

The Life of a Chossid

Reb Boruch Mordechai Babruysker

Born: 5521*

Passed away: 14 Elul 5612*

Chossid of: The Alter Rebbe, the
Mitteler Rebbe, and the Tzemach

Reb Boruch Mordechai Babruysker was born in 5521* in a town near Shventzian (Švenčionys), Lithuania, some 50 miles north of Vilna. He studied under the tutelage of the famed Chossid Reb Michel Apotzker, eventually learning Chassidus with him. As he grew older, he traveled to study in the famed yeshivos of the time in Vilna, Slutsk, and Minsk. In recognition of his brilliance, he became known by his peers as the *Baal Higayon*, the “Master of Logic” from Shventzian. He married the daughter of Reb Shmuel, the *av beis din* of Vilna, circa 5541*, and was then appointed to head a major yeshiva in Vilna.

Reb Boruch Mordechai was one of the leaders of the Chassidim in Vilna, marching at the head of the protest to disrupt the *cherem* placed on them by the city’s *misnagdim*. Reb Boruch Mordechai also played a key role in exposing Shimon Hakofer, an infamous member of the Haskalah—the Enlightenment movement—who attempted to infiltrate *frum* communities in the guise of a *melamed*.

He was a prominent Chossid of the Alter Rebbe, from whom he received *semicha*, and he was one of the Chassidim who were arrested when the Alter Rebbe was arrested. After the Alter Rebbe’s *histalkus*, he became a Chossid of the Mitteler Rebbe, with whom he would learn when he visited Lubavitch, and then of the Tzemach Tzedek, who appointed him to the Communal Affairs Committee charged with combating the Haskalah and the anti-semitic Czarist regime.

He was appointed rav of the city of Babruysk, in modern-day Belarus, circa 5561*, and tens of Chassidim made the move with him from Vilna.

After serving as rav for 50 years, he moved to Eretz Yisroel in 5611*, where he lived in Yerushalayim until his passing.¹

Reb Boruch Mordechai’s halachic erudition and brilliance were often put to use in resolving legal disputes, and even forewarning them.

Two business partners once came before the Alter Rebbe with a disagreement, asking for an adjudication. The Alter Rebbe asked whether they had a contract formulating their partnership. They did, and the Alter Rebbe found a clause detailing precisely what the course of action should be if they found themselves in exactly the situation in which they were. Satisfied, the partners went on their way.

Some time later, again they disagreed, again they came before the Alter Rebbe, and again the Alter Rebbe found a clause in their contract that mapped out precisely what they should do. This happened several times. Eventually, the Alter Rebbe asked them, “Who wrote your contract?” “Reb Boruch Mordechai Babruysker,” was the reply.

During one of Reb Boruch Mordechai’s visits to the Alter Rebbe, the Alter Rebbe asked him in indignation: “Is this the extent to which you immerse yourself in business, considering all of the claims that can come to light?”²

Two women came before Reb Boruch Mordechai with a *din Torah*. After careful consideration, he ruled in the favor of one of them. The woman who had been ruled against became furious, hurling insults at the rav. “Why don’t you throw her out?” asked Reb Boruch Mordechai’s wife? “She doesn’t really mean what she’s saying,” he responded. Hearing that, the woman’s curses increased in their intensity. Reb Boruch Mordechai asked her, “Tell me please: would you like your sons to be like me?” “Of course,” replied the woman. “If only they would be!” “You see?” smiled Reb Boruch Mordechai to his wife. “She doesn’t really mean it.”³

There was always a puddle in front of Reb Boruch Mordechai’s home, and visitors would have to walk through it on their way in. He once explained: “Our sages tell us that ‘Hashem showed Adam Harishon each generation and its teachers; each generation and its judges.’ When Adam Harishon saw Boruch Mordechai playing the part of rav in Babruysk, he spat and said ‘פע! אויך מיר א רב’ ‘Feh! Even *he* is a *rav*!’ This spittle created the puddle in front of my house, which never dries up.”⁴

לעילוי נשמת
הרה"ת ר' זלמן יודא
בן הרה"ת ר' שלום ישעי' ע"ה
דייטש
נלב"ע כ"ט תמוז ה'תשס"ו
תנ"צ'ה'
נדפס ע"י
משפחתו שיחיו

Chassidim would often ask Reb Boruch Mordechai to say over Chassidus, and he would always refuse. Once, however, he was visiting a city and the Chassidim would not cease their entreaties that he say Chassidus. Finally, he asked them, “Would you prefer to hear Chassidus, or to hear a Chassidishe *maaseh* that you’ll be sure to appreciate properly?”

