

Tower Of Strength

By RABBI CHAYIM S. CHASAN



The 2nd of Sivan marks the *yahrzeit* of the fourth Munkatcher Rebbe, Rabbi Chaim Eleazar Shapira, who passed away in the year 5697 (1937).

It is difficult to describe this unusually dynamic man. To some, he was an extremist, who dogmatically refused to yield to his opponents and who combated them tooth and nail. But to those who merited to be in his presence, he was a tower of strength and heir to a dynasty which elevated the town of Munkatch to a citadel of Czechoslovakian and Hungarian Chassidus.

Rabbi Chaim Eleazar descended from a line of intensely spiritual and energetic men. His great-great-grandfather, Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov — also known as the B'nai Yissaschar, after his most famous work — was related to Reb Elimelech of Lyzhansk, one of the earliest chassidim and a disciple of the Maggid of Mezhirech. After being asked to become chief rabbi and judge of Munkatch, the B'nai Yissaschar traveled there and declared, "The town of Munkatch is beyond compare."

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Munkatch was a town in the Carpathian region, straddling the countries that are now Hungary and Czechoslovakia — at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

The kernel of Chassidus was successfully planted in Munkatch; it sprouted when Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech's grandson Shlomo took over. This boy was the offspring of Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech's son, who had married the daughter of Rabbi Eliezer of Lancut. When he was born, in 1832, in the town of Ribatic, his grandfather wanted to attend the *bris*, but could not come due to heavy snows. However, he sent a messenger with word that the boy be named Shlomo, because his days would be filled with peace. After finally seeing the infant three months later, the elderly sage is said to have declared, "This child will be a leader in Israel."

Indeed, young Shlomo was destined to be a leader. After marrying the daughter of the Sassöver Rebbe,

he came to Munkatch, which flowered spiritually as it never had before. Like his grandfather, Shlomo revealed himself as a scholar, whose keen mind was full of Torah insights.

His strong personality was very much needed, for ironically his days were filled with anything but peace. It was the mid-nineteenth century, which was an era of great change; at that time, there were people who were trying to introduce secular studies into the curricula of the yeshivos. At the time this was unheard of in Hungary, and was considered a step against Torah.

The Munkatcher Rebbe, in the tradition of Hungarian Chassidus, opposed such changes, and declared all-out war. When his opponents tried to have religious schools closed down and persuaded parents to send their children to state schools instead, Rabbi Shlomo personally went to Budapest, the capital, to have his schools reopened. On no account would he allow any outside influence into his community; he devoted

much of his considerable powers to stopping it. Waving high the banner of Torah, he earned himself a lifelong reputation as a fighter against secular forces.

Reb Shlomo died in 1893 (5653); his son Tzvi Hirsch filled his place, as *Av Beis Din* (chief rabbi and judge) of Munkatch. A genius in both revealed (*giluy*) and hidden (*nistar*) parts of Torah, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Shapira considered himself a heavenly messenger shouldering the responsibility for all his Jews and a soldier guarding a Divine fortress. Also occupied with battling more secular-minded forces, he allowed no thoughts he considered foreign to be introduced into the Munkatcher life. He even advocated creating more "fences" around the Torah — stricter laws in order to lock the Jews more securely within.

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Shapira devoted much time to further developing institutions in Munkatch

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and its environs. He established *kollelim*, yeshivos for married men, including one in the Land of Israel, and set up funds to support the poor scholars dwelling in Jerusalem. One Munkatch neighborhood, "Battei Munkatch," whose inhabitants were Russian and Carpathian Jews, still exists.

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Shapira, who authored a well-accepted work on the Shulchan Aruch called *Darchei Teshuvah*, died on the second day of Succos 5673 (1912). Shortly beforehand, he appointed his son, Rabbi Chaim Eleazar, born in 1872, as successor. Rabbi Chaim Eleazar displayed the fervor so characteristic of his ancestors. He tolerated no injustice; he maintained strict standards in conduct and spirituality, and expected the same from those around him.

Firmly Rabbi Chaim Eleazar guided his flock through an even stormier period in Jewish history. Some men had tried to make his appointment as Rebbe conditional upon his acceptance of demands for more modern types of study in the yeshivos. Although some of his followers begged him to pretend to agree to the deal, Rabbi Chaim Eleazar pushed them all away. Despising flatterers, he foiled their schemes and allowed no compromises. "I am prepared to give up my soul, my body, and my strength to defend even the smallest article of our faith," he declared. "I will not budge even one inch from the ways of my father."

His *chiddushim* on Torah revealed his astounding originality and consistency of thought. This was a man who not only expounded on Torah principals, but lived by them zealously and carried them everywhere.

The education of children, especially boys, remained Rabbi Chaim Eleazar's chief concern. The boys, he declared, must have a strong foundation of Torah learning; for the girls he stressed modesty and kind deeds. He exhorted his flock constantly to keep the Sabbath, strengthen their faith, and anticipate the complete redemption of the Messiah. He not only strove to keep his young charges within the perimeters of Torah, but to elevate Munkatch and its surrounding communities to the highest level of purity.

