

# PORTRAIT OF A CHOSSID

ע"ה REB AHARON YOSEF BELINITZKY



Presented to Our Dear Guests  
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**AHARON YOSEF ש"י SCHMUKLER**  
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# Reb Aharon Yosef Belinitzky ז"ל

Reb Aharon Yosef, of blessed memory, was the eldest son of the renowned Chossid, Rabbi Yisroel Noach Belinitzky (5643-5743 – 1883-1982), one of the most distinguished of the first generation of students who studied at the original *Tomchei Temimim* yeshiva in the town of Lubavitch (founded in 5657 – 1897). Reb Aharon Yosef, a worthy son and disciple of such a prominent personality, was an outstanding Chossid in his own right.

For Reb Aharon Yosef, this material world had no importance on its own, for he was concerned primarily with the spiritual. His great father educated him thoroughly in the outlook and practice of *Chassidus*, and this Chassidic education was evident in every aspect of his personality. Reb Aharon Yosef was such a deeply sensitive Chossid and had absorbed the message of *Chassidus* so profoundly that, when he prayed, he would weep heartfelt tears and be unaware of what happened around him. His tears did not derive from sadness, but from his feelings of humility and dissatisfaction with his spiritual level. He never ate much and most of his life slept without a mattress. But while his own material needs were of secondary importance for him, he was deeply concerned for the needs of others, helping whomever he could and observing the mitzva of honoring his parents with boundless devotion.

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## Early years

Aharon Yosef was born to his parents, Reb Yisroel Noach and Sterna, on 12<sup>th</sup> Adar, 5665 (1905), in the Lubavitch Chassidic town of Disna, Lithuania, where his mother's parents lived. His mother's father, Reb Yitzchok Yoffe, known as "Reb Yitzchok Disner," was a distinguished Chossid of the third and fourth great Rebbes of Chabad, the *Tzemach Tzedek* (1789-1866) and the Rebbe MaHaRaSh (1834-1882). Reb Yitzchok was a *melamed* (Torah teacher) by profession. He used to visit Lubavitch every year and, like many Chassidim in those days, used to walk all the way (and then all the way back) – a few hundred miles! He would set out on *Rosh Chodesh* Ellul, a month before *Rosh Hashona*, in order to get there in time. When his daughter married Reb Yisroel Noach, they too settled in Disna, and Aharon Yosef, their oldest child, was born a year or two later.

In his childhood, Aharon Yosef studied in Disna under the well-known *melamed*, Reb Boruch Yosef Kozliner, a Lubavitcher Chossid and close friend of his grandfather, Reb Yitzchok. Among Reb Boruch Yosef's students were many who later were considered among the best students of *Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim* in Lubavitch. When Aharon Yosef's parents had married, his mother wanted to live near her parents in Disna, but they could not find a suitable home. As a close friend of her father, Reb Boruch Yosef cleared space in his yard so that a small house could be built for them, where they lived for several years.

Several years later, his grandfather, Reb Yitzchok, caught typhus, a dangerous disease, from which he passed away. Doctors warned that anyone touching the body could catch the highly contagious illness. But Reb Boruch Yosef refused to agree that his close companion be buried without a proper Jewish burial. After drinking a full glass of strong alcohol, he declared himself fully sterilized and therefore immune to the typhus contagion! He proceeded to give his friend's body *tahara* (ritual washing of the



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dead) and to bury it, all single-handed. In the merit of his *mesiras nefesh* (self-sacrificing efforts), he did not catch the dread disease.

This close friendship continued through their descendants. Reb Boruch Yosef's son, Chayim Shneur Zalman Kozliner – later known in the USSR as “ChaZaK” – was a close companion from childhood of Reb Yitzchok's grandson, Aharon Yosef. They also studied together in *Ysehivas Tomchei Temimim*.

Years later, in 5745 (1984-1985), Reb Aharon Yosef visited the Holy Land and, while there, went to meet his old friend, ChaZaK, who had been allowed to leave the Soviet Union several years earlier and had settled in Nachalas Har Chabad, the Chabad neighborhood in Kiryat Malachi. They were both excited to see each other. But when Reb Aharon Yosef had to leave, it was deeply moving to see how difficult they found it to part. As he left, ChaZaK accompanied him out, in order to “escort” him, as the Torah requires. “Let's talk a little more,” he urged him. When Reb Aharon Yosef finally got into the car, ChaZak, unable to bear the thought of parting from his dear friend and probably not getting an opportunity to see him ever again, called out several times, in great sorrow, “Aharon Yosef! Aharon Yosef!”

From his youth, Aharon Yosef's father educated him in *hiskashrus* – a close bond with the Rebbe. One year, his father took him for the month of Tishre to the Rebbe RaShaB (Rabbi Sholom DovBer, 5621-5680 – 1861-1920 – the fifth Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch). Because of World War I, the Rebbe had left Lubavitch in fall, 1915, and had settled in Rostov, in southern Russia. For the first time in his life, Aharon Yosef accompanied his father for *yechidus* (private audience) with the Rebbe, prayed in the Rebbe's *minyán*, and listened to him giving *maamarim* (profound discourses) of *Chassidus*.

During his youth, the family moved to Kremenchug, an important city in Ukraine with a large community of Chabad and



other Chassidim. Although students of *Tomchei Temimim* had remained in Lubavitch when the Rebbe left, the yeshiva moved to Kremenchug in 5678 (1918). Aharon Yosef entered the yeshiva two years later in 5680 (1919-1920). Soon after, his father became the yeshiva's director, which enabled him to continue guiding his son's education.

Aharon Yosef studied in *Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim* for ten years. During that time, the yeshiva was forced by Soviet persecution to wander from one location to another, establishing clandestine branches where the students studied secretly. He excelled at his Torah studies, and was considered an expert in *Chassidus*, with a deep understanding of its profound concepts.

### Studying near the Rebbe

In fall, 5684 (1923), Aharon Yosef was privileged to enter the central yeshiva in Rostov, located in the home of the Rebbe RaYaTz (Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, 5640-5710 – 1880-1950). Earlier that year, in Tishre, the Rebbe (who succeeded his father as Rebbe over three years earlier) decided to transfer the yeshiva from its previous location in Kharkov to Rostov, so that it be close to him, as it had been close to the Rebbe RaShaB in Lubavitch. Reb Yisroel Noach related how the Rebbe, when asked whether the yeshiva should move to Rostov, replied, "Yes, they'll enjoy themselves, and I'll enjoy myself!"

Reb Yisroel Noach also related that when the renowned Chossid, Reb "Chatshe" (Yechezkel) Feigin, who had recently joined the yeshiva's faculty, told the Rebbe that the yeshiva then had only a small number of students, he replied, "The Alter Rebbe's *Cheder Alef*, too, had only 20 students!" It was the original three classes ("*Chadorim*") of great scholars formed by the Alter Rebbe to study *Chassidus* who became the greatest of the first generation of Chabad Chassidim.



## Experiencing his first *farbrengen* of the Rebbe

Studying at the yeshiva in Rostov allowed the students to be constantly close to the Rebbe RaYaTz and to observe his regal presence often several times a day. They were present whenever he gave a *maamor* (discourse) of *Chassidus* – usually every *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* – and at his *farbrengens*. They were privileged to be admitted for *yechidus* with the Rebbe, receiving his holy guidance in serving *Hashem*.

The first *maamor* Aharon Yosef heard from the Rebbe RaYaTz was on *Shabbos Parashas Vayishlach*. It started with the verse “*Ki yeshorim darchei Hashem,*” and Aharon Yosef always viewed the content of this *maamor* as being directed specifically at him.

Reb Aharon Yosef was a man of deep, heartfelt emotion. All his life, whenever he recalled the first time he was present at a *farbrengen* of the Rebbe RaYaTz, he became very emotional. It was on the eve of *Yud-Tes* (19<sup>th</sup>) Kislev, three days after hearing that first *maamor*.

This *farbrengen* remained engraved in Aharon Yosef’s mind for good reason, for it was a notable milestone in Chabad history. Chassidim from all over the country thronged to Rostov for this *farbrengen*, including a number of distinguished personalities.

At the *farbrengen*, the Rebbe expressed himself with remarkable outspokenness, demanding from those present to volunteer as *shamoshim* (special “officials”) to travel to cities throughout that vast land to work with utter *mesiras nefesh* (self-sacrifice) to organize Torah classes for both adults and children, to establish *mikvaos*, and to strengthen *Yiddishkeit* in general. Several Chassidim accepted this challenge, and the Rebbe gave them *mashke* to drink *lchayim*, declaring that he was establishing with them a “covenant.”



Central yeshiva in Rostov, in the home of the Rebbe Rashab

## Study colleagues who became well-known

During the year the yeshiva expanded, and the Rebbe's home no longer had enough room for all the students. Many of them now studied at various *shuls* in the city. The yeshiva's director and *mashpia* (spiritual guide and teacher of *Chassidus*) was Rabbi Chatshe Feigin, while the *rosh yeshiva* (who taught *Gemora-Talmud*, etc.) was Rabbi Yehuda Eber, a renowned *Gaon* (Torah genius) and Chossid. Although both were in their twenties, they were brilliant scholars and teachers, and were also *ovdim* – who prayed devoutly according to the profound directives of Chabad *Chassidus*. They were both very close to the Rebbe RaYaTz, and they set the tone in the yeshiva, serving as outstanding role-models for the students.

Among the students were some who later became prominent Chabad personalities. One was Rabbi Nissan Nemanov, who became a renowned *mashpia* in Nevel and other *yeshivos* and later in Brunoy, France. Others included Reb Chayim Shneur Zalman Kozliner (ChaZaK) a prominent Chossid, Rabbi Nochum Goldshmid, a renowned *maskil* (profound expert) in *Chassidus*

who later lived in Bnei Brak and taught *Tanya* on Israeli radio, Rabbi Dovber Gorfinkel, who became a *mashpia* at *Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim* in Warsaw and Otvotsk, Poland. Aharon Yosef was especially close with all these outstanding students.

