

# The Life of a Chossid

## Reb Alter Simchovitch

Born: 5650\*

Passed away: 7 Nissan 5699\*

Chossid of: The Rebbe Rashab,  
the Frierdiker Rebbe

### From Rostov to Warsaw to Yerushalayim

The year was 5681\*. World War I had just ended and Communism had descended upon Russia. In Rostov, starvation and suffering were rampant. Many of the *temimim* were forced to leave the hallowed halls of Tomchei Temimim and earn a few kopeks in whatever occupation they could find.

On a dusty street corner stood Reb Alter Simchovitch. Just eight years earlier, he had been among the group of seven hand-picked *temimim* who were sent by the Rebbe Rashab to establish Yeshivas Toras Emes in Chevron. Now, he stood in the freezing cold of the Russian winter selling *kvas*—a peasant drink made of fermented bread.

Reb Yitzchok Goldin found him in this state. While the *temimim* wore rags, they thirsted for Chassidus; they needed a *mashpia*, and Reb Yitzchok hired Reb Alter to serve as *mashpia* in Tomchei Temimim in Rostov.<sup>1</sup> Reb Alter would go on to serve as *mashpia* in Tomchei Temimim in Warsaw, before journeying to Yerushalayim, where he served as *mashpia* of Toras Emes until his passing on 6 Nissan, 5699\*.

### The Rebbe's Chozer

At the Yud-Tes Kislev farbrengen in 5673\*, the Frierdiker Rebbe asked Reb Alter to *chazzer* the *maamar* that his father, the Rebbe Rashab, had said that previous Shabbos. Reb Alter, who had said some *l'chaim* at the time,

replied that he did not recall the *tochen* of the *maamar*. The Frierdiker Rebbe then instructed him to *chazzer* a different *maamar*, to which Reb Alter replied that he had forgotten everything.

The Frierdiker Rebbe questioned him: had he really “forgotten everything?” Reb Alter responded that he recalled that the Rebbe Rashab told him to say *l'chaim*. The Frierdiker Rebbe responded: “Know, Reb Alter: When my father speaks to a Yid, he speaks *nefesh* to *nefesh*, *ruach* to *ruach*, *chaya* to *chaya*, *yechida* to *yechida*.”

### A Chassidishe Chasuna

Reb Alter's *chasuna* took place on Friday (as was often the custom in that time). Because the day was short, there was time only for the *chuppah* to take place, with the *simchas chasan v'kalla* planned for the next day.

The next morning—Shabbos—before Shacharis, Reb Alter's new father-in-law, Reb Shlomo Zalman Havlin, asked him not to daven at length, as a lavish *kiddush* was planned. After the *minyán* concluded davening, Reb Shlomo Zalman set out the *kiddush*, and Reb Alter remained in his place in the *cheder sheini*, trying his best not to daven for too long. When he reached *Nishmas*, however, he could not bear to continue at such a (relatively) fast pace, and he reverted to his accustomed, drawn-out pace. A bystander later recalled how Reb Alter stood in the midst of “*Nishmas*,” and his father-in-law pleaded with him, “Please, have pity! I invited everyone to a *kiddush* for the wedding!” Reb Alter's only reply was to continue davening soulfully with his *niggun*, “... מי ידמה לך ומי ישוה לך”

### The Gemara of a Chossid

Reb Alter's *chassidishkeit* permeated every fiber of his being. One of his students, Rabbi Moshe Ashkenazi, told

how Reb Alter explained the difference between how a *misnaged* learns Gemara and how a Chossid learns.

The *misnaged* reads the words of the Gemara, “Let us say that the Mishnah is not in accordance with Sumchus,” and interprets them as fact: Sumchus’s words contradict the Mishnah. In contrast, the Chossid refuses to accept that. He wonders, “Let us say the Mishnah is not like Sumchus?!“ Could Sumchus possibly contradict the Mishnah?!

## How a Chossid Learns Tanya

Reb Alter instructed his students that when they learned Tanya, they should point at themselves with their thumbs, as if to say, “I’m not excluded from this.” They would remind themselves that the Alter Rebbe’s words are directed at each of them, not just at someone else. In this way, the teachings would have their desired effect.

## Pretend it’s an Empty Room

Reb Alter put great emphasis on *chazzering* Chassidim properly. One of his students, Reb Yosef Menachem Weintchok related: “Reb Alter asked me to say over a *maamar*, but I was a young *bochur* and had stage fright. He advised me to imagine that around me were only empty, unoccupied *shtenders*.”

*Rabbi Moshe Weber would often tell his students stories about Reb Alter. Here are several he related:*

- It was the custom of the Chassidim that when they visited the holy resting place of the Alter Rebbe in Haditch, they would stay there for some time before entering the Ohel, as a preparation for their entry to this sacred place. Each person would take as long as they felt was necessary. Reb Alter, however, related that he would enter immediately upon arrival, for he felt that even after making preparations, it would be the same as before.

- When Reb Alter studied in Tomchei Temimim, he wore—as was customary in Tomchei Temimim in those days—a long coat. This coat stood out and was a cause for scorn and derision among the neighbors where his father lived. He poured out his heart to the Rebbe Rashab, and the Rebbe Rashab strongly encouraged him to continue wearing the coat.

## At the Rebbe’s Wedding

Reb Alter was the *mashgiach* in Tomchei Temimim in Warsaw in 5689\*, the year of the Rebbe’s marriage to Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka. At the *chasuna*, the Frierdiker Rebbe charged Reb Alter with the duty of distributing *l’chaim* to the *temimim*.<sup>2</sup>

The *bochurim* in Toras Emes once asked Reb Alter to *chazzer* a *maamar* for them and to *farbreng* with them as well. Reb Alter replied that he could only do one of the two, since each one required eight hours of internal preparation.

## “Create a Healthy Set of Lungs”

Reb Alter contracted tuberculosis, a dreaded lung disease, and suffered agonizing pain as a result. He once turned to the students sitting around his bed and shared what he was thinking: “Hashem! You create the world every moment anew. Does the fact that yesterday you created a sick set of lungs mean that you should continue to do so every moment?”

Reb Alter truly felt with all his being that Hashem “Creates the world, in His goodness, each day, constantly.” **1**

1. Toldos Chabad B’Russia HaSoveitis p. 246.  
2. Sefer Hasichos 5688-91 p. 54.