enough? It depends whether you follow Reb Chaim Na'eh or the Chazon Ish. Tzitzis, Matzah, or any mitzvah that is dependent on measurement of any sort, his name—Reb Chaim Na'eh—reappears. “*Er iz doch unzer posek acharon*—for us, he is the final arbiter,” the Rebbe once told a chossid.

Here is the story of the devoted chossid, brilliant *talmid chochom*, beloved *rav*, and famous polemicist: Harav Avraham Chaim Na'eh.

*This article is based on Nodah Bashiurim, the comprehensive work chronicling the life of Reb Chaim Na'eh by Rabbi Shneur Zalman Berger.*

## The Rav with the Measuring Stick

It was a common sight in Yerushalayim in the *tofshins*: Reb Chaim Na'eh, respected Dayan and *rav*, walking around with a measuring tape, measuring people's fists, thumbs, and arms.

“So many people would come to our home,” explained Reb Chaim's daughter, “asking my father questions about the size

of a lulav, the amount one can eat on Yom Kippur, and other such topics. He realized that these complex issues needed to be simplified into terms everyone could understand.”

The Gemara gives us many measurements for mitzvos, such as the *tefach*, *amah*, and *revi'is*. These measurements are



THE SEFER 'SHIUREI  
TORAH' PUBLISHED  
BY REB AVRAHAM  
CHAIM IN 5703.

key to understanding how to observe a mitzvah, and yet they are given in ‘natural’ terms—by the size of a fist, an arm, or a barley seed. This left people in the dark on many important issues; how much, exactly, may an ill person eat on Yom Kippur? What is the real minimum to fulfill the mitzvah of matzah? How much wine is needed for kiddush?

Many of the measurements observed among Ashkenazim simply reflect a strict approach. Some even assumed that the *kezayis* or *kibeitzah* was larger than the actual olive or egg because the food of our day was—perhaps—not the same size as it once was.

However, one cannot simply be *machmir* and follow larger *shiurim*, because it is a two-way street. An incorrectly enlarged *amah*, for example, might be a *chumrah* in the case of tzitzis while causing someone to carry *daled amos* on Shabbos or place his menorah too high above street level.

Seeing the confusion, Reb Chaim Na'eh set out to convert these *shiurim* into modern measurements.

As it turned out, the *shiurim* were already converted into modern measurements—over one thousand years earlier. The Rambam—basing his rulings on the Geonim who came before him—gives very specific measurements for various *shiurim*, primarily based on the weight of the ‘*dirham*,’ a common unit of measurement in his time.

Reb Chaim set out to obtain those original weights and measure them against the various details of the *shiurim*. Was the modern *dirham* the same as in the time of the Rambam? Did the measurements match the Gemara’s descriptions?

To work out the complex calculations for his sefer, Reb Chaim needed books on coins, weights, and mathematics, so he would send his son to the National Library at Hebrew University. It was quite a sight to see a *bochur* from the Old Yishuv, with *peyos* and a long coat, walking around the university library. Once, a professor asked, “What are you doing here?” The son answered, “My father is writing a *sefer*, and I need these books.” The professor looked at the list and, amazed, asked, “Where did your father learn mathematics?”

When the book *Shiurei Torah* was finally published in 5703, it was a huge hit, and flew off the shelves. Until then, halachic measurements had been an immense challenge; finally, a leading *rav* had established standards that everyone could understand. The *sefer* was warmly endorsed by the Raavad of Yerushalayim, the Chief Rabbinate, and the leading Sephardi Chachamim.

## On The Other Hand

But, opposition arose.

First, several articles appeared in Torah journals claiming that Reb Chaim’s measurements were incorrect. There was nothing unusual about discussing matters of Halachah, so



REB AVRAHAM  
CHAIM IN HIS  
LATER YEARS.

Reb Chaim responded with articles of his own, defending his approach and showing that they were backed by the Gemara, Rambam, and Shulchan Aruch. The issue soon died down.

