

The boy was brought into the little office. He might have been taken for one of the typical village patients, and the doctor might have examined him one-two-three.

But the boy's father, Rabbi Shmuel Leibowitz, the Rabbi of Slutsk, clutched his ten-year-old's hand and announced, "My Baruch Ber is suffering headaches."

"Headaches?" The doctor adjusted his spectacles and bade the boy come closer. The first thing the doctor noticed were the eyes. Unusually large and luminously blue, they pierced the doctor with intellectual curiosity, making him feel as if he were the one being examined.

He cleared his throat. "What kind of headaches?"

"Tension headaches," the father declared. "They keep him from studying. We want to know if you could prescribe a remedy."

"A remedy," the doctor repeated, and looked again. The pale face plainly indicated that its wearer scarcely saw the sunlight.

Instead, he had made the study hall his home.

"Simple," the doctor answered. "Send him outdoors."

"Outdoors?" Rabbi Shmuel Leibowitz exclaimed.

"The boy obviously spends too much time with his books. Turn him loose." The doctor dropped his

spectacles. "Give him plenty of unstructured time and free air. Hours of it."

Primly the rabbi thanked the doctor, then seized his son's hand. "Let's hurry, Baruch Ber," he said. "You're already an hour late for your Gemara class."

This little boy was on his way to becoming one of the greatest Torah sages of modern times. His *yahrzeit* falls on the 5th of Kislev, since he passed away on that date in 5499 (1939). Rabbi Baruch Ber Leibowitz headed the Kaminetz yeshiva with a brilliance gleaned by years of complete devotion to Torah. His method of Talmudic learning, inherited from his beloved teacher, into his own legacy.

Rabbi Baruch Ber was born in Byelorussia, in 1866 (5626). At a young age he displayed an intensely creative mind, which he applied in endless study. At sixteen he attended the famous yeshiva of Volozhin, under the tutelage of Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik.

There young Baruch Ber earned

A NEW LIFE

An example of the extreme honor Rabbi Baruch Ber bestowed upon his father took place during the latter's final days.

While Rabbi Shmuel Leibowitz lingered in bed, his son never left his side. Day and night Rabbi Baruch Ber tended to him, agonizing so much that his students began to worry about his health. After much effort, they persuaded him to let a student take his place — staying at his saintly father's bedside while Rabbi Baruch Ber rested.

In spite of the constant care, Rabbi Shmuel Leibowitz, an old man, could not overcome his sickness, and he soon died. During *shivah* Rabbi Baruch Ber berated himself, crying, "If only I had stayed at my father's side, he would still be alive! Why did I allow myself to listen to others?"

So great was his self-reproach that again his community worried. Rabbi Baruch Ber plunged into depression, and regretted his "sin" — of neglecting his father.

A conversation with the Chafetz Chaim finally pulled him out the abyss. At a rabbinical gathering, the great scholar spoke privately with Rabbi Baruch Ber, describing the importance of *teshuvah*, repentance.

"*Teshuvah* does not merely atone for a person's sin," said the Chafetz Chaim. "It transforms the very essence of a person. He is no longer the same man as he was yesterday."

"In that case," said Rabbi Baruch Ber, "I shall no longer ruminate on the past. It is not relevant, for I am a new man. I am grateful to the Chafetz Chaim for restoring my life."

Smiling, he lessened his grief and resumed his affairs.

Rabbi Baruch Ber Leibowitz, zt'l

Rosh Yeshiva — Yeshiva Knesses Beis Yitzchak

ridicule from other students for his own style of commentary. When he complained to Reb Chaim, the rebbe answered, "Slutzker (referring to Baruch Ber's birthplace), I'm afraid they're right."

Baruch Ber learned to temper his imagination and channel it instead into Reb Chaim's train of thought. In time Baruch Ber totally adopted his rebbe's Talmudic method. When he later complained again to the rebbe about the students' ridicule, Reb Chaim answered, "Don't pay attention to them, Slutzker. You're doing fine."

So much a disciple was Rabbi Baruch Ber that in later years, when analyzing Gemara, he would wonder, "How would Reb Chaim have approached this?" In Kaminetz, where he eventually resided, Rabbi Baruch Ber stressed to his students the importance of every single word. Clarity of thought meant clarity of expression, and textual analysis involved familiarity with the commentator's language. Otherwise, one might arrive at a distorted meaning of the text.

"The depth and

comprehension — the *havanah* — must come from the words on the page," he asserted. "Every deduction and generalization must come from the text before us. . . . This is the only way to answer questions and clear up misunderstandings."

