

The Jews of Poland

By DEVORAH KIRSCH

Part III: Before the Fall

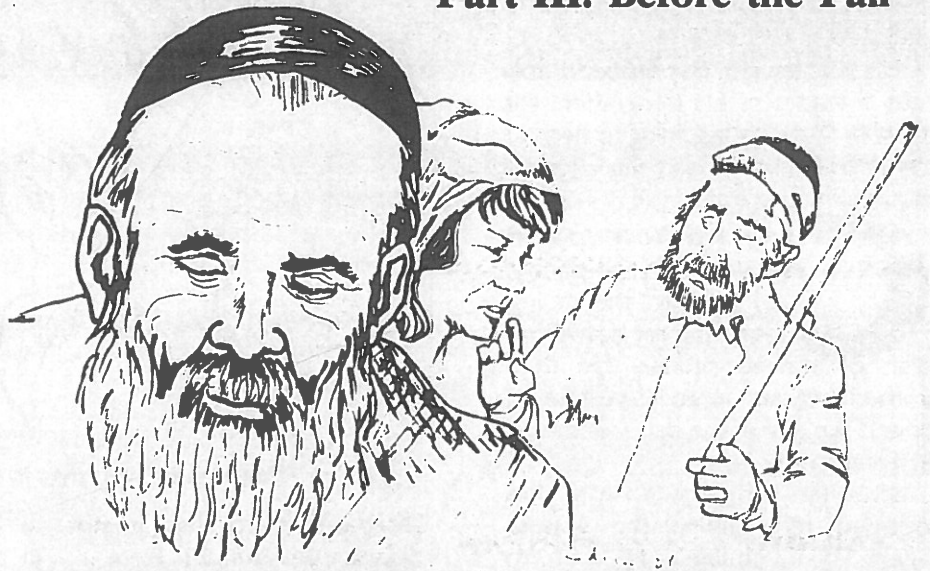
By the 19th century, chassidus, begun by Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov, had emerged triumphant. Its numbers of followers had spread, and *rebbe's* courts were established all over Poland. A wave of spirituality engulfed the population, as the common worker realized he could be just as important as the scholar. Thousands "converted" to this intense life style.

However, not everyone embraced chassidus. Many opposed what they felt was legitimized ignorance. In Lithuania, a movement arose which fostered the study of Talmud and *mussar*, ethics (see Sivan issue).

Some Lithuanians felt that chassidus, in much the same way as Talmud, could be systematically studied. A style of thought originated along these lines. Developed by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Lyady in his work *Tanya*, it came to be known as *Chabad* (from the acronym *Chochmah-Binah-Da'as*, Wisdom-Knowledge-Understanding). Rabbi Schneur Zalman's son and successor, Rabbi Dov Baer, moved to the town of Lubavitch, which remained the center (and synonym) for this philosophy.

In Poland, many sharply criticized simple faith and blind emotionalism, as well as reckless devotion to "miracle workers." These men, on the one hand, were attracted to the mysticism and emotionalism of chassidus; on the other, they appreciated Talmudic logic. The result was an intellectualized chassidus, which at the same time affected Talmudic study. Scholarship blended with mysticism; together they integrated into the Jewish life style and refined Jewish behavior.

The *rebbe*, too, was regarded in a new light. Though his role as spiritual leader remained essentially unchanged, he took on a more sophisticated function. Instead of "miracle worker" (though he still was), he now became a scholarly guide, who led his own group of students and who contributed his own chassidic philosophy. This group of men forged a dynamic link and a golden age in Jewish thought.



A Woman of Valor

Although the Jews of Poland enjoyed religious achievement, one area remained neglected: the education of women. Throughout Jewish history a few women had managed to receive instruction from their parents. Most didn't. The yeshiva was very much a man's world; not even the *cheder*, the school for young children, was available to the Jewish girl.

In Poland by the end of World War I, the situation had grown critical. Secularity had barged its way even into chassidic homes. On Shabbos, Jewish girls were more likely to read the latest novel than to study *Tzenah U'renah*.

"Every parent takes care of his own daughter until he discovers that she is no longer *shomer Shabbos* — and then it's too late."

The comment above was penned by a shy seamstress named Sarah Schenirer. Her efforts to pioneer Jewish education for women resulted in the Bais Yaakov school system — today the most famous in the Orthodox world.

Born in Cracow to a religious family, Sarah Schenirer was an avid reader, who devoured any holy book in Yiddish she could find. Though she loved to study, Sarah had to work, and became a seamstress.

THE FIRST WAVE

The first in this line of thinkers was Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak, who is known as the Seer of Lublin. Highly intuitive, he was said to be able to analyze a person just by looking at him or by reading his *kvitel* (note of request). Like the Besht, the Seer spent much of his time listening to people's problems. He was known for his rapturous prayer; he could stay in a trance for hours.

