

THE UNIQUE VILLAGE OF NEW SQUARE

The First Entirely Orthodox Community In America Offers Inspiration To All

BY RABBI MAYER SCHILLER

On Friday July 16, 1954, a few miles north of Spring Valley, New York, a strange ground breaking ceremony took place. Under the watchful eyes of a few cows and the property's former owners, the Harm brothers, a bulldozer employed by the Zemach David Development Corporation began to dig. The land being excavated, over one hundred and thirty acres of it, had been purchased a year earlier in order to fulfill the dream, seen as wildly utopian by both friend and foe alike, of a visionary leader who in many ways seemed the least likely candidate for such a venture.

The leader behind the endeavor in question was a Chassidic Rebbe who had arrived in America a little over six years before, virtually without a following. Yet, it was not merely the lack of numerous supporters which rendered the presence of bulldozers behind the pine trees lining Route 45 so improbable, but the very nature and ideals of the saintly man himself. He was committed to an essentially private existence, shunning the public forum, its controversies and fanfare. His saintliness was based upon the ways of his ancestors who had pledged themselves to a most demanding path in *avodas Hashem*, while simultaneously embracing every Jew who came their way with a deep seated empathy most often described as love. He was light years removed from the "rough and tumble" forcefulness seemingly so necessary for worldly success. Perhaps, though, forcefulness may be rooted in other than this-worldly sources. Perhaps, simple (but not simplistic) faith, true humility, simple purity and selfless love are fertile ground upon which to nurture forcefulness after all, provided such forcefulness be devoted to holy endeavors.

The tale that follows is that of the Skvera Rebbe, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Twersky *z"tl* and of his followers, a widely divergent group of *Chassidim* with almost as many backgrounds as they were individuals, who against a massive

array of forces would go on from that July day in 1954 to establish the first totally Orthodox community in America. In the process, they would imbue that community with the Chassidic doctrine and practices of Skvera Chassidism, a movement that had last flourished almost half a century before, in pre-revolutionary Russia. The enormity of this undertaking is better understood when one realizes that the Rebbe himself had last seen Skvera in 1919 (at age 19); that his father (R. Dovid, *z"tl*, the previous Rebbe) passed away in the winter of that year; that between then and the July 16th groundbreaking the Rebbe had spent time in Kishinev, Belz, Kolrashe (Rumania), Yassy, Bucharest, Budapest, Antwerp, London, Boro Park and Williamsburg. He had suffered throughout the 1920's, '30's and 40's the fate of East European Jewry: persecution, pogrom, ghettoization, deportation. Despite all this, the Rebbe never faltered and never deviated from the service of God, the way of Chassidism bequeathed to him by his father.

The New Square community (its name an anglicized version of Skvera), which today numbers over three thousand inhabitants and covers almost all of the Harm brothers' property, came into being because of the Skvera Rebbe's indomitable will. Indeed, it is impossible to discuss the efforts expended in the village's foundation without first trying to understand to some extent the Rebbe himself.

Piety And Torah: Deeply Hidden, Silently Passionate

The Belzer Rav, R. Aharon Rokeach once noted that the Skvera Rebbe, despite being "of the *gedolei hador*" (the spiritual giants of the generation) was nonetheless "*a sod fun a yid*" (a secret of a Jew). By this cryptic comment, the Belzer Rav meant that the Rebbe succeeded in concealing



Vachnacht: a New Square cheder rebbe takes his class to recite Shema beside the crib of a newborn on the eve before the bris.

the true level of his holiness from public view. This desire to hide the depth of one's saintliness from others was rooted in humility, in a desire to remove from one's action the minutest admixture of ego fulfillment and falsity.

The way of self concealment was the trademark of the Rebbe's father, R. Dovid. Once, on the fifteenth of Kislev at the *Tisch* marking the day of R. Dovid's passing, the Rebbe was asked by a leading rabbinical figure to say a few words describing his father. Steadfastly, he refused to do so. Later in the privacy of his own family he remarked, "A Jew who struggled mightily for seventy years — that there should be nothing to say about him. Go explain it to them!"

Indeed, R. Dovid himself offered a most revealing insight into the nature of his Divine service when he would remark frequently, "One must be silent (*m'darf shveigen*) and silent. And, when one tires from so much silence then one must rest a bit and then continue the silence."

