

# The Final Oasis

The story of Nevel and the last  
public Yeshiva in Russia

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לע"נ  
הרה"ת ר' שלום דובער בן הרה"ת ר' יעקב  
יוסף ע"ה ראסקין נלב"ע ח"י חשון ה'תשע"ד  
וזוגתו מרת רבקה בת הרה"ת ר' אברהם  
ישעי" ע"ה נלב"ע י"א סיון ה'תשע"ד  
תנ"צב"ה

נדבת משפחתם שיחיו

“The Yidden of Nevel, men and women alike, were overjoyed that a *Tomchei Temimim* Yeshiva had established itself in their city. They saw it as a privilege and a blessing to host a stronghold of Torah. Deep down, though, they knew this reality wouldn't last forever. ‘The day will come,’ they understood, ‘when we will pay dearly for the ‘sin’ of providing a haven for Torah in Soviet Russia.’ But no one allowed themselves to dwell on the future. For now, they were simply grateful that Torah was being learned openly, and—on Shabbos—Chassidus was being studied in every corner of the city” (From the memoirs of Reb Shmaryahu

(Shmerel) Sasonkin).

In the first year of the Frierdiker Rebbe's *nesius*, as the Bolshevik menace began to bear down on Tomchei Temimim, the Frierdiker Rebbe sent a group of *bochurim* to establish a branch of the Yeshiva in Nevel. The twenty younger *bochurim* learned under Reb Yehuda Eber, and the older *bochurim* studied under Reb Pesach Freidkin.

For several years, the small group of *bochurim* quietly continued their studies. Meanwhile, the Soviet oppression was growing worse, and the main branch of Tomchei Temimim, located in Kharkov, was shut down by the authorities. At that point, the Frierdiker Rebbe came to a decision: The entire Yeshiva would move to Nevel.



THE TOWN OF NEVEL IN THE YEAR 1867.

## The Legendary Town

The town of Nevel was legendary in the annals of Chabad history as a warm, chassidishe community with a deep *hiskashrus* to the Rabbeim. The Rebbe Rashab was known to have said, “A butcher in Nevel is more dear to me than a *maskil* from Kremenchug.” Generations earlier, when a group of young Ovdim arrived

in Lubavitch from Nevel, the Mittlerer Rebbe played on the words of *Pesukei Dezimra* and said, “*Haleluhu B’Nevel...*”

Reb Yehoshua (Heishke) Dubravsky wrote the following description of the town he had known in his youth:

“A Yid from Nevel—a ‘*Neveler*’—always carried a distinct mark. You could recognize one instantly—the *Neveler* way of speaking, the *Neveler* personality, the unmistakable *Neveler* type. It was ingrained in them through and through.

“But it wasn’t just their dialect that set them apart. The ‘*Neveler* spirit’ ran deep, shaping their very being—their character, temperament, and unique outlook on life. It influenced not just their personalities but the entire rhythm of the *ruchniusdiker* life of the town.

“*Neveler* Chassidim belonged to the ‘*freilach chassidarnye*,’ ‘the joyous stream’ of Chassidus. A *Neveler* was always in high spirits, loved a good *farbrengen*, and especially cherished the moment of *l’chaim*—or as they called it in Nevel, ‘*arayngisn a koise*.”

But along with their lively nature came a *Chassidische* innocence, a pure sincerity.

“I knew a few of the butchers from Nevel,” recalled Reb Yehoshua, “and one stands out in my memory. I remember him davening, swaying quietly. Every so often, he would briefly emerge from his quiet corner and turn to the *chazan*: ‘Please, slow down a little. For simple Jews like me, the words don’t come out so fast.’”

## Tomchei Temimim in Nevel

When the Frierdiker Rebbe decided to send the entire Tomchei Temimim to Nevel, the townspeople were overjoyed. They utterly ignored the danger, immediately embracing the *bochurim* and helping them get settled.

“It’s important to remember,” writes Reb Shmerel Sasonkin, “that this was Soviet Russia. The moment a Yeshiva was opened, there were immediate informers. The organizers would be summoned for intense interrogations by the KGB, to find out who was running the Yeshiva, the names of the teachers, the *mashgichim*, and it was a literal matter of life and death.

“But Nevel was different. None of this mattered there. There were no restrictions on the number of *bochurim*, and learning took place openly, just like in the good old days, as if nothing had changed.”