In spite of his emotional side, the Seer was very much an intellectual. In Lublin, as in other cities, the academic climate was far greater than in the villages. Talmudic study was still very much valued by yeshiva

The Jew broke away from the Seer and established his own headquarters, in the town of Peshischa.

students, who wanted to uphold the tradition. At the same time, chassidus, they felt, could enhance their studies. They wanted to discuss and analyze it in much the same way they did the fine points of Talmud.

A disciple of the Seer was Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak of Peshischa, also known as HaYehudi HaKaddosh (the Holy Jew, or The Jew). He emphasized study, prayer, and piety. The Jew disapproved of the way people venerated the *rebbe*; he felt that a person had to struggle to be a good Jew, and not simply rely on a *tzaddik*.

The Jew broke away from the Seer and established his own headquarters, in the town of Peshischa. Unlike the atmosphere in the Lublin school, The Jew's yeshiva was exclusive, accepting only the highest scholars. Friction developed between the Seer and the Holy Jew. Nevertheless, the "Peshischa system" attracted many fine men. Unfortunately, The Jew, who suffered from his practice of denial of

A Friday night girls' club shocked her into realizing the necessity for women's education. After one of the leaders flicked on the light on Shabbos, the girls sat around discussing what they had learned in public school. "Then and there the idea was born in my mind," Sarah wrote. "If those girls would only have a proper environment."

When World War I broke out, she moved to Vienna. On Shabbos Chanukah she attended a synagogue lecture about notable women in Jewish history. Not only did she become fired up, but when she returned to Cracow after the war, she tried to instill Jewish pride in girls.

Her first attempt failed miserably. While delivering a lecture to the girls on Pirkel Aves, she could feel their boredom and contempt. She decided that education had to begin at a young age.

After her brother, a Beizer chassid, helped her get a blessing from his rebbe, Sarah opened a two-room school, with twenty-five children. Initially, parents doubted her ability to teach. But when they saw the difference in their children from those who attended public school, the number of students grew.

Sarah's school proved to be a success. However, she encountered opposition — from Orthodox rather than secular Jews. Many, including leaders, refused to believe that a girl needed *cheder* as much as a boy; others, under pressure to earn a living, could not afford to send their daughters to school.

worldly pleasures, died at the age of forty-eight.

He passed on his position to Rabbi Simcha Bunem (1765-1827), another star of Polish Judaism. Unlike his predecessor, Rabbi Simcha Bunem was more inward and philosophical. He encouraged the study of Sephardic philosophers, like the Rambam, and insisted on extreme modesty as well as cleanliness.

Rabbi Simcha Bunem's heir was destined to be the most famous among the "first wave" of Polish chassidim. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk was born circa 1788 in the town of Guryea. From childhood on he displayed a brilliant mind and a mastery of Talmud. Attracted to the new movement, the prodigy went to visit

There he began to display leadership qualities. His strong personality attracted many followers.

the Seer in Lublin.

Unfortunately, the teenage Menachem Mendel's impressions were negative. Self-willed and temperamental, he argued with the Seer and criticized what he felt was "tzaddik-worship." He made his way to Peshischa, where immediately he was drawn to Rabbi Simcha Bunem's intellectual approach.

There he began to display leadership qualities. His strong personality attracted many followers. Rabbi Menachem Mendel was definitely an individualist: he walked around in tatters, oblivious to his neat and clean colleagues, and spent hours in fervent study.

When Rabbi Simcha Bunem died, in 1827, dispute arose over who would fill his position. The radicals favored Rabbi Menachem Mendel. He moved first to Tomashov, then to Kotzk, and set up a yeshiva devoted to his ideals.

There the Kotzker Rebbe, as he came to be called, served as Talmudic guide and

spiritual mentor. Committed to moral perfection, he elevated Polish chassidus to its highest form. The Kotzker system attracted hundreds; its court reverberated with intellectual and spiritual foment. Under his tutelage developed men who became the leaders of the next generation.

THE FOLLOWERS

To list all of these leaders and the dynasties they established would be impossible. However, it is important to mention at least a few.

Rabbi Chanoch HaCohen was the Rebbe of Alexander, who came to Kotzker after dreaming that his deceased master,

The Bialyer Rebbe became famous for his strict adherence to truth and justice. He strove for self-perfection.

Rabbi Simcha Bunem, pointed out Rabbi Menachem Mendel to him.

Another great leader was the Kotzker Rebbe's son-in-law, Avraham Borenstein, the first Rebbe of Sochachev. One of the greatest Talmudic scholars of his time — he authored the classic work *Avnei Nezer* — he ascribed all his learning to his father-in-law.

The Bialyer Rebbe, Rabbi Moshe Michal, met and befriended Rabbi Menachem Mendel in Peshischa. Himself wealthy, he supported Rabbi Menachem Mendel and his family for years. The Bialyer Rebbe became famous for his strict adherence to truth and justice. He strove for self-perfection on every level.