Yet, despite the Rebbe's efforts to keep the true depth of his piety between himself and God there were those awe-inspiring occasions such as *hataras nedarim*, *tekias shofar*, *hakafos* or even the Friday night *Tisch* when the cauldron of his pure fear, love and yearning for God boiled over and that, which ever-present though concealed, became a revelation of holiness to one and all. As his *Chassidim* were wont to say in Skvera, "Whoever heard the Rebbe recite *Min hamaitzar* before *shofar* blowing no longer needed to hear a *droshah*."

Saintliness And Love

Of all traits which the Rebbe possessed, one is spoken of with uniform affection: his profound empathy and love for every Jew who crossed his path. His vast erudition in *Gemara* and *Shulchan Aruch* remained largely hidden from the world. His demanding regimen of *perishus* (asceticism) was known only to family and a few individuals. As for his passionate *avodas Hashem*, it had to remain, due to the Skvera teachings of humility and simplicity, a largely private matter. His *ahavas Yisrael* was another story. That, by its very definition, had to be manifest, and manifest it was in every encounter the Rebbe had with another Jew.

Shortly after the Rebbe's passing, one of his followers composed the following to show what it meant to be cared for by the Rebbe as if he were a loving father:

"As exhausted as one's heart could become from the tribulations of daily life, from the struggle to earn a living, from sickness and all the day to day sufferings, of family disputes, marriages, business failures, despite all this...it took but one smile from your face and all the dark clouds were dispersed — all was healed...In a country in which everyone is running and none have time...you had time...With

your smile, so many broken hearts were made whole... You were as joyous when a poor Jew had *parnassah* (a livelihood) as when you achieved an exalted spiritual level!... The sufferings of others stayed with you for years... The suffering of Jews was your *mikveh* in which you immersed twenty-four hours a day. Your whole body was wounded from Jewish pain... For you there was no self, no 'I', for to you the only 'I' was the Creator of the World."

The compelling nature of the Rebbe's *ahavas Yisrael* was rooted in the realization that here was a man who, despite his righteousness, or rather (for those familiar with the Baal Shem Tov's teachings) because of it, bound his soul to those of the simplest of Jews. Their sufferings, hopes and joys became his. Weeks after someone would visit him concerning a problem he would remember it, at times long after the petitioner himself had

forgotten. Jews experiencing a *simchah*, such as the birth of a child or a wedding, would often remark that they didn't experience the heights of their own joy until they saw the happiness of the Rebbe when he would hear their good tidings.

Throughout a lifetime marked by astonishing external upheavals and much personal sickness and suffering, the Rebbe's obsession was always the "others," the *Yidden*. "How was this one feeling?" "How was that one's *parnassah*?" In the tradition of Russian Chassidism, he would rarely criticize Jews in-

dividually or collectively, but only defend and love them before man and God. Our faith teaches that every Jew is unique, created and loved by God for a never to be duplicated purpose in this world. This simple truism, so often forgotten, was a living reality for the Rebbe.

The Yeshivah and Kollel of New Square become the living fulfillment of the Rebbe's extraordinary emphasis on the absolute primacy of learning Torah. His constant refrain was that "it is impossible to accomplish anything in *avodas Hashem* without in-depth study of Torah." Since the notion of vacations of any sort was anathema to the Rebbe, the *yeshivah* and *kollel* are year-round institutions. *Kollel* is a village requirement. After marriage every young man has to remain in *kollel* for, at the very least, two years. The Rebbe's commitment to *kollel* was a deep one, based not merely on the desire to spread learning and knowledge, but as he put it "to bring *ahavas Torah* into Jewish homes." By placing several years of full-time learning as the foundation stone of Jewish family life, the Rebbe hoped to create Jews who would "open *seforim* throughout their lives." Indeed, he even felt that the ability to *daven* properly afforded a *kollel* fellow would allow him to chart a lifetime's course of reverent prayer.

The *yeshivah* program established by the Rebbe (virtually intact till the present) involves close to seven hours devoted to *Gemara b'iyun* (in-depth Talmudic study), two



The Rebbe in Rumania, c. 1940-45

hours of *Shulchan Aruch* (studied with the *Tur* and *Bais Yosef* throughout), and an hour-and-a-half of *Gemara b'bekius* (quantitative Talmud study). This curriculum was broadened somewhat for *kollel* members. In addition the Rebbe expected that all young men devote a short time period before sleep every night (and increase this time on Shabbos) to Chassidic works.

Shabbos and Yom Tov themselves were awe-inspiring events featuring lengthy, passionate prayers, solemn *Tischen* led by the Rebbe's *Psalm* recital and study of the Ohr HaChayim's commentary on the Torah. Those holy days were anticipated by all, from the oldest *Chassidim* to the youngest children.