Seizing the rare opportunity, they clamored for a story. He began: “Once, Reb Nochum of Chernobyl visited the Alter Rebbe on Sukkos, and they entered the *sukkah* to talk. Reb Nochum made a precondition that no one was to listen to their conversation. The Mittler Rebbe, and an individual named Reb Boruch Mordechai (referring to himself in the third person, as he wouldn’t refer to himself as “I”) longed to hear the conversation, and climbed onto the roof of the *sukkah*. Listening intently, they heard Reb Nochum ask the Alter Rebbe, ‘What was the special ability of Reb Mendel Horodoker?’ ‘He could read everyone’s minds,’ said the Alter Rebbe. Reb Nochum asked, ‘What’s the big deal about that?’ The Alter Rebbe added: ‘He knew everything a person had thought about his entire life.’ Reb Nochum asked again, ‘What’s the big deal?’ The Alter Rebbe responded: ‘When Reb Mendel entered a house, he knew everything that had been thought in that house from the time it was built, and everything that would be thought inside that house in the future.’ The Alter Rebbe concluded and said, ‘This is the difference between a *merkava* for *Atzilus* and a *merkava* for A”K, which is the general world.’ Reb Nochum was extremely impressed by this. Suddenly, he called out, “Didn’t we agree that no one would listen to our conversation!?” Upon hearing this,—Reb Boruch Mordechai concluded—“we jumped off the roof of the *sukkah*, and did not merit to hear the rest of their conversation...”⁵

A Chossid name Reb Zalman Leib lived in Babruysk. A simple, unlearned man, he was known as Zalman Leib the Whipster, as he had previously worked as a wagon driver. He now worked as a vegetable farmer, and his business was successful, enabling him to hire himself a *melamed* to finally teach him Torah each day. Whenever he had the time, he would daven at length.

Reb Boruch Mordechai’s brother-in-law Reb Avigdor, who was a *misnagdishe rosh yeshiva*, once visited Babruysk. When he arrived, he was escorted with great honor by a delegation of Torah scholars, who led him to one of the largest shuls in town to give a *pilpul*. To give him a chance to rest, he was brought to the side room, the *Chabadnitze*, where Reb Zalman Leib was davening. Reb Avigdor was so moved by the soulful tones that he asked, “Who is this Chossid davening so late?” “That’s Zalman Leib the Whipster,” answered Reb Boruch Mordechai. Reb Avigdor reacted scornfully: “Zalman Leib the Whipster! That’s what you call a davener? Him?! He’s barely the heel of a davener!” Reb Boruch Mordechai remained silent. Again, after the *pilpul*, Reb Avigdor scornfully, and publicly, called Reb Zalman Leib the “heel davener.” Now, Reb Boruch Mordechai responded: “The heel of a davener is highly esteemed in the Torah and is of benefit in three areas. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos says, “Akavya ben Mahalalel, the heel [Akavya related to the Hebrew word for heel—*eikev*] of a *davener* [Mahalalel meaning “one who praises Hashem”] says: Reflect intently upon three things and then you will not come to sin.” He then went on to explain the Mishna, and how it saves people from arrogance and sin.⁶

[After the Frierdiker Rebbe related this story at a *farbrengen*, some individuals ridiculed this “*Chassidishe pshat*” on the Mishna. In response, the Rebbe explained the significance of this teaching in a lengthy letter, showing how, far from being a “humorous” take, the notion of explaining the meaning of names has a storied history in Tanach and *divrei Chazal*, and that a person’s name represents—and guides—their very essence and that of their children. Akavya ben Mahalalel’s own name, and father’s name, are intrinsically tied with his teachings.⁷ ①

1. Toldos Boruch Mordechai

2. Ibid p. 106

3. Ibid p. 107

4. Ibid p. 115

5. Ibid p. 131

6. Sefer Hasichos 5702 Shemos sicha #2. English translation courtesy of SIE via Chabad.org/4062574.

7. Igros Kodesh vol. 1, letter 154.