The most famous of Rabbi Menachem Mendel's disciples was Rabbi Yitzchak Meir. Besides being the Kotzker Rebbe's greatest disciple, he was also the latter's closest friend and confidant. Rabbi Yitzchak Meir was, in fact, offered the leadership after the death of Rabbi Simcha

Luckily, Sarah's cry: "Girls also need yeshivos!" received attention by none other than the Agudas Israel. Eliezer Gershon Friedenson, Agudah activist and editor, discovered Sarah's school and convinced the organization of its necessity. Friedenson proved of enormous help: he contacted rabbis and communities, published a *Bais Yaakov Journal*, and warned parents against neglecting Jewish education for their girls.

Two years after Sarah opened her school — which by now had swelled to 280 pupils — letters were pouring in from all over Poland with the plea: Save our girls! So dire was the need for teachers that Sarah graduated her senior class early — the eldest member was fifteen — to send them to different cities.

Under the advice of Rabbi Meir Shapiro, the future *rosh yeshiva* of Lublin, Sarah opened up a seminary. The Agudah acquired a five-story building, with dormitories, classrooms, and dining halls. Another person came to the rescue: Dr. Leo Deutschlander, a Frankfurt-born scholar whose fund, *Keren HaTorah*, subsidized *Bais Yaakov*, as well as other religious schools.

Dr. Deutschlander recruited teachers, who quickly trained others. He also admitted orphan girls for half tuition. Under his general tutelage, students blossomed into true "women of valor" — the goal of Sarah Schenirer. She stressed *tznius* (modesty) in personal conduct. She herself was very much a

Bunem. However he considered Rabbi Menachem Mendel far worthier.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir later became a *rebbe* himself — in the town of Ger, near Warsaw. There he established what came to be the most powerful and influential chassidic group in Poland. Rabbi Yitzchak Meir is best known to us as the *Chiddushei HaRim*, the title of his classic work. His grandson, Rabbi Aryeh Leib, known as the *Sefas Emes* (after the *sefer* that he wrote), declared that he was proud to be one of the original Kotzker chassidim. The *Sefas Emes* became the second Rebbe of Ger.

The Gerer chassidim, whose current (and fifth) *rebbe* resides in Israel, would eventually take on another role in the years ahead. The spiritualism that revolutionized

There he established what came to be the most powerful and influential chassidic group in Poland.

Polish Jewry in the first half of the 19th century would conflict, and even coexist, with growing politicization in the later half. Both forces remained very strong, dominating Jewish life in every facet until World War II.

THE POLISH PROBLEM

Poland, by the 19th century, had ceased to exist. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the already divided nation was further partitioned. Much of the area was annexed to the Russian empire and called the Kingdom of Poland, or Congress. The Polish ruling class (*szlachta*) remained intact. The peasants, backward and illiterate, made up the bulk of the population.

The Poles deeply resented "Russification." Until 1830, they enjoyed some autonomy; nevertheless, they refused to come to terms with foreign rule, and on

at least three occasions tried to rebel. Many Jews helped out in these insurrections; the more assimilated believed that through an independent Poland anti-Semitism could possibly be erased. In the end they were sadly mistaken.

Relations between Poles and Jews remained hostile. The Church reigned supreme, and did not hesitate to support anti-Jewish measures. The *kahal*, or Jewish community, was abolished in 1822; in 1826, a modern rabbinic seminary was designed by the government to produce "enlightened leaders."

Nevertheless, the legal status of Jews improved during the 19th century. In 1862, they were emancipated under a short-lived, semi-independent Polish

The first was Orthodox — usually chassidic. They remained separate from the gentile society.

regime which had emerged after a somewhat successful revolt against Russia. Special taxes were abolished, and Jews were free to live where they pleased.

Over 1,000,000 lived in the east, in Congress Poland, which was soon annexed to Tsarist Russia. Warsaw and Lodz contained the largest Jewish populations. These Jews helped to make the Congress one of the most advanced industrial areas in the Tzarist Empire.

In contrast, the southern half of Poland, called Galicia, remained backward. This area, annexed to Austria-Hungary, was dominated by Polish landowners who oppressed the peasantry. The Jews, however, were better treated under Austria-Hungarian rule than they were under Russian rule.

In the west, annexed by Prussia (later Germany), a struggle went on between the Poles and their conquerors, who tried to "Germanize" the area. For centuries their influence was strong; many towns, filled

role model. She counseled hundreds of girls.

A new Jewish woman emerged — not only modest and refined, but educated, and instilled with a love of Torah. No more would she be ashamed of her parents' ways, or of being labeled "old fashioned." Instead of novels and plays, she embraced Jewish books with zeal.

No longer was her life spiritually and intellectually empty. She had an outlet of her own within the community. Under Sarah's slogan "A true Jew must be a whole Jew" sprouted clubs and extracurricular activities — the birth of *Bnos Agudas Israel*.

By 1937 *Bais Yaakov* had over 250 schools and 38,000 students all over Eastern Europe. It had its own textbooks and other materials, as well as its own newspaper. The behavior of its alumni during the Holocaust was noteworthy. Even within the Nazi death camps they displayed self-sacrifice and religiosity — often lighting Shabbos or Chanukah candles, or smuggling food to prisoners.

