



CHASSIDUS for NON-CHASSIDIM

A PORTRAIT OF MOSHE “GABBAI”

A look at the life of this quintessential Polish Chassid demonstrates the enduring legacy and universal message of the Baal Shem Tov.

By Rabbi Mayer Schiller

Reb Moshe ben Chaim Peretz Weiss (1896-1973), universally known as Moshe “Gabbai” or Moshe “Batlan,” was twice a survivor. He was a physical survivor, being among a small number of Polish Jews who emerged from the First World War and the Holocaust. In a deeper sense, though, he was a spiritual survivor; one of the last of a “vanishing breed.” Moshe was a prototypical *Chassid*, a *Chassidische Yid* of the old school whose every word and deed was the living embodiment of the Baal Shem Tov’s holy path. From him young *Chassidim* on three continents, spanning the century, would imbibe the ideas and practices of their predecessors. Academic theories and scholarly works about “*Hasidism*,” with their ivory tower detachment, are incapable of capturing what it means to live as a *Chassid*.

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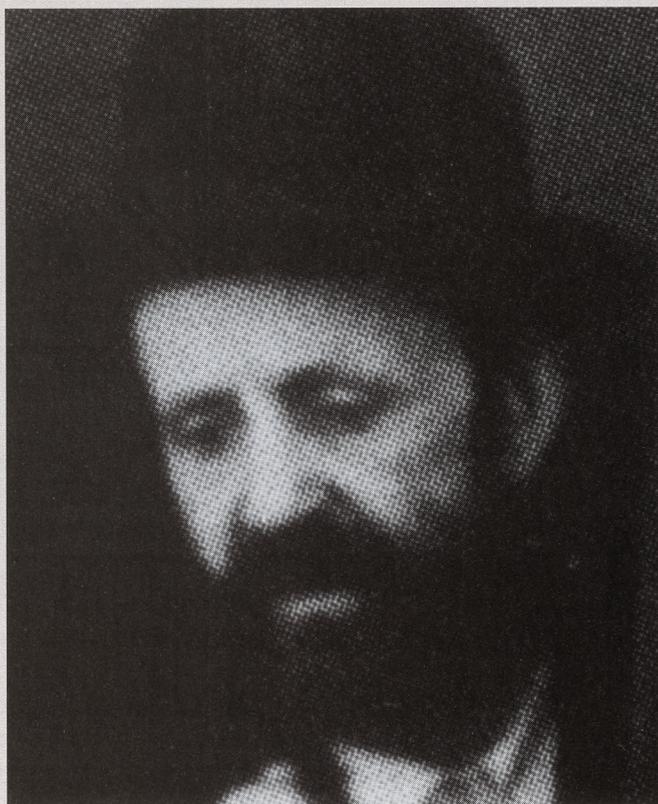
Indeed, even the study of the movement’s works in the original cannot serve as a substitute for having witnessed the towering divine service of *Chassidic baalei avodah* [masters of serving God] of past generations.

Before meeting the unique figure of

Moshe “Gabbai,” we must understand that *Chassidic* groups were and are extraordinarily diverse. The paths in God’s service which each demanded often differed on fundamentals. This was especially so when the groups were separated geographically. The

passion and creativity which the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples released into the world took many and, at times, contradictory forms. “Reb” Moshe, (a respectful term used about him — though never to his face, for the outer trappings of respect were viewed with much disdain in the *Chassidic* circles of his youth) was a Polish *Chassid*. This was a particular type, in no way to be confused with Lithuanian, Hungarian, Galician or Ukrainian *Chassidim*. Moshe Gabbai was not your typical “Polisher,” but the *Chassidic* orientation of that land formed the core of his sensibilities and certainly of his style throughout his life.

He was born in 1896 in Lodz, a teeming metropolis overflowing with thousands of



A rare photo of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Twersky, the Skvera Rebbe for whom Moshe Weiss served as “Gabbai.”