Then, when *Shiurei Torah* was being prepared for a second print, something more dramatic happened. The Chazon Ish publicized his own *Kuntres Shiurim*, arguing for larger measurements. This opposition was much more significant, and to defend his approach, Reb Chaim quickly added several pages to his new edition.

A short time later, a new pamphlet appeared. *Shiurin D’Oraysa*—published by a student of the Chazon Ish—claimed to disprove Reb Chaim’s approach. This *kuntres* cited Reb Chaim Na’eh directly, but strangely, many of the citations seemed to have been purposefully misconstrued. They appeared to paint Reb Chaim in a negative light, as someone who disrespected *Gedolei Yisrael* and the great *Poskim* of previous generations.

When the misrepresentations came to light, the author apologized to Reb Chaim with a shocking admission. “I learned your *sefer* during the summer *bein hazmanim*, and wrote my response at the beginning of the yeshiva *zman*, from memory, being occupied with the regular *shiurim* in the Yeshivah.”

Reb Chaim debated whether to let the matter rest, but many of his colleagues argued that if this was the final say on the matter, people would observe *shiurim* incorrectly. So, he published a pamphlet called *Shiurei Tziyon*, countering the claims. The student soon followed with *Eifas Tzedek*, and Reb Chaim countered with *Avnei Tzedek*.

Many people followed the debate, and matters became heated. Some followers of the Chazon Ish took it upon themselves to defend his honor with underhanded tactics. Some

of the *kuntreisim* were filled with misrepresentations of Reb Chaim's statements and often outright forgeries. Until that point, Chassidim and *misnagdim* usually got along in Eretz Yisroel, but now things started to go downhill.

Reb Chaim Na'eh was not the type to take these accusations lying down. A prolific writer and energetic debater, he published article after article and pamphlet after pamphlet, exposing the lies about him and showing the truth about his opinion. He demonstrated that it was the other side that was blatantly disrespectful of the great Poskim, most notably the Alter Rebbe. In some instances, he threatened to take them to Beis Din, and on several occasions, they were compelled to issue an apology.

Rabbi Tuvia Blau recalled how Reb Chaim would talk heatedly about the issue, making stinging sharp comments in his characteristically humorous way.

Reb Chaim Na'eh had a lot of support from the practical *minhagim* widely observed throughout the Jewish world. The kiddush cup of the Chafetz Chaim was smaller than shiur Chazon Ish, the Chasam Sofer's challah measurement supported Reb Chaim Na'eh's calculation, and the common *minhag* of Eretz Yisroel (and the entire Sephardi world) was exactly as Reb Chaim had written.

When the dust settled, Reb Chaim Na'eh's *shiurim* were accepted throughout the Jewish world. Some chose to follow

the Chazon Ish, but doing so only in cases of *chumrah*, and never relying on it *l'kulah*.

## Fighting With A Gematria

The *shiurim* saga, which took place in the final decade of Reb Chaim's life, was not a unique occurrence. Reb Chaim Na'eh was already famous for his sharp tongue and witty responses in Halachic arguments. For decades, he was involved in the work of the Edah Hachareidis and Agudas Yisrael, where he became well-known for his speeches against the secular Zionist establishment, always coming up with an interesting *vort* or *chiddush* to express his view.

On one occasion, Reb Chaim encountered Eliezer Ben Yehuda, the famous secular writer who reinvented the modern Hebrew language. Ben Yehuda had a complaint. The Raavad of Yerushalayim, Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, would often respond to attacks by the secular community using *gematria*. To one person, he said their name equaled "*rasha*," and to another, he said that their name corresponded to "*ocher Yisrael*." Ben Yehuda said to Reb Chaim, "Is this really a way to respond? With *gematrias*?"

Reb Chaim replied with a proof from Avraham Avinu: "When going to battle, he took 318 men with him, but Rashi says that the number is just the *gematria* of one person's name—Eliezer. So you see," Reb Chaim concluded, "you



REB AVRAHAM CHAIM (CENTER) WEARING YERUSHALMI GARB.

can really fight with a *gematria*!”