When Sarah Schenirer died, in 1935, her funeral was attended by hundreds of weeping girls. She never had children of her own; instead, she became the spiritual mother to many. Today *Bais Yaakov* is a worldwide network; over 100 schools exist in Israel alone. Its contribution to Orthodoxy has been formidable. Not only can Jewish women acquire an education, but they receive as well the tools to safeguard the Jewish home.

with German-style houses, were populated by ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*).

Oddly enough, Germany tried to incur favor with the Jews during World War I. The Kaiser had hoped to establish a Jewish partnership with the German-dominated west. Unlike the Poles, the Germans were liberal enough to support minority rights. Many Jews, remembering German kindness during World War I, could not believe Germany's behavior during World War II.

THE "JEWISH NATION"

During the 19th century, the Jewish population swelled. The Jews filled every city and town, and lived in a few of

The second group was the extreme opposite of the first. Urbanized and highly acculturated.

their own (called a *shtetl*.) The low Jewish death rate, as well as their urbanization, contributed to their exploding growth.

Although massive, the Jewish community was by no means cohesive. Its character was shaped by its region. In life style and practice, the Jews fell under the "East European" and the "West European" categories. The first was Orthodox — usually chassidic. They remained separate from the gentile society; they spoke Yiddish and clung to Jewish culture. The East European type tended to be lower middle class; they had a high birth rate and many lived in the *shtetl*.

The second group was the extreme opposite of the first. Urbanized and highly acculturated, the West European types abandoned Yiddish, along with Orthodoxy, and integrated into Polish society. Most of these people were at least middle class; some were professionals. They had a lower birth rate and — not surprisingly — a high rate of intermarriage.

Basically the West Europeans represented the *haskalah*, or Enlightenment, which had originated in Germany nearly 200 years earlier. Blaming Jewish misery on their separateness, the *maskilim* pushed as early as 1816 for “modernization” (see Adar II issue). During the 1860’s and ’70’s, they printed Polish-language Jewish newspapers. Just as the German Jews had their “Germans of Mosaic Faith,” so too did this “enlightened” group have their “Poles of Mosaic Faith.”

Unlike in Germany, the *haskalah* never fully succeeded in Poland. Part of the reason stemmed from strong anti-Semitism. Many *maskilim* who had embraced assimilation or who had joined the left-wing parties turned away in disillusionment. Nevertheless,

The *maskilim* put out satirical anti-religious literature, and even arranged to have chassidim thrown in jail.

quite a few remained; the communists, for example, had a large number of Jews. Other Jews made important contributions to Polish life, literature, politics, and culture.

In Galicia, where the Jews enjoyed freedom and affluence under the Austria-Hungarian empire, the *maskilim* were particularly strong. Often they came to blows with the large chassidic population. They put out satirical anti-religious literature, and even arranged to have chassidim thrown in jail. Later, when these *maskilim* — most of them youthful — were themselves arrested for revolutionary activities, the government realized that chassidim made more loyal citizens.

In Congress Poland, the *haskalah* was imported from Russia, notably Lithuania. Vilna, the Lithuanian capital that housed so many yeshivos,

became the center of the Russian *haskalah*. The Tsar’s expulsion of Lithuania’s Jews drove many of them to Poland in search of economic opportunity. They brought along modern political doctrines.

Both the “Galitzianers” and the “Litvacks” — those from Galicia and Lithuania — represented a new breed of *maskilim* — one quite different from the German. Unlike German Jews, most of these *maskilim* returned to the Jewish fold — but not the religion. Although they broke away from the secular movements, they retained the ideals, and tried to integrate them into Jewish life.

An example was socialism. During the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution saw the rise of the working class (called “proletariat”). Many of these proletarians were Jewish. In Vilna in 1897, a Jewish labor union, called the Bund, was founded to campaign for workers’ rights.

The Bund grew in size and influence. It had its own network and internal structure — with libraries, literature, meeting halls, and cafeterias. It claimed to represent the Jews, though in reality it spoke for only a fraction of them. The Bund was very much secular and left-wing; in fact, it was overtly anti-religious.

For that reason, though the Bund attracted many young and rootless Jews, it failed to win over the majority, who were Orthodox or traditional. The Bund favored Jewish solidarity based on class. They believed there could be no reconciliation between Jewish workers and those in the upper class. They envisioned a world free of economic struggles — a “workers’ paradise.”

Essentially the Bund was a socialist movement that spoke Yiddish. It had very little of Jewish content with the exception that its membership was composed of Jews. Nevertheless, the Bund demonstrated the emergence of “Jewish politics” in Poland. Over the

next 50 years, until World War II, the Jews cloistered under ideological banners and expressed themselves in strikes, demonstrations, and revolutions. Many found an outlet in art and literature, and these generations produced a dynamic Jewish culture.

Culture is the key word. Although Orthodoxy maintained a stronghold, the *haskalah* made inroads by taking on another guise. Rather than “Polanization,” it opted for a middle ground. Unlike the German *maskilim*, who considered Judaism a religion to be discarded, the Polish Jews — most of them — retained their Jewish identity and their loyalty to Jewish people. While the German enlightened considered themselves Germans, the Polish enlightened considered themselves Jews.