Chassidim and their *rebbe*s. This was a milieu in which Torah learning, primarily Talmud and Codes, was seen as the first and most necessary ingredient for a *Chassid*. ("What is *Chassidus*? It is Abaye and Rova and *chesed* [i.e. Talmudic study and doing kind deeds for Jews].") This was a somewhat flip-pant, somewhat reductionist, but unmistakably Polish *Chassidic* refrain.) Thus, prior to becoming a *bar mitz-*

It was a grueling regimen. Entire days — of the 12-16 hour variety — would be devoted to learning a few paragraphs in the *Shulchan Aruch*. They were studied first in the *Tur* with the *Beis Yosef* commentary, then in *Shulchan Aruch* with *Shach* and *Taz* and finally, *Pri Megodim*. The key was review and the forceful, oft-repeated cry of "*Noch a mol!*" [One more time!] would inevitably follow the conclusion

The *shtiebel* was a unique institution. Literally it means "room" or "home." It was occasionally small enough to qualify as the former. It was always the latter. Large segments of the *Chassid's* life were played out within its walls. It was there he prayed three times daily. Prayers were often followed by a "*l'chaim*," schnapps and cake. This was offered to commemorate the passing of some righteous per-



"The Synagogue" by Isidor Kaufmann. Courtesy of Michael Kaniell

vah, the young Moshe was entrusted by his father, Reb Chaim Peretz, to the care of the latter's father-in-law, Reb Pesach Poltiska. Reb Pesachya, as he was called, was an expert in *Yoreh Deah* and it was in this difficult field that he spent many marathon sessions with his grandson.

of all units of study.

Polish *Chassidim* did not, generally, establish *yeshivos*. It was in the *shtieblach* [small, intimate houses of worship and study] of the land where the young sat under the tutelage of elders immersing themselves in the intricacies of Talmud day and night.

son, about whom tales would be told while partaking of the Spartan repast. Throughout the day the *shtiebel* was alive with Torah. The very young would sit side by side with aged scholars. There were no forms of hierarchy among the learners. They all drank the same tea throughout the day and

would eat the same herring, potatoes or noodles at night. There were no pews or theater seats in the *shtiebel*. Long tables and benches were the only furniture. Candles lit for prayers or to commemorate a *tzaddik's* passing bathed the *shtiebel* in the silent mysteries of their flickering illuminations.

In the *shtiebel*, the major events of life were celebrated — *bris*, Bar Mitzvah, as well as *Shalosh Seudos* and *Melevah Malkah*. And when national or world news was deemed of significance to the Jewish community, the *shtiebel* would become the place where this news was discussed and analyzed.

The atmosphere in *Polisher shtieblach* was relaxed, almost brash. Any outer piety which departed from communal norms was mocked. ("How do you know a Jew is doing *teshuvah*? If you see him doing it, you know he isn't; if you don't, there is a possibility he is!" they would say.) The Jew sitting next to you need not know of the intensity of your prayer or any aspect of piety. The only overt form of service in Poland was the study of Talmud.

If the *shtiebel* was the *Chassid's* spiritual home, his spiritual father was not there. The apple of his eye, the *rebbe*, generally lived elsewhere. The *Chassid* would frequently journey over long distances to spend Shabbos or Yom Tov in his *rebbe's* company. This journey itself was part of a process of spiritual transformation, for on the way he would meet other *Chassidim* with the same destination. Thus united, they would study Torah, tell stories or sing till late into the night as they traveled as preparation for the awe-inspiring meeting with the *tzaddik*.

This pure air of Torah and *Chassidus* of Polish Jewry was all the young Moshe breathed during his formative years. While his son was yet a child, Reb Chaim Peretz took him along whenever he would visit his *rebbe*, Reb Yisrael Yitzchok Yerachmiel, the noted second Rebbe of Alexander. The Rebbe's foremost work, *Yismach Yisrael*, is a classic which emphasizes all the basic tenets of *Chassidus* — faith

and trust in God, devotion of one's energies to intense Torah study and prayer, humility, joy, love of all Jews, and faith in a *tzaddik*.

Throughout his life Reb Moshe would make mention of the Alexander Rebbe's greatness, although the latter passed away in 1910 when the young *Chassid* was barely a *bar mitzvah*.

Shortly after the outbreak of the First World War and its draft, Moshe was forced to flee the Lodz of his youth. He lived for a brief time in Slonim where he became attached to the second *rebbe* of his youth, Reb Shmuel Slonimer. It was there that he immersed himself in the unique rhythms of Karlin-Stolin *Chassidus*, of which Slonim is a derivative. He sat long hours among the elder *Chassidim* at their festive gatherings and absorbed the joy, the songs, the tales and the epigrammatic genius of this Lithuanian *Chassidus* which creatively fused passion and lucidity. In his later years, Reb Moshe spoke constantly of Reb Shmuel Slonimer. His refrain was, "Slonim was all heart. And even when it was necessary to think deeply, it was a *tifkeit mit hartz*" [depth with heart].

