

A FIR UND II



BY:
RABBI
SHOLOM
POSNER

לזכות
עליזה תחי' שוחאט
לרגל יום הולדתה - כ"ב טבת

ולזכות הוריה
הרה"ת ר' שלום דוב בער
וזוגתו מרת חיה מושקא
ולזכות אחיותיה ברכה ליפשא,
שיינדל, ואחיה מנחם מענדל שיחיו

The name Reb Itche Masmid conjures images of holiness, solemnity, and otherworldly asceticism.

Yet Reb Itche der Masmid was very much a real person who lived in this world in an era not too distant from our own. His dedication to *avoda* in its fullest sense, whilst serving as a mentor for the common folk, serves as a symbol of uncompromising values of Chassidus in the modern world.

Books have been written about him but still have not succeeded in properly portraying his greatness. We shall not attempt to limit him in this brief article. We will try to provide just a glimpse into the biography, persona, and character of this enormous figure.¹

REB ITCHE MASMID



THE LEGENDARY CHOSSID
AND SHADAR,
REB ITCHE
MASMID

YITZCHOK'S MERIT

Our story begins with another Itche, a *yungerman* from the Chabad settlements of the Cherson region in Ukraine. Reb Itche was a physical laborer, earning his living from a tannery, but was a deep soul. His spiritual development was, to a large extent, a result of the uplifting annual visits of Reb Hillel Paritcher.

Reb Hillel—a renowned Talmid Chacham, *mehader b'mitzvos*, and an exceptionally holy individual—served as a “*shadar*” (emissary) for the Mitteler Rebbe and, later, the Tzemach Tzedek. Several months a year, he would make his rounds in the various villages and settlements of Cherson, teaching Chassidus, raising funds, and bringing a boost of holiness wherever he went.

On 11 Av 5624, Reb Hillel passed away while in the middle of his yearly travels. His passing not only plunged his students into mourning but also left them in discomfort. Before his passing, Reb Hillel had taken out enormous loans for his purposes of *pidyon shivuyim* and—his fundraising trip cut short—did not leave the necessary funds to repay them.

Reb Itche was part of a group of Reb Hillel's students who took this matter personally. Taking responsibility for their *mashpia's* honor, they publicized that they would personally reimburse Reb Hillel's creditors.

To produce more income, Reb Itche exerted himself beyond his body's ability, and his health deteriorated rapidly. Within a short time, he passed away, leaving behind his wife, Elka, who was expecting their first child.

Tragedy mounted when Elka passed away in childbirth. The baby girl was adopted by Elka's brother, Harav Avraham Dovid Lavut, whom he named Ita Elka. Elka after the baby's mother, and Ita as a remembrance for her father (Itche - Ita).

However, the story has a happy ending after all. For, as Chassidim later pointed out, Reb Itche's sacrifice for his *mashpia's* honor was ultimately rewarded. Ita Elka would have a son, bearing the name of her father, whose greatness was reminiscent of Reb Hillel himself.²

THE MASMID

Reb Itche was born to Reb Shlomo Mendel and Elka Horowitz in 5644 [according to his official documents]. His family was one of the first who came to the Chabad settlement “Nahar-Tov” in the city Brezhnagavato (Berezhnevate), where Reb Itche was born.

It's not clear when he received his nickname “Masmid,” but it could have applied to him at virtually every point of his life. Already at seven years old, he took to learning Gemara with great enthusiasm, often late into the night.

Itche burned with the desire to study in a yeshiva beyond his small village, but his parents would not hear of it. His father—a *melamed* in the village—was delighted by his son's enthusiasm for learning, but could not bring himself to allow Itche to travel far from home. After becoming Bar Mitzvah, Itche took his future into his own hands. Without consulting his family, he braved the long journey to the city of Kremenchuk by himself.

After his risky flight to Kremenchuk—sneaking onto trains and hiding under the seats—he set out to find a worthy yeshiva. At first, he was deemed too young to be accepted into the yeshiva and was left to fend for himself. Selling his only possessions (his tefillin!), he sustained himself and studied diligently in the *beis midrash*. Upon seeing Itche's remarkable dedication and capability, the yeshiva agreed to register him.

Four years were spent in that Kremenchuker yeshiva until Itche moved elsewhere. He learned in various *yeshivos*, including a chassidische yeshiva in Putchep. Throughout this time, Itche succeeded exceptionally in his learning. *Frumkeit* as well was never an issue. Itche avoided negative influences and refused to engage with *bochurim* of questionable *yiras Shamayim*.