Rabbi Baruch Ber carried this lesson into his personal life, and he

analyzed everything thoroughly. He lived simply, sharing a downstairs apartment with his son and grandchildren. So absorbed was he in scholarship that he had to be coaxed by his wife to eat. In town he cut a modest but imposing figure: his round face was topped by a large velvet *yarmulke* and

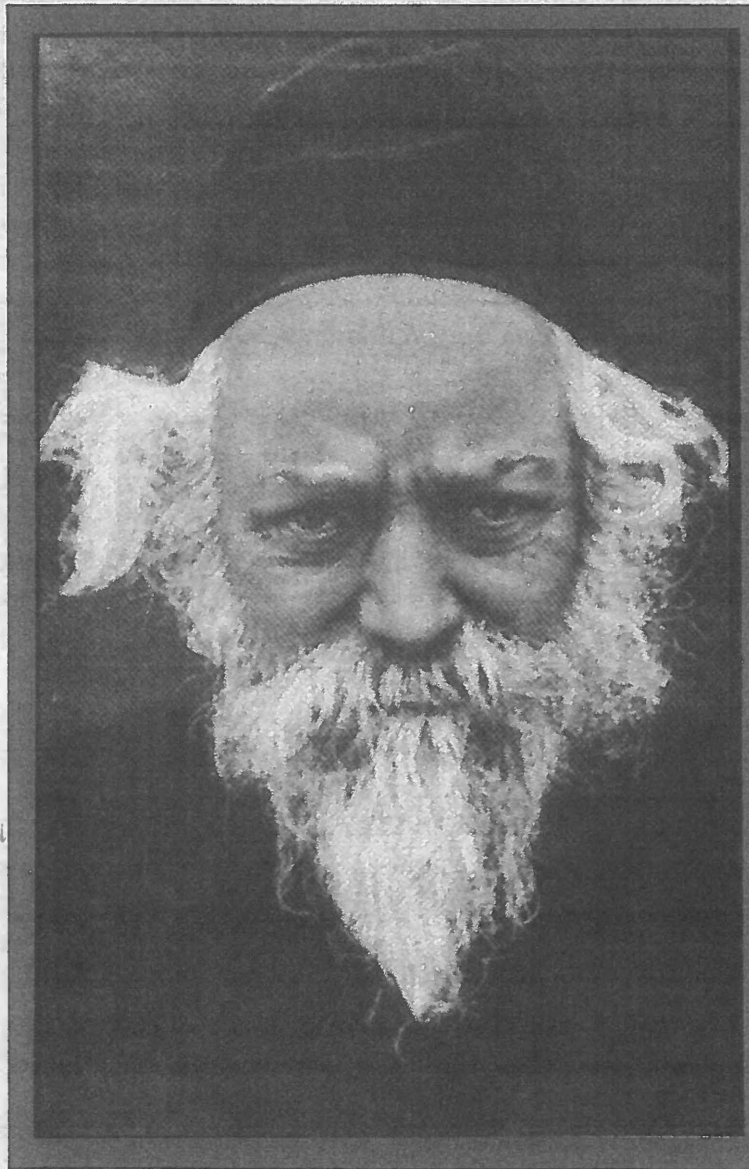
framed by thick shocks of white hair, while his great blue eyes burned.

Twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays, he gave lessons to his students at the Yeshiva Knesses Bais Yitzchak. He spoke slowly, calling every sage "*Heileker*" [Yiddish: holy] and reconsidering his thoughts even as he was expressing them.

Some students found it difficult to concentrate till the end. Once, when one of them approached him afterward, Rabbi Baruch Ber returned to the lecture hall the next day. The students were stunned: It wasn't Monday or Thursday. Why would he be there?

"Because of your questions," he answered.

His lessons he



BEARER OF THE FLAME

By CHAYIM S. CHASAN

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gave over first to his senior students, who in turn arranged private study groups with the others. These senior students, who themselves later became heads of yeshivos, possessed sterling qualities: *lomdus*, analytical abilities; *hasbarah*, a gift for clear explanation; and *amkus*, depth in reasoning. Above all, they had to be able to pick the precise words and to define concepts.

One Monday, Rabbi Baruch Ber gave over an explanation in advance to his senior students; when he came to the lecture hall the following Thursday, he spoke on a completely different topic. The students, who had reviewed ahead of time in their groups, were confused. Why wasn't he discussing what he had said previously?

Explained Rabbi Baruch Ber, "While giving over something to my students the other day, I developed doubts as to what I was saying. Any doubt implies something that isn't the truth. What isn't the truth isn't Torah, and it is forbidden to teach it. So I had to change the topic."