After these *maskilim* were themselves arrested for revolutionary activities, the government realized that chassidim made more loyal citizens.

However, they considered the “Jewish people” to be just like any other, regardless of observances. Nationalism took the place of religion, and these people tried to shape Jewish thought their way.

The “Yiddish” and “Hebrew” societies were products of this philosophy. One was devoted to spreading Yiddish language and culture, the other to the development of modern Hebrew. A body of literature arose, producing a number of writers in both languages. A gifted poet who in the past might have composed beautiful liturgy for prayer now wrote popular novels and short stories.

Both the “Yiddishists” and the “Hebraists” had their followers. For the most part, though, Yiddish remained the spoken language of the Jews.

Zionism was another offshoot of nationalism. Imported from Lithuania, it started out as a small group, called Chovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion), and developed into a full-scale organization. Insisting that Jews were an ethnic rather than a religious group, its followers believed that the Jews needed a homeland of their own — Palestine — in order to end anti-Semitism.

The Zionists also insisted that the Jews, being a national entity, had the right to exist as such in a foreign land, and deserved minority rights. Many even felt that the Jews deserved their own territory within Poland.

Generally the Zionists fell into two "schools." In Galicia, where the treatment of Jews was generally good, the Jews emphasized flexibility and

Like the Bund, Zionism won over many of the young and alienated. They rejected religion, which they mistakenly equated with backwardness.

compromise with the authorities in order to win civil rights. On the other hand, the Jews in the Russian area, who sprang from a hostile environment, refused to deal with anti-Semites.

Like the Bund, Zionism won over many of the young and alienated. They rejected religion, which they mistakenly equated with backwardness. Instead they envisioned a new kind of Jew: the rugged peasant/warrior, unafraid of Gentiles and Hebrew-, not Yiddish-speaking.

Again like the Bund, Zionists tended to be socialists. They believed that Jews should collectively work the land, thereby removing class barriers. The *kibbutz* movement started this way; later, pioneer (*chalutz*) groups established their own camps to train youth for immigration to Palestine (called *aliyah*).

Both Zionism and the Bund horrified religious Jews. Yet Orthodoxy too answered the call of politics. In the past it had relied on *shtadlanim* — mediators who could deal with the ruling powers on behalf of the community. Now the Orthodox realized the need for legal representation.

In Germany a movement had started called the Agudas Israel; it was composed of Orthodox Jews. In Poland it was taken over and guided by the Gerer Rebbe. The Agudah was to become a formidable power (it still is), committed to upholding the rights of religious Jews.

Though all three groups (there were others) opposed each other in theory, they all had something in common: they showed that the Jews could function within the framework of a political unit. By the 20th century, the Jews demanded, not just requested, civil rights — as Jews. Unfortunately, internal differences deprived them of any unity or unified leadership. In later years this disunity would worsen, crippling the Jews and leaving them helpless in the face of disaster.

THE POLISH REPUBLIC

In 1918, nationalism emerged triumphant. The three nations that had ruled Poland collapsed — Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary. Under the terms of the Versailles Treaty, which ended World War I, the Polish republic was created out of former annexed areas.

The Jewish population was enormous. Over 3,000,000 strong, the Jews resided in every major city and town, and in thousands of villages — in all, some 16,000 localities.

The average Jew was urban, middle class, and proletarian. He might be a craftsman — especially a tailor — or involved in light industry. Often he ran his own shop or enterprise, either by

himself, with his family, or with several other people. Jews preferred to be self-employed, partly because of *Shabbos* and *yom tov* observance. They were highly visible in trade and commerce. They also made up a small but influential group of professionals.

The majority identified themselves as Jews, either by religion or nationality. Yiddish was the mother tongue, though the Zionists pushed for Hebrew. Still, Polish rapidly made headway, even among chassidim. During this interwar period, secularity crept in, although Jewish identity remained strong.

As the Polish constitution was being drafted (it was completed in 1921), the Jews pressed for national autonomy. Some of their demands were met — on paper, anyway. President Jozef

The Jews discovered that emancipation brought no guarantee of equality. The Poles desired a Poland "for the Poles."

Pilsudski promised to allow the Jews their own schools and to respect their Sabbath. Jewish representatives served in the senate (called the *Sejm*). Much to the delight of the Zionists, the Jews were even recognized as a nationalist group, with minority rights and protection.

Reality proved the opposite. The Jews discovered that emancipation brought no guarantee of equality. The Poles desired a Poland "for the Poles," and deeply resented the presence of "foreigners." As early as 1897, an anti-Semitic political party formed, called the Endeks. It pushed for elimination of the Jews. When in 1912 the Jews supported a socialist candidate, the Poles responded with an anti-Jewish boycott.

In 1918, the Poles shared their land with three chief ethnic groups: Ukrainians, Volksdeutsche, and Jews.

In fact, over one-third of the population was non-Polish. Problems over the rights of ethnic groups plagued the new republic right up until World War II. The Germans and Ukrainians identified with their native countries rather than Poland, and wanted autonomy.