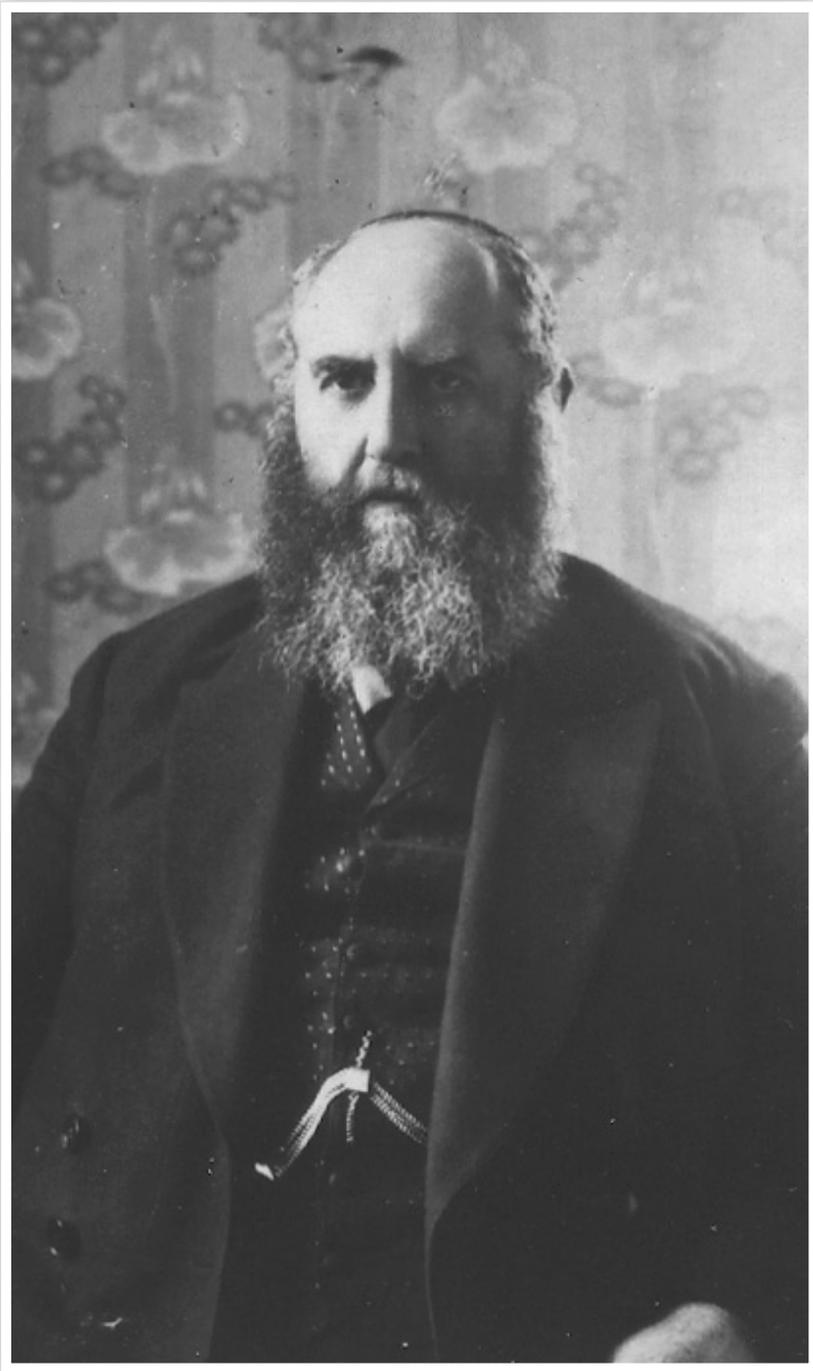
## An exalted soul

Another of Aharon Yosef's close companions was an 18-year-old student named Hirshel, who had only recently entered the world of Chabad. For several months, Hirshel studied very diligently at the yeshiva, although his fellow students apparently did not realize Hirshel's special qualities. But Aharon Yosef, with his warm Chassidic sensitivity, befriended this new student, and took him under his wing.

Unfortunately, a few months later, Hirshel became afflicted with an unusual sickness (probably a serious form of hepatitis), which prevented him from functioning normally unless he slept an abnormal number of hours. At first it was for nine hours a night, and then for longer and longer as his condition worsened and he had to be hospitalized.

The Rebbe was deeply concerned about him and often asked for updates about his condition. Trying, no doubt, to avoid causing the Rebbe heartache, Reb Chatshe would report that he was improving. To this the Rebbe replied, "*Halevai* [If only that were true]!"

Tragically, Hirshel passed away, and suddenly everyone realized how only the Rebbe had understood how serious his illness was. The Rebbe sent word that he would attend the funeral and even travel to the cemetery. A few years earlier, when several students present in Rostov had perished in a typhus epidemic, he participated in their funerals only by coming out when their hearse passed his home, and sometimes had not participated at



The Rebbe RaYaTz

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all. But it had never happened that he went to the cemetery for a student's funeral. Now, however, for a student who had just entered the world of Chabad, everyone was amazed that the Rebbe was according him such special honor. When the coffin was brought close to the grave, the Rebbe assisted in helping to carry it and, throughout the burial, gazed intently into the grave.

The following *Shabbos*, the Rebbe gave a *maamor* starting with the verse "*Im ruach hamoshel*" (published in *Sefer Hamaamorim* 5684, page 216), which explains how the greatest of Jews can suffer for the sins of their generation. Only then did everyone realize that Hirshel, apparently, possessed a soul of exalted level!

## Kharkov

After the Rebbe was forced by the *CheKa* (secret police) to leave Rostov following Pesach, 5684 (1924), he moved to Leningrad. The yeshiva, too, was forced to leave and wander from place to place. Aharon Yosef studied in these underground *yeshivos*, first in Kharkov, then in Nevel, Kursk and other locations.

Together with his brother Mendel, Aharon Yosef arrived at the newly established yeshiva in Kharkov during that summer. Starting with a small group of students, it gradually grew until their numbers exceeded 40. One of his close companions there was Mendel Futerfas, who later became a renowned Chossid and *mashpia*. His study partner was Nochum Goldshmud. Rabbi Chatshe Feigin was the yeshiva's *mashgiach* (dean), particularly for *Chassidus*, and he was assisted by Rabbi Nissan Nemanov, who was then in his early 20's. Rabbi Shneur Zalman Alpert, known as Zalman Kurnitzer, became the *mashgiach* for *Nigleh* (*Gemora* and *Halacha*).



Synagogue in Kharkov

### “Servants of Hashem”

A major problem for students of *Tomchei Temimim*, whose main desire was to study Torah and serve *Hashem*, was the Soviet military draft. To serve in the Red Army was out of the question for *Temimim* because, besides the years of being unable to study Torah, it was virtually impossible to eat only kosher and keep other *mitzvos* in the military/ If the Soviet government made it so difficult even for civilians to keep Torah and *mitzvos*, how much more difficult was it, in the army’s closely regimented life, to put on *tefilin* and *daven* (pray) regularly, to keep *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* and all other Jewish practices. But the military authorities were very strict about the draft and rarely gave young men exemptions.

At the end of 5685 (summer, 1925), Aharon Yosef received his draft letter, as did his companion, Shneur Zalman Serebriansky (later one of the leaders of Lubavitch in Australia). For the month of Tishre, 5686, Reb Chatshe Feigin traveled with these two



students to the Rebbe in Leningrad, intending to ask his blessing that they receive exemptions from the military.

The time of *hakofos* on *Shemini Atzeres* and *Simchas Torah* is known to be an *eis rotzon* (propitious time), and Reb Chatshe utilized the opportunity before *hakofos* to bring the two students into *yechidus* with the Rebbe, asking for his blessing.

The Rebbe replied, "They should be servants of *Hashem* instead of serving in the army."

Trusting firmly that the Rebbe's blessing would be fulfilled, they returned to their studies in Kharkov. When it was time to appear at the draft office, they were overjoyed to receive "white cards" – unconditional exemptions!

For *Rosh Hashona*, 5687 (1926), all students and faculty in Kharkov traveled to Leningrad for the whole month of Tishre in order to benefit from the Rebbe's spiritual influence.

Years later, Reb Aharon Yosef would tell about *Simchas Torah* that year: Before *hakofos* on *Simchas Torah* evening, the Rebbe announced, "One doesn't go to *hakofos* alone." He directed Chassidim to light candles and walk on either side of him. The Rebbe's face glowed red.

Whenever Reb Aharon Yosef related this episode, he wept profusely. Hearing him tell this, his father, Reb Yisroel Noach, added that the *Midrash* states that when the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) rests upon *tzaddikim* (saintly Jews), their faces flush red!

### Learning practical *shechita*

After the month of Tishre, the Rebbe directed that the yeshiva be moved from Kharkov in southern Ukraine to Nevel in White



Russia (now Russia), where a special academy was established to school Rabbonim and *shochetim*.

There *Temimim* learned in depth the many Torah laws necessary for Rabbis and *shochetim* to know, and the required practical skills for *shechita*. After receiving their ordination, they were sent to various Jewish communities throughout the Soviet Union to strengthen and reorganize them after the ravages of the *Yevsektzia* (Communist party's Jewish section), which did so much to undermine them.

It was the Rebbe himself who decided which students should learn *shechita*. Aharon Yosef, one of the yeshiva's most outstanding students, was among those selected to learn *shechita* as part of a group sent to study under the renowned Chassidic *shochet*, Reb Shmuel Zalmanov, in Kursk.

The booklet *Zichron Shmuel* describes these students' experience in Kursk: "Reb Shmuel Zalmanov's students attested that he was a Jew of *mesiras nefesh* (self-sacrifice). Teaching *shechita* to classes of students, at a time when it was officially regarded with disfavor, required true *mesiras nefesh*.