The yeshiva was his life. While a rabbi at Helusk in 1903, and in Kovno in 1915, he was to a certain extent involved in community affairs. By the time he came to Kaminetz, his withdrawal from the outside world was virtually complete.

Nevertheless, although not involved in politics, Rabbi Baruch Ber supported the Agudah, which he considered crucial in the fight against assimilation. And in spite of his retiring nature, Rabbi Baruch Ber journeyed to the United States to raise funds for his yeshiva.

The job wasn't easy. It was 1929, the year of the Stock Market

Crash and the beginning of the Great Depression. Money for any institution, let alone a small yeshiva in Eastern Europe, was scarce. Worse, Jewish communities, even the Orthodox, were becoming lax and assimilated. Once, the president of a synagogue pulled up in a car Shabbos afternoon to offer Rabbi Baruch Ber a check for \$2,400. When the *rosh yeshiva* refused, the president angrily tore it up.

Rabbi Baruch Ber returned to Poland, to his quiet life. It crumbled in 1939 with the outbreak of war, and on *erev* Rosh Hashanah the Nazis entered Kaminetz. Unlike in other places, they were surprisingly civil toward the Jews, who attributed it to the merits of Rabbi Baruch Ber and the yeshiva. Nevertheless, the Germans planned to hand over the town to the Russians, in accordance with the Hitler-Stalin Pact which had divided up Eastern Europe. (Germany did not attack Russia until June 1941.)

Rabbi Baruch Ber's son-in-law, Reb Reuven, worried. He himself long ago had openly fought the *Itsveskia*, the Jewish Communists, who certainly would not tolerate any form of religion, much less their own. Not only were they marked, but the yeshiva's days were numbered.

His father-in-law insisted on moving to Vilna, though the city was being occupied by the Russians. But when a delegation of *ba'alei battim* (lay leaders) came to him, pleading, "Rebbe, are you forsaking us? Will you leave us to the Bolsheviks?" he decided to stay. Just then, a messenger came with an order from Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, the leader of European Jewry, telling Rabbi Baruch Ber to

move with his yeshiva at once to Vilna.

One by one the students slipped away. The Communists continued to watch the house where Rabbi Baruch Ber and his son-in-law lived. Late one night, friends placed the old *rosh yeshiva* and his family on a wagon and sneaked them out to Brisk. Then they were placed on a train to Vilna.

No sooner did the family arrive than the Russians gave Vilna over to Lithuania, in exchange for being allowed to retain Russian bases on her territory. The yeshiva would be free from Communist oppression. The prophecy of Rabbi Grodzenski was amazing; the life

of Rabbi Baruch Ber was spared, and he could continue his work.

He passed away that year, and the days of Vilna Jewry came to a violent end. But before the Nazis invaded, many students escaped — first to Shanghai, then elsewhere in the world, where Rabbi Baruch Ber's achievements outlived him and those who perished. His son, Rabbi Yaakov Moshe, later headed a yeshiva named Kaminetz, after the town whose leader had carried the scholarly flame.

And in yeshivos around the world, students analyze Rabbi Baruch Ber Leibowitz's Torah insights in *Birkas Shmuel*, the *sefer* that contains his thoughts.

At Mama's Knee

(Continued from page 13)

signs of his return, my mother climbed down from the chaise and tramped off to the tavern. In no time at all, she reemerged with Jacob, roaring drunk, and an inebriated post-boy marching tipsily before her.

By now I figured out what "pot-brother" and "guzzler" meant, as well as "soaker," "souse," "sot," and the few other choice names my mother called the penitent Jacob all the way to Hamburg. I also learned I never wanted to be called one.