The Jews, lacking a collective voice or sympathetic government, suffered the worst. Over the next twenty years they would watch their fortunes decline, their economic situation worsen, and their political power be stripped away. This period provided a grim rehearsal for the Holocaust.

The years immediately after World War I brought pogroms in Lvov and Vilna. In the ensuing civil wars among Poland, Russia, Lithuania, and the Ukraine, Jews were caught among the warring factions.

The largest private school system was operated by the Agudah. Of all the groups, the Agudah remained the most successful in prewar Poland.

The growing Polish bourgeoisie (middle class) and intelligentsia (educated) declared a virtual holy war on Jewish competitors. Jews could find little work in public schools and none in civil service. Although discrimination was officially illegal, job preference was given to Poles. The drive to "Polanize" banks and railroads kept out many Jews. Industry and commerce also gradually slipped from Jewish hands.

The bleak prospects of employment, coupled with the failure of the Jewish home to offer guidance, left a great void for the younger generation. It looked more than ever to the Jewish political groups to find a sense of purpose.

Zionist and Bundist youth movements offered sports, recreation, intellectuality, and social life. Most importantly, they supplied a surrogate

home — a place for the young Jew to find support and direction. Youth movements became the rage; everyone was expected to join them, whatever the affiliation.

The young Jew had plenty to choose from. There were General Zionists, Labor Zionists, Bundists, Folklorists Yiddishists, Hebraists. Members broke away and formed offshoots. It was not uncommon for a Jew to wander from one to another if he grew bored or dissatisfied.

Jewish school systems were designed to teach children their "culture." Some, like the Tarbut, had a measure of success. Most ended in failure. One problem was lack of state support. Another was internal squabbles.

The third was lack of public support. These new, modernized schools offered and produced little of lasting value. A child might write Hebrew or Yiddish beautifully, or study the Bible as "Jewish history," but of the religion he knew nothing. Many secular children ended up in public schools (called *gymnasium*). They were free, and offered Polish instruction as well as university preparation.

The largest private school system was operated by the Agudah. Of all the groups, the Agudah remained the most successful in prewar Poland. Committed to Orthodoxy, it earned a loyal mass following. In addition, because it was less loud and demanding than other groups, the Agudah received greater government support.

The Agudah came under attack from the other groups. It was accused of rigidity and failure to "live with the times."

The Orthodox did not remain impervious to change. They formed their own labor party, called Poale Agudah. Some even became religious Zionists. Their group, called Mizrachi, pushed for some modernity and

acculturation. Though opposed by the Agudah, the Mizrachi wooed a number of the Orthodox to Zionism.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

In the 1930s, a violent anti-Semitism erupted throughout Poland, which the Jewish community, hopelessly fragmented, could not combat.

Poland, like Germany, was hit hard by the stock market crash of 1929. The loss of jobs made the Poles clamor even more to remove Jews from all economic spheres. Christian shops bore "Ayran" signs, and gangs beat up Jewish storekeepers. In over 150 towns attacks on Jews broke out.

The government tightened its control over industry and trade,

Anti-Semitism became a political issue. Throughout Poland the "Jewish Question" was discussed — with emigration as the goal.

eliminating Jews. A growing pauperization took place as the Jews, unwelcome in villages and crowded out of businesses and professions, went through an irreversible economic decline. Increasingly they relied on foreign aid.

The rise of Nazi Germany created additional problems. Pilsudski, the Polish President who held anti-Semitism in check, had died, and in his place ruled a group of rabid nationalists. These men tried to emulate Hitler, now ruler of Germany.

They weren't the only ones. Polish youth formed their own party based on the Nazi model. In 1934, Josef Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, lectured at the University of Warsaw to a packed auditorium.

As in Germany, anti-Semitism became a political issue. Throughout Poland the "Jewish Question" was

discussed — with emigration as the goal. Some Poles tried to work out a plan with the Zionists to evacuate the Jews. Others even considered shipping them to Madagascar, a large island off of east Africa.

The years 1935-1939 marked the sunset of Polish Jewry. Legislative efforts against them increased, along with brutal attacks — all with Church support. In 1936, *shechitah* (ritual slaughter) was outlawed. Jews were forbidden to work on Sunday. As many depended on this day for business and could not afford a two-day weekend, they suffered greatly.

In Polish universities, Jews were required to sit on “ghetto benches” — segregated areas of the classroom, away from the other students. White collar workers were ousted from professional positions and societies. Jewish businesses were boycotted.

By the late 1930's the Jews were despondent. The number of suicides increased. The younger generation called itself the “youth without a future.” In anger some joined the Revisionists, a new Zionist branch which denounced the British and Arabs and set out to forge a Jewish state through military means. Their youth group, called Betar, was virtually an army boot camp. Menachem Begin, the future Prime Minister of Israel, was one of its members.

The push for *aliyah* increased prodigiously during this time. It was not always idealistic; for many Jews, emigration — anywhere — was the only way out. Clearly they were no longer welcome in Poland, where the economic situation worsened each day.