One could relate thousands of incidents which would illustrate the foregoing. The following personal experience was my own first encounter with the Rebbe's love. It was the spring of 1965. Less than a year before, at age thirteen, I had made a commitment to Torah Judaism. Hesitantly, and burdened with the ignorance born of a typically 1950's vaguely-Jewish Brooklyn upbringing, I would occasionally visit New Square while attending the local public school. There, a small circle of *Chassidim* had befriended me. At home, equipped with an English *Kitzur*, a Rosenbaum-Silberman *Chumash* and a Soncino *Gemara Berachos*, my time was devoted to learning Torah. One cold Sunday morning, I visited New Square carrying my red Soncino volume. Surprisingly, the entire village seemed to be gathered on Washington Avenue, the town's main thoroughfare. The event there was a sad one; an elderly woman had passed away. Slowly the procession led by the Rebbe and his entourage followed the coffin to the car waiting to take it to a nearby cemetery. As the vehicle pulled away, the Rebbe remained respectfully watching until it disappeared from sight. I was standing at the outskirts of the crowd when the Rebbe's eye caught mine and he gestured for me to come over.

I was fourteen years old at the time, clad in the blue ski parka typical of the period, sporting a crew-cut and a brown *yarmulka*. Scared out of my mind, I headed toward the crowd's center which had now thickened considerably as *Chassidim* gathered round to see what would follow. The Rebbe smiled at me and asked to see the Soncino Hebrew-English volume in my hand. Time seemed to stand still while he leafed through that volume with great solemnity. Slowly a smile spread across his face. It was as if that red *Gemara* and my possession of it was the most important, joyous fact of his life. In Yiddish he asked if I understood what was in the volume and when I replied that I was trying, his face broke into a huge smile. "*Boruch Hashem, Boruch Hashem*," he said and his happiness seemed to know no end. Handing me back the *Gemara* he gave me a lengthy blessing in Yiddish of which I understood nothing but felt everything.

The entire affair lasted a matter of minutes. Over twenty-six years have passed since it happened. Yet, the Rebbe's warmth and enthusiasm have inspired, sustained, consoled and strengthened me though every significant juncture of my life to this day. This was my story. Suffice it to say, volumes could be filled with similar tales.

Strength Rooted In Faith

As the world collapsed around him in Europe during this century's middle decades, he remained strong, devoted with unswerving selflessness to Divine Service and love for all. He experienced the depth of barbarism and suffering during the infamous Yassy pogrom during which 12,000 Jews were butchered on that city's streets in three days of depraved hell. He was taken away in a cattle car to a work camp. Eventually, he returned to his family in Yassy. Afterward, even under Nazi rule in Rumania, he remained the dutiful soldier of God, hand grinding flour for *matzot*, conducting his *Tischen*, visiting the *mikveh* daily, adding ascetic practices and recitations of *Psalms* to the already heavy regimen of his father's house, even when fulfillment of some of these activities were punishable by death.

Never, though, did his striving for the sake of Heaven allow him to forget the sufferings and yearnings of other Jews. After the war, his residences in Bucharest and Budapest became, as they had been in Yassy and Kolrashe, homes for all Jews yearning for a meal, a bed, spiritual instruction or merely a kind word.

The Rebbe then made his way (via Antwerp and London) to America. It was Wednesday, March 10, 1948 that the Queen Elizabeth carrying the Rebbe and his extended family docked in New York. From the start, the Rebbe was uncomfortable with the fake publicity and empty hoopla of America. He became increasingly convinced that the country's very soul was deeply antithetical to a life of Torah and faith. Although he moved from Boro Park to what were becoming the more intensely Chassidic environs of Williamsburg in 1950, the Rebbe became convinced that in order to raise future generations with true Jewish values it would be necessary to leave the city and establish a secluded community separated from its spiritually inhospitable atmosphere.

A Daunting Task

The odds against the establishment of their community seemed overwhelming. The Rebbe had been exiled from his natural home for over three decades so there was a decided lack of a natural following. The general Chassidic community of Williamsburg was comprised of immigrants, largely still impoverished, seemingly incapable of providing the amount of capital necessary. Indeed, by moving out of the city, the Rebbe would be deserting those *Chassidim* who remained behind, perhaps cutting himself off from their future support.

Beyond these practical considerations, though, there was the sheer wildness of the plan. A famous Chassidic leader of that era remarked, "The Skvera Rebbe will get his village when hair will grow on the palm of my hand!" That statement was fairly accurate of the public's assessment of the Rebbe's plans.