But it wasn't always fire and brimstone.

One year on Hei Iyar, Reb Chaim was davening at the *amud* when the *mispalelim* began to come over. Some whispered, “Say Hallel today,” while others told him, “Say Tachanun!”

Reb Chaim continued davening as he always did. When he reached *Sim Shalom*, he raised his voice and ended “*Bashalom*” with the familiar tune used for *Hallel*. The Zionist congregants beamed with satisfaction, but when Reb Chaim finished *Sim Shalom*, he began reciting *Ashamnu*, *Bagadnu* out loud. Soon, everyone in the minyan was smiling.

Stories abound about how Reb Chaim used his sharp wit to help resolve problems before they even developed.

In one of his official capacities, Reb Chaim was the *rav* of Shchunat Habucharim in Yerushalayim, and the *safra di-deina*, the secretary of the Beis Din of the Eidah Hachareidis, responsible for recording and issuing the *piskei dinim* of the *rabbanim*. Over time, he would sit on many of the *dinei Torah* himself, and he became very close with the Raavads of his time, Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnefeld and Rav Zelig Reuven Bengis. Later, he served on the Beis Din of Agudas Yisrael. Naturally, he heard many cases of divorce.

“I remember one time,” his daughter related, “when a couple came to see my father, accompanied by the husband's mother. The couple stayed quiet while the mother-in-law did all the talking, insisting her son wanted a divorce because his wife didn't clean or cook for him. My father listened patiently, then asked her to step outside.

“Once alone, my father asked the wife if she wanted a divorce, and she quickly said no. He asked the husband the

same question, and he said he was very happy with his wife and had no interest in divorcing her.

“My father called the mother back in and suggested a solution: the couple would remain married, but she should refrain from visiting their home for one year... That was a story everyone enjoyed retelling.

“Another time, I saw my father enter the building across the courtyard, home to a few poor families who lived in run-down basements. After a few minutes, he came back, and I couldn't help but ask what he was doing there.

“He explained that a woman there had just given birth to a baby girl. Knowing her husband's temperament, my father was worried that he might be upset that she'd given birth to another girl, as they already had several daughters and no sons. My father decided to step in before any problems arose. He went down to wish her a warm *mazal tov* and to give her a *bracha* for much *nachas*. He knew that if the husband saw that the *rav* had taken the time to visit and congratulate them, he'd feel proud and appreciate his wife instead of getting angry. My father's visit wasn't just about offering blessings—it was about preventing a difficult situation before it even began.”

## Who Was Reb Chaim Na'eh?

Reb Chaim Na'eh was born in Chevron on 13 Iyar 5650, several years after his parents immigrated to Eretz Yisroel. His father, Reb Mendel Na'eh, was one of the leading Chassidim in Eretz Yisroel, and his mother Musya was named after the Tzemach Tzedek's rebbetzin—her father Reb Berel Kalisker had been a *chozer* and *shadar* for the Tzemach Tzedek and Rebbe Maharash.

As a child in the small Chevron community, he quickly became known for his sharp mind. He began learning with his grandfather Reb Berel Kalisker and other notable Chassidim like his uncle Reb Shlomo Leib Eliezrov and Reb Shimon Menashe Chaikin, who had been a chossid of the Mittlerer Rebbe.

He soon began to attract the attention of the Sefardim and the Misnagdim as well.

The Ateres (a famous non-Chassidic *rav*) took notice when a young boy approached him during his visit to Chevron with questions on a *pilpul* he had published. He thought the young Chaim Na'eh was asking the questions on his father's behalf and tried to push him off with a simple answer, but he soon realized that the boy was speaking for himself. Impressed, he paid a special visit to the Na'eh home to discuss his answer with him.