"But Reb Shmuel paid no attention to any intimidation. He was fully immersed in his work both as a *shochet* and as a teacher of *shechita* to classes of students, besides his other efforts to strengthen *Yiddishkeit*. The students made sure to avoid being conspicuous when they walked in the street, realizing that if any were caught by police, both they and their teacher could be punished severely – with imprisonment, exile or worse.

"The students made wooden cases in which to carry their *chalofim* (special *shechita* knives) and special sharpening stones, from Reb Shmuel's home to the slaughterhouse. These cases were made to look like the boxes used for a chess board and its pieces, in order to disguise their true use.



“When Reb Shmuel taught *shechita* – checking the sharpness of their knives, or when the animal to be slaughtered lay before them – there was no teacher stricter than he. Even his wife Rochel sometimes remarked about his over-strictness towards his students. He always replied that it was impossible to treat lightly such a seriously responsible matter as *shechita*.

“In fact, this strictness endeared him to his students, for they too realized that it was the only way to give them a thorough skill in this unique craft, as befitting G-d-fearing *shochetim*.

“On the other hand, in all matters other than *shechita*, Reb Shmuel related to his students with true friendship as if they were his own children, concerning himself with every detail of their material and spiritual needs. His wife too treated them like a devoted mother, making sure they had everything they needed – food, drink, bedding, etc. – and giving them the feeling that it was their own home.”

### ***Haskola and avoda***

Aharon Yosef became known among his fellow *Temimim* as having a unique understanding (*haskola*) of *Chassidus*. One of his fellow students from those days, Reb Leib Edelman, noted, “When someone wanted to point to a *Tomim* [student of *Tomchei Temimim*] for whom the knowledge and accomplishment of *Chassidus* were systematically absorbed, he would point at Reb Aharon Yosef.”

His father, Reb Yisroel Noach, attested that his son had a sublime understanding of the most abstract philosophical concepts of *Chassidus*.

Reb Mendel Futerfas related that when Reb Aharon Yosef was once in *yechidus*, the Rebbe RaYaTz told him that when one repeats a *maamor* of *Chassidus* publicly, one has to know it



clearly, word by word. But during the actual public repetition, one should say it “as it flows” (i.e. in one’s own words).

Concerning his Chassidic sensitivity for *avoda*, Reb Yisroel Konson, another close friend and fellow student from those days, told the following:

“Once, Aharon Yosef lay in bed sick. After *shacharis* (morning) prayers, I brought him breakfast. At night, after the end of my studies, I came back and noticed the food was still there. When I asked Aharon Yosef why he hadn’t eaten, he replied, ‘Because I had a desire to eat it.’” He had so worked upon himself not to do what his body desired that, although he was sick and needed the food to help him recover, he didn’t eat because he felt a physical craving for the food! (See *Hayom Yom*, 25<sup>th</sup> Adar Sheini.)

Over the course of many years, Reb Aharon Yosef worked on accustoming himself to devote his life to serving *Hashem*. This involved both refraining from giving in to bodily desires and praying at length, slowly and with deep feeling.

At the same time, Reb Aharon Yosef worked on himself to help others with true feeling for their needs. At one point, his younger brother Yitzchok became dangerously sick with tuberculosis, and Aharon Yosef was deeply concerned for his life. Even when the doctors declared that Itche had no more than two years left to live, even when they had to remove one lung, Aharon Yosef left no stone unturned to save his life, traveling with him to distant places for treatment by expert doctors and to medicinal baths, and buying for him expensive medications. With *Hashem*’s help, he succeeded in saving his life, and although Itche remained in weak health all his life, he later married, raised a family and lived for many more decades until his passing in Eretz Yisroel in 5751 (1991).



## Recovery after Chassidim ask for the Rebbe's blessing

With the same devotion, Reb Aharon Yosef brought aid to multitudes of Jewish refugees during World War II. Over half a year after the Germans invaded the Soviet Union on 27<sup>th</sup> Sivan, 5701 (June 22, 1941), Aharon Yosef escaped with his parents and siblings to Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in Central Asia.

As more and more refugees fled to safety there, without any means of support, they needed urgent assistance simply to survive. Reb Aharon Yosef devoted himself to helping them both materially and spiritually. Almost all suffered from hunger, and many fell sick with contagious sicknesses.

During the month of Shvat, 5702 (1942), shortly after Reb Aharon Yosef arrived in Samarkand, he too caught such an illness. Medications were scarce, and those who fell ill rarely recovered. Nevertheless, with *Hashelm's* help, Reb Aharon Yosef was among the few who miraculously recovered. As Reb Yisroel Levin wrote in his memoirs, "On 15<sup>th</sup> Shvat, we had a *farbrengen* at the home of Reb Shia Korf. Reb Michael Teitelbaum spoke how we needed to arouse *Hashem's* mercy on *Anash* [the Lubavitch Chassidic community] and on the whole Jewish people. At that time, Reb Aharon Yosef and Reb Avrohom Zelig Gansburg had fallen sick. We wrote a letter [to the Rebbe, asking for his blessing and] mentioning these two, and they recovered."

Reb Aharon Yosef was not concerned for himself. As soon as he recovered, he threw himself into saving other Jews who had fallen sick, and taking care of victims who succumbed to their sickness. Despite having barely survived himself, he exposed himself again to the danger of contagious illness in order to help other Jews.

The many thousands of Jews who fled to Samarkand from all areas invaded by the Germans arrived with no means of support. No work or employment was available, so they had no money to



buy food. Even if someone obtained money, food was very scarce. The famine became so critical that many perished from weakness and malnutrition.

## Burying the dead and visiting the sick

So many Jews passed away from hunger and disease that the *chevra kaddisha* (burial society) of the Bukharan community – the Oriental Jews who had lived there for centuries – could not keep up with the new crisis. Several new arrivals who were Chabad Chassidim saw the urgent need to establish another *chevra kaddisha* devoted to burying the many deceased refugees. Reb Yehuda Leib Levin established the new organization, and Reb Yisroel Noach and his son, Reb Aharon Yosef, soon joined.

The task was huge. Those involved had to take care of every aspect of burial, from buying land for burial plots and material for *tachrichim* (burial garments), which then had to be sewn, wandering through all streets of the city to find abandoned Jewish corpses and those still in homes, visiting all the hospitals for the same purpose, performing *tahara* (traditional washing of the bodies), protecting the bodies until burial, digging graves, performing the burial and erecting burial markers (*matzeivos*). Reb Aharon Yosef and his colleagues went from one hospital to the next and all around the city to find deceased Jews and give them Jewish burial.

Before long, the *chevra kaddisha* extended their mission to keeping sick Jews alive by providing them with food. They established a *bikkur cholim* (caring for the sick) society in which Reb Yisroel Noach and Reb Aharon Yosef enrolled, and again, Reb Aharon Yosef played a key role.

Finding quantities of nutritious food on a daily basis was a major problem, needing large sums of money. So was distribution



of the food to all the sick. Besides the logistics of getting the food to everyone who needed it, it was also dangerous for ordinary citizens to carry quantities of loaves of bread, for example, which was a serious crime during wartime, when food was rationed and everyone received only a small bread ration.

But members of the *bikkur cholim* society, with great devotion and self-sacrifice, managed to overcome the problems, saving countless Jews from dying of hunger.

Reb Aharon Yosef was especially careful about treating the dead with proper dignity. If a grave had been dug but no one had yet been buried in it, he would lie in it all night to watch, for it was dangerous to leave the grave open.<sup>1</sup> When corpses could not be taken out for burial before nightfall; he would watch the dead in a special room next to the cemetery.

When he heard that Sholom Ber Drizin, eldest son of the renowned Chossid and *mashpia*, Reb Avrohom Maiyorer, had experience in burying the dead, he persuaded him to join the *chevra kaddisha*. Once, Reb Aharon Yosef told him that, as usual, they had dug several graves that day but, thank G-d, no one had passed away. Since graves were not to be left open overnight unless someone slept inside, he asked him to come and sleep in one of the graves that night.

“When he saw me trembling at the thought of being alone in a deep grave all night,” recalls Sholom Ber, who was still a young boy, “he reassured me by saying he’d give me a long rope to hold, and he’d hold the other end, so that if any need arose, I could pull on the rope and he’d come immediately.

<sup>1</sup> *Tzavoas Rabbi Yehuda Hachossid*, by one of the respected medieval Halachic authorities, states that leaving a grave left open can cause further deaths, G-d forbid. Later authorities recommend covering it with boards in such a case. During World War II, boards were likely not available, particularly in the Soviet Union, where everything was government owned and good reason had to be given for obtaining them. So Reb Aharon Yosef, thinking nothing of his own comfort, decided to lie in the grave himself – a unique act of self-sacrifice!



“But I’d heard that jackals frequented the cemetery at night and even tried to drag corpses from their graves, which was why we always buried them very deep in the ground. Despite Reb Aharon Yosef’s efforts to reassure me, I was terrified to sleep at the cemetery, and had to refuse him.”

Reb Aryeh Leib Demichovsky, too, who lived then in Samarkand, remembers how the cemetery was a frightening place at night. Wild beasts were prevalent there, and it was with great self-sacrifice that Reb Aharon Yosef insisted on staying there all night to watch the open graves. It seemed an impossible task. Nevertheless, he learned from it a lesson in serving *Hashem*:

“One night, when I was alone at the cemetery, I thought to myself: Here are two Jews lying next to each other all night, and not thinking about each other at all, neither positively nor negatively. That’s what it means to be dead. But we who are alive have the duty to think about each other only positively!”

### Helping to found *Tomchei Temimim* in Samarkand

Besides kindness for the dead, Reb Aharon Yosef did much kindness for the living. One example was helping to establish a *Tomchei Temimim* yeshiva in Samarkand. Many families of Chassidim and other Torah-observant Jews had found refuge in the city, and they needed a framework in which their children could study Torah. Besides studying *Nigleh* and *Chassidus*, the students received food, which saved their lives from famine and spared their parents the burden of providing for them. It was Reb Aharon Yosef who somehow managed to obtain the bread for them every day.

