

On the 24th of Tishrei, 5655 (1895), in the Polish town of Ger, a holy soul entered this world. Born to the third Rebbe of Ger, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter, the boy was named Yisrael, after the Ba'al Shem Tov. (Today Yisrael is often called the Bais Yisrael.) While yet a child he exuded a presence felt by even the elder chassidim, and his Torah knowledge gleamed like polished gold.

His grandfather the Sefas Emes, who was the second Gerer Rebbe, not only adored this boy, but favored him over his other grandchildren. Yisrael loved to rummage through his grandfather's private documents, reading everything and absorbing the information. Often his grandfather hid the papers on his desk with the remark, "Oh, the detective is coming."

The Sefas Emes had the custom on Simchas Torah of circling the *bimah* with the *Sefer Torah* at the first round and then holding onto it until the end of the seventh; afterwards he would sing and dance, followed by his disciples.

One year, when the young grandson broke through the *hakafo*s and rhythmically began kicking his feet, his grandfather stopped and joined in. The chassidim were stunned; nevertheless, they too danced.

Once an unusual visitor made an appearance. A woman came running into the courtyard of the

Sefas Emes's house, raving and screaming for help. Apparently something in her head was forcing her to make noises and speak in a different voice, as if someone else, like a *dybbuk*, dwelled inside her. (A *dybbuk* is a spirit that possesses someone's body and speaks through it.) As she stood before

the amazed crowd, the strange sounds emerged—so loudly and forcefully, in fact, that everyone nearby came running, including little Yisrael.

Noticing his arrival, the lady yelled at him, "You can help me too!"

"Who, me?" Afraid, young Yisrael began to run, but the possessed woman caught up with him.

The boy demanded, "What do you want from me? I'm only a child!"

"I know," she replied. "But you are going to be a great rebbe one day!"

After his marriage, Reb Yisrael attracted many students. The elite group came to be known throughout Poland, and many students,



The present Gerer Rebbe shlit'a (left) with the Bais Yisrael (right).

"As a Mother Carries Her Child"

By CHAYIM S. CHASAN

even from other Jewish sects, flocked to partake of Reb Yisrael's wisdom.

World War II came, bringing with it the Nazi destruction. Reb Yisrael lost his wife, daughter, son-in-law, and only son. But he himself was able to escape with his father, who was by then the third Gerer Rebbe, to Palestine.

In deep grief Rabbi Yisrael arrived on the sacred shores. Nevertheless, he resolved to rebuild, and immediately set about his work. Once again young students came from the remnants of communities, shunning worldly treasures and reaching heights in Torah and fear of Heaven. During this time Reb Yisrael also tended to his ailing father. So meticulous in his care was Reb Yisrael that when entering the sick man's room he would nearly be on his knees, to spare his father the agony of raising his head.

But on Shavuos 5708, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter passed away. In his will he had stipulated that his son Rabbi Yisrael would stand at the helm, to reconstruct Torah Judaism.

And what a sorry ship it was. Before the war, thousands had trekked through Poland to be at

their rebbe's side; after the war, the new Gerer Rebbe could barely put together hundreds. An enormous task lay ahead — to gather the survivors, infuse them with new life, and reestablish the vibrant world that had been so ruthlessly shattered.

Thus did Rabbi Yisrael earn the

them rebuild.

He himself sent students elsewhere to help get new yeshivos started. Quite a few became *roshei yeshivos* in the U.S. and Israel, to be the pillars of those institutions. Rabbi Yisrael even sought out secularized

families — those who had once had a connection to the Gerer dynasty in Europe — in order to bring their children closer to Judaism.

Throughout his life, the problems of *klal Yisrael*, as well as those of individual chassidim, lay on his shoulders. He knew each of his followers by name — what they did, who their family members were, and the state of their spiritual and financial status. Involved with every chassidic rebbe and *rosh yeshiva* in the world, he knew everything going on in every Jewish institution, even the standard of education it was offering.