Yet, something was missing. In that era, before the founding of Tomchei Temimim, the prevalent attitude among *bochurim* was one of haughtiness and competition. Itche himself was absorbed in a culture where academics reigned supreme.

An episode that captures Itche's life before learning in Lubavitch—both his amazing qualities and the culture of which he was a part—is the story of his *semicha*. Itche was in fierce competition to receive *semicha* before a friend of his. With his strong physical stamina, Itche was able



ELKA HOROWITZ,
MOTHER OF REB
ITCHE DER MASMID.
SHE PASSED
AWAY IN 5713.



THE SHUL IN THE SETTLEMENT OF NAHAR TOV.

to study intensely without resting. He was rewarded when, at just 17 years old, he received his certificate. His friend, however, was of weaker build, and could not keep up with the intensity of their competition. The strain he exerted on himself made him ill, and he ultimately passed away.³

TRANSFORMATION

The revolution that was Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim appeared at the end of 5657, and the number of students it attracted gradually grew each year. Reb Itche began receiving regular recommendations to join the yeshiva, which provided an intense regimen of studying *nigleh* within an atmosphere of Chassidus and heightened *yiras shamayaim*.

Reb Itche heeded their advice, and at the end of 5661⁴ became a student of Tomchei Temimim. There, he found what he was looking for; his fellow students, in turn, were impressed by his *hasmada*.

The daylight hours did not contain enough time for Reb Itche to complete his desired 20 hours of Torah study. While the *zal* was transformed into a dormitory—beds pulled out from the wall to replace the benches and tables—Reb Itche would continue studying by the light of a small lamp (so as not to disturb the sleep of his friends). Hovering over a *shtender*, he would immerse his feet in cold water to force his exhausted body awake. (He continued this practice throughout his life.)

Even Reb Itche had his limits. One night, he fell into a deep sleep while still standing at his *shtender*. Reb Itche

toppled over together with his *shtender*, *sefer*, and lamp, onto the nearest sleeping *bochur*. In general, his friends, worried for his health, would look for an opportunity when he was dozing off. They would quietly extinguish his lamp and ease him into bed.

It seems, however, that Reb Itche was not fully informed about the nature of his new yeshiva. He spent the hours allocated to study Chassidus to continue studying Gemara, and saw *farbrengens* as a convenience—allowing him to study at a table in the corner of the well-lit *zal*. Apparently, this behavior was tolerated in those early years of the yeshiva.

Seeing that he had no intention of following the yeshiva's schedule, his friends would try to persuade him to at least learn a little Chassidus. Reb Itche's ready response was, "If there will be a 25th hour in the day, I will spend that hour learning Chassidus."

One night he broke. While learning, he picked up some words being said at the nearby *farbrengen*. Intrigued, he picked up his head to listen more. Being emotionally inclined by nature, he was deeply moved by the words of Chassidus shared by the elder Chassidim.

Wanting to "drown" himself for having "wasted" all his time for no reason, Reb Itche threw himself entirely into the study and practice of Chassidus. Now, when his friends would try to persuade him to learn some *nigleh* his ready response was, "If there will be a 25th hour in the day, I will spend that hour learning *nigleh*." Eventually, Reb Itche found his way to "the middle path," studying both *nigleh* and Chassidus.

With his newfound depth, he began to stand out not only



RECONSTRUCTED ZAL OF
TOMCHEI TMIMIM IN LUBAVITCH.

in his *hasmada*, but also in his *avoda*; his *chumros* and *hiddurim* in halacha, his abstention of all bodily pleasures, regular fasting, and—most notably—lengthy and emotional davening. Significantly, Reb Itche was devoted to the value of *bittul* and humility. He now held his hard-earned *semicha* in contempt, and tore it to shreds.

Tomchei Temimim's effect on him was so powerful that the Rebbe Rashab saw the yeshiva as worthwhile if only for Reb Itche and Reb Dovid Horodoker. When the Rebbe Rashab would go to "Datche," Reb Itche was among the ten *bochurim* chosen to be the *minyán*. The Rebbe Rashab also did not advise him against wearing a *gartel* before marriage; hence, Reb Itche was the only *bochur* in Tomchei Temimim who wore a *gartel*.⁵

A WORTHY PARTNER

On one of Reb Asher Nikolayever's trips to Lubavitch, he took notice of Reb Itche. Seeing that he was an unusually impressive *bochur*, Reb Asher took care to arrange a *shidduch* for him with someone who would value his spiritual and slightly ascetic way of life.



REB ITCHE IN HIS YOUNGER YEARS.

LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD

In the town of Dobrinka, near Nikolayev, lived a Chernobeler chossid named Reb Shmuel Litutchi. Reb Asher thought that his daughter Fruma would be an appropriate match.