Reb Rafoel Wilschansky, a student of the yeshiva, recalls with amazement how Reb Aharon Yosef, after his study-partnership in *Chassidus* every morning with Reb Zushe Koblitzer, would

go from house to house with a big sack over his shoulder to beg generous Jews to donate some of their precious bread for the students. When he finished collecting it, he would distribute it to the secret locations of the yeshiva's various classes.

## Weeping in heartfelt prayer

Although Reb Aharon Yosef was so busy with the activities involved in these *mitzvos*, it did not reduce his spiritual intensity at all. He remained totally immersed in *avoda* (serving *Hashem*) and *haskola* (studying *Chassidus* in depth).

Reb Moshe Niselevitch, another student of the yeshiva, recalls hearing Reb Aharon Yosef's prayers with amazement: "I remember him sitting on *Shabbos* in the Chabad *shul* in Samarkand. Although there were other *ovdim* (Chassidim who prayed at length with deep devotion), Reb Aharon Yosef was special. He would sit in his corner and pray for a long time, breaking into quiet but bitter sobs from the depth of his heart. Although he worked such long hours for the *chevra kaddisha*, his mind remained totally involved in *Chassidus*.

"Once, I happened to hear an intense discussion he had on subjects of *Chassidus* with Reb Yona Kagan [director then of all *Tomchei Temimim yeshivos* in the USSR]. Although both were so concerned with ensuring the continued existence of the *yeshivos* during such difficult times, it did not prevent them from continuing to discuss *Chassidus* with great passion."

As the war came to a close, he was a leading participant in a group of married men who studied *Chassidus* early every morning. Others who participated included the well-known Chassidim, Reb Shneur Zalman Butman, Reb Abba Pliskin and Reb Shlomo Matusof. All participants highly valued Reb Aharon Yosef's contribution to their understanding of the subjects, and



Reb Zalman Butman once said, “If there’s one young man left in Samarkand who understands *Chassidus*, it’s Aharon Yosef!”

## Teaching with love

In Kislev, 5707 (end of 1946), Reb Aharon Yosef and his family managed to escape from the Soviet Union, and they wandered through Europe until they reached Paris. Although France was the very symbol of secular modernity, Reb Aharon Yosef continued to conduct himself as he always had, praying at length and studying *Chassidus* as intensely as before.

In Paris, Reb Aharon Yosef earned his living by teaching children of the Chabad refugees from the Soviet Union. One of his students then, Shneur Zalman Chanin, told how, at the Modern Hotel where many of the refugee families were accommodated, they had a small number of young children of varying ages – one or two of each grade level. Reb Aharon Yosef taught them all in the large room at the hotel designated as a *shul*, teaching various levels Hebrew reading, *Chumash* or *Mishnayos*.

“He related to us as a loving father and educator. When he felt it necessary in order to educate us properly, he punished us strictly. But he also hugged and kissed us. Despite our young age, we realized he was teaching us with true dedication, which is why we loved him deeply.”

As the Chabad refugees found more permanent places of residence, whether in Paris or in other lands, Reb Aharon Yosef found other Jewish parents willing to let him teach their children privately for payment. Again he taught each according to his level, whether Hebrew reading or *Chumash*, etc. He was exceptionally honest, even refusing to accept payment if the child hadn’t absorbed his lesson properly!

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Wilschansky, today head of the Chabad





Tutoring Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Wilschansky

yeshiva in Tzefat, Israel, was taught privately in his childhood by Reb Aharon Yosef. In retrospect, he perceives his one-time teacher's qualities from an educational perspective: "He was absolutely devoted to his students and loved them intensely with fatherly warmth."

Reb Dovid Chein, who lived many years in Paris, recounts how Reb Aharon Yosef once "complained" that his private lessons placed him in "exile" – meaning in a situation to which he wasn't accustomed – for, in order to get parents to let him teach their children, he had to look presentable and change his shirt daily to a fresh, clean white one!

Besides teaching, he served as *shamash* at the *shul* established by Reb Shneur Zalman Schneersohn (a leading Chossid who had arrived in Paris several years before World War II and been active in communal work). One year, Chassidim held a *farbrengen* at the *shul* in honor of 10<sup>th</sup> Kislev, anniversary of the release of the Mittlerer Rebbe (Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch, 1773-1827) from Czarist arrest. It was a lively occasion lasting until early in the morning. Reb Aharon Yosef drank *l'chayim* quite a few times, and remained at the *shul* until daybreak. A much younger Chossid, Reb Nochum Jacobowitz, also stayed there all night. He remembers how Reb Aharon Yosef declared – with no hint of arrogance (for that was utterly foreign to him) – “The Mittlerer Rebbe’s fire is burning within me!” He meant to say that the *farbrengen*’s message had penetrated him deeply.

## Utter humility

In 5720 (1959-1960), Reb Aharon Yosef moved to Brunoy, outside Paris, staying with his parents at their quarters in *Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim*. To earn a living, he did all sorts of ordinary work, continuing also his private lessons for children. At one point he manufactured wine. His father, Reb Yisroel Noach once commented that it was regrettable that his son had to earn his living doing ordinary jobs when he had such a unique understanding of profound concepts of *Chassidus*. Reb Aharon Yosef, however, in his utter humility, felt no embarrassment at all in doing work of any kind.

For most of his years in France, he earned his living by taking care of what was then the only *mikveh* in the Paris area. Although he lived then in Brunoy, he used to travel daily into Paris in order to arrange for the cleaning, heating and proper operation of the *mikveh*.

.When the renowned Moroccan *tzaddik*, Rabbi Yisrael

Abuhatzira, known as the “Baba Sali,” stayed in Paris, he immersed himself there daily. Reb Aharon Yosef used to open the *mikveh* for him at the times he needed to use it, waiting for long until he completed his many immersions, which were accompanied by Kabbalistic devotions.

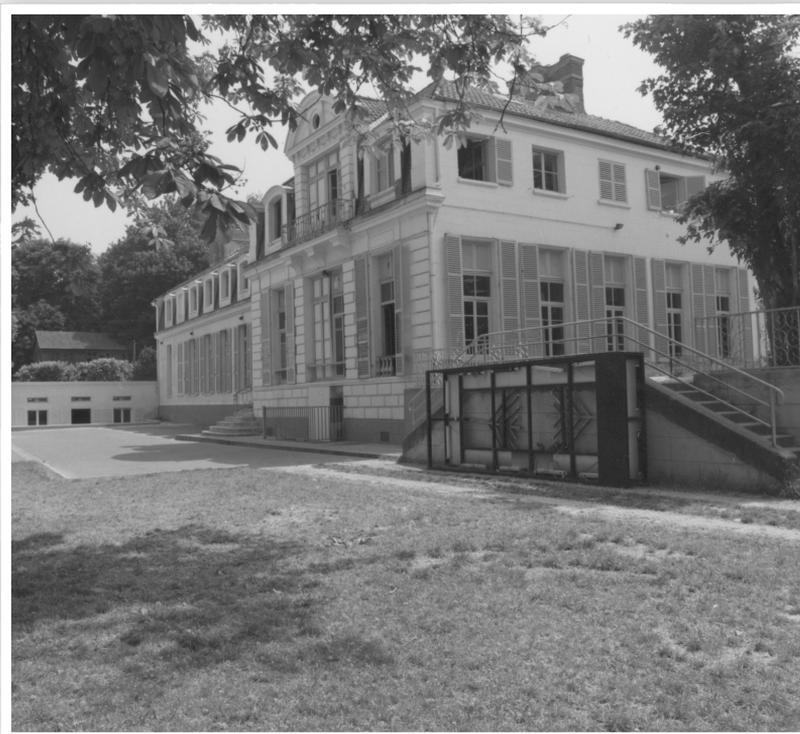
## Teaching at the yeshiva

Living in Brunoy, he spent much time in the yeshiva, discussing with students their Torah studies and telling stories of Chassidic personalities of past generations. At a later stage, he taught young students *Gemora* privately, and after a while was appointed as *mashgiach* for *Nigleh* study in the yeshiva.

His contemporaries, who knew him from years back as being unusually familiar with the works of *Chassidus*, accompanied by a profound understanding, used to joke with him how he had now become *mashgiach* for *Nigleh*, while another contemporary, Reb Leizer Gurevitch (a son of the renowned Chossid, Reb Yitzchok Hurwitz, known as “Itche the *masmid*”), who was known as a Talmudic scholar, had been appointed to become *mashgiach* for *Chassidus* study at *Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim* in Israel!

Nevertheless, although he never flaunted it, Reb Aharon Yosef was a deep scholar of *Nigleh*, too. During the time when he served as *mashgiach*, he had to answer students’ questions on their *Gemora* studies. Students had heard that, in his humility, he made every effort to conceal his knowledge, and some of them tried to test him.

One student recalled how he found a difficult question asked by the *MaHaRShA* (a classic commentary on the Talmud) on the *Gemora* passage then studied, and decided to test Reb Aharon Yosef by asking the question as if it were his own. Reb Aharon Yosef started explaining the entire subject as expressed in the



*Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim in Brunoy*

*Gemora* text, and then how the two standard commentaries of *Rashi* and *Tosefos* explain it. His explanation was so comprehensive that, when he finished, the question fell away and was no longer relevant. The student then revealed that the question was asked by the *MaHaRShA*. Reb Aharon Yosef realized why he had asked it and rebuked him, warning him not to do it again. But then he showed the student how he hadn't understood the *MaHaRShA*'s question, which was much deeper than he thought, and went on to explain the difficulty it raised.

Reb Aharon Yosef was *mashgiach* during *Chassidus* studies, too, and used to walk around the *zal* (study hall), checking that the students were studying properly and inviting questions on their studies.

A student who was quite new to Torah observance was once

studying a *maamor* in *Likutei Torah* and, when he finished studying through it to the end, closed the volume. Reb Aharon Yosef noticed and asked why he had closed it.

