



A KINGDOM REBUILT

How Rav Aharon Rokeach brought postwar Belz back to life

Rav Ahrele Belzer accepted the loss of his family during the Holocaust with the equanimity of his Biblical namesake, *Vayidom Aharon*. But he refused to allow his personal devastation to spell the end of the Belzer dynasty. How did a man so removed from worldly pleasure possess the keen insight to intuit the needs of a generation? How did this otherworldly rebbe innovate and rebuild Belz in postwar Israel? And how did he institute forward-thinking measures that only enhanced and bolstered the