

# Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov

**O**n the 19th of Iyar, 5575 (1815), the soul of the great Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov left this world.

His impact was enormous: as one of the greatest rebbes of early Polish Chassidism, he furthered the movement with his tenacity in learning and helped to further the country's reputation as a center for Torah study.

The poverty in which Reb Menachem Mendel grew up is legendary. He lived with his parents (the subject of this month's feature "Beyond Price") in a broken-down shack on the outskirts of town. His

father Yosef, nicknamed Reb Yosef Charif (the "sharp one," in reference to his brilliant mind), left his house open all year to guests and strangers, sharing with them what little he had. A shy and quiet man, he refused to allow the community to support his learning. While he sat all day with a holy book in front of him, his wife Leba ran a small store and with her earnings supported the family.

Menachem Mendel's mother constantly sought the finest teachers for the boy and supervised his

progress, until it became apparent that he was an *illuy* (genius) and needed special education.

Sometime after the boy's bar mitzvah, his father called him aside and said, "Mendel, what will become of you? You have reached your limit here. It is time for you to move on. Go into the world and seek a *rosh yeshiva* who will teach you something."

After packing his meager belongings, young Menachem Mendel went to his mother's shop to bid her farewell. She gave him money and he went off, not knowing exactly where. In many ways he typified the Jewish scholar of eighteenth-

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By RABBI CHAYIM S. CHASAN

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## Reb Menachem Mendel complied, and in Lyzhansk found what he was looking for.

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century Poland — restless, idealistic, and always dissatisfied in his search for truth.

He drifted from town to town, somehow sustaining himself. Finally he reached the yeshiva of Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg, at the time one of the greatest learning centers in Europe. Reb Shmelke, a student of the Maggid of Mezherich (one of the Ba'al Shem Tov's greatest disciples), took the gifted youth under his wing.

It was there that Menachem Mendel came upon renowned contemporaries like the Chozeh (Seer) of Lublin and the Maggid of Koznitz. They became friends and pursued their studies together for a long time afterwards. Later in life, Reb Menachem Mendel fondly recalled those amiable years. The three of them eventually decided to part ways, each seeking a different place of Torah where he could climb to greater heights.

For Reb Menachem Mendel, parting with his mentor did not come easily. But one day Reb Shmelke approached the young man and said, "Mendel, you are young, and the world is open before you. What are you doing here? What will become of you?"

So once more Reb Menachem Mendel set out to find his niche. He ended up in Berlin and the yeshiva headed by the famous Rabbi Yosef

Teomim. (Rabbi Yosef is known for his classic *Pri Megadim* commentary. The *Pri Megadim* was written to clarify the *Shach* and the *Taz*, the two primary commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch and the Rema.) There for many years Menachem Mendel spent time mastering the various classic texts and the *halacha*. His favorite text was the Talmud commentary of Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi, who is commonly known as the Rif.

In spite of Reb Menachem

Mendel's brilliant success, the young prodigy didn't feel that he had found an establishment truly compatible with his personality and taste. While poring over the Rif one night, Menachem Mendel wept to himself, thinking, "What will become of me? Where do I belong?"

He fell asleep. As the story is told, the Rif appeared to him in a dream and announced that if Menachem Mendel wished to further develop his knowledge he was to

# The Power

**A**n example of the Reb Menachem Mendel's amazing powers took place in a small town near Rimanov. Typical of that era, the Jews rented their property from the local lord and labored day and night, donating to him much of their meager income. Though vital to the nation's economy, the Jews remained the victim of either the Church or the nobleman's whims.

The Jews of this particular town were extremely poor. Too exhausted from their work and isolated from each other on the large tract of land, they lacked the strength or cohesiveness to organize a *minyan* or Torah study group. They could not even educate their children or meet on Shabbos. Only on the holidays did they flock to neighboring Rimanov and receive some spiritual uplift.

One day, a decree from the local lord struck down the Jews like a scythe, without warning: within one month they were to leave the land. In vain the Jews appealed. Finally they decided to send a delegation to the great Reb Menachem Mendel of Rimanov, pleading for a way out of this predicament.

The delegation arrived right before Shabbos. Because of the lateness of the hour, they did not get to see him or even pass on the information. Instead, they had to wait in the town until after Shabbos. They dispersed and found places to spend the night.

On Shabbos afternoon the rebbe gave his customary *seudah shlishis*, this time accompanied not only by his followers, but by the delegation. As everyone there sat, enraptured, the rebbe rose and to the out-of-town Jews announced, "If you willingly accept upon yourselves to keep Shabbos properly and get a *minyan* together, Hashem will bestow on you the peace of mind you

trek to Lyzhansk and the yeshiva of the great Rabbi Elimelech. This great chassidic leader, who is known as the Noam Elimelech, had studied under the Maggid of Mezherich.

Reb Menachem Mendel complied, and there at last found what he was looking for. Delighted to have this great rebbe as a mentor, he threw himself into his studies. Reb Elimelech in turn rejoiced over his superb new *talmid*, who virtually became his right-hand man. Often

the rebbe called him over to discuss deep Torah insights. Reb Menachem Mendel frequently left Rabbi Elimelech's chamber in distress for not fully understanding his subject matter, and he would pray and work diligently until he did. From his experience he learned the importance of hard work in order to truly grasp the Torah.