“Because I finished it,” he replied.

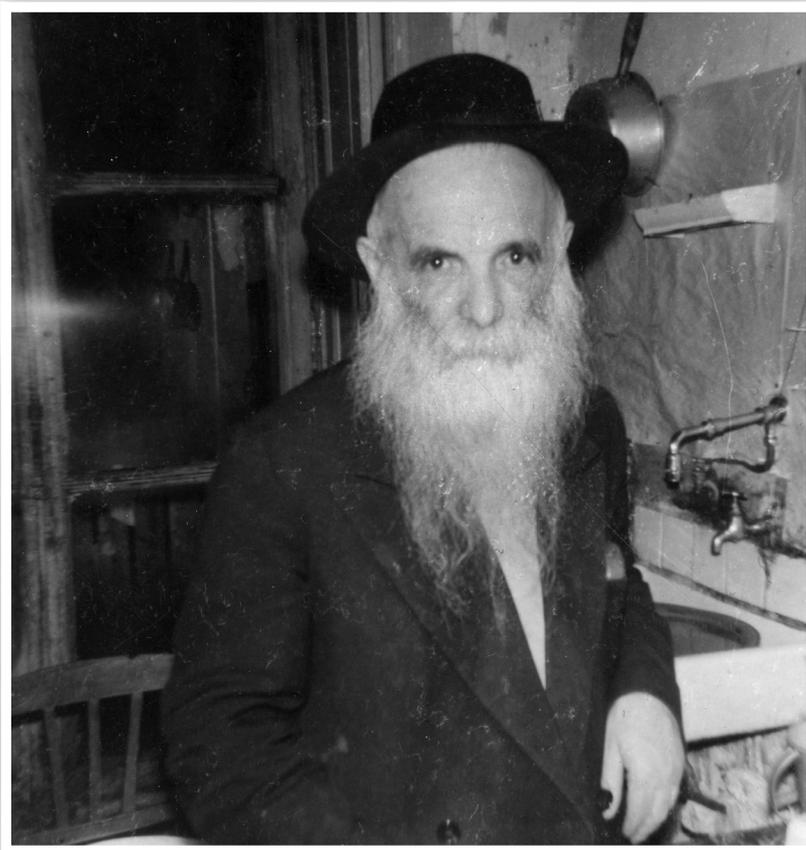
Reb Aharon Yosef called him a harsh name, and rebuked him, “You didn’t understand it!”

The student was offended. He felt he had understood it well and, having completed it, was entitled to stop his study. Why had he been rebuked so harshly?

But he thought it over, and realized that Reb Aharon Yosef, who was universally respected, was much older and wiser than he. He decided to study through the *maamor* again, and this time had no choice but to agree with Reb Aharon Yosef that he hadn’t understood it properly the first time.

Someone returning from a visit to the Rebbe in New York showed him a newly published volume of *Sefer Ho’arochim – Chabad*, the encyclopedia of Chassidic philosophy, edited by Rabbi Yoel Kahan. Looking through it, Reb Aharon Yosef was enormously impressed. “Do you realize how deeply one has to be involved in Chassidus for many hours on end in order to write such profound explanations?” he observed with amazement. He was more impressed with the ability to delve so deeply in *Chassidus* for such lengths of time than with the intellectual exposition itself.

His own deep *avodas Hashem* derived from his dedication to the study of *Chassidus*. In a conversation during his later years, he once emphasized that *Chassidus* study is the key to Chassidic life. In this connection he would note that the distinguished *Tomim* in Lubavitch, Zalman Dovid Homliner (Michlin) – known as an outstanding *oved* (who would spend hours on devoted prayer)



– first learned 2000 *maamorim* of *Chassidus* by heart before he started praying at length!

### Sufficing with the minimum

Meanwhile, Reb Aharon Yosef lived modestly and ascetically, never indulging in the simplest material comforts. During his years in Brunoy – where students could observe him closely – he always slept without a mattress! Whoever knew him attested that he was a personality as if from a previous generation. Sholom Ber Butman, who studied there during the early years, summed it up,

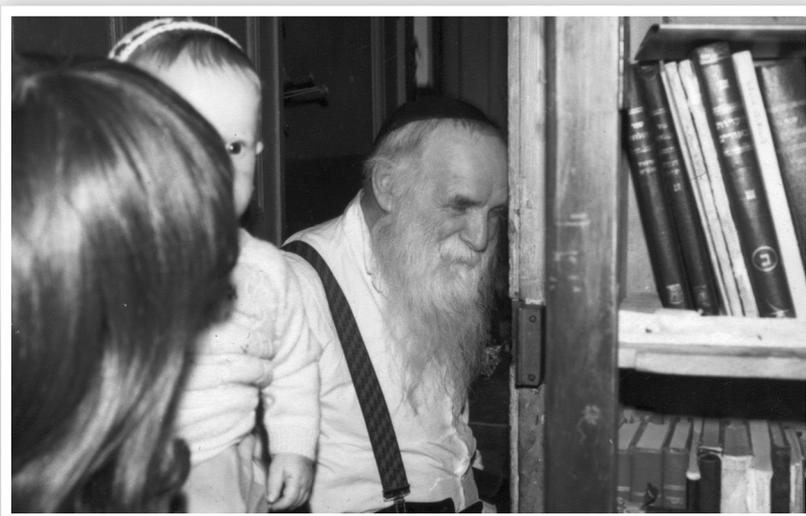
“He laughed at this world!” – standing back from this material world and viewing it as being of secondary importance.

His entire lifestyle was one of sufficing with the barest minimum. He ate and drank little, and sometimes made do with just bread and water. His relatives relate how, when they served him warm, tasty soup, he used to pour in cold water before eating it in order not to benefit from this material world!

Once he started a regular study partnership with Shneur Zalman Labkowsky, who was then a student (now he is *rosh yeshiva* of the Central Yeshiva Tomchei Temimim Lubavitch at 770) to study *Derech Chayim* – a profound ethical work of the Mitteler Rebbe which, if taken to heart, is intensely humbling, arousing heartfelt *teshuva* (repentance). Reb Aharon Yosef, as a deeply sensitive Chossid, absorbed this work’s message so profoundly that he started conducting himself with even more *iskafya* (asceticism to subdue physical desires). It came to a point where his father, Reb Yisroel Noach, begged Zalman to stop the study, for his son was now eating so little that it was damaging his health.

Another student at the yeshiva related how at one point he had a daily study partnership with Reb Aharon Yosef to study “*Samech-Vov*” (the classic series of 61 profound *maamorim* – discourses – given by the Rebbe RaShaB during the years 5666-5668 – 1905-1908). Once, as they studied together, someone brought the student a chocolate-coated wafer, a kosher delicacy scarce in France in those days, which he was obviously happy to receive. Next day, Reb Aharon Yosef didn’t show up for study. Later, when the student asked why he hadn’t come, he answered simply, “A wafer and *Samech-Vov* don’t go together!”

Reb Nochum Jakobowitz, who now lives in Antwerp, Belgium, tells how, when he lived in Paris and needed a loan, he could always get one immediately from Reb Aharon Yosef, with no



preconditions and on easy conditions for repayment. “He never thought about his own benefit at all. Even his salary that he toiled to earn, he’d give most of it to his brothers and sisters who all had families to support.”

## Soaked with tears

His deeply Chassidic character became a legend in his lifetime. Reb Sholom Ber Butman tells how, when his father, Reb Zalman Butman, lived in Paris, he used to blow the *shofar* in the *shul* on *Rosh Hashona*. Reb Aharon Yosef served as the *makri* – who, according to Chabad custom, points at each word in the *siddur* that indicates the correct blast to be blown (*tekiya*, *shevorim* or *terua*). Reb Zalman often related how, due to Reb Aharon Yosef’s deep emotion during the *shofar*-blowing (one of the reasons for which is to arouse us to *teshuva*), his *siddur* was always soaked with tears!

As reported by the yeshiva students in Brunoy, he used to pray every *Shabbos* at great length, with deep *deveikus* (devotion),

accompanied by heartrending weeping. Yosef Yitzchok Gurevitch (now *mashpia* at the Chabad yeshiva of Migdal Haemek, Israel) relates how, after the congregation finished its *Shabbos* prayers, Reb Aharon Yosef would escort his father to his room, and then return to the yeshiva to pray at great length with deep devotion. He would burst into tears and continue sobbing as he prayed. His *talis* would be soaked with tears and, after he finished, his face was flushed red from his weeping.

Another student at the yeshiva, Menachem Mendel Gluckowsky (now a leading *Rav* on the Chabad *Beis Din* – Rabbinic court – in the Holy Land), declares, “I have never seen prayer by anyone else comparable to Reb Aharon Yosef’s. Everyone knows the impressive painting by Reb Zalman Kleinman of a Chossid praying with his hands raised to the heavens. That was exactly how Reb Aharon Yosef prayed. Every *Shabbos* he would pray in the yeshiva’s *cheder sheini* (a special side room in every Chabad *shul* for those who pray slowly and devoutly). With his *talis* covering his face, he would sing haunting Chassidic melodies, as his tears streamed down like water.”

Moshe Nissan Azimov (now in Yerushalayim) studied in Brunoy in his youth and tells how “still engraved in my mind is the sweetness of Reb Aharon Yosef’s prayer every *Shabbos* afternoon.” Yosef Yitzchok Wilschansky adds, “To adequately describe Reb Aharon Yosef’s prayer requires all expressive terms in the thesaurus. Whenever he prayed, he wept and was unaware of what went on around him.”

Reb Nochum Jacobowitz tells how, one *Shabbos* after the *minyan* finished, Reb Aharon Yosef was not at his regular place where he would continue his own prayer. He looked for him all over until he discovered a locked closet where Reb Aharon Yosef had found himself a quiet, private place to pray at length undisturbed, in his usual, deeply devout manner!



## Chassidic qualities

A nephew of his, Yosef Yitzchok Gansbourg (now an educator at Nachalas Har Chabad, Kiryat Malachi, Israel), cannot forget how his uncle was aroused to weeping as he related a Chassidic story.

