

לע"נ  
הרה"ח הרה"ת ר' שמעון ע"ה  
בהר"ר שמואל זאנוויל ע"ה הי"ד  
גלב"ע כ"ט תשרי ה'תשע"ז

ולע"נ זוגתו  
מרת אסתר ע"ה  
בת הרה"ח ר' יוחנן ע"ה  
גלב"ע ט"ב תשרי ה'תשע"ד

תנ"צ'ב'ה'  
נדפס ע"י בנם  
הרה"ת ר' שמואל זאנוויל  
וזוגתו מרת צירל שיחיו  
גאלדמאן



**The Alter Rebbe's great-grandfather, Reb Moshe of Posen, was a descendent of the Maharal, an astounding gaon, scholar of many sciences, and a linguist. This is the story of how he reconnected dozens of young Jews to Yiddishkeit in the Vatican University.**

**Adapted from Sefer Hazichronos Chapters 108-113.**

Reb Moshe was appointed head of the Jewish community of Posen at the age of twenty-five and served in that capacity for 22 years. It was a time of immense pressure for Jewish communities throughout Europe. There were constant banishments, heavy taxes, and local laws barring Jews from many professions or owning land.

Worse than the physical persecution, the Catholic Church endeavored to strengthen its influence

# UNIVERSITY

by forcing local Jewish leaders into public religious debates. These debates were never organized in a fair manner and always ended in disaster for the Jews.

Posen was no exception and the local church leaders tormented Reb Moshe with endless debates that led to baseless libels and incitement against the community. Reb Moshe realized it was impossible for him to continue leading the community effectively and he decided to resign and secretly relocate to another community. He smuggled his vast estate out of the country and eventually settled in Minsk over the course of several years.

During this transition period, Reb Moshe visited the *yeshivos* and Torah scholars of Padua, Italy, where he had spent several years of his youth learning Torah and the sciences. He continued on to visit other Italian communities, until he arrived in Rome and visited the Vatican Library with its priceless collection of rare *seforim* and unknown Torah manuscripts.

The Vatican librarian was impressed with Reb Moshe's scholarship, noble character and charisma. He shared his impressions of the venerable Jewish scholar with his colleagues and they invited Reb Moshe to publicly debate with them. He reluctantly agreed on condition that the debate be conducted in a room without religious symbols and that even the cardinals not wear their religious symbols during the debate. Some were deeply insulted by this but eventually agreed to his conditions and the debate was set.

Although Reb Moshe's initial conditions were followed (no symbols were in the room nor on

# REB MOSHE'S SHABOS

their clothing), he found himself representing Yiddishkeit alone against 30 Vatican representatives, including 12 famous scientists.

After a cardinal opened the debate with a long speech on the importance

of faith in life, Reb Moshe protested, in fluent Italian, the unfairness of the arrangement. He demanded that the two sides be represented equally and that he should be allowed to present the Jewish perspective in *Lashon Hakodesh*. (An interpreter could translate for the benefit of the majority who were unfamiliar with it.) Furthermore, the opening remarks should be reserved for the representative of Judaism, since it predates Christianity.

His logic and eloquence vexed the cardinals and some clamored that he be punished for his insolence. Ultimately, they realized he was correct and the debate was adjourned and postponed indefinitely. The Vatican librarian felt guilty for the discomfort Reb Moshe experienced as a result of the entire episode and

he was extra friendly with him from thereon.

Meanwhile, Reb Moshe was perturbed by the fact that during the short debate he noticed a young student who was clearly Jewish sitting among the prominent Vatican guests. Curious to discover this fellow's identity, he asked his librarian friend what he knew about him. At first he demurred, explaining that this information was top secret. This obviously intensified Reb Moshe's urgency to get to the bottom of the matter.

Finally, his friend relented and shared with him everything he knew. The young Jewish genius hailed from Poland and travelled to Venice to study astronomy. While there, he enrolled in a theology course and the professor recommended he transfer to the Vatican University, where he would benefit from the best theology courses in the world. The professor clearly hoped the young Jew would ultimately convert, but the young man did not sense this and heeded his advice.

At first, he remained a committed Jew, but after several months under the influence of the Vatican theologians, he started to be lax in his observance, although he was still careful with Shabbos and *kashrus*. The cardinals hoped that in due course he would convert and serve as a powerful tool for their proselytizing endeavors. Until then, his identity was kept top secret to ensure that no Jew have the opportunity to interfere with their grand plans.

R' Moshe was overcome with feelings of gratitude to Hashem for being presented such an opportunity during this otherwise regretful experience. He now understood the real reason for his being in Rome and entering into the debate at the Vatican—to save this young Jew from *shmad, r"l*.

## THE MAHARAL



HARAV BETZALEL



HARAV SHMUEL



HARAV YEHUDA LEIB



HARAV MOSHE



HARAV SHNEUR  
ZALMAN



HARAV BORUCH



THE ALTER  
REBBE

With two weeks to go until the debate resumed, and cognizant of the fact that he was under constant surveillance, Reb Moshe strategized how to meet the young man in a way that would not arouse suspicion. After some research, Reb Moshe started eating his meals at the kosher guesthouse frequented by the young man each day. On Shabbos, during the Shabbos meal, the young man entered and introduced himself to Reb Moshe as Gedalya Moshe Gordon of Vilna.