Eventually the upheavals of war caused the young *Chassid* to continue his wanderings. He fled to Russia where his travels brought him for a brief time to the town of Skvera. The Skvera Rebbe at that time was "Reb Dovid'l" whose powerful silence and fear of Heaven were matched by his limitless love for *Klal Yisrael*. It was to be with Reb Dovid'l's son and grandson that Moshe would forge extraordinary bonds in later life. At the Skvera Rebbe's advice, Moshe journeyed on to Kishinev to attend the world-renowned yeshivah there.

The Kishinev yeshivah had gone through several periods of growth and decline in its existence. It flourished immediately after the First World War. At its head was Reb Gamliel, a Tschortkover *Chassid*. He fused *bekius* and *amkus* [breadth and depth] in his

Talmudic study and *Chassidus*. It was under his tutelage that Reb Moshe acquired an affinity for the *Chassidus* of Rizhin (with its emphasis on the *tzaddik's* cosmic significance) and the firm sense that *sipurei tzaddikim* [tales of *rebbes*] were not matters to be trifled with. Reb Gamliel was always careful to relate a *Chassidic* tale exactly as he'd heard it with no embellishments of fact. In addition, he would not "tell over" any *sipur* [tale] which he hadn't heard from either *rebbes* or elder *Chassidim*.

Years later, when Moshe would sit at a *Melevah Malkah* or *yahrzeit seudah* [meal in honor of a *yahrzeit*] and relate a tale, one was struck with his precision of detail. More significantly, though, one couldn't help but be overwhelmed with the reverence in his voice and gesture, the aura of holy quiet which would envelope his listeners as the *sipur* would unfold.

Among the illustrious *talmidim* attending the Kishinev yeshivah in the early '20s were the future Rebbes of Ribnitz (Reb Chaim Zanvil Abramowitz) and Skulen (Reb Eliezer Zusya Portugal). Reb Moshe was a *chavrusa* [study partner] of both of them for a long time. The level of Kishinev was most demanding. Few emerged from it without a thorough knowledge of *Shas* and *Shulchan Aruch*.

In 1920 Reb Moshe was married in Kishinev to Susha Schlachter, the daughter of a Bialer *Chassid*. Shortly thereafter he began to give *shiurim* in the yeshivah in Gemara and *Yoreh Deah*. Despite the depth of his presentations, he always devoted some time daily to the study of *Chumash* with *Rashi's* commentary. During the week of *Parshas Yisro*, Gemaras were always closed. The entire week was devoted to in-depth study of that fundamental *sidra* (in which the giving of the Torah is related) with the entire commentaries of Rashi, Or HaChaim and Ramban.

In Kishinev, Reb Moshe once again came into contact with the Skvera dynasty. The surviving children of

Reb Dovid'l Skvera had fled there in the winter of 1920. Reb Itzikel Twersky, the Rebbe's first born from his second marriage, was the Skvera Rebbe of Kishinev. Reb Yaakov Yoseph, his younger brother, also lived there. It was at this time that Reb Moshe made the acquaintance of this saintly prodigy who would eventually become the most world-renowned of all Skvera Rebbes.

It was from Kishinev that Reb Moshe would journey to a *rebbe* who in many ways was very different from those *rebbe*s of Poland and Lithuania whom he had known previously. Reb Avraham Matisyahu of Shtefineshter in Rumania had succeeded his father, Reb Menachem Nachum, in 1869. The young *rebbe* was only 20 at the time. Over the following 64 years, he was to become the most popular *rebbe* in Rumania. The first Shtefineshter was a son of Reb Yisrael of Rizhin. Unlike their counterparts to the north, the Rebbes of Rizhin were most private when it came to their Torah learning, but quite public with their great love of every Jew. This became manifest during their endless hours of private counseling and frequent miraculous assistance to suffering Jews of every type. The Rizhiner Rebbe was a very private person but his record of wonders spread far and wide. Tens of thousands flocked to his doorstep. Indeed, secular historians note that after his passing in 1933 the town's economy never recovered.

Reb Moshe was in Shtefinesht on every Yom Tov. His stays there would extend for weeks as, immersed in Torah and prayer, he attempted to absorb a bit of the holiness which emanated from the Rebbe. Faith, love and nonverbal instruction were the means of teaching in Rizhin.

Above all else, Reb Moshe was a believer. Once he decided that a *rebbe* was worthy of his devotion, nothing was ever to be called into question thereafter. It should be noted that he

was far from naïve, and not every *rebbe* who crossed his path received his loyalty — yet all the customs and statements of those who did were forever meaningful to him.