After looking into Reb Itche's character, the Litutchis were divided on the proposal. Although they knew that no better prospect could be found regarding *yiras shamayim*, some expressed concern about his ability to support his family. The matter was left for Fruma herself

to determine. She responded confidently: “I prefer a life of holiness rather than a life of modernity and comfort.”

They were married around the year 5665 and, for a short time, were supported by the Litutchis in Dobrinka. Upon the Rebbe Rashab’s instruction, Reb Itche opened a branch of Tomchei Temimim in Dobrinka, which he oversaw. Every day, after a long Shacharis, he would proceed to give a *shiur* in Gemara to the older *bochurim*. He also served as an unofficial *mashpia* for the *balle-batim*, and would teach Chassidus to them every Shabbos.⁶

RAMMENN

At this time, another yeshiva was being established in a Ukrainian town called Rammenn (Romny). Its wealthy Rosh Hakohol—a pious Lubliner chossid—set out to create a yeshiva to serve the town’s boys, all at his own expense.

At this point, the name Tomchei Temimim was already synonymous with Torah and *avoda*, removed from external influences. Rammenn also had a sizable Chabad population, and even the Rosh Hakohol maintained a relationship with the Rebbe Rashab. It seems that for these reasons, the community wished for their yeshiva to be run in the spirit of Lubavitch.

Thus, at the beginning of the year 5667, the Rebbe Rashab transferred Reb Itche to head this new yeshiva, teaching *nigleh* and Chassidus.

Apparently, the Rosh Hakohol was not too excited about the Lubavitch influence in his yeshiva after all. As a result, he hardly paid Reb Itche a salary. Into this utter poverty, all of Reb Itche’s children were born.

Undeterred, Reb Itche carried out his mission with tremendous dedication. His schedule was strikingly similar to the one he led in Dobrinka. After his lengthy davening, he would give a *shiur* in Gemara to the *bochurim*, and at night, a *shiur* in Chassidus.

The remarkable clarity with which he explained Chassidus attracted many ‘guests’ to those *shiurim*. Under his tutelage, many *bochurim* received their *chassidische chinuch* and later graduated to the yeshiva in Lubavitch. In addition, *bochurim* who wished to be accepted to Tomchei Temimim were regularly referred to Rammenn to study under Reb Itche. Some *bochurim* already learning in Lubavitch were transferred to Rammenn as well.

Eventually, some *balle-batim*, who could no longer bear to see Reb Itche’s destitution, established a small fund to supplement his meager salary. Reb Itche described this development in a letter to his father-in-law: “They provide



THE TOWN OF RAMMENN.



REB TZEMACH
GUREVITCH,
ELDEST SON
OF REB ITCHE.

LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD

me with all my needs, and the situation has improved...” In reality, their contribution still left Reb Itche a poor man, but he saw himself undeserving of even this slight betterment.⁷

A SHINING LIGHT

When the yeshiva in Rammenn closed at the very end of 5677, Reb Itche moved his family to Cherson. Soon after moving, Reb Itche took his oldest son, Tzemach, and traveled to Rostov to be with the Rebbe Rashab for Rosh Hashanah.

They were of the relatively few who were present for Tishrei. Since the outbreak of World War I, life in Russia grew increasingly difficult, and travel was a luxury that few could afford, both monetarily and due to the practical risks involved.

In *yechidus*, the Rebbe Rashab gave Reb Itche a task that would solve this issue. If Chassidim could not travel to the Rebbe to hear Chassidus, an agent of the Rebbe

would bring Chassidus to them. From this point on, Reb Itche served as a “*shadar*” and his salary was covered by the Rebbe Rashab.

To succeed as a *shadar* in disseminating Chassidus, Reb Itche was the most natural fit. His enthusiasm and deep understanding in Chassidus paired with his warm, kind, and prestigious demeanor, attracted the masses. However, the other responsibility associated with a *shadar*—raising money—was not within Reb Itche’s realm. He would focus on *chazzering* Chassidus, and accompanying Chassidim would collect *maamad* (donations to the Rebbe’s personal fund).

Reb Itche had always been a master at explaining deep concepts. Now that he was tasked with making Chassidus relatable to everyone—requiring the use of simple Yiddish vernacular—Reb Itche carefully studied the few *maamarim* that were written in such terminology. He quickly trained himself to accurately translate Chassidus in this manner. He also would come up with new *meshalim* to bring Chassidus to their level, and confirmed their accuracy with the Rebbe Rashab.

