

# To Make A Dream

By CHAYIM S. CHASAN

**R**abbi Chaim Mayer Hager was born on 15 Kislev 5648 (1888) in the town of Vizhnitz, in Poland. His father, Rabbi Yisrael, the Vizhnitzer Rebbe, is sometimes called the "Ahavas Yisrael," because of his deep love for every Jew. The Hager family had an impressive lineage, descending directly from a student of the Ba'al Shem Tov named Rabbi Yaakov Kopel. It is said that Rabbi Yaakov traced his ancestry back to Rashi and King David.



So sheltered was the life of young Chaim Mayer led that he was never permitted to leave the yard of his house without authorization or supervision. When he once went to swim at the edge of town with his brother, he was angrily scolded by his mother, who also told his father about the incident. "How is it possible not to listen to your mother?" Rabbi Yisrael declared. Rabbi Chaim Mayer, who always feared any reproach from

his father, remembered this incident all his life.

At the age of eight Chaim Mayer became engaged, and at seventeen he married. After receiving his *semichah*, rabbinical ordination, from Rabbi Shalom Mordechai HaKohen Schwadron (known as the Maharsham — see Shevat 5751 issue), he became the rabbi of Vilchowitz. There he proved an effective community organizer, raising funds and

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*The ninth of Nissan marks the nineteenth yearzeit of Rabbi Chaim Mayer Hager, the Vizhnitzer Rebbe, often called the "Imrei Chaim."*

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instituting programs for the community at large. Meticulous about *kashrus* supervision, he investigated the butchers of the town to make sure they were competent in their field.

It was in Vilchowitz where his spiritual gifts truly flowered. The *tisch* (chassidic table) of the Imrei Chaim became known far and wide for his words of Torah. These were followed by synagogue melodies, which he often sang until dawn, when he would begin to prepare for *shacharis*. One song, in particular, *Kah Ribbon*, made him famous, and his audience listened spellbound to his rendition. Sharing his father's love for every Jew, he received his visitors graciously.



World War I brought many changes to European Jewry. As the tide of assimilation grew stronger, the Orthodox rallied under political banners. The Imrei Chaim, the new Vizhnitzer Rebbe after his father's

death, became an active member of Agudas Yisrael. He traveled to Hungary in order to bring its Jews closer to Torah. Not only chassidim were attracted to him; Ashkenazim also found him inspiring.

Following the devastation of World War II, the Imrei Chaim again moved to the forefront. In Antwerp, Belgium, he led the fight to rescue Jewish children who had been hidden by gentiles during the critical years. When the Pirchei Agudah, the juvenile division of Agudas Yisrael, was formed, he had the children brought to him for a blessing. He hugged and kissed them all, as if they were gems, which they were — they were the surviving jewels of the Jewish crown. It was a scene that those present never forgot.

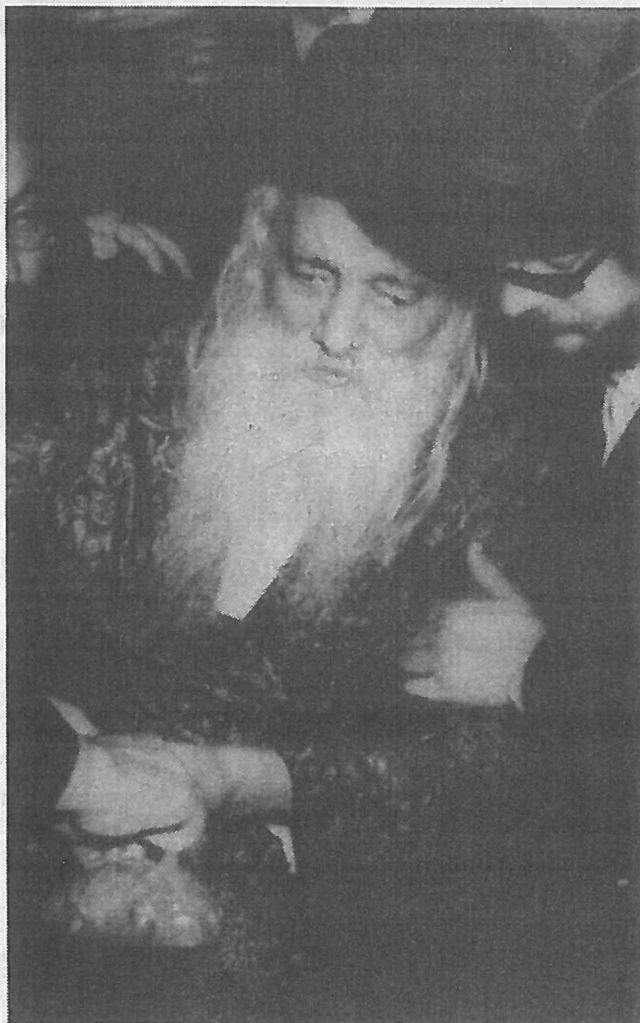
In Antwerp he also received adult visitors; quite a few came for advice and guidance, especially after the recent horrors. Some, questioning the Holocaust, harbored doubts about G-d and wondered how He could have allowed such a calamity to happen. The Vizhnitzer Rebbe replied, "If we understood everything G-d did, He wouldn't be our G-d. I personally wouldn't want a G-d I could understand."