After the Shtefineshter's passing, the next *rebbe* who would be the object of Reb Moshe's loyalty and love was to transcend all those who came before, and even a few who were still to follow. Reb Yaakov Yosef Twersky had moved from Kishinev to Kolarash in 1927 and begun his service as *rebbe* there. In the winter of 1933-'34 he settled in Yassy, a major Rumanian metropolis. Reb Moshe had moved there in order to accept the position which would forever give him one of his nicknames — Gabbai. From that winter till 1948, Reb Moshe was the Skvera Rebbe's loyal attendant. He took care of the needs of the Rebbe and his family and deeply involved himself in the process of greeting, consoling and, in many cases, educating the Jews who flocked to the Rebbe's door. And flock they did from all segments of Rumanian Jewry, even those who were far removed from a Torah life. Undaunted, the Rebbe, schooled in the Torah asceticism of his father's home and Reb Moshe, scholar and "*Chassidische amkan*," managed to engage all who came to their door on whatever level was appropriate. There were many *baalei teshuvah* who emerged from this period, and even those incapable of carrying through the process to its conclusion would carry the impression of the loving *rebbe* and his loyal *gabbai* throughout their lives.

Yassy was particularly hard hit by the war's savagery. In one historic pogrom over 12,000 Jews were killed. Yet, despite the precariousness of the situation and the Rebbe's eventual deportation (he was one of the few who survived the infamous "death train") Reb Moshe remained a *Chassid*: joy, faith, humility, study and prayer were the center of his existence and he brought this indefatigable spirit to all those around him. Time and again, then and in later years, he would proclaim,

"My *zeida* was a *Chassid*, my father was a *Chassid* and I am a *Chassid*." This refrain summed up the man.

After the war, Reb Moshe accompanied the Skvera Rebbe as the latter made his way across Europe, with America as their destination. In Antwerp, though, a tragedy intervened which caused Reb Moshe to be separated from his Rebbe for many years to come. The incident was never spoken about by him in later years and to this day is somewhat shrouded in legend and conflicting reports. These are the bare bones of the story: Reb Moshe's only son Chaim was a teenager at the time. He fell off a trolley and hit his head. His situation deteriorated rapidly. His brain was irreparably damaged. The Rebbe's travel date to America arrived. Reb Moshe would have to stay behind to care for his son. Apparently there was some form of treatment or doctor there who held out the possibility of recovery. Antwerp became Reb Moshe's home.

It was there that he made the acquaintance of Belzer *Chassidim* who had a *shtiebel* in the city. In the early '50s, Reb Moshe joined them on several trips to Israel where the Belzer Rov, Reb Aharon had settled. Thus, when his aged in-laws and daughter asked him to settle in Jerusalem in the mid-'50s, he did so. After all, the Belzer Rov would be there. Besides, he continued the custom he had begun a few years before of writing daily to the Skvera Rebbe. The latter had by this time (1956) moved out of New York City and founded the all-*Chassidic* village of New Square.

In Israel, Reb Moshe assumed the role he would have the rest of his life — spreading Torah to one and all and teaching *Chassidus* to the next generation as he had received it from his *rebbe*s. He followed the Belzer Rov until the latter's passing in 1957 and thereafter returned to his Polish roots, attaching himself to the Gerer Rebbe. This was an extraordinary period in his life. He was regarded as one of the old generation of *Chassidim* in Belz, Ger and Slonim. The younger genera-

tion flocked to his side. He was ready at any time of day or night to learn. All *masechtos* in *Shas* were familiar to him. And on *Shabbosim* and *Yomim Tovim* he'd dazzle the next generation with tales of the old *Chassidim* and the vast array of *rebbe*s he'd known.

Finally in the early '60s, with the passing of the elderly folk of his immediate family and his son institutionalized and no longer able to recognize him, he set out on the last of his pilgrimages. He went to America or, better stated, to New Square, where the spirit of the old country still lived.

Mechal Direnfeld, an electrician whose charity and good deeds knew no bounds, provided Reb Moshe and his *rebbe*tzin with a modest apartment in his basement. His true home, though, was in the yeshivah, *shul* and the Skvera Rebbe's *hojf* [courtyard]. It was there that he shaped the minds and hearts of so many in New Square.