Despite his care in maintaining accuracy, his *chazara* was far from monotonous. Reb Itche would choose a *maamar* which he had thought through and absorbed in his davening. The result was that he would speak loudly and with deep enthusiasm. His talent was enhanced by a *bracha* from the Rebbe Rashab to teach Chassidus in a smooth and lucid manner.

Ultimately, it was not what Reb Itche said that made him so impressive; it was who he was. When this frail chossid with a shining face, seemingly from a bygone time, showed up in a city, his presence was felt by all inhabitants. He could be found every day passionately davening. When he sat down each night to *chazzer* Chassidus, often leading to a *farbrengen*, souls were drawn.

The Frierdiker Rebbe advised him, “*Itche, m’darf keinem nit arainemen. M’darfleichten bei zich dem or ha’emes oif azoy fil az yenner zol oich tzugetzoygen veren*” (Itche, we don’t need to lure anyone in. We must shine the light of *emes* within ourselves to the extent that others should be attracted as well).⁸

THE HARD TIMES

The quality of life in Russia was in precipitous decline. The war coincided with and was followed by disease, starvation, and violent power struggles—accompanied by deadly pogroms. Reb Itche’s own wife succumbed to the typhus epidemic on 14 Sivan 5679. Regulations

surrounding the contagious disease required complete quarantine. Reb Itche could not even bury his wife.⁹

Despite the ongoing violence against Jews, Reb Itche attempted a trip to Rostov to see the Rebbe Rashab in the winter of 5680. Perhaps due to the danger of being a noticeable Jew on the speeding train, Reb Itche opted out of standing in the packed car, instead standing between the cars. When the train made its first stop, Reb Itche lost his balance and fell. He was injured and unable to travel for several months.

News came from Rostov that the Rebbe Rashab was not well; this only increased Reb Itche’s desire to travel there, but it was impossible. When news reached Reb Itche in the middle of Iyar that the Rebbe Rashab had recovered, he was at first elated, “*Azoy azoy, der Rebbe is gezunt gevoren!*” But for some reason, he was not at rest with this information. He decided to make the 80-kilometer journey to Nikolayev, to consult with Reb Elya Chaim Althoiz—a dear friend of *Beis Harav* who surely had further information.

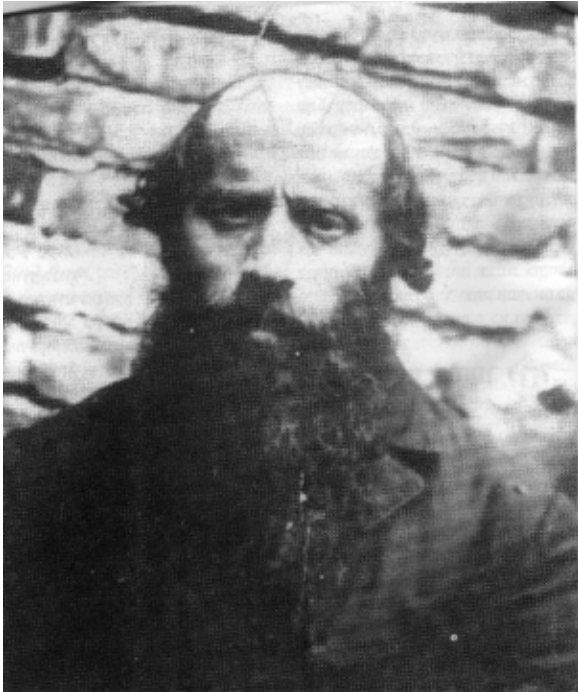
When he arrived at Reb Elya Chaim’s house and began pressing for more information, he was met with silence. Reb Elya Chaim could not bring himself to tell his friend the truth—the Rebbe Rashab had been *nistalek* over a month prior. When his question was repeatedly ignored, Reb Itche understood what had happened and collapsed in a faint.

This all transpired on Lag B’omer. A mere three days later, on 21 Iyar, the Chassidim of Nikolayev and its environs delivered a *ksav hiskashrus*, declaring themselves connected to the Frierdiker Rebbe. Reb Itche’s signature is displayed prominently on this document, second only to that of Harav Meir Shlomo Yanovsky.

The Frierdiker Rebbe’s acceptance of the *nesius* breathed hope and comfort into that volatile era of war, pogroms, and the beginning of Bolshevik oppression. But that stability was shattered when, in Cheshvan 5681, the deadly typhus epidemic struck *Beis Harav*. This tragedy coincided with the Bolshevik confiscation of property, depleting *Beis Harav* of its ability to pay the enormous medical fees.