So far did he go in upholding education that he even had classrooms built or renovated so that they

were more spacious. Crowding and unsuitable conditions, he argued, distracted the children from their learning. For this project he contributed a considerable sum, encouraging others to do the same.

The Munkatch Rebbe did not desire glory. His power was something he wielded simply for the sake of the Jewish people. Whenever an urgent matter arose, Rabbi Chaim Eleazar was the first to

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tend to it; he applied all his resources to achieving whatever goal lay at hand.

He was considered a "miracle worker," although his chassidim generally stayed away from telling the "wonder stories" common to the followers of the Ba'al Shem Tov. Miracles don't make the *tzaddik*, the Rabbi Chaim Eleazar stated; good deeds do. Nevertheless, he received numerous visitors who told him their troubles and asked for blessings and

advice. Whenever he did perform a miracle, he skillfully hid it or disguised it so that the miracle appeared natural.

At his synagogue, he attracted no fewer than one thousand followers. After approaching the holy ark, he would wrap himself in his *tallis* and delivered a discourse before his audience. His voice, wavering and melodious, at times cried from the throat in anguish. He stood for hours,



Munkatch Yeshiva in B'nai Brak, Israel.

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keeping his audiences spellbound and at times scolding them in fiery language, while tears fell from his eyes. The words, flowering like a waterfall from his lips, penetrated the hearts of many and brought them to thoughts of repentance.

When he wasn't sermonizing, Rabbi Chaim Eleazar sang through his prayers and services. Graced with an exceptional voice, he drew forth listeners with beautiful melodies, inspiring many souls and raising them to even higher planes.

During *Selichos*, the penitential prayers recited before Rosh Hashanah, he was especially moving. Hundreds gathered while he passed before the ark and, eyes brimming with tears and voice tinged with pain and supplication, pleaded mercy on behalf of the Jewish people.

His yeshiva, *Darchei Teshuvah*, established in 1922 (5682) and named after his father, remained a source of boundless satisfaction. Rabbi Chaim Eleazar himself came to the study hall to test the students and encourage them. Hundreds came from near and far to attach themselves to this holy man. Like a father, he looked after them all. Young and inexperienced they entered; mature and wise they emerged from the yeshiva. Many noted scholars

emerged under his guiding hand; walking tall in the footsteps of their leader, they carried high his banner.

He turned Munkatch into a Torah metropolis. Everyone there lived his life around the rebbe, and throngs came to receive the blessings of the town's most renowned citizen. Even government officials in the newly created Czechoslovakia came to ask his advice.



Rabbi Chaim Eleazar passionately applied his philosophy to the Land of Israel. He sent money there, supporting Palestine's religious Jews.

When World War I hindered the flow of funds, the rebbe boarded a carriage for Vienna and Budapest to raise money. From organization to organization he traveled, often through snow-covered roads, until he succeeded in his mission. Thanks

A Fantastic Comeback

At the time that Rabbi Chaim Eleazar passed away, the Munkatch community had reached the peak of its glory. However, only one year later marked the beginning of the end. Under Hitler's Munich Pact in 1938, Czechoslovakia was sliced in pieces, of which one went to neighboring Hungary. Anti-Semitism reared its ugly head as the Hungarians instated a pro-Nazi government.

During this time, the Minchas Eleazar's son-in-law and successor, Rabbi Baruch Rabinowitz, gallantly carried on the dynasty's traditions. He established new scholarly and charitable organizations, and guided his people with the same strength and insight of his forefathers.

Nevertheless, he could not hold back the deadly tide. In 1941, thousands of Jews were banished from the Carpathian region, thus extinguishing the Munkatch fire. Eventually the Jews there were driven to the Ukraine, a region notoriously steeped in warfare and Jewish blood. Among the refugees was the Munkatch Rebbe who, with his youngest son, managed to return to Hungary. There he set up an office to help rescue the Jews still living there, as well as those who had fled Poland.

Although Rabbi Baruch Rabinowitz survived the war, many of his followers did not. Those who had eluded the fires of Auschwitz returned to Munkatch, only to find a town ravaged and desolate. No more would the streets echo with the cries and footsteps of loyal chassidim, nor the houses shimmer with Sabbath lights. Sorrowfully the survivors dispersed.

Rabbi Baruch Rabinowitz himself desired neither to rekindle the fire of Munkatch nor to return there. He arrived in Palestine with his family; shortly his wife died, and he accepted a rabbinic post in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Sad and weary, he longed for a peaceful place to work, far away from the bitter memories. He eventually returned to the Holy Land and became the rabbi of the town of Cholon.

to him, hundreds of lives were saved.

Once his adversaries told the government that he was stashing away great sums of money. Tax collectors came to his door and conducted a search, ready to levy heavy fines upon the holy man.

When the collectors came to the *tzeddakah* box of Rabbi Meir Ba'al HaNes, the special charity for scholars in the Holy Land, they asked to open it. But the Munkatcher Rebbe stood

rock still. When the men threatened him, he declared, "The bullets of the revolvers in your hands will rip my heart before I let you open that box." So impressed were they with his courage that they retreated and left the house.