Yet, these cynics were not aware of the powerful, holy fire that burned in the heart of the *bahaltener* (hidden) Rebbe. A strikingly heterogeneous following was slowly gathering around him. There were Hungarian Jews who related well to his uncompromising loyalty to traditional

Orthodoxy, Galician Jews who saw in him a continuation of Belzer tradition, Polish Jews who admired his combination of Torah and Chassidism and Americans who were attracted by his deep sincerity. All of them sensed that in the Skvera Rebbe they had found a father and they were comforted being his children.

Slowly commitments were made and money, though limited, was raised. A property was located and purchased. However, the ground-breaking ceremony of July, 1954, far from being the end of the struggle, was only the beginning of a series of difficulties which the Rebbe and his followers would encounter. Immediately a host of man-made and natural road blocks were thrown in their way.

Farm land was not all the Harm brothers had sold to Zemach David (the New Square corporation). The property sloped steadily downhill from Route 45 and as it did so, became entirely wetland and swamps. This presented the Chassidim with a major problem. The local Town of Ramapo Planning Board ruled in January, 1954 that the 130 acres was too wet to permit the use of septic tanks. A sewage system would have to be installed. This seemingly innocent development plunged the Rebbe's dream village into the depths of a crisis from which it would take years to escape. Installing the proper system was a massive undertaking, capable of bankrupting Zemach David Corporation before its plan even got off the ground.

The Ramapo Town Board, none too happy about the proposed Orthodox community, assumed that the initial financial woes would prove insurmountable. They requested a \$140,000 bond guaranteeing the conclusion of satisfactory work within three years. The financial burden was only part of the story. Trucks arriving at the property would inevitably sink into its swamps, often remaining stuck there for days on end. As physical and financial difficulties mounted on all sides, the Rebbe remained committed to his dream. Sewers and homes were slowly constructed. Huge debts piled up. The Town Board believed that the entire project would soon collapse.

Two years had passed since the property's purchase. No family had yet moved in. Not one Certificate of Occupancy had been issued. Yet, on June 5, 1955 the foundation stone for the community's synagogue was laid in a festive ceremony attended by the Rebbe and his followers. This was typical of the Rebbe's unshakable conviction that the holy project could not fail.

Finally, in December of 1956, the Town Board's Chief Inspector relented. Clearly Zemach David was not going away. He issued four C. of O.'s to Reb Moshe Holczer, a



*Rabbi Dovid Twersky, shlita,
the current Skvera Rebbe.*

builder deeply involved in the construction of Square (and an early settler in the village). Shortly thereafter another eight C. of O.'s followed and then the remaining 54 were received.

The families arriving in New Square in early 1957 found dirt roads, no lights and a sense of total isolation. Food had to be brought from nearby Monsey. Commuting to New York was grueling. Yet, those early pioneers were suffused by a joy born of the conviction that they were creating a community free of America's negative influences and permeated by the spirit of Torah Judaism.

On April 5, 1957 the Rebbe joined them. Now, there would be no turning back. Over the next three years assorted financial and other pressures were placed upon the new community by the Local Town Board, the Federal Housing Administration, which had guaranteed the original mortgage, and

the United Mortgage and Serving Corporation. The only possible way out of the increasingly precarious situation was to erect more houses than those allowed for by town zoning laws. Thus, in February, 1960 the New Square leaders filed for incorporation as a village.

The town was furious. The Chassidim had now found a way to buy themselves time and, perhaps, render their venture financially solvent. Legal battles began between the town and Zemach David ending in July 18, 1961 with a State Supreme Court ruling in favor of the latter. Accordingly, on November 6, 1961 the Village of New Square was officially incorporated by the State of New York.

The Sun Sets...

For the next seven years the Skvera Chassidim lived a near idyllic existence in the village with their Rebbe. A cheder building was constructed as the early inhabitants' children grew up. Most of them had been Holocaust survivors beginning life anew. Their teenage children were unlike their contemporaries outside of New Square, remaining untouched by the '60's spirit of rebellion. The media, viewed by them as a source of so much contemporary evil, was kept out of their lives: no television, movies or popular music were permitted. Most significantly, they were free of the man-centeredness of modernity. Theirs was a traditional Jewish world. God was the focus.

On March 31, 1968 (2 Nissan) this happy picture was shattered by the Rebbe's passing. Thousands of people descended upon the village for his funeral. He had been a friend to so very many. On the streets of New Square, men, women and children wept. Who would console them now that their saintly comforter was gone? Who would bring them

the joy of Divine Service now that their dutiful Divine servant was gone?