REB HEISHKE  
DUBRAVSKY.

## The Beis Midrash L’Rabbanim

Seeing that all the *yeshivos* in Russia had been closed down, the Frierdiker Rebbe realized that there would soon be a dire lack of *rabbanim* and *shochtim*. So, he also established a special *Beis Midrash L’Rabbanim* in Nevel, where *talmidim* were able to learn *semicha* and *shechita*, under the tutelage of Reb Shmuel Levitin.

Many *talmidim* who knew how to learn Gemara but lacked mastery in halacha came to enroll in the Beis Midrash, and from within its walls emerged *rabbanim*, *poskim*, and *shochtim*, who spread out to various cities and towns, wherever circumstances allowed.

“Those were dark and difficult times for the Jewish people,” writes Reb Shmerel Sasonkin. “*Yeshivos* and Torah institutions across the country were shut down; the few remaining *batei midrash* operated under constant threat of closure. The Yeshiva in Nevel stood as a lone ember, the only one of its kind in the vast Soviet empire. To the [Frierdiker] Rebbe, this Yeshiva was as precious as the apple of his eye. The Yeshiva—along with its *Beis Midrash* for *rabbanim*—served as a lighthouse for all of Russia.

“During my visit to Nevel [to bring his son Moshe to the Yeshiva], as I spent time in the Yeshiva and its *Beis Midrash*, I completely forgot that we were in Soviet Russia, under the iron grip of the *Yevseksiya*. For those moments, it felt just like being in Lubavitch.

“Nevel had another distinct advantage: it wasn’t too far from Leningrad, where the [Frierdiker] Rebbe resided—just an overnight train ride away. This allowed the Yeshiva to function under the Rebbe’s direct super-

vision, an immeasurable advantage in those dark times.

“I returned to Nevel for Pesach and found the Yeshiva in all its glory. The *bochurim* were learning openly, and the *Beis Midrash L’Rabbanim* was running well. Many of the *bochurim* were dear friends and acquaintances of mine, and we rejoiced at seeing each other.

“Reb Itche *Masmid* also came to Nevel for Pesach. He refused to spend *Yom Tov* anywhere unfamiliar, choosing only his own home where he could uphold every *hiddur* to the fullest. We conducted the Seder together, and my two sons, who were learning in Nevel at the time, were there as well.

“Pesach in Nevel, together with Reb Itche, was an elevating experience. If in Kharkov I had felt as though I was in *Gan Eden HaTachton*, in Nevel I felt as though I had entered *Gan Eden HaElyon* itself!”<sup>1</sup>

## Rabbi Zevin’s Description

Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin,<sup>2</sup> who was very active in the underground network in Russia at the time, wrote of his own amazement at the reality in Nevel:

“Nevel stood as the central hub for the vast underground network of *Tomchei Temimim yeshivos* that branched out from it. It was like a lone tree in the wilderness, untouched by the storms that raged around it. The world was in upheaval—old structures were

collapsing, new ideologies were taking hold, values were shifting, and moral boundaries were crumbling. But Nevel? Nevel paid no attention to any of it. She was too busy, too absorbed within the four walls of halacha.

“New winds were sweeping across the country—Torah was fading from Jewish life, replaced by new ‘ideals’ and radical philosophies. But in Nevel, nothing had changed. She continued along her well-trodden path, dismissing all these so-called innovations as insignificant, not worth sacrificing even a single letter of Torah.

“The Soviet regime issued endless decrees and bans, cracking down on the education of young children. The *Yevseksiya* waged its war against Torah with ruthless determination, seeking to crush all remnants of Torah learning. But Nevel? Nevel paid them no mind. Neither the decrees nor those who imposed them were of any concern. ‘Nonsense,’ they thought. ‘Because of these *shkotzim*, Jews should stop learning Torah? Let them do their thing, and we’ll do ours. Let the *shkotzim* waste their time on foolishness, and we’ll keep learning Torah.’

“It sounds unbelievable, but this was the reality: stepping into Nevel, you would forget that you were in Soviet Russia. The air was filled with the sweet sound of Torah—children in *cheder*, *bochurim* in *yeshiva*, young men training for *rabbanus*. From one end of Nevel to the other, in *shuls*, on the streets, and in homes, *Hakol Kol Yaakov* rang strong and clear.