Uncle and nephew were once walking together, and Reb Aharon Yosef told how, when the Rebbe RaShaB once stayed abroad for health reasons, he remained in the local *shul* to pray after the *minyan* finished. The *shamash* had wanted to lock up, but seeing how the Rebbe prayed with such heartrending sobs, he did not disturb him and waited until he finished. As the Rebbe prayed, he continued weeping, and his heartfelt tears reminded the *shamash* of his own problems, which aroused him, too, to tears.

“As Reb Aharon Yosef related this, he started to weep, and

streams of tears poured from his eyes, too. I was deeply moved to see how an elderly Chossid, whose beard had turned white many years before, was so aroused by a story of the Rebbe RaShaB that he was unable to hold back his tears!”

His humility and unpretentiousness were coupled with a subtle ability to conceal his special qualities. Only those who knew him closely could perceive his essential Chassidic character.

Reb Refoel Wilschansky summed him up: “The right words to describe his character would be, ‘My soul is like dust to everyone.’ He prayed with deep devotion and was a truly great Chossid. Yet he related easily to others and was everyone’s friend. He never considered himself greater than anyone else.”

He regarded himself an ordinary person. Only when he was asked to explain a Torah subject, whether *Nigleh* or *Chassidus*, did others realize his breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding.

He was especially close with the yeshiva students. Yitzchok Goldberg, son of Brunoy’s *rosh yeshiva*, Reb Yosef Goldberg (now he is himself *rosh yeshiva* in Migdal Haemek, Israel), describes him:

“Reb Aharon Yosef was a unique personality. He was genuine, acting all his life simply and inconspicuously, with true humility. He studied Torah diligently, and when he taught, he repeated each subject’s explanation again and again, not giving up until all his students understood properly.

“Despite his relatively advanced age, he acted with utter humility like a friend to all the students. He would to speak with them on ordinary matters – although, of course, his ordinary speech was full of Chassidic stories and sayings, etc. His *ahavas Yisroel* (love of fellow Jews) was outstanding; he was full and overflowing with love towards everyone.”



Tammuz 5750. Receiving a *Kuntres* from the Rebbe

### ***Hiskashrus* (soul-attachment) to the Rebbe**

In 5710 (1950), after the passing of the Rebbe RaYaTz, Reb Aharon Yosef rededicated himself entirely to our Rebbe. Before *Rosh Hashona*, he sent the Rebbe a *pidyan nefesh* (or “*pan*,” for short) – a request to pray for him at the burial place of the Rebbe RaYaTz.

The Rebbe replied to him, “Your *pan* has been received and I will read it at the burial site of my holy father-in-law, the Rebbe... ‘A *tzaddik* who passes away is to be found in this world more than during his [physical] lifetime’ [as the *Zohar* states. Therefore] he will certainly give his blessing, and *Hashem*, may He be blessed, will fulfill his blessing for material and spiritual matters...”

“I read your *pan* on the day before *Rosh Hashona* at the burial place, and later in the chamber of my holy father-in-law, the

תשורה מהגנת הכר מצווה של אהרן יוסף ש"י שמוקלעך



Rebbe..., where people enter to give in *pidyonos* and for *yechidus*. One who gives [a gift to another] has the duty to inform him.

“You must surely have seen my general letter and the letter to yeshiva students, and you will surely let [me] know what [your community] has accomplished and done during the course of this month of overarching significance, the month of Tishre. And whoever increases [his activities] will have [his blessings] increased.”

To the above typed letter, the Rebbe added, in his own handwriting, special directives for Reb Aharon Yosef, “You request that [Divine] compassion be aroused upon you. You will surely let [me] know how you have prepared pure and broad [spiritual] receptacles for this, by setting fixed times for Torah study, working on yourself and with others, etc.”

Reb Aharon Yosef was never particular about his own dignity. But in defending the honor of *Chassidus* and of the Rebbe, he was outspoken. While taking care of the *mikveh*, he met Jews of all groupings and backgrounds, and if ever anyone spoke negatively about Chabad or the Rebbe, Reb Aharon Yosef gave him right back, showing how wrong he was.

## The Rebbe's special regard

The Rebbe expressed his special regard for him with unusual words. During one *yechidus*, the Rebbe directed him to spend much time reciting *Tehilim*, adding, “When you say *Tehilim*, Dovid *Hamelech* says them along with you!”

At another *yechidus*, the Rebbe asked whether he prayed with *avoda* only on *Shabbos* or during the week, too. He also asked which works of *Chassidus* he studied, in general and particularly on *Shabbos*. When he replied that he studied “whatever *Chassidus* works he happened to encounter,” the Rebbe seemed very pleased



with that reply. Then the Rebbe started discussing with him his great father, Reb Yisroel Noach. Later, when he reported to others the content of his *yechidus*, he summed up that part, “The Rebbe, seeing he had no one [of substance] with whom to converse, turned the conversation to discussion of my father.”

The Rebbe directed him to obligate himself every year to study a *masechta* (tractate) of *Gemora* as part of the traditional *chalukas HaShaS* (participation of many individuals in studying the entire Talmud by each obligating himself to study one or more tractates during the year). Thereafter, Reb Aharon Yosef was always particular about this every year.

One of the Rebbe’s secretaries, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Groner, relates how, in 5723 (1962), when Reb Aharon Yosef first visited the Rebbe, he told Rabbi Groner he wanted *yechidus* but was not yet ready. When he would be ready, he would let him know. Three weeks later, he told him he still wasn’t ready, but since he

had to have *yechidus* before he left, he asked to be the last person admitted that night so that he could prepare himself properly.

He entered the Rebbe's room without having written the usual note of questions and requests for blessings that others submitted, for his entire intention in having the *yechidus* was to ask whether his father, Reb Yisroel Noach, should move to the Holy Land. His audience lasted 25 minutes – an unusually long time for a Chossid who was not a leading activist. After he emerged, the Rebbe told Rabbi Groner, "It's been a long time since there's been such a 'spiritual' *yechidus*. The whole [evening of] *yechidus* was worthwhile just for such a *yechidus*."

After every *Yom Tov farbrengen*, the Rebbe used to distribute *kos shel brocha* from his wine cup, over the course of several hours, to the Chassidim, who lined up to receive it. On at least one occasion, when Reb Aharon Yosef went to receive it, the Rebbe, after pouring wine into his cup, followed him with his eyes as he walked on – another sign of the Rebbe's high regard.

### A single act free of ulterior motives

One year, Rabbi Nissan Nemanov, the renowned Chossid who headed the yeshiva in Brunoy, returned from a visit to the Rebbe and told his fellow Chassidim there how, on the several occasions when the Rebbe had spoken publicly, he had spoken extensively on the subject of *Moshiach*.

On hearing this, Reb Aharon Yosef suggested his own explanation:

Two disciples of the Mezritcher *Maggid*, Rabbi Dov Ber (the Baal Shem Tov's successor as leader of the Chassidic movement), swore to each other that the first of them to pass away would come to his companion in a dream to reveal what happens in the "World of Truth" beyond this world.



When one of them passed on, he appeared to his companion in a dream a few days later. He told him how he had come before the Heavenly Court, where all the *mitzvos* he had ever done were mentioned. For every mitzva he had done, however, he was informed of some ulterior motive he had had for his own self-benefit – except for one mitzva: Once, he was honored in *shul* with “*hagbeh*” – raising the open *sefer Torah* scroll for all to see. When called for this, he ran to do it. And the Heavenly Court told him that his running to do that mitzva was free of all ulterior motives!

Likewise, Reb Aharon Yosef explained, the Rebbe asks us to do something so that *Moshiach* be revealed, in order that, at least once, Jews get the chance to do something for *Moshiach*'s revelation without any ulterior motive. And then, he concluded, *Moshiach* will come.

During the years after 5730 (1970), when regular “hook-up” broadcasts of the Rebbe’s *farbrengens* were transmitted around the world, Reb Aharon Yosef used to listen attentively, with deep

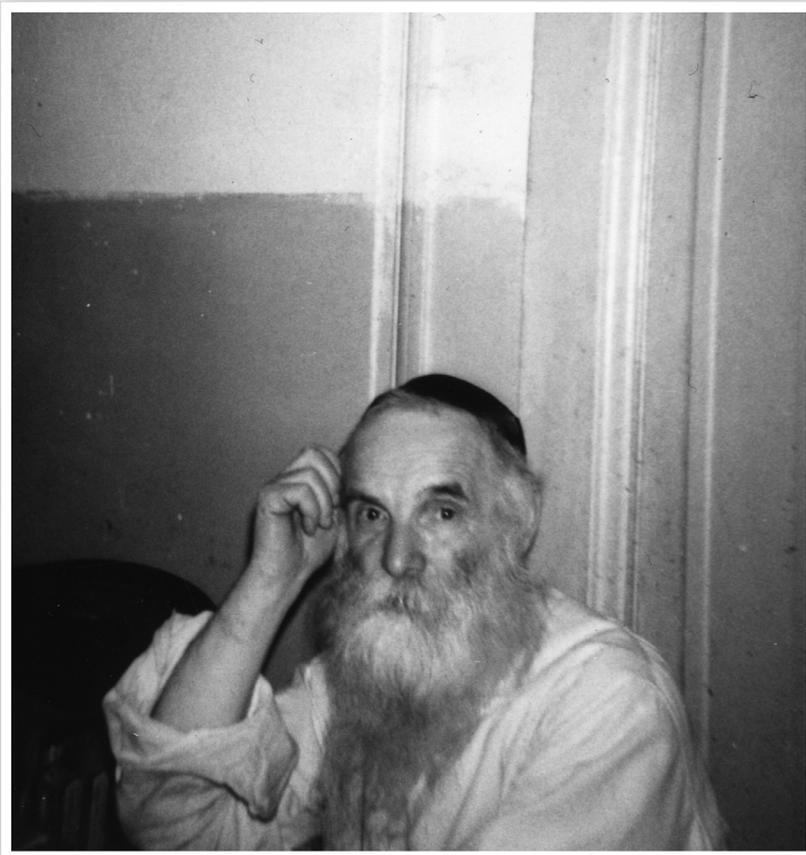
concentration, following the Rebbe's every word. When he heard the Rebbe giving a *maamor* of *Chassidus*, Reb Aharon Yosef seemed transported into a different, exalted, spiritual world.