The entire family was affected by the disease, the Frierdiker Rebbe most of all; the doctors proclaimed that the worst would soon happen. Chassidim were broken and desperate. They increased in reciting Tehilim, reading *panim* by the Rebbe Rashab’s Ohel, and even fasting.

Seeing that the situation was dire, Reb Itche announced the opportunity for those who desired to gift the Rebbe



REB ITCHE. CIRCA 5690.

years of life. This gift, however, was to be drawn from their own remaining years. With emotion and trepidation, the Chassidim gathered in the Rebbe Rashab's room, and the *aron kodesh* was opened.

Reb Itche proclaimed the seriousness of this undertaking, "Think hard and well how precious life is, how precious is each day of your lives. Yet, consider also the value of the Rebbe's life." Through heartwrenching sobs, the Chassidim lined up to "give their donation." Each person made a "*kinyan*" and declared the number of years they were giving up. Reb Itche recorded each "donation" on a note.

Reb Itche remained in Rostov throughout that time, doing his utmost to assist the Rebbe. He was also the one who recited *kaddish* during the period when the Frierdiker Rebbe was unable.

Their prayers were answered, and slowly the Frierdiker Rebbe's health grew stronger until he fully recovered. Reb Itche remained in Rostov until Yud-Tes Kislev, when the Frierdiker Rebbe's health had significantly improved. That winter, he set out again on his mission as *shadar*, this time on behalf of the new Rebbe.¹⁰

MASHPIA

For the next seven years, Reb Itche faithfully served as the Frierdiker's Rebbe's agent—traveling throughout

the Soviet Union. He now needed not only to *chazzer* Chassidus, but to assist in the various activities to keep Yiddishkeit alive under Communist rule.¹¹

When the Frierdiker Rebbe decided to leave Russia, Reb Itche was one of the first to be informed. He was completely devastated by the news. The last Simchas Torah spent together in Leningrad, Reb Itche had a lot of *mashke*. At the *seuda*, he lay at the Frierdiker Rebbe's feet and cried bitterly, "Rebbe! Rebbe!" The Frierdiker Rebbe handed his plate of food to Reb Itche to "make an Eiruv" with the Russian Yidden—they should always be connected.¹²

Upon arriving in Riga, the Frierdiker Rebbe set out to arrange for Reb Itche's passage to the free world so that he could continue his work as a *shadar*. Within the borders of the USSR, Reb Itche worked for his freedom as well, following the directives he received from the Frierdiker Rebbe.¹³

Throughout this long and complicated process, Reb Itche was mostly stationed in Charkov (as the Communist oppression intensified, it became increasingly impractical to travel often). There, he served as *mashpia*. Living on the same property as the shul, he poured his soul into invigorating the Chassidim with authentic Chassidus despite the hard times they were experiencing. Through his efforts, there was a regular *seder Chassidus* of *balle-batim* as well as frequent *farbrengens*.¹⁴

Eventually, the "troublesome" efforts paid off and Reb Itche was granted freedom to leave the USSR. His arrival in Riga after Tishrei 5693 was met with much excitement. Even Riga's extremely secular Yiddish daily newspaper—often a platform for rhetoric against Lubavitch—featured a beautiful piece about him.¹⁵

Riga served as Reb Itche's base, but he wasted no time in resuming his travels as a *shadar* throughout Latvia and the entire Europe. However, the location where Reb Itche's services were truly needed was the United States.

The Frierdiker Rebbe's visit to America—three years prior—had stoked the fire of Chassidus on those shores, but over time that warmth was dissipating. The decline in Chassidic sentiment was felt in the reduction of *maamad* contributions. The Frierdiker Rebbe's ailing health required the consultation of specialists and costly treatments, coming at a strained time in the finances of *Beis Harav*.

The solution to both of these problems—the weakening of Chassidus in America and the financial crisis—could be found in a *shadar*. Now with Reb Itche on free

soil, efforts were doubled to enable his mission to the U.S. The urgency of this undertaking was emphasized by the Frierdiker Rebbe himself. However, the logistical arrangements were undermined by the U.S.'s immigration paranoia and proceeded at a sluggish pace.

The decision that Reb Itche should serve as the U.S.'s first *shadar* was, in fact, determined three-and-a-half years before Reb Itche's freedom from the USSR! Despite the urgency of this mission, it seems that the delay was worth it so that Reb Itche would be the one to go.¹⁶

AVODA

A representative of the Rebbe must be an exemplary chossid, and in this regard, Reb Itche was a shining example.