“A small town, barely a thousand families—and yet, it had fifteen full-fledged *cheder* schools for young children. Not just afternoon learning, not a token introduction to the *Aleph-Beis* before moving on to the general school system, never to study Torah again. Not small underground groups of two or three children just to be ‘*yotze*.’ These were real *chadarim*—places where children spent the entire day immersed in learning, progressing from *Aleph-Beis* to reading Hebrew, then to Torah, Mishnah, and Gemara. Ten, twelve, even fifteen students in a class... truly a wonder!”

## The End of an Era

For several years, the Yeshiva continued uninterrupted, but finally, the Communists came to Nevel too.

A Jewish journalist wrote the following description of Nevel’s final stand against the Communists. He first describes the *yeshivos*, with some minor inaccuracies, and then tells the story of their end:



REB SHMARYAHU SASONKIN'S IMAGE ON THE COVER OF HIS RECENTLY REPRINTED MEMOIR, 'ZICHRONOSAI'.



A PHOTO OF CHASSIDISHER CHILDREN WITH THEIR FATHER IN NEVEL IN 5684. REB PERETZ (BEN REB MEIR SIMCHA) CHEIN AND HIS CHILDREN (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) BERKE, AVROHOM AHARON, DOVID LEIB, AND FEIVESH CHEIN.



REB YEHUDA EBER.

“In 5682, young *bochurim* from various towns arrived in Nevel, following the [Friediker] Rebbe’s directive, and began studying Torah in the city’s largest shul, *Yunger Shul*. The Bolsheviks immediately arrested them, releasing them only later during the NEP (New Economic Policy) period. But these arrests did nothing to weaken the resolve of the Yidden—on the contrary, their determination was only strengthened. A letter arrived from the Rebbe: ‘*My heart tells me that Nevel is a Makom Torah.*’ Inspired by this, the Rebbe’s devoted Chassidim opened a *yeshiva ketana* for boys ages 13 to 16 in the *Beis Midrash HaGadol*, under the leadership of Reb Refoel Kahan.

“At the time, the *yeshiva gedola* in Lubavitch was on the verge of closure. As a result, part of the *yeshiva* was transferred to Nevel in 5684 or 5685. In the smaller *Beis Midrash*, *bochurim* ages 16 to 20 learned under Reb Yechezkel, grandson of the Mashpia Reb Gershon Ber (likely referring to Reb Chatche Feigin). Reb Yeshaya, known as ‘the bagel baker,’ served as *gabbai* and administrator. Around eighty *bochurim* learned there consistently. Dedicated individuals such as Reb Meir Simcha Chein, Reb Zalman Schneerson, and Reb Yehuda Eber played an active role.

“All of this took place openly. Among the *Yevseksiya*, a rumor spread that the Rebbe must have received some sort of high-level permit to operate—otherwise, why would the authorities allow it? And so, they hesitated to interfere.

“Every Jew who arrived in Nevel, religious or secular, could immediately feel its uniquely Jewish atmo-

sphere. At a time of relentless persecution and hatred, the *yeshiva* in Nevel stood like a refreshing oasis in the desert. Once, the Rov of Novozivkov visited Nevel. So moved by what he saw, he said, ‘*It feels as if I have become young again—my very soul has been revived.*’

“But then, the tightening grip of Stalinism began to take hold. In early 1929, a young Jewish Communist, barely 22 years old, arrived in Nevel with direct orders to shut down all *yeshivos*. On 14 Kislev that year, the decree was carried out. Accompanied by *Yevseksiya* agents, Soviet officers stormed the *yeshivos*, seized the *batei midrash*, and arrested the leaders. Reb Shmuel Levitin was sentenced to five years in prison, and the *bochurim* were ordered to disperse. The persecution was fierce and relentless.

“At the time, the Communist newspaper *Velikiye Luki* proudly declared: ‘*Nevel has ceased to be ‘Schneersonist’ and has now become Soviet.*’ But today, we respond with confidence: The *Yevseksiya* and the Communists have long since vanished. Their names and their legacy have been erased from history. And yet, the *Schneersonists*—the Chassidim of the Rebbe—are alive and well, thriving as ever. And so it will remain, forever.”<sup>3</sup> **T**

1. Zichronosai Chapter 24.
2. See “Gaon and Chossid,” Derher Sivan 5779.
3. This article is based on the collection in Maskilim V’Ovdim, Kahn-Lantzintzky Teshura, Adar II 5779.