...And Rises

Yet, God in His great mercy continued to bless this holy venture. The Rebbe's only son, R. Dovid, *shlita*, succeeded his father. His imperative was to teach the doctrines and practices of his father and see to it that his father's work survive and prosper.

For twenty-three years the current Skvera Rebbe has led the community along the path of his father during a period of astonishing growth. Skvera Chassidim have multiplied throughout the world and their *shatieblach* are found in North America, Europe and Eretz Yisrael.

Of course, difficulties abound. Financial problems are ever present and an undertaking as vast as Skvera will never be free of this world's manifold travails. However, as the thirty-ninth anniversary of the purchase of the farm land approaches, it seems safe to say that the Rebbe's dreams were largely realized.

New Square And Us

Other Chassidic groups have followed the example of New Square in recent decades. Non-Chassidic examples of Torah-focused communities exist as well. However, for the majority of American Orthodox Jews, the isolation and insularity of these communities is not a possible goal.

Yet, an elementary sociological fact cannot be ignored: Environment creates the parameters of our thoughts, words and deeds. The Rebbe's great concern with the purity of Jewish souls, his yearning that our values be totally imbued

with the spirit and letter of our faith led him to dedicate his life to establishing a community where the joys of eternity would be the chief source of happiness. His fear was that an easy openness to contemporary America would lead to a weakening of a Jew's required response to virtue as well as sin. We all sense the legitimacy of this fear. Let us listen to the pertinent words of the Rambam in the *Yad*:

"It is man's nature to be drawn after his acquaintances and friends in his thoughts and actions and he conducts himself in the way of the land's people. Therefore, it is necessary for a man to attach himself to *tzaddikim* and to always sit with *chachamim* in order to learn from their actions; and he should remove himself from the wicked who walk in darkness, in order not to learn from their actions." (*De'os* 6:1)

Clearly America's all-encompassing media and its potent cultural controls are frequently in conflict with Torah values. For the Jew there is only one solution: he must live in a Torah community. That community may be an isolated village, or a shul, or merely a group of committed people that share its participants' sorrows and joys, emphasizes the joys of a normative Torah lifestyle and creates an awareness of the negatives of contemporary America. As Jews, our refuge must be God and Torah and the strength supplied by life spent amongst dedicated Jews.

The Skvera Rebbe, that profound lover of every Jew, will surely serve as a merciful intercessor for us before God's throne as we attempt, each firmly rooted in our own Torah communities, to live the life of joyous purity he wished for us all. □

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J. Levine Co. Thrives As They Move to Diversify

The showroom has marbled floors, polished chrome and glass cases with blue neon trim. On display are hand-painted mezuzahs, Batman and Ninja Turtle yarmulkes, and gold and silver menorahs. J. Levine & Company is not the typical old-fashioned religious bookstore.

"I've found that people are looking today for presentation or atmosphere," said Danny Levine, the owner of J. Levine & Company, a Manhattan store that specializes in Jewish books and a variety of Judaica.

"I want the store to be the Henri Bendel of Judaica," he said. "People should feel, wow, this is Judaism at its best."

Mr. Levine said his sales had doubled over the last three years and estimated that sales were up 10 percent this year. Mr. Levine believes that diversification has made his store recession-proof.

The store, at 5 West 30th Street, also sells religious articles and furniture to synagogues and schools and

Hard times appear to be increasing interest in religion.

operates a mail-order service.

"When one part of the business doesn't work, we can turn to another," he said.

In a time when many businesses have cut back, religious booksellers appear to be thriving.

Among the Jewish books are a new translation of the Talmud, "Chutzpah" by Alan M. Dershowitz and "The Search for God at Harvard" by Ari L. Goldman, a reporter for The New York Times.

"We're Doing Surprisingly Well"

"In light of everything going economically down the tubes, we're doing

surprisingly well," said Rabbi Michael Monson, executive vice president of the Jewish Publications Society, a nonprofit publishing house that publishes 15 to 20 titles a year.

One reason for this growth is the increasing types of Jewish books, expanding well beyond rabbinical studies. "There's a wide range of books," said Arthur Kurzweil, vice president of Jason Aronson Publishing Inc. "Serious theology, cook books, gay and lesbian Jews, intermarriages, Soviet Jewry, humor, photography. We publish a new book every two or three weeks."

Although there are no chains of Jewish bookstores, Mr. Kurzweil notes that there are many small bookstores, as well as larger booksellers with big Judaica sections.

But for him, J. Levine & Company and J. Roth Bookseller in Los Angeles are "the king and queen of retail Jewish bookstores."



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