Rabbi Moshe Sherer, president of Agudath Israel in America, remarked,

“One great *rosh hayeshiva* in America once told me that he was embarrassed before the Gerer Rebbe, who knew more about what was going on in this man's

Where Honor Waited

In B'nei B'rak, Israel, a street is named “Chazon Ish,” after the town's most illustrious resident. Considered the premier halachic authority of the last generation, Rabbi Avraham Yeshayah Karelitz was also an admirer of the Bais Yisrael, whom he knew from the time of the Bais Yisrael's father. The Bais Yisrael, in turn, considered the Chazon Ish the *tzaddik hador* (the holy man of the generation) and often paid him visits.

The following story occurred late in the life of the Chazon Ish (who passed away in 1953). While a car waited outside his house, three figures opened the front door and emerged in the bright Israeli sunlight. Anyone would have recognized two of them right away: the glowing white beard and burning eyes of the fourth Gerer Rebbe, accompanied by the weak and ailing Chazon Ish. In spite of his infirmity, the Chazon Ish wouldn't think of bidding his guest goodbye without the proper escort.

title “Rebbe of the Diaspora Jews.” In time Rabbi Yisrael would be called the “Rebbe of Rebbes.” He encouraged the children of other great rebbes to continue their lineage, and helped

yeshiva than the *rosh yeshiva* did himself.”

From all over the globe Torah leaders traveled to Israel for the advice of the Gerer Rebbe. The Bais Yisrael worked diligently to build Agudath Israel into a viable organization, which strengthened the union of Torah-observant Jews.

One of his greatest achievements was the Chinuch Atzmai movement, which provides children in Israel an opportunity for a religious education. When the funds ran out and the doors almost closed, he and the Vizhnitzer Rebbe gathered their followers and demanded financial aid. As people came in to see the Gerer Rebbe, he taxed each and every visitor according to how much that visitor could afford. Rich and poor alike pulled out their checkbooks and wrote out the demanded sum.



Rabbi Yisrael probably sensed that his dying day was approaching. At the end of *ne'ilah* prayers on Yom Kippur of 5737 (1976), he told his followers gathered in the Gerer *bais midrash* to say *kaddish* again. Though puzzled as to what for,

they complied.

As his days drew to an end, the rebbe grew weaker. Nevertheless, he maintained his daily routine, and presided over his *bais midrash* and *tisch* (rebbe's table), where hundreds met with him daily.

Then came the week of *Parshas*

announced.

“Shall I get the auto ready?” asked the *gabbai*.

Smiling, the rebbe answered, “That is not what I mean.”

On Thursday, Reb Chaninah asked what time the congregation should *daven minchah* the following week.

Puzzled, the rebbe replied, “What's the difference to me?”

The next day, when the rebbe wondered why one of the students had brought him a bottle of milk, the *gabbai* explained that it was for Shabbos. “Good,” answered the rebbe. “After Shabbos I won't need it.”

The following morning, Shabbos Rosh Chodesh Adar, the Gerer *bais midrash* was crowded, as usual. The rebbe had finished giving out tea to a few privileged chassidim. After Rabbi Chaim Mandel from Belgium received his, the rebbe announced, “That is the last tea.”

In the middle of morning prayers, the rebbe doubled over with pain and retired to his room. Nervously

the chassidim waited. Nevertheless, they continued the prayers, heeding the rebbe's orders.

The Bais Yisrael, meanwhile,

After they had advanced to the entrance, the Chazon Ish opened the gate of his porch, which faced the street. As they approached the auto, the driver immediately turned on the ignition, and the rebbe's servant ran to open the door and stood by it, waiting.

The Gerer Rebbe halted. Instead of going inside, he turned around and promptly walked his host back to the doorstep, while resuming their conversation. Later the rebbe turned to leave. The Chazon Ish followed, continuing to speak.

The car, meanwhile, idled, and the servant stood there, confused. After the two great men had finished, the Chazon Ish again turned around and headed toward his house. Right behind him trailed the Gerer Rebbe. At the doorstep the Gerer Rebbe mumbled a hasty goodbye and almost fled to the car.

But it wasn't the Chazon Ish he was fleeing—rather, the honor. So humble was the Gerer Rebbe that he despised any kind of deference.

Mishpatim (in mid-February 1977). Rabbi Yisrael approached his faithful *gabbai* (sexton), Rabbi Chaninah Schiff.