Sadly, at the time when unity was needed the most, it was farthest away. The Zionists had grown so divided

that they could not even convene a Jewish Congress. The Agudah, though it successfully rallied the Orthodox, could not halt the rapid secularization, even within its own ranks. More and more Jews attended state schools, read newspapers, spoke Polish, and entered the secular world — with limited success. The Bund, though it had gained support among the trade movement and waged strikes against anti-Semitism, did little to alleviate the plight of Jewish workers.

In the long run, what did these groups accomplish? Politically, very little. Rather than convey forcefulness, they revealed the powerlessness among Poland's 3,000,000 Jews. By 1939 they were in no better a situation than in 1918. Broken, dispirited, and

impoverished, they struggled to survive. Their misery, as well as disunity, would aid their extermination at the hands of the Nazis.

Spiritually, culturally, and intellectually, however, the Jews of Poland achieved in a way unsurpassed elsewhere. Their identity was strong and powerful, permeating the lives of millions. The Jews of Poland were a nation in every respect. They created a glorious society — one imbued with Torah scholarship and *chassidus* — which did not die of old age. In 1939, it came crashing down — along with all its institutions — and sank into a quagmire of blood and ash. But though gone, it can never be forgotten.

A Providential Deal

(Continued from page 23)

maggid, the heavenly voice which often spoke to him regarding Torah matters. “Rav Yosef, it has come . . . good fortune awaits.”

“Fortune?” he murmured.

“The item you have purchased has brought you wealth. Soon . . . you shall go to Safed. But you must not tarry longer.”

Rav Yosef awoke and hurried to his wife's bed. He shook her awake and told her what had transpired.

She listened, nodded, and smiled groggily. “Oh, yes, the grinder. Yesterday I took it to the goldsmith. He said it was solid gold. I wanted to tell you. But seeing you were weary . . . I waited. I knew it was not news you had to know immediately. You trusted in Hashem; you left our income in His hands. Your trust has paid off.”

The journey to Safed took well over a year. The seas were rough, and

twice their vessel was threatened by pirates. Nevertheless, they arrived — battered, but grateful. With the money from the spice grinder Rav Yosef was able to print his works, as well as support himself and his family.

100-Point Contest Winners

Congratulations to
Miriam Hinda Cohen
for winning the
Shevat 100-Point Contest
and to
Rochel Leah Malka
for winning the
Adar I contest.
Your prizes will be
on their way
to you shortly.