His daily routine remained virtually unchanged, kept up even through the years of adult life. He would arise early in the morning to prepare for davening by going to the *mikvah* and learning Chassidus for many hours. Before Shacharis, Reb Itche would not so much as drink tea, let alone taste a morsel of food, yet he was in no rush to finish davening. Even on Erev Rosh Hashanah, his davening would continue until well after midday.

His davening itself was in the manner of the great Lubavitcher Chassidim—involving deep concentration and contemplation into the greatness of Hashem as expounded on in Chassidus.

After his lengthy Shacharis, he often had to immediately begin davening Mincha, after which he would move directly to Maariv. Only late in the afternoon (or night) would Reb Itche sit down to eat his only meal of the day. His *netilas yadayim* was more substantial than his meal. Whereas he meticulously fulfilled the mitzvah of washing his hands—a process that took him twenty minutes to complete—his meal usually consisted of just enough bread to allow him to make a *bracha Al netilas yadayim*. Reb Itche despised partaking in the pleasures of this world any more than absolutely necessary.

After his humble meal, Reb Itche would spend the rest of the night learning *b'hasmada*. Although he would doze off periodically, he would quickly wash his hands and resume his study.

Often, especially on *yomim tovim* and *yomei d'pagra*, Reb Itche would *farbreng*. Naturally, the Chassidim looked to him to do most of the talking. Reb Itche was prone to speak of the importance of personal *avoda*, which was the focus of all the stories, thoughts, and demands he would share. All this time, he would say *l'chaim*, and, given his

frail composition, he was well under the influence early on—yet he never dozed off or lost his bearings.

Only toward dawn would he begin “preparing for davening” by resting. He would either rest his head on the table, or at most lie down fully on the bench—but after twenty minutes, he would jump up with renewed vigor, and the routine would begin anew.¹⁷

A HUMBLE SERVANT

If Reb Itche's body suffered malnutrition or neglect, it showed no signs of it. Although he seldom ate—due to his numerous *kashrus* conditions and intense *iskafya*—his face radiated color. Despite his infrequent moments of rest during his intense *avoda*, study, and travel, he was always full of energy and joy. He never bathed—unless we count his many *tevilos* in the *mikvah*—but he and his clothing were consistently immaculate.

It was clear to most, if not all, that Reb Itche's sustenance was not that of an ordinary man. His physical vitality certainly did not come from tangible nourishment. The only explanation that remains is that his *chayus* came from the spiritual nourishment of his Torah and *avoda*.

The opinion his peers had of him is astounding. Lubavitchers are not prone to exaggerating an individual's qualities, yet Reb Itche received unmasked reverence even in his lifetime. This astonishment was expressed by Reb Avraham Elya Axelrod of Baltimore:

“[Reb Avraham Boruch Pevzner, who lives in Russia] wrote to me matter-of-factly, ‘Reb Itche the Masmid is now in your country,’ while praising him very much. He writes that he has a reputation similar to that of Reb Hillel Paritcher in regards to mofsim etc. Now, being that anash, especially Temimim, and most especially Reb Avraham Boruch sheyichye, are very distant from Polisher excitement and exaggerations, I was amazed by [his description]...”

One of the outstanding figures around Reb Itche was Reb Chatche Feigin, secretary of the Frierdiker Rebbe and organizer of this shlichus to America. Among his instructions to the Chassidim in America to make the best use of Reb Itche's time there, he writes, *“You can have him serve in various functions. B'shaas hadchak, he can even give brachos.”*

This additional revelation, that Reb Itche could give powerful *brachos*, is perhaps the most astonishing. However, Reb Itche insisted that this was a mistake. When a time-sensitive need arose, he did not have time to physically bring the *pan* to the Rebbe, so he sent it “in



A LETTER FROM REB ITCHE DURING HIS TIME IN ENGLAND IN 5697. UNDER HIS NAME AT THE TOP OF THE PAGE, IT SAYS “REPRESENTATIVE OF THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE.”

his mind” instead.

At the same time that he was lauded, Reb Itche was also perceived as a peer—a fellow chossid, albeit a few steps above and beyond everyone else. This is certainly as was preferred by Reb Itche, given his humble spirit.

His approachable nature made him easy to connect with, and indeed his students included young *bochurim* along with elder *talmidei chachamim*. In the various stories in which he is recalled, as well as the few surviving letters he penned, the picture emerges of a genuine friend to the great and the small. His genuine concern over another’s pain, his vibrant joy in their celebration, and his characteristic sense of humor endeared him to his friends, students, and the many communities and individuals who came under his influence.¹⁸

DEDICATED ENTIRELY

In truth, examining Reb Itche’s attributes is unnecessary in determining why he was so fitting as a *shadar*, because the Frierdiker Rebbe clearly stated which quality made him the first choice; “For a *shadar* we need *hanochas atzmuso*”—dedication of his entire essence.