“I am ready to take a trip,” he

lay in agony. Although doctors rushed to his bedside and wanted him hospitalized immediately, the ailing man refused to be driven on Shabbos. Only afterward was he rushed — but not before telling his wife, “Today is Rosh Chodesh Adar, and when Adar approaches we must be happy.”

That night his condition worsened. In spite of the Psalms people all over Israel recited, his recovery did not come. On Sunday, at 10:25 a.m., his soul returned to its source.

The funeral was enormous. The highway from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was clogged with hundreds of cars and buses carrying mourners — an estimated two hundred thousand. It was a crowd the size of which no one in modern Israel had ever seen before, a crowd consisting of Jews from every background. Wailing, they escorted the coffin to its final resting place on the Mount of Olives.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *zt'l*, later declared, “He was a king of the Jews, a king who ruled with the power of Torah.”

But let Reb Chaim Shmuelevitz, the *rosh yeshiva* of Mir in Jerusalem, have the final word: “The one and only is gone. On his shoulders he carried us all, *klal Yisrael*, as a mother carries her child. We saw it with our own eyes.” JR

New Test

Another figure with whom the Bais Yisrael remained in close contact was the previous Belzer Rebbe. Rabbi Aharon Rokeach had also managed to escape the Nazi nightmare. The Belzer Rebbe had arrived in Palestine and settled in Jerusalem. Like the Bais Yisrael, he struggled to rebuild Torah Judaism.

A group of prominent individuals approached the Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveichik, with a request to build up the religious schools. The Brisker Rav answered, “It is not in my power to undertake such a project. For that you must seek the Gerer Rebbe.”

When approached, the Gerer Rebbe pondered the request. He replied, “For what you ask you would need a lot of money.” He sighed. “Unfortunately, my fellow religionists just do not have that amount. I don’t think they ever did; generally, the pious prefer to shun wealth, fearing its temptation. Nevertheless, I shall bring up the matter with my friend and mentor the Belzer Rebbe.”

A few days later the Gerer Rebbe met with the Belzer Rebbe. “Times have changed,” began Rabbi Yisrael. “In order for Torah to be rebuilt, it costs plenty.” And he relayed the request.

The Belzer Rebbe listened quietly. Finally he rose and said, “The Jewish people can be tested in two different ways: with great poverty and with great wealth. Up to this point we have been tested with great poverty. Then we were tested with terrible afflictions — most recently, of course, being the European destruction. In spite of all that, we are still being tested with poverty.”

The Belzer Rebbe raised his arms. “Master of the universe! The time has come to put a stop to all that! Test your people with wealth! Let them have the money and the means to serve you!”

He and the Gerer Rebbe clasped hands and recited a prayer together three times: “May it be Your will, O G-d, that the Jewish people be blessed with wealth!”

In time, the Orthodox community received heavenly bounty with which to restore the citadels of Torah.