The Sdei Chemed, Sephardi *rov* of Chevron, drew a liking to the boy, and invited him to use his famed library to prepare his bar mitzvah *drasha*. The Sdei Chemed attended the bar mitzvah and peppered the bar mitzvah boy with questions throughout his speech—all of which Reb Chaim answered



REB MENACHEM  
MENDEL NA'EH.

satisfactorily, to the delight of the impressed crowd.

The Na'eh family soon moved to Yerushalayim, and Reb Chaim enrolled first in Yeshivas Toras Chaim and then Yeshivas Ohel Moshe, both yeshivos for excelling students. He quickly became known for his broad knowledge of Shas, Poskim, and Chassidus. He was sharp and analytical and very quick on his feet, responding to arguments immediately and often with a dash of humor. Despite his wide range of knowledge, his greatest passion was for *halachah l'maaseh*, with a special focus on the Alter Rebbe's Shulchan Aruch; he would devote much of his life to those pursuits.

## The First Shlichus

When Reb Chaim was just twenty-one years old, a letter arrived from Russia. His uncle, Reb Shlomo Leib Eliezrov, had been sent by the Rebbe Rashab to Uzbekistan to establish *chadorim* and yeshivos for the Bucharian Jewish communities. When the time came for him to leave Uzbekistan, he asked his nephew to take over. With the *bracha* of the Rebbe Rashab, Reb Chaim set out for Samarkand.

The Bucharian community couldn't have been more different than Chevron and Yerushalayim. The cities of Eretz Yisroel were populated mainly by members of the Old Yishuv, people who learned Torah all day and were supported with money from Europe. The Bucharian community, on the other hand, while very devout—was profoundly unlearned.

To overcome the language barrier, Reb Chaim took a

chumash with a Bucharian translation and began learning the local tongue. Within a month, he was able to converse fluently with the locals. He began wearing Bucharian garb and adopted a Bucharian-style last name, Mendilov.

The local community became very devoted to him, its members were soon convinced that he was a holy man.

Everything he did seemed to have a miraculous touch. His very presence in Samarkand was illegal, yet somehow, he always managed to escape the attention of the police. One day, Reb Chaim ended a shiur a bit early, and—as soon as he left—police showed up and asked for everyone's papers. He had escaped by a hair's breadth. In their eyes, he was definitely a miracle-worker.

Decades later, Bucharian Jews would come to him to receive his blessing. "One Friday night," his daughter related, "a Bucharian Jew came over to us in Yerushalayim with his son and said that he owes his son to my father's *bracha*. My father had no recollection of the event, but he had apparently blessed this man with children after several years of childlessness—and a short time later his son was born."

Dealing with the youth in Samarkand, Reb Chaim noticed that bar mitzvah boys weren't well-versed in the halachos of tefillin. So, he embarked on the first of his many publishing projects. He composed a practical work of Hilchos Tefillin called Chanoch Lanaar, and had it translated to Bucharian. He was already so well-versed in Bucharian that he did half the translation himself. There was no possibility to publish the work in Samarkand, so Reb Chaim undertook the long journey to Warsaw, Poland, to bring his first work to fruition.

At the time, it seemed that his role among Bucharian Jewry had come to an end—but decades later, when Reb Chaim moved his family of ten souls into a small two-room apartment in the Bukharan Quarter, his relationship with the community was rekindled.

There too, in the Bukharan Quarter of Yerushalayim, Reb Chaim worked hard to raise the level of mitzvah observance and developed a close connection with the youth. He established a youth minyan in one shul and a new shiur in another, always finding a way to assist and encourage the locals to strengthen their Yiddishkeit. Some of the youth grew to be major figures; Rav Mordechai Eliyahu, Rav Ben Zion Abba Shaul, and Rav Ovadia Yosef would all later recall Reb Chaim Na'eh, the venerable Chabad Chossid, as one of their beloved mentors. ①

TO BE CONTINUED...



REB AVRAHAM CHAIM DRESSED IN BUCHARIAN GARB DURING HIS TIME IN SAMARKAND.