\$1.50

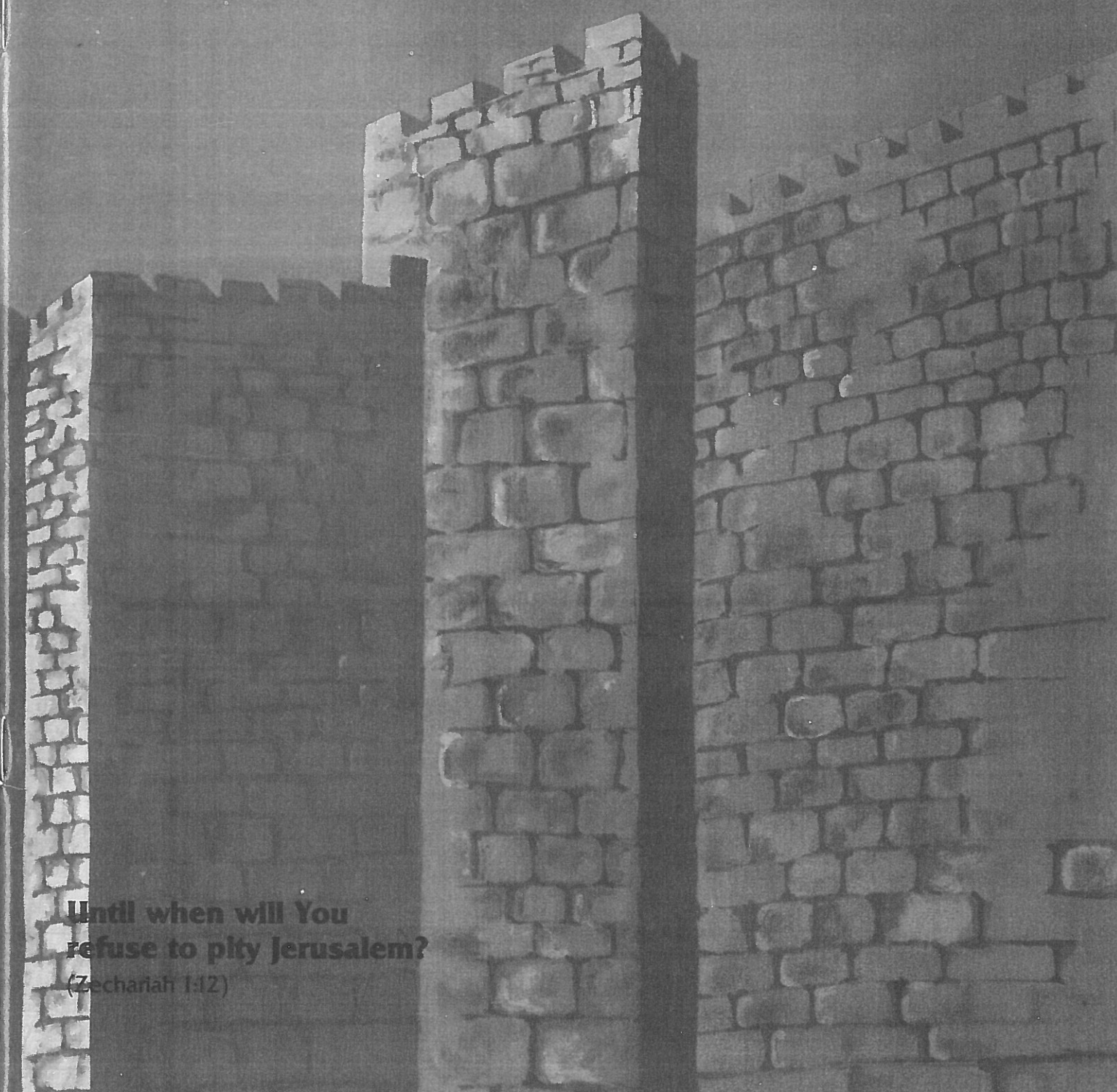
ת"ד

The Jewish Reader

Tammuz 5749

Vol. 1 No. 10

July-August 1989



**Until when will You
refuse to pity Jerusalem?**
(Zechariah 1:12)

TO OUR READERS

While summer ushers in a time of vacation and outdoor fun, for Jews it also signals the onset of the mourning period we call the Three Weeks — beginning with Shivah Asar BeTammuz and culminating with Tisha B'Av. During this time we mark the destruction of the First and Second Temples. We pray for the rebuilding of Yerushalayim and the construction of the Third Temple, which will never be destroyed.

Our cover, of the wall surrounding the Old City of Yerushalayim, is meant to serve as a reminder of what we once had and what we will have, in the future, once again. May the rebuilding of the Temple and the arrival of the Mashiach take place soon!

"Music of the Heart" is the poignant tale of how one girl gets an education during her summer vacation.

The stories about Rav Yosef Caro and the Jews of Poland conclude in this issue, as does "Across the Atlantic."

We at *The Jewish Reader* have enjoyed our first year immensely, and we hope the feeling has been mutual. Our best wishes for a happy and healthy summer. We'll be back in Elul with exciting new features. See you then!

This publication
is made possible
by a grant from



Laboratories.

MAIL ROOM

The Iyar Issue

Dear Editor,

I really liked "Torah Highlights" (Iyar). I lived in Israel with my parents, and I remember how tough it was to keep the *shemittah*. We had to look for special stores to buy fruits and vegetables that weren't grown during the year. But when I knew we were doing what Hashem wanted, somehow it all didn't seem that bad.

Yossi Stern
Chicago, IL

□ □ □

Dear Editor,

Part 2 of the "The King and the Pawn" (Iyar) brings to mind the time I started keeping Shabbos. A *ba'al teshuvah* and a basketball player, I was once sorely tempted by a game which was scheduled for Friday night.

I thought I could do both — participate without violating Shabbos. I even tried to rationalize — same as Eli — that I was performing some great sacrifice.

Sorry. Even if you score a basket, you lose. The Torah tells us to keep

and *remember* Shabbos. The day does not become holy just by avoidance of physical activity. It's a mental and emotional experience.

By the way, I didn't go to that game. At the last minute I decided not to, "for some reason."

Daniel Silverstein
Cleveland, OH

□ □ □

Dear Editor,

Your "Jews of Poland" (Iyar) was interesting. I thought you might like to know that in Kiev there is a statue of Bogdan Chmielnicki. Can you believe this killer of Jews is considered a hero by the Ukrainians? But then, they liked the Nazis, too.

Shmuel Levy
Flushing, NY

□ □ □

Likes Puzzles

Dear Editor,

I love your magazine.

I wish it would come out twice a month, because I like the puzzles and contests.

Chaim Eliezer Zalmanov
Brooklyn, NY

Mayer Bendet, editor
Avraham M. Goldstein, managing editor
Chaya Sarah Cantor, associate editor
Avraham Silverstein, Shmuel Graybar, Suri Moskowitz,
Lisa R. Wacholder, illustrations
chairman, advisory committee
Rabbi Nochem Y. Kaplan, Dean, Yeshiva Dov Revel

THE JEWISH READER () is published monthly according to the Hebrew calendar, except July and August, by HaChai Publishing, 705 Foster Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. Application to mail at Second-class postage is pending at Brooklyn, N.Y. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE JEWISH READER, 705 Foster Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. Reprinting of any part of this publication without written permission from the publisher is prohibited.

All requests, subscriptions, and manuscripts should be addressed to: **The Jewish Reader**
705 Foster Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. (718) 692-3900