His time in Antwerp was limited. He realized that Palestine, though at the time still under British control and perpetual Arab threat, would play an important role in postwar Judaism. As a leader

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**Rabbi Chaim Mayer Hager, zt'l  
The Vizhnitzer Rebbe**

in the revival and redevelopment of Orthodoxy, he aimed to foster its

presence in the emerging Jewish state.

Even before World War II, the Imrei Chaim had dreamed of an exclusively Vizhnitzer community in the Land of Israel: a self-sufficient town comprised entirely of Vizhnitzer chassidim, with their own shops, businesses, synagogues, yeshivos, and *mikvaos*. While in Antwerp, he openly made his dream known, and set about realizing it.

His dream astounded many. In those days — the early '50's — the refugees of Europe were broken down and poor. How could funds possibly be gathered for such an enterprise? But Rabbi Chaim Mayer persisted. Somehow raising the money, he encouraged a number of his followers to make *aliyah*, which he himself also did. They settled on vacant land just outside of Bnei Brak and named their little enclave Shikkun Vizhnitz.

Today, as Bnei Brak itself has grown, absorbing adjacent areas, Shikkun Vizhnitz is connected to the town in general. Nevertheless, the self-sufficient flavor has remained: besides a yeshiva, Shikkun Vizhnitz has its own bakeries, businesses, and even a hotel, where visitors from all over the world flock to meet with the current Vizhnitzer Rebbe. (His brother resides in Monsey, New York, where he also commands a group of followers.) In short, this little corner of Bnei Brak has developed into world headquarters for the Vizhnitzer Chassidim, fulfilling the dream of its most visionary leader, Rabbi Chaim Mayer. JR