It was in New Square that I encountered Reb Moshe during my first visits there in 1964. A window into what this man was may be gleaned from his Shabbos schedule: Although he most assuredly ate and slept, these activities were fairly minor items on a day devoted to the study of *Chumash* with the commentary of Rashi and the Or HaChaim. He never missed nor came late to the Rebbe's *tisch*, as far as I can recall. At the time of candle-lighting, he was already in *shul* with a group gathered around him, immersed in study. This lasted about an hour until davening began. After davening, during the 10-15 minutes that it took for the congregation to file by the Rebbe in order to wish him a good Shabbos, once again a group gathered around Reb Moshe and a few more "Or HaChaims" would be learnt. No matter how quickly you'd finish your meal, by the time you'd get back to the *shul* for the Rebbe's *tisch*, Reb Moshe would once again be there. Surrounded by anywhere from 2-30 disciples, he'd work his way through the most complex Or HaChaims. Again and again, throughout Shabbos, this process was repeated. He learned with everyone,

from the oldest *baalei batim* to children from *cheder*, always with the same enthusiasm and fire. Every word had to be translated and understood. Of course, during the *tisch* itself all the above activities ceased. Reb Moshe sat at the opposite end of the table from the Rebbe and viewed every second of this holy event as demanding his undivided awe and attention. I can still see him Friday night, after the conclusion of the *tisch*, even at 2:00 in the morning, gathering anyone who was interested to his side to learn yet "*noch a mol.*"

He was a never-ending whirl of energy and enthusiasm. Meeting him on the street was an experience. He'd slap you on the back or on top of your hat, careful to crush it in the process. Everyone was referred to in the rough and tumble egalitarian parlance of Polish *Chassidim* as "*chonyuck*" [disheveled], or a "*parach*" [a speck of dust]. At times the slap on the back would be accompanied with an exhortation to "*vax a Chassid*" [may you grow to be a *Chassid*] or "*vax a layt*" [grow to become a decent fellow]. Invariably he'd invite you to some *yahrzeit seudah* to mark the passing of a *rebbe*.

His *Melavah Malkahs* over the years were largely attended by older men whose weekdays were devoted to earning a living. Reb Moshe was their favorite as well. Together with them he'd "*shecht* a herring" and store it in oil for weeks on end in order to get it to ideal herring "quality." His basic *Melevah Malkah* menu never deviated — old *challah*, herring and tea. Occasionally the menu expanded to include cooked fish. The order of events never varied. Between songs, Reb Moshe would relate tales and sayings of *rebbe*s. Afterwards, the entire group would dance in circle. Depending on how things went, the *Melaveh Malkah* could last anywhere from a half hour to two or three. It didn't matter how many people were there or what time of night it was. Popularity

and comfort were just not in his vocabulary. I never saw him down or defeated. He was always there to learn, tell a story or playfully insult you. His only negativism was to institutional authority of which he was highly skeptical. If you were wealthy, a *rosh kehillah* or *rosh yeshivah* you'd have to prove to him that the position had not gone to your head before he'd be willing to call you a "*parach.*"

His faith in the Skvera Rebbe was absolute. He davened with the Rebbe's *minyán* three times a day. He accompanied the Rebbe on all trips out of New Square. On the bitter day of 2 Nisan, 5728 (1968), he mourned the passing of the Rebbe upon whom he based so much of his life. Immediately, he transferred his loyalty to the Rebbe's only son, the current Rebbe. Thus Reb Moshe spanned three generations of devotion to Skvera Rebbe's beginning with his Shabbos spent in Skvera in the Ukraine of WWI.

Over the years, I was convinced that Reb Moshe had lived through so much because he was destined to welcome *Mashiach*. Sadly it was not to be. He passed away on Shabbos, the 22nd of Teves, 5733 (1973). The funeral was on *Motzei Shabbos* on a bitter cold evening. At its conclusion, many returned to *shul* for a very lonely *Melevah Malkah*.

His smile and laugh are with me to this day, as well as his defiant and joyous proclamation, "*Ich bin a Chassid!*" To the degree that thousands of others around the world and their disciples of all ages can in some small way say the same, we have Reb Moshe "Gabbai" *z"l* to thank.

For the modern Jew whose cultural context is much different than Reb Moshe's, the task as we view his life is to look beyond externals. It is to look at the man's essence. There we discover the lasting legacy of the Baal Shem Tov. There we find faith and joy in the face of all adversity; we find camaraderie capable of carrying us through life's confusions; we find Torah as the final healer of souls and ultimately we find a loving, personal God.