In his later years, he decided to memorize *Tanya* by heart (doubtless he had already memorized several chapters in his youth, as did most students of *Tomchei Temimim* during those years). Despite his advanced age, he managed to memorize about 40 out of the 53 chapters in *Tanya's* first section.

### True friendship

An especially deep friendship existed between Reb Aharon Yosef and the renowned Chossid, Reb Mendel Futerfas. This closeness dated back to the years when they studied together in yeshiva in Kharkov, and had continued in Samarkand. While, however, Reb Aharon Yosef managed to leave the Soviet Union in the famous mass escape of Lubavitcher Chassidim in 1946, Reb Mendel was arrested and exiled to Siberia for many years. Nevertheless, their abiding friendship remained undiminished.

In 5724 (1963), Reb Mendel was permitted to leave the Soviet Union to be reunited with his wife and children in England. After reaching the free world, he often traveled to many lands to raise funds to help his fellow Jews, particularly Chassidim, who were still left in the USSR. Two years later, when flying from Brazil to the Holy Land, his plane made a stop in Paris. Through the efforts of Moshe Nissan Azimov, French authorities permitted him to leave the airport to meet his dear old friend, Reb Aharon Yosef. "Their joy at seeing each other again after 20 years of separation was tremendous," relates Azimov. "They *farbrenge*d together, and Reb Mendel drank *l'chayim* many times as they fondly exchanged memories of their experiences together in the underground *yeshivos* and later in Samarkand."



# תשורה מהגנת הכר מצווה של אהרן יוסף ש"י שמוקלער

In the years following, they met again several times. In 1972, Reb Mendel was appointed by the Rebbe to become *mashpia* of the yeshiva in Kfar Chabad, Israel, but still spent several weeks every year traveling to raise funds for Jews left in the Soviet Union. During his last years, however, it became difficult for him to travel and he didn't get the chance to pass through Paris.

At a Belinitzky family celebration in Kfar Chabad in 5750 (1989-1990), Reb Mendel longingly exclaimed, "If only I could now meet Aharon Yosef! Listen," he said to Aharon Yosef's nephew, Chayim Belinitzky, "I can't travel to see him. So you go to Paris and see how he feels."



Chayim thought it was just wishful thinking on Reb Mendel's part, and soon forgot about it. A month later, however, his father-in-law, the unforgettable Reb Shlomo Meidanchik, called up and asked, on behalf of Reb Mendel, why he had not yet taken the trip to France! Soon after, Reb Mendel bought him a plane ticket and he traveled on this mission on Reb Mendel's behalf, to find out about the health of his uncle, Reb Aharon Yosef.

Reb Mendel once observed that, as we know, everyone has faults. But the only fault he could find in Reb Aharon Yosef was that he was too much a *penimi*, too self-effacing and humble, concealing all his outstanding qualities! On another occasion, he said that if there is any true Chossid in this generation, it is Reb Aharon Yosef.

When Reb Aharon Yosef visited the Holy Land, he once *farbrenge*d with Reb Mendel in Kfar Chabad. They debated a certain aspect of *Chassidus*, and Reb Aharon Yosef asked him, "When did you become a Chossid?"

"From my mother's womb," replied Reb Mendel.

"No," retorted Reb Aharon Yosef, "I mean a true Chossid, who learns and *davens*" [prays as a true Chossid should].

### His special mitzva – honoring his parents

For Reb Aharon Yosef, honoring his parents was his most important mitzva, at which he toiled with great effort to fulfill it in the most fitting manner. With attentive care, he used to prepare and cook the best and most nourishing food for them, and arrange whatever they needed, continuing to do this even as he himself advanced in years.

Once, in *yechidus*, the Rebbe asked why he had to prepare and cook the food himself when he could pay someone else to do



Taking care of his Father

# תשורה מהגנת דבר מצווה של אהרן יוסף ש"י שמוקלער





Taking care of his Mother

it. Reb Aharon Yosef replied that only he knew properly how to prepare the food his father needed, and he was unwilling to give up that mitzva.

It was a heartwarming sight to see Reb Aharon Yosef, already in his seventies, bringing his father every day from his quarters to the yeshiva's *beis hamidrash*, and then back again. With both their faces adorned by long white beards, the two elderly Jews looked more like brothers than father and son, and strangers sometimes mistook Reb Aharon Yosef for the older of the two.

Once, after drinking a number of *lchayims* at a *farbrengen* in Brunoy, Reb Aharon Yosef remarked that he fulfilled what the *Zohar* says (quoted in *Tanya*, chapters 10, 41 and 44), "like a son who toils on behalf of his father and mother, loving them more than his own body and soul... and is prepared to offer his body to death in order to save them."



Next day, he was reminded of what he had said. He admitted he had no recollection of saying it, adding, "If I said that, then I resolve from now on not to drink too much *l'chayim* at *farbrengens*."

After his father's passing, when he once stood on line to receive the Rebbe's dollar and blessing, the Rebbe blessed him with a long and good life in merit of keeping the mitzva of honoring his parents.

When his father, Reb Yisroel Noach, passed away on 10<sup>th</sup> Cheshven, 5743 (1982), he invested much effort to arrange for his burial in the Holy Land. Immediately after the burial, he begged his father's forgiveness if he had not properly fulfilled his obligation of honoring him! Those present were amazed at this remarkable expression of his Chassidic character, that he could not feel satisfied he had fully fulfilled even a mitzva at which he had toiled so devotedly over the course of so many years.

## Last years

He spent his last years in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, at the home of his extremely devoted sister, Mrs. Chaya Majesky and with the aid of a faithful personal assistant, Nachman. Later, he stayed at the home of their niece, Mrs. Dina (nee Gansbourg) Tzfasman, and her husband, Reb Chayim Ezra. On *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*, he would stay at the home of his nephew, Rabbi Shloma Majesky and his wife Rivka, to be close to 770. At the Rebbe's *farbrengens*, he would sit humbly behind the Rebbe among the other Chassidic elders on the platform. On several occasions, he was privileged that the Rebbe directed him to drink *l'chayim*. His dear friend, Reb Chaikel Chanin, helped him physically and financially during his old age.

On *Shabbos*, 5<sup>th</sup> Shvat, 5763 (2002), the Chossid Reb Aharon



# תולדות הרה"ח ר' אהרן יוסף ע"ה בלניצקי

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Yosef returned his soul to his Maker at the age of 97. He was buried not far from the *Ohel* in New York.



# Stories Told By Reb Aharon Yosef

It was not often that Reb Aharon Yosef formally told Chassidic stories, but when he did relate stories about the Chabad Rebbes, tears often flowed from his eyes.

## The Baal Shem Tov rectifies a soul

Reb Aharon Yosef related the following story, which he heard from the Rebbe RaYaTz:

The Baal Shem Tov's disciples took turns attending to him. Once it was the turn of his eventual successor, Rabbi Dov Ber, the *Maggid* of Mezeritch,

During one of his times attending to him, the Baal Shem Tov latter told him, "Take the stick and give him."

The *Maggid* didn't see anyone else there. Nevertheless, he felt the stick being pulled from him. Realizing that some other, spiritual being must have been present, the *Maggid's* knees were knocking together out of fright.

"Apparently," the *Maggid* later said, "it must have been the soul of someone who had passed away, which needed to be rectified by an act of the Baal Shem Tov."

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## The *Maggid* on Yom Kippur

As is known, the *Maggid* suffered continuously from poor health, to the extent that, because of his weakness, he was unable to fast on Yom Kippur thirteen times.

He once commented about this, “The *Samech-Mem* [*Soton*] wants me to fast on Yom Kippur,” hoping that his weakness would prevent him from praying properly.

## Living is a novelty, not the opposite of living

One of the Alter Rebbe’s prominent Chassidim, Reb Leizer *der Krumer* (the “crooked one,” because he was lame in one leg), noticed a group of people in Lyozna talking excitedly. When he asked what news they had, they told him someone in town had passed away.

“That’s not news,” he said. “When someone walks around alive on two feet, with his head held erect, that’s a novelty. But when he stops doing that, it’s no novelty!”

## Finding a Rebbe

A follower of the Koidenover Rebbe once suffered as a result of his Rebbe’s annoyance, and decided to find a new Rebbe. He arrived in Lubavitch in the years before the yeshiva was founded, and observed the Rebbe RaShaB praying daily in *shul* at great length, with deep devotion. Day by day, he observed the Rebbe praying, but did not yet feel he could accept him as his Rebbe.

One day, when the Rebbe came to the passage “*Vayevoreich Dovid*,” the visitor felt something special was about to happen. Suddenly, the Rebbe cried out the words, “*Vatokem es devorecho*



*kee tzaddik Otoh*” (“You fulfilled Your words because You are righteous”).

It was those words that persuaded the visitor to become a Chossid of the Rebbe. He explained that he understood those words to mean that first we must fulfill the Rebbe’s words and directives, and only then can we come to feel how he is a righteous *tzaddik* and Rebbe.

### **A businessman doesn’t go back on his word**

A relative of the Rebbe RaShaB from the Holy Land once visited Lubavitch and had *yechidus*. He gave the Rebbe a gift – a manuscript written by the Alter Rebbe.

With both hands, the Rebbe went through the manuscript line by line, and agreed it was certainly the Alter Rebbe’s handwriting. The Rebbe’s face showed his great joy, and he asked the relative what he wanted as payment. The man was very poor, and had little understanding of what he could request from the Rebbe.