“Ever since I heard your speech during the debate, I have many doubts in the legitimacy of Christianity,” he said. “When I asked my mentors to introduce me to you they told me you had left town.”

His naiveté was evident, so Reb Moshe advised Gedalya Moshe to keep his newfound relationship with him a secret from his mentors and offered to meet with him secretly to discuss all matters of faith. Gedalya Moshe gladly accepted.

During their first conversation, Gedalya Moshe shared his story with Reb Moshe. His father was a *talmid chochom* and a prominent doctor in Vilna. After many years of Torah study, he travelled to Venice to study the sciences and languages. At the Venetian Academy he studied theology and transferred to Rome upon the recommendation of his professor.

He enrolled in a mathematics and astronomy course and a philosophy course on the development of religions. Under the influence of the religion professors he was attracted to Christianity, however, as a result of his discussions with Reb Moshe he

realized that he had much more to learn and discover. He was far from the end of the road...

Reb Moshe’s influence over Gedalya Moshe became absolute and he advised him to move off campus so that he not be so strongly influenced by the church environment. He lived with a Jewish family and came to the Vatican campus only for classes.

Reb Moshe was surprised to discover that there were dozens of Jewish students enrolled at the Vatican University. Since most European universities did not accept Jewish students at the time, those seeking a higher secular education had no choice but to attend classes at the Vatican, which accepted Jewish students with open arms—for obvious reasons...

Many of the professors were also Jewish. This included many priests who had converted, *r”l*, as well as professors and scientists who were apathetic and hostile to Yiddishkeit although they had not taken the dramatic step of conversion.

After a short while, Gedalya Moshe’s commitment to and observance of Yiddishkeit intensified, to the chagrin of his professors and mentors. He started debating the religion professors during class, successfully disproving all of their points. As long as there was the possibility that he would ultimately convert and serve as a powerful proselytizing tool for the church, Gedalya Moshe was adored by the faculty. Now he was treated with obvious disdain and ridicule.

He graduated the mathematics and astronomy course with honors, but failed the philosophy course and was even admonished for his stubbornness and naiveté for rejecting the “true faith.” Gedalya Moshe was angry and bitter from the unfairness he was subjected to, but was happy to receive his doctorate in the exact sciences.

His conversations with Reb Moshe became longer and more frequent and he even started inviting fellow Jewish students to join these sessions. They formed a support group and strengthened each other in all matters of Yiddishkeit. Gedalya Moshe was the pride and joy of the group due to his exceptional talents and genius and became their de facto leader. The fact that he had returned to a life of absolute Torah observance and passion for Yiddishkeit had a great effect on the rest of the Jewish students. Many were inspired to follow in his ways.

The members of the group openly discussed the importance to reach out and be *mekarev* the other Jewish students, who had never merited a proper Jewish education and were completely unfamiliar and distant from Torah and *mitzvos*.

Reb Moshe observed these developments with much joy and satisfaction. He felt that this was his reward for his extended stay in Rome.

Meanwhile, the debate with the cardinals resumed. After much negotiation, Reb Moshe opened the proceedings with a brilliant three hour speech in eloquent Italian proving the truth of Torah-true Judaism. Everyone in attendance was forced to admit

that Reb Moshe was the undisputed victor in the debate and this made an indelible impression on the many Jewish students and lecturers at the Vatican.

Although Reb Moshe was pained from the fact that his forced debate could possibly cause the church authorities to become more hostile and vengeful of the Jews, he was delighted at the opportunity to reach these Jews who were in such spiritual despair. Many young Jewish students who were previously ignorant of Yiddishkeit were returning to a life of Torah and *mitzvos*.

Many came from assimilated families. Their parents were shocked to hear that their sons had adopted completely Jewish lifestyles, in the Vatican, of all places! Some were understanding and supportive of these developments, but others were upset and distraught.

Anthony Yanovsky came from a family in Warsaw so assimilated that he did not even have a *bris milah*. They did not have the courage to convert to Christianity, so they sent Anthony to study the Vatican University with the hope that he would convert, settle in Italy, after which they would follow him there and convert as well.

Anthony became a member of this special group of students, had a *bris mila*, and started living a complete Jewish life. He did not notify his parents of these developments until he graduated.

His parents were thunderstruck to learn from their son, the newly ordained professor, that he was now Avrohom Yanovsky, a fully observant

Jew. He moved to Krakow, married into a prominent Jewish family and secured a professorship in the academy of Prince Radziville.

Another student came from an assimilated Jewish family in Sweden. His parents also did not have the courage to officially convert to Christianity. They sent their son to study at the Vatican University hoping that at least he would ultimately do so. Now they heard that he was living a Torah-true life!

His father sent him a long letter, admonishing him for his foolishness and for the life-threatening danger he was causing for himself and his family back home. The young man responded by disproving all of his father’s arguments, and clarified that although the Torah obligates him to honor his parents regardless of their spiritual state, with regard to Torah and *mitzvos* he need not follow their instructions.

He notified them that after graduating the Vatican medical school, he planned on moving to Amsterdam, which boasted a vibrant Jewish community, as he would never return to the spiritually devoid and anti-semitic environment of Sweden. He invited them to join him there.

He indeed moved to Amsterdam, married into a prominent family and became a well renowned physician as a *yarei shamayim*. His parents ultimately joined him there and started living a life of Torah and *mitzvos* as well. **1**