It’s not too difficult to decipher this value found in Reb Itche. Being devoted is special but not rare. However, *hanochas atzmuso* implies that one is not tied to any particular *tziyur*. Rather, one does whatever Hashem wants of him at that moment. The result is that such a person will pursue actions that are different and at times opposing, modifying themselves to the situation with complete dedication.

A few vignettes illustrate this point in the biography of Reb Itche:

At one point, the Horowitzes hosted an orphaned boy named Avrohom Dovid Yanovsky in their home. Noticing that Avrohom Dovid loved to eat chalah, Reb Itche would begin his day, before davening and its preparations, by ensuring that there was chalah in the house. At times, he needed to search the early-morning market to find the treat, but Reb Itche made sure that this *yasom* would feel cared for. Despite him being removed from materiality, he knew and cared for the needs of a child.¹⁹

Given his tender nature, one can only imagine the pain Reb Itche endured during his tenure in Rammenn, when he could not afford to provide his own children with their essential needs. Despite this, he displayed his trademark consistency in all things holy throughout his tumultuous life.

AMERICA

As important as it was that Reb Itche would embark on this shlichus, they would need to overcome the bureaucracy of American immigration. The Frierdiker Rebbe said that it would be more feasible to obtain a tourist visa for one year.

The Chassidim in America began sending requests to the U.S. consul in Latvia, “to grant Rabbi Itzhoc Gourewitch permission for a short visit to the U.S.” for the primary purpose of answering their difficulties in Chabad-Jewish philosophy.

The process dragged on, ironically, because of the American government’s wariness of tourists “overstaying” their visit. Of all people, Reb Itche was least interested in

the glamor of America and would much prefer staying close to the Rebbe.

Finally, in Elul 5693, the consulate issued his visa, and Reb Itche set off for America. This stay would bring out another powerful aspect of Reb Itche's character—his dedication to the Rabbeim. If his role as *shadar* typically focused on teaching Chassidus, with fundraising taking a secondary role, on this trip, his primary focus was alleviating the financial burden of *Beis Harav*.

No more than a month after arriving in New York, he sent a sum of \$5,000 to the Frierdiker Rebbe—a tremendous amount during the Depression era. Most of this money was secured not as donations, but rather loans from various *gemachs*. Reb Itche gladly accepted the

responsibility of raising the funds to repay these loans, and hoped to raise more beyond that.

In a letter to Reb Yisroel Jacobson, we can see Reb Itche's deep devotion to the Rebbe, "*The apathy of anash is inconceivable. How can we sit with folded arms when the 'crown of our head' is in frightful suffering!? Where is the effect of Chassidus!? Where is the love for our holy Rabbeim!? What are we [worth], what is our life, if we do not work for the good of Beis Chayenu!? In a troubling time like this, a holy obligation rests on us to arouse all of our abilities to establish Beis Chayenu!*"

These heated emotions did not remain in the realm of theory; Reb Itche was possessed by the need to provide money for the Rebbe. Almost entirely alone, he navigated the unfamiliar territory of the U.S. and trekked out to every major Jewish community he could. All for the Rebbe's well-being.

Reb Itche's passion clashed at times with American *balebatishkeit*. While he made efforts to adhere to the protocols of 1930s American philanthropy, he forcefully pursued his purpose, revealing a side of himself seldom seen in other situations. Despite opposing voices, Reb Itche insisted on prioritizing *maamad* over other funds, publicly exposed the desperate times the Rebbe was experiencing, and demanded that others dedicate themselves at least a fraction of how much he did.

Ultimately, his work was quite successful. His presence and guidance not only rekindled the passion for Chassidus, but he also initiated practical changes in the organization of Agudas Chabad in America. In the realm of *maamad* as well, he succeeded beyond anyone's expectations. However, much was left to be accomplished (notwithstanding the extension of his visa). As Reb Itche was returning to Europe, requests poured in from America for him to be sent to them again. The Frierdiker Rebbe had considered this idea, as nobody could fill the role like Reb Itche. Unfortunately, the plan never came to fruition because of issues with legal documents.²⁰