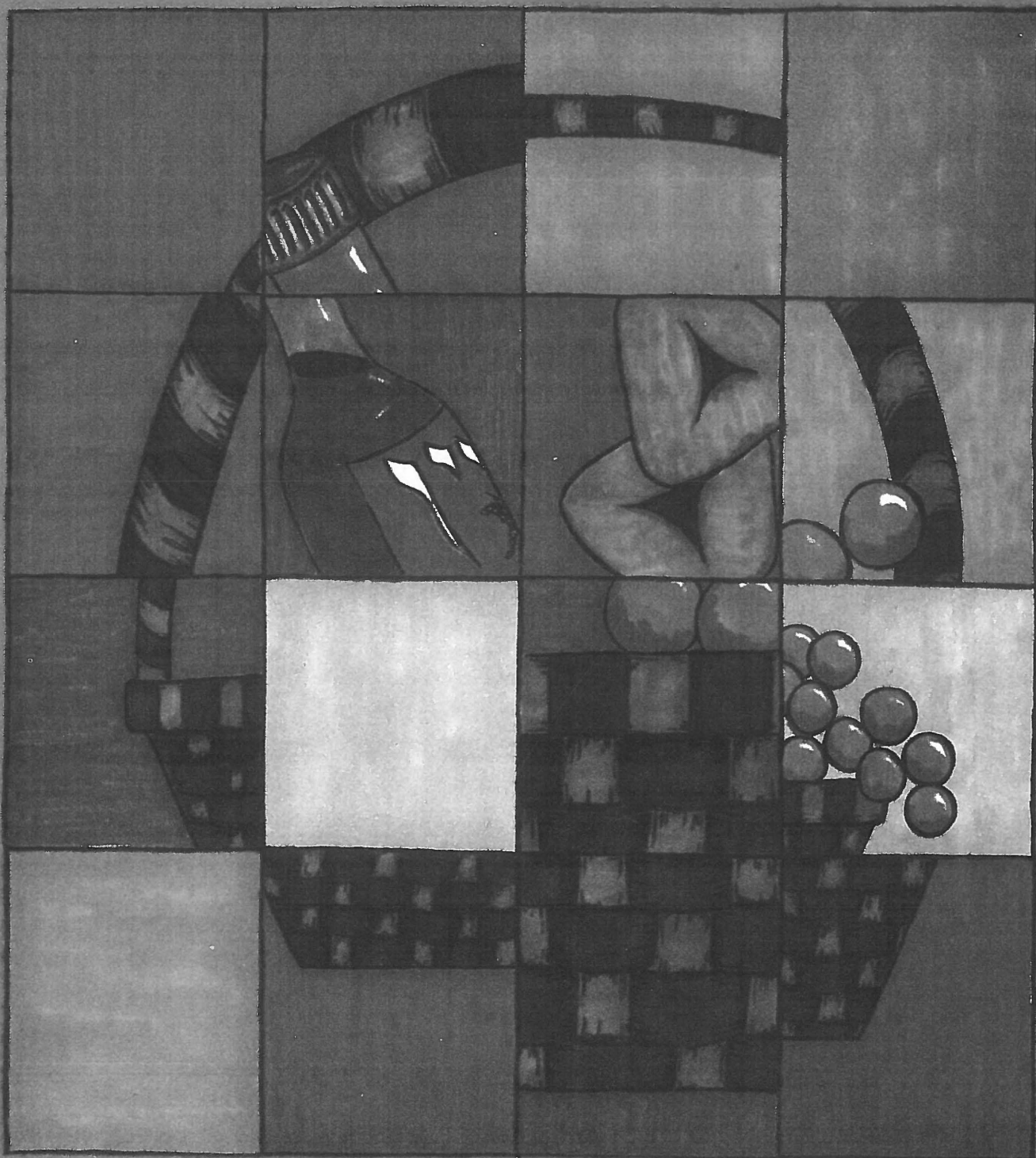
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TO OUR READERS

We recently received a letter from a parent, writing that it was sometimes difficult for young readers to tell which stories in our magazine are true and which are fictional.

We hope that most of our readers have not had the same problem, as we try to avoid confusion in this regard.

Here are examples of the kinds of stories we present. "Three Tales," which ran in the Shevat issue, is a rendition of a story about the Ba'al Shem Tov. When retelling a chassidic tale, several facts must be borne in mind. First, there are often different versions of the story. Second, it is impossible to reconstruct the dialogue precisely as it took place. We try to tell the story in a fashion that is faithful to the way it has been told through the centuries.

In the case of the series "At Mama's Knee," the title graphics describe it as a "dramatization" of the diary of Glückel (Tzipporah) of Hameln. The diary is an actual diary, and all the episodes and characters are present in the diary. Only the dialogue is invented.

Then there are the biographies of Torah Sages. The current issue features Rav Yisrael of Ger. The details of the lives of these Sages are true, although, again, it is often necessary to reconstruct dialogue.

We will continue to make the effort to indicate whether a story is pure fiction, a mixture of truth and fiction, or completely true.

Our best wishes for a happy Purim.

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MAIL ROOM

High Praise

I am enjoying your series "At Mama's Knee." I also like reading about the *gedolim* (Torah greats) who have died. The story about Rabbi Abuhazera ("A Little Town Amidst Giants," Teves) was quite interesting.

I also was fascinated by the story about how Rav Shimon ben Gamliel risked his life in order to give his son a *bris milah*.

Also, your health and news sections are usually informative.

Yonatan Kimmel
Brooklyn, NY

What do you mean when you say that "Our Wonderful World" and "News in Review" are "usually informative"? Does that mean that sometimes they aren't interesting?

Seriously, these are among our most popular features, and we are grateful for the compliments.

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