

The Life of a Chossid

Reb Nechemya of Dubrovna

Born: 15 Shevat 5548*

Passed away: 15 Shevat, 5612*¹

Married to: The daughter of Reb Chaim Avraham (the Alter Rebbe's son)

Chossid of: The Alter Rebbe, the Mittlerer Rebbe and the Tzemach Tzedek

Reb Nechemya Halevi lived in the city of Dubrovna (Dubroŭna) on the banks of the Dnieper River in Belarus. He was a star pupil of the Alter Rebbe and indeed, his second wife was the Alter Rebbe's granddaughter.

His erudition and scholarship were legendary, and his *sefer*, *Divrei Nechemya*, was published at the behest of the Tzemach Tzedek.² At the very beginning of the Mittlerer Rebbe's *nesius*, the Mittlerer Rebbe appointed the Tzemach Tzedek, Reb Avraham of Kalisk, and Reb Nechemya to respond to halachic queries, a position they held for a time.

The Right Melamed

Even in his youth, Reb Nechemya's brilliance was obvious. Not wishing to waste a single drop of his son's potential for Torah-study, Reb Nechemya's father, Reb Avraham Beirach, who was a Chossid, decided that for his son's advancement in Torah, it would be ideal for him to have a *misnaged* as a tutor. A Chossid—Reb Avraham Beirach reasoned—would spend much of the day preparing for davening and then davening at length, and spend yet more time *farbrenging*, leaving precious little time for studies with his pupil. A *misnaged* was hired and began to teach young Nechemya. Reb Avraham Beirach left town on business for several months, and when he returned home, he heard his son speaking very negatively about the Alter Rebbe. "Where did you learn this?" his father asked.

"From the *melamed*," came the son's reply. Immediately, Reb Avraham Beirach traveled to the Alter Rebbe in Liozna and told the Alter Rebbe what had transpired. The Alter Rebbe told him, "Even though a *melamed* who is a Chossid will spend much time in *chassidisher* things, nevertheless, it would be better if you hired a *chassidisher melamed* for your son."³

How to Make a Living

The Tzemach Tzedek was determined to be financially self-sufficient, and chose to go into business with Reb Nechemya, making furnaces out of clay. After molding the ovens and baking them in a kiln, they would light a small fire inside the oven. This would expose any cracks and imperfections, which they would then seal. Since they were both Torah-scholars, they passed the time talking in learning, becoming quite engrossed in their conversation. It once happened that one of them was sealing cracks inside the furnace and the other was sealing cracks from the outside, and without realizing it, the furnace door was sealed shut. The fire, meanwhile, grew bigger, unbeknownst to the one outside, who was only brought to the realization that something was wrong when he heard the cries coming from inside. Quickly breaking open the oven door, he saved the other, but the furnace was a total loss.

After seeing that business was not going to be successful, the Tzemach Tzedek reluctantly agreed to earn a living through Torah by becoming a tutor.

Ein Od Milvado

Later on, Reb Nechemya sold *taleisim* (*taleisim* needed to be imported from other regions, so the Tzemach Tzedek had located a new *tallis*-weaving factory in Dubrovna and



convinced local wool merchants to begin supplying raw material, creating a local source for *taleisim*⁴). Once, he was calculating his finances and after entering all of the figures that needed to be calculated, upon reaching the bottom line, he wrote “*Ein od milvado*”—nothing exists besides Hashem. While obviously, the purpose of his calculations was to come up with the amounts he owed—or was owed—he nonetheless wrote this, because the concept that nothing exists besides Hashem permeated him to the extent that his honest business calculations resulted in a sum total of “*Ein od milvado*.”⁵

Stay Warm

Reb Nechemya once witnessed a soldier in the Czar’s army being whipped. While corporal punishment was commonplace in the Russian army, the reason for this soldier’s lashes was unusual: He had remained at his guard post on a bitterly cold night, persevering even when his feet froze. The Czar was told of this soldier’s dedication, but instead of rewarding him, he ordered the soldier to be whipped, because “the oath a soldier makes to the Czar should have kept him warm.” Reb Nechemya said, “This experience invigorated my *avodas Hashem* for 25 years. We took an oath at Har Sinai, and it must warm us forever.”⁶

Traveling to Lubavitch

After the Mittlerer Rebbe’s *histalkus* on 9 Kislev 5588*, the Tzemach Tzedek did not accept the *nesius* openly until Shavuos of 5589*. Before that Shavuos, a group of Chassidim traveled to Lubavitch to request of the Tzemach Tzedek to accept the *nesius*, which the Tzemach Tzedek did on Erev Shavuos. Two years later, a large group of Chassidim visited Lubavitch for Shavuos, and returned via Dubrovna, where they met Reb Nechemya. He related how he had seen the Alter Rebbe in a dream, and the Alter Rebbe had hinted about the *nesius* of the Tzemach Tzedek. As a result of this dream, Reb Nechemya resolved to journey to Lubavitch for the following Shabbos. Upon hearing this, the Chassidim, too, decided to accompany him back to Lubavitch. That Shabbos, the Tzemach Tzedek

said Chassidus three times. That Shabbos was a turning point for many of the elder Chassidim, who now became *mekusharim* of the Tzemach Tzedek.

Aha!

Reb Nechemya once asked the Tzemach Tzedek, “Why must we toil to learn Chassidus, which we don’t fully grasp? The *navi* says that when Moshiach comes, everyone will know Hashem—even those who didn’t learn Chassidus—so why should we waste time on it now?”

The Tzemach Tzedek replied that the difference is in the “Aha!” that the Chassidim will say.

The Tzemach Tzedek explained this with a *mashal*: A person stands near a wall. On the other side of the wall, two people are having a conversation. The person can’t quite make out everything they’re saying, only snippets of their discussion reach him; he gets a general picture of what they’re talking about, but would not be able to repeat what they were saying. Later, they tell him all about their conversation. As he hears each detail, he recalls what he had been able to pick up from the other side of the wall, and thinks, “Aha! Now I understand what I had heard then!”

The *nimshal*: We learn Chassidus today and only partially understand it. But when Moshiach will teach it to us, we will be able to say “Aha!” The Tzemach Tzedek concluded, “Someone who hears something for the second time understands it far better than someone who hears it for the first time. This is why the *navi* says, “For they shall all know Me from their smallest to their greatest.”⁷ Can one compare the knowledge of the smallest to the knowledge of the greatest? **Ⓢ**

1. See Beis Rebbe, Part One Chapter 26. See also the *sicha* of 15 Shevat, Shabbos Parshas Vayakhel-Pekudei and Shabbos Parshas Vayikra 5742.
2. Preface to Divrei Nechemya.
3. Reshimos Devarim p. 84.
4. <https://www.chabad.org//3284891>. Excerpt from Likkutei Dibburim vol. 4, preface 36.
5. Toras Menachem 5742 vol. 2 p. 1129.
6. Shmuos Vesippurim part 3, story 139; Arba Chassidim p. 107.
7. Yirmiyahu, perek 31 possuk 33