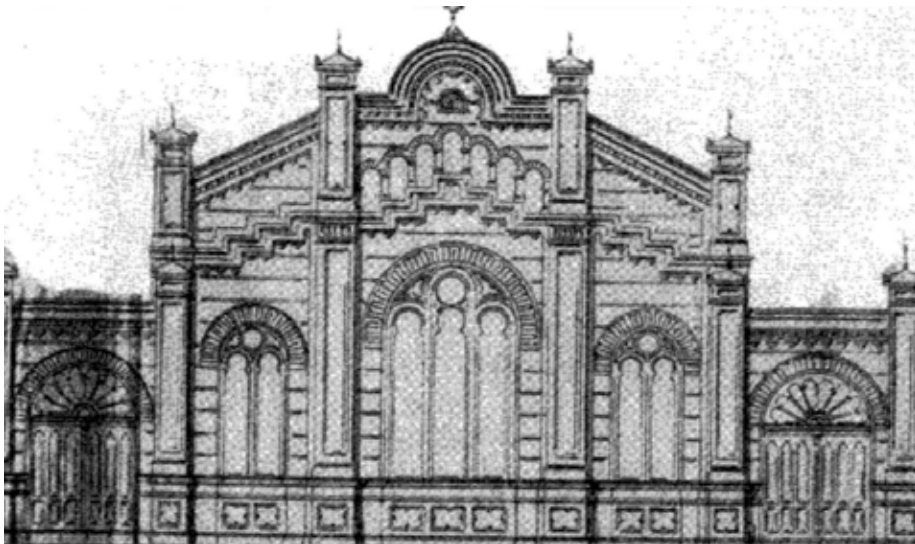


REB ITCHE'S
PASSPORT FROM
EARLY 5697.



A HEAVENLY FIRE

Although Riga was Reb Itche's home at the end of his life, he spent much of his time traveling the continent on missions of the Frierdiker Rebbe. His trips took him to an assortment of *kehilos*, including Belz, Ponevetch, Manchester, and Antwerp. In each city, he was welcomed with appropriate honor—in one instance, a *choshuve rav* insisted that Reb Itche sit in his own seat. Reb Itche utilized his standing to carry out missions of the Frierdiker



THE CHABAD SHUL IN RIGA.

Rebbe as well as spreading Chassidus in places where its light was never appreciated previously.²¹

With the outbreak of WWII, Latvia was conquered by the Axis and occupied by Russia. Once again, Reb Itche found himself under Communist rule. Their safety further deteriorated when the Nazis שׂמ׳ר betrayed Russia and prepared to take Latvia. However, the Jews were not yet aware of the extent of the danger which was approaching. Was it worth avoiding German occupation by escaping deeper into Russia? Or could nothing be worse than the Communists? Reb Itche decided to wait it out, and advised his two sons who lived in Riga to do the same.

The Nazis approached Riga in Sivan 5701, and at this point, Reb Itche changed his mind. Alas, only his son Shmuel escaped, on the last train to leave. Reb Itche himself refused to join as it would entail traveling on Shabbos.

From this point on, we have no reports of Reb Itche—aside from his log in the ghetto census. Practically every Jew who remained in Riga was murdered by the Nazis and their eager collaborators, leaving few witnesses.

However, a compelling legend persists about Reb Itche’s last moments on earth:

Locked up in a shul, the Jews waited helplessly as the foundations were doused in oil; any moment now they would be set ablaze. Suddenly, Reb Itche stood erect in front of the aron kodesh, “Tayere yidden,” he declared, “we are now fulfilling the tremendous mitzvah of kiddush Hashem, and we ought to do so joyfully!”

He opened the aron kodesh and removed a sefer Torah. With one arm clutching the Torah, and the other on the

shoulder of another chossid, he led everyone in dancing. Beneath the flames, a Hakofos Niggun was heard in the place of crying.

The story is difficult to corroborate, but knowing how Reb Itche led his life with such purity, it can only be expected that he would meet his death with such dignity.²² **T**

1. All sources refer to the book “Yiras Hashem Otzaro” unless otherwise specified.

2. p. 18.

3. pp. 23–25

4. Bitáon Chabad vol. 25.

5. pp. 26–30, 51. Eile Toldos Peretz pp. 51–52.

6. pp. 32–33.

7. pp. 34–36. Eile Toldos Peretz pp. 49–51.

8. pp. 36–37, 97, 114, 156–159, 278.

9. pp. 36–39.

10. pp. 116–122, 158.

11. p. 38.

12. pp. 42, 124.

13. p. 162.

14. pp. 39–42.

15. pp. 43, 259.

16. pp. 160–162, 168.

17. pp. 54–55, 57–62, 72, 75, 78.

18. pp. 49–50, 52, 63, 67, 80, 88–91, 104, 141, 171, 177.

19. p. 52. B’darkei Hachassidim vol. 1, p. 281.

20. pp. 160–234.

21. pp. 238–246.

22. pp. 272–281.