“Rebbe,” he said, “I receive support from *Colel Chabad* [the charity founded by the Alter Rebbe to support poor Jews in the Holy Land]. Since the Rebbe is the *Colel*’s official president, I ask that he send them a letter to increase my support.”

The Rebbe agreed and the visitor left his room. When he told Reb Elchonon (“Chonye”) Marozov, the Rebbe’s *gabbai* (attendant and secretary), about his *yechidus*, the latter expressed great surprise: “You could have asked for so many personal blessings. Or you could have asked to receive rare manuscripts of *Chassidus*!”

Realizing his mistake, the visitor returned to the Rebbe’s room and asked to withdraw his previous request and replace it with another.



But the Rebbe replied briefly, "A businessman doesn't go back on his word."

## High temperature from depth of thought

The Rebbe RaYaTz once told his secretary, Reb Chatshe Feigin, how his father, the Rebbe RaShaB, had such depth of thought on profound subjects of *Chassidus* that sometimes it caused his hair to fall out and his temperature to rise to 39 degrees (Centigrade-Celsius), and he would hear no one speaking.

## A new approach in *Chassidus*

Concerning the celebrated *hemshech* (series of *maamorim*) known as "*Ayin-Beis*," which the Rebbe RaShaB started in the year 5672 (1912) and continued until three and half years later in 5676 (1915), including an unprecedented total of 144 *maamorim* on the most profound subjects of *Chassidus*, the Rebbe RaYaTz once said that it was "laced differently, with a new direction" – a new approach in the teachings of *Chassidus*.

## Hearing *Chassidus* in *Gan Eiden*

The renowned *mashpia*, Reb Meshulam ("Shilem") Kuratin, passed away on 5<sup>th</sup> Ellul, 5679 (1919) a half year before the Rebbe RaShaB. After the Rebbe RaShaB's passing, his son the Rebbe YaTz said that he envied Shilem, "because he's in *Gan Eiden* and hears there the *Chassidus* said by my father," the Rebbe RaShaB.



## Greetings from *Gan Eiden*

One year (probably in 5684-1923), during the *farbrengen* on *Simchas Torah*, the Rebbe RaYYaTz said, “My father directed me to conclude the *maamor* [that the Rebbe RaYaTz had given] with the words [meaning] ‘bringing down joy throughout the year.’”

The renowned Chossid, Reb Itche *der Masmid*, asked when he had received that directive. The Rebbe replied, “On *Hoshana Rabba*” (just two days before).

Reb Itche turned pale. He stood up, holding his head in both hands, and exclaimed, “In other words, we have just received greetings from the World of Truth!”

In a rebuking tone, the Rebbe called him sternly by name, “Itche!” and covered his own mouth with his hand to indicate that he should keep quiet.

## The Rebbe’s prophetic words

One *Simchas Torah* in Leningrad (between 5685-5687 – 1924-1926), when Aharon Yosef was present, the Rebbe spoke about the serious responsibility of *shochtim* to ensure that the public receives properly kosher meat. To one *shochet* who was present, the Rebbe said, “One has to see what’s happening with the animals” at the slaughterhouse.

Returning from his visit to the Rebbe, the *shochet* went to his local slaughterhouse to see what was happening. As he entered, he heard a loud sound of someone smacking the wall. Realizing it could be problematic, he quickly walked over to see what it was.

Along the wall hung carcasses of animals properly slaughtered by *shechita*, which had been stamped with a seal attesting to their *kashrus*. This seal, when first stamped and still wet, had left its



impression on the wall. A non-Jew working there smacked his hand on that still wet impression, and then smacked it onto the carcass of an animal that, for some Halachic reason, the *shochet* had declared non-kosher, so that it, too, should appear to be kosher!

### The “mail” from *Atzilus*

In Leningrad, a *farbrengen* once lasted all night, ending in the early morning. Later that morning, the Rebbe RaYaTz came out of his room to ask his secretary, Reb Chonye Marozov, whether the mail had arrived.

Reb Chonye, still under the influence of the long *farbrengen*, jokingly asked, “Which mail? From *Atzilus*?” (*Atzilus* is the highest of four spiritual worlds above our physical world.)

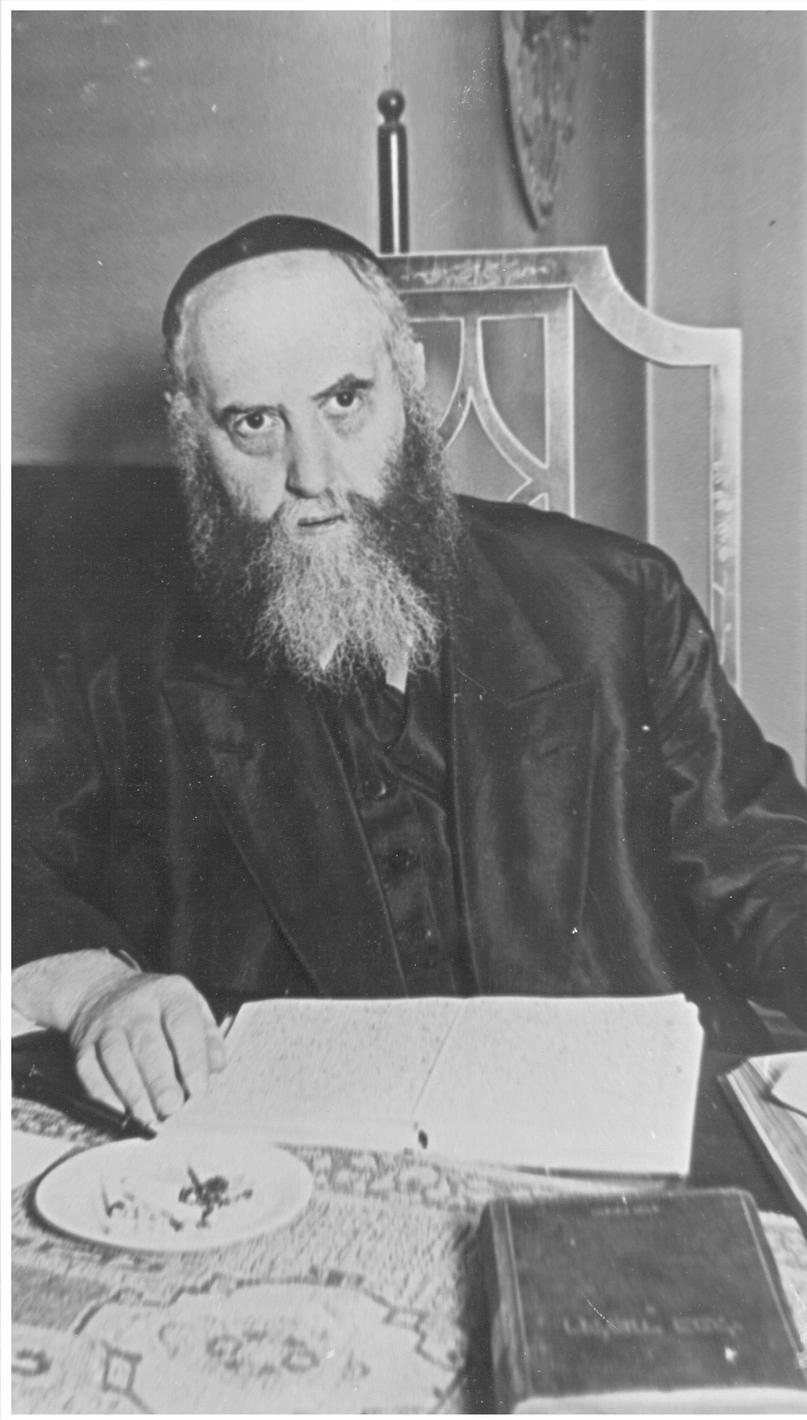
The Rebbe retorted, “The mail from *Atzilus* doesn’t go through you!”

### Father took him to be my study partner

Once, in the middle of a *farbrengen*, the Rebbe RaYaTz referred to his secretary, “Chonye is an extremely deep *penimi* [one who is totally into whatever he does]. My father asked him to be my study partner.”

### Important for a *shidduch*

Reb Zalman Butman, before he was married, once had a *yechidus* with the Rebbe RaYYaTz. He was involved then in a partnership for selling meat, and told the Rebbe he would like to leave it. But the Rebbe told him not to do that, suggesting that



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if ever one of the partners had to travel far for purposes of the business, he should volunteer to do it.

“Why is that important?” asked Reb Zalman.

“For a *shidduch* [suggestion of marriage prospects],” the Rebbe replied.

After a while, a need arose for one of the partners to travel to a faraway place, and Reb Zalman volunteered. While there, he did receive a suggestion for a certain *shidduch*, which, however, didn't work out. Nevertheless, other discussions he had while there eventually led to the *shidduch* that resulted in his marriage to a member of the Schneersohn family.

### **A perfect *avoda* for a *beinoni***

In Lubavitch, there was once a funeral which the Rebbe RaShaB attended. Afterwards he came into the great *zal* (study hall), where the students studied and prayed, in order to repeat seven times the verses of *yosheiv b'seiser* said after participating in a funeral, each time sitting in a different location. All the Chassidim who had participated followed the Rebbe in to do the same, and it became very noisy.

At the time, the *Tomim* (student), Avrohom Dovid Pevzner (some say it was Shilem Kuratin), was praying, and despite all the noise around him, was utterly oblivious to it. Looking at him, the Rebbe quoted *Tanya*, end of chapter 15, “This is a perfect *avoda* for a *beinoni*!”

### **ChaBaD, ChaGaS, NeHI**

*ChaBaD* – *Chochma, Bina, Daas*, the soul's three intellectual powers, mean (should be used for) studying Torah.



*ChaGaS* – *Chessed, Gevura, Tiferes*, the soul's three main emotional powers, mean (should be used for) prayer.

*NeHI* – *Netzach, Hod, Yesod*, the three powers bringing the emotions to influence actual practice, mean, once again, studying Torah!

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