Hour after hour he sat in the *bais midrash*, absorbed in Gemara, while students flocked to hear how

he explained everything to himself with crystal clarity. Suddenly interrupted by their presence, he would yell, "Don't you have anything to do but waste precious time? Take a *sefer* in your hands and learn!" The crowd would disperse, but then returned moments later, when the explanations continued pouring from his lips.

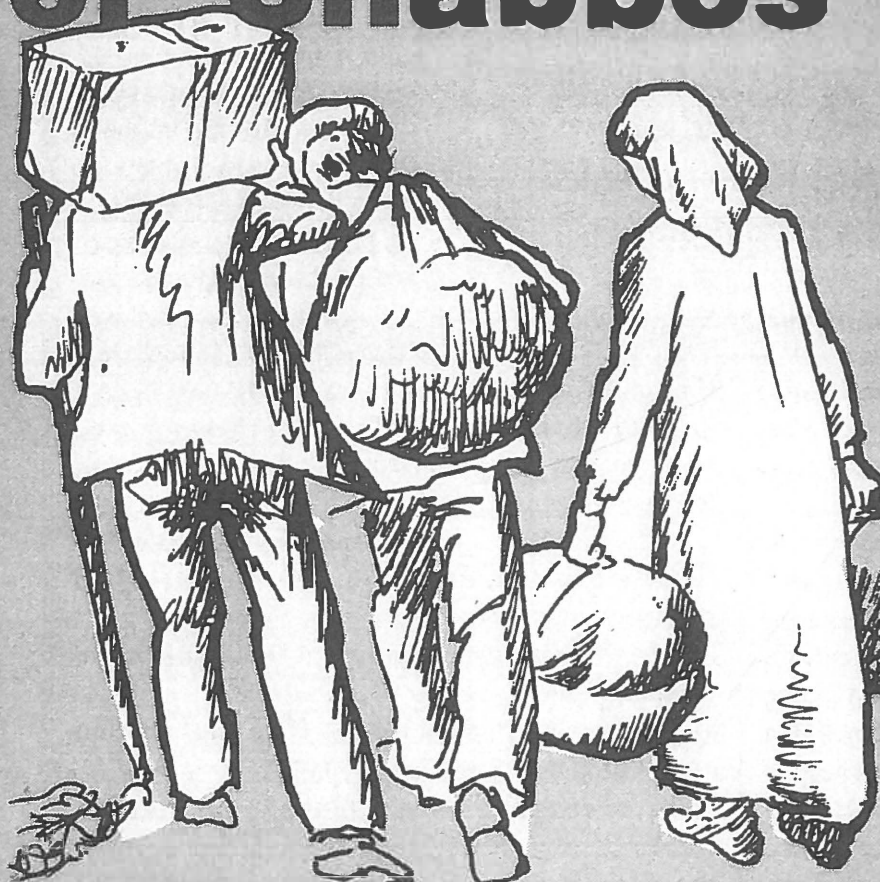
Although Reb Menachem Mendel married the daughter of a rich man from Pristik and went to live there, his father-in-law refused to support him. Just like his father Yosef, the lofty genius was destined to live in poverty.

After the passing of his mentor Reb Elimelech, Rabbi Menachem Mendel earned wide recognition as a *tzaddik* with *Ruach Hakodesh* (Divine Inspiration), attracting hundreds of followers.

He cloaked himself further in Torah and good deeds, scarcely knowing the pleasures of this world but striving to pray and intercede for his fellow Jews. For ten years Reb Menachem Mendel remained in Pristik after the passing of Reb Elimelech, and although he considered himself unworthy of leadership, he continued attracting students. They often waited days to see him, as he remained perpetually secluded and ensconced in his learning. But the wait was well worth it: a blessing from his mouth became a reality.

Eventually he traveled to Rimanov, but returned to Pristik for another ten years until the year 1808, when a delegation from Rimanov came and asked him to be their leader. He accepted, and made the town Rimanov famous as a center of Torah study. It has, in fact, become synonymous with Reb Menachem Mendel Rimanover. **JR**

## of Shabbos



seek. The decree will be nullified, and you shall remain on your land."

The dumbfounded delegation did not even bother to see the rebbe after *Havdalah*. Instead they returned home, told their families, and did exactly what the rebbe ordered. The rebbe's insight proved accurate: within a very short time, the decree was revoked. **JR**