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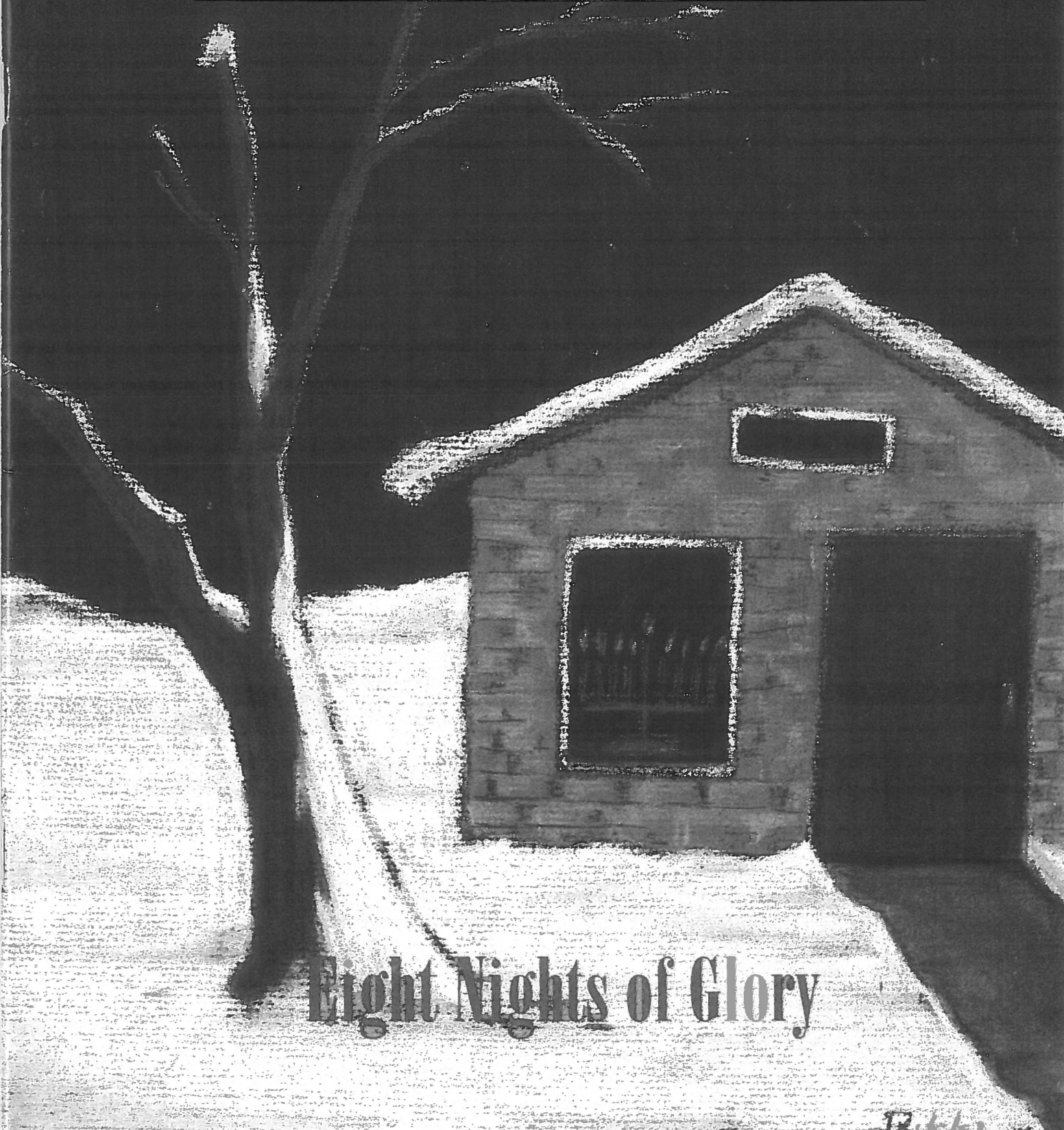
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Eight Nights of Glory

Richard

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Our Wonderful World

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TO OUR READERS

As the cold days of fall and winter come around (unless you live in the Southern Hemisphere), our homes receive spiritual warmth from the Chanukah lights.

So cherished is the mitzvah of lighting the menorah that many Jews risked their lives to fulfill it even in the concentration camps, although Chanukah is a Rabbinic, not Biblical, holiday. The lights remind us of the time when Hashem came to our defense, permitting the Maccabees to defeat the powerful Syrian-Greeks, who had prevented the Jews from keeping the Torah's commandments.

"Torah Highlights" focuses on the holiday of Chanukah.

There are many stories and legends surrounding the saintly Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov, founder of the chassidic movement. A frequent theme of these tales is the foresight of the Ba'al Shem Tov, a sign of the Divine Spirit that rested upon him. "The Traveler" tells one of these astounding stories.

"At Mama's Knee" continues in this issue, but "Our Story" is taking a brief vacation. It will return next month, along with "Stranger in Shanghai." Also planned for Teves is the return of the Torah Contest.

Our best wishes for a Happy Chanukah!

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MAIL

Likes "Highlights"

I enjoyed "Torah Highlights" in the September issue (Tishrei). The coverage of the holidays was interesting. I especially liked the story of the chassidic rebbe who believed that everyone must be a *ba'al teshuvah*. I would like to know who that rebbe was.

Yisroel Gordon, N.Y., NY
Avraham M. Goldstein replies: I heard this story told about the previous

ROOM

Gerrer Rebbe.

Missing in Action

I have enjoyed the first two issues of the year very much, but I would like to know what happened to the Torah Contest. Please put it back in your fine magazine!

Sharon Lesh, Skokie, IL
We hope, G-d-willing, to have a Torah Contest, featuring a 50 dollar prize, in the next issue.

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