His enemies charged that the Munkatcher Rebbe cared little for the Land of Israel. This claim stemmed from his uncompromising anti-Zionist stand. However, the

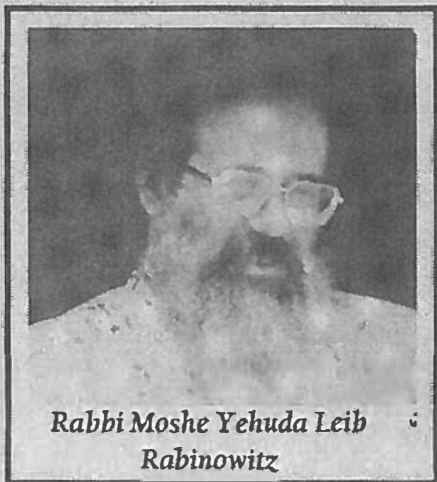
*He especially desired
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in Jerusalem.*

proof of his love for the Holy Land came in 1930, when the rebbe boarded a ship to the holy shores.

He was not there in order to prove his critics wrong; rather, he was fulfilling a lifelong dream. He especially desired to meet the 100-year-old head of the Sephardic scholars, Rabbi Shlomo Alfandari, in Jerusalem. After an exchange of letters, Rabbi Chaim Eleazar announced on Passover the decision to leave.

In Jerusalem he was greeted with great fanfare. Jews flocked to see him. During his thirteen days there, Rabbi Chaim Eleazar prayed at the Kotel, visited the Tomb of Rachel and the grave sites of our forefathers at Chevron, and met with the famous Sephardic leader. In a letter to relatives back home he wrote, "Those thirteen days were like the thirteen years that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai spent in the cave with his son Eleazar . . . At night I trembled as if I were lying in the Holy Sanctuary within the Holy Ark."

During his lifetime he wrote a number of great works. The most significant was certainly the *Minchas Eleazar*, a compilation of responses to questions concerning Jewish law, and the Munkatcher Rebbe is often called the "Minchas Eleazar." JR



Rabbi Moshe Yehuda Leib
Rabinowitz

Nevertheless, there were a few Munkatchers who did not want to see the chain of a golden tradition severed. Witnessing other chassidim who had revived their own communities, the Munkatchers in the U.S. decided to do the same. Rabbi Moshe Yehuda Leib Rabinowitz, a young grandson of the *Minchas Eleazar*, was crowned as the new leader. The Munkatcher dynasty was reborn.

Today, the Munkatcher community has made a fantastic comeback. Under the leadership of the current rebbe, the institutions began again, virtually from scratch. Displaying the tenacity of his grandfather, the new Munkatcher Rebbe obtained funds and set about restoring what the forces of evil had tried to destroy.

Munkatch now numbers thousands of chassidim and supporters, many of them refugees whose relatives had had ties to the original Czech-Hungarian town. Emissaries sent to remote places in the globe try to help these people physically and spiritually, and to spread Torah knowledge. Munkatcher institutions in Israel have also grown, notably in Jerusalem and B'nai Brak. There are also centers in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Montreal. They keep strictly to an anti-modern philosophy.

The current Munkatcher Rebbe lives in Brooklyn, N.Y. On the High Holidays, hundreds pack the Munkatcher synagogue to hear him sing and pray, just as they listened to his grandfather. And in crowded Boro Park, Brooklyn, Munkatcher children play ball in the street and learn Torah in the yeshiva named "Minchas Eleazar."

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TO OUR READERS

It is a custom to stay awake the entire first night of Shavuot, studying Torah. One reason given for this practice is to make up for the fact that the Israelites fell asleep at Mount Sinai the night before they received the Torah.

Our cover this month depicts the Torah emerging from the Kotel. This represents the phrase: "The Torah shall go out of Zion."

"Torah Highlights" discusses various aspects of the holiday of Shavuot.

Judaism encourages us to look at the lives of our rabbis and learn from them. To further this end, in the course of the last several months we have featured biographies of various rabbis. We are gratified by the positive response to this section of *The Jewish Reader*. One of the great chassidic rebbes of the last century, Rabbi Chaim Eleazar of Munkatch, is the subject of this month's biography, titled "Tower of Strength."

The final installment of "At Mama's Knee" appears in the current issue. A full-length book describing the adventures of the Hameln family is in the works, featuring many more episodes that illustrate the life of German Jews during the seventeenth century.

We wish all of our readers a Happy Shavuot!

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MAIL ROOM

Helping Russian Jews Find Their Place

"Make Them Feel ACCEPTED!" (Nissan) was an excellent choice for your contest winner. In our school we have many Russian students, and I think the advice given by the author will come in very handy. Congratulations to Tirtza Meystel.

Shalom Gruen
Brooklyn, NY

It is never too late to enter the Writing Contest, which is ongoing. You may send your entries in throughout the summer months.



The article by Tirtza Meystel made me wonder whether sometimes we don't treat our American friends properly. Everything she wrote about Russian kids sometimes not being accepted can be said about some of our American classmates.

The last *Bais HaMikdash* was destroyed because of hatred. Isn't it time we learned our lesson and practiced some love?

Sharon Solomon
Los Angeles, CA

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