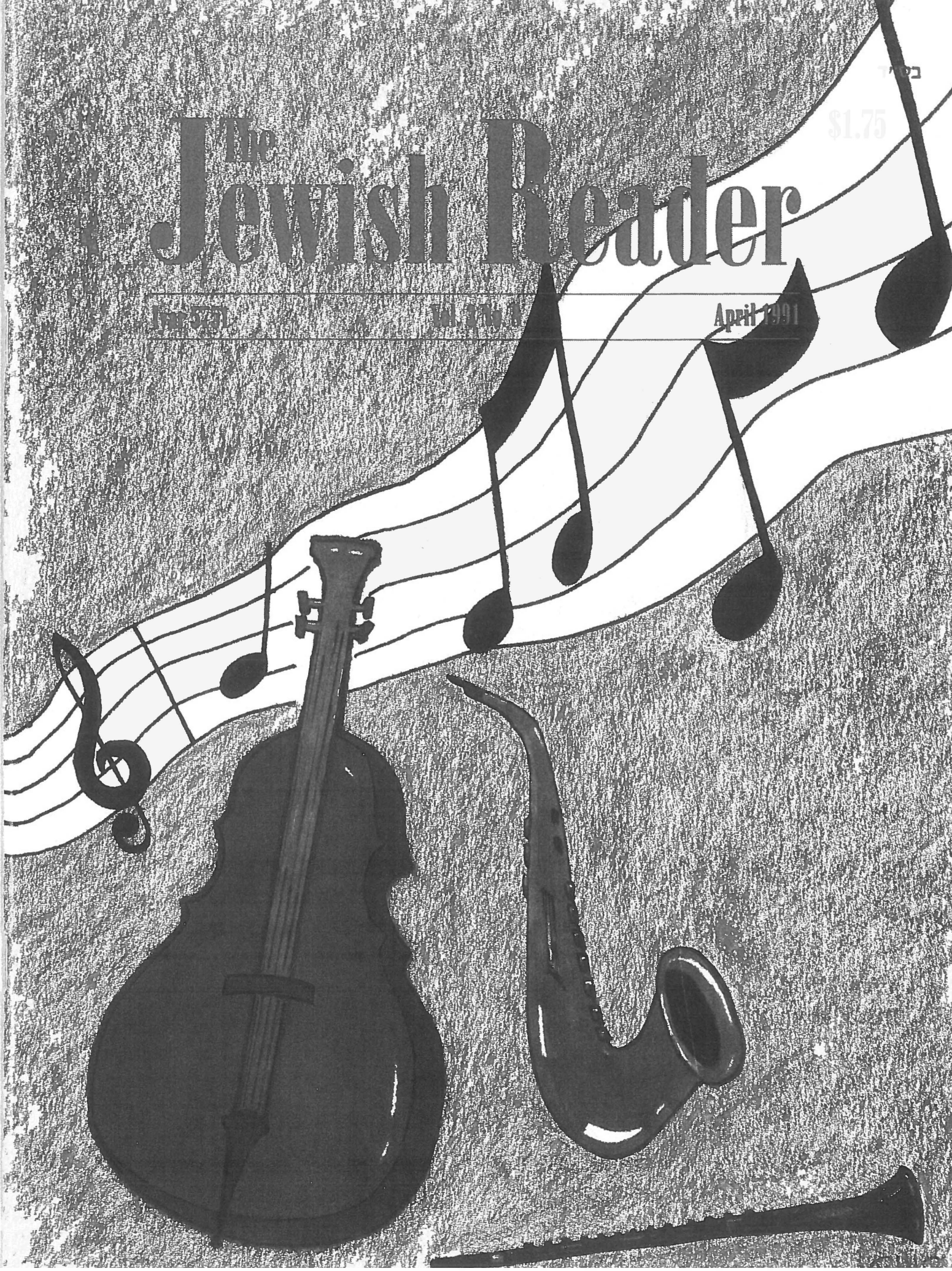
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## TO OUR READERS

In the course of the last few months we have presented biographies of various *tzaddikim* who have passed into the next life. These great men have represented various trends in Jewish life, but all had in common a deep love for the Torah and for the Jewish people.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov, who is profiled in the current issue, fits this mold perfectly. A chassidic leader who studied at the feet of one of the great non-chassidic Torah giants, Rabbi Menachem Mendel was familiar with the entire gamut of Jewish religious life. His influence has continued to be felt until today.

One of the hardest rules to keep is that against speaking slanderously of others — *lashon hara*. How far does the prohibition to speak *lashon hara* go? In "At Mama's Knee," which returns after a one-issue hiatus, the Hameln family explores this critical subject.

In "Our Story," the development of the Talmud Bavli, or Babylonian Talmud, is depicted. The Talmud, which is the bedrock of Jewish law, has helped keep the Jews alive through centuries of persecution. It has been insulted, censored, and burned, but it has survived and even become stronger. In our generation we are witnesses to the phenomenon of *Daf Yomi*, with thousands of people studying a page of Gemara every day. With Hashem's help, this trend toward more study will continue.

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# MAIL ROOM

## The Bais Yisrael

I had not known anything about the Bais Yisrael until I read your article about his life ("As a Mother Carries Her Child," Adar). I was amazed by the story of how a woman predicted he would be a rebbe when he was still a young boy.

The story about how the Chazon Ish and the Bais Yisrael respected

each other was very moving. I think it is important for all of us to learn a lesson from this story: we must treat all people respectfully.

The other anecdotes about the Bais Yisrael were just as interesting and informative. Thank you very much for this beautiful biography, and keep writing about our *gedolim*.

Yaakov Michael  
Cleveland, OH

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