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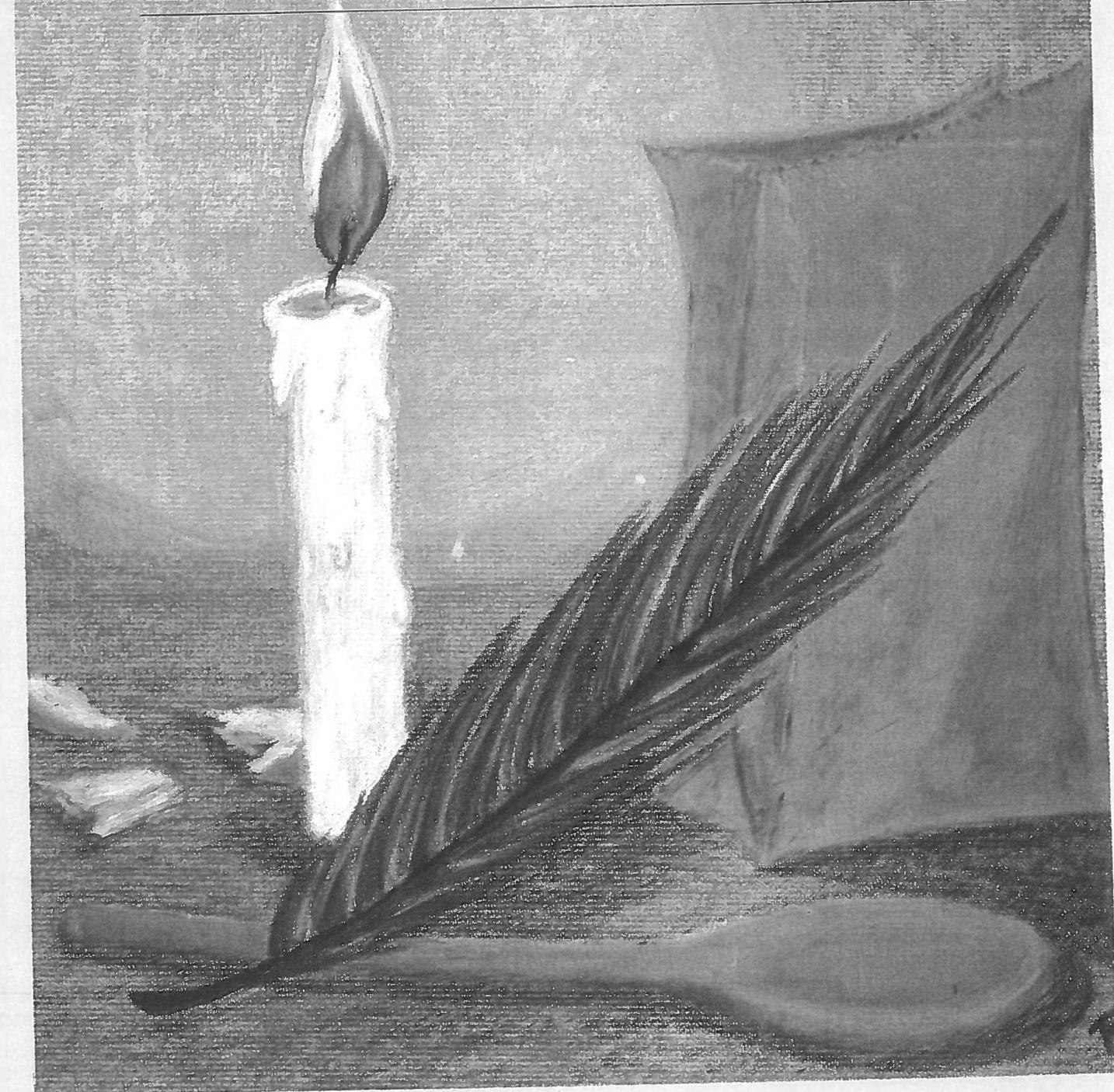
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# The Jewish Reader

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## TO OUR READERS

The Pesach holiday serves as the backdrop for "Two Sons," this month's lead feature.

The first night of Pesach marks the forty-eighth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In the dark night of Nazi Europe, brave Jewish fighters stood up to the Germans, who wished to empty the ghetto and send its inhabitants to death camps. For six weeks, the undermanned, outgunned Jews battled against overwhelming odds. Eventually the Nazi animal triumphed, but the memory of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters has been imprinted on the collective consciousness of the Jewish people.

Those of you who enjoy surprise endings will like "The Peddler," a story of turn-of-the-century Russia.

We are pleased to announce a winner in our Writing Contest. Tirtza Meystel, of Chicago, Illinois, has written a provocative essay about the influx of Russian Jews into our schools. We hope that not only kids, but adults too will take her advice to heart.

On that positive note, we wish all our readers a happy and kosher Pesach!

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# MAIL ROOM

## The Ba'al Shem Tov

I thoroughly enjoyed your recent story about the Ba'al Shem Tov, "Three Tales" (Shevat). As a parent, I have always been inspired by tales of the Ba'al Shem. This tale is a particular favorite, with its message of repentance and its promise that Hashem gives everyone a second chance.

I hope that in the future you will feature other stories about the father of Chassidism.

Mrs. Marilyn Gross  
Lawrence, NY

"At Mama's Knee" is taking a Pesach vacation, and will return in Iyar. Also next month, the winner of the Teves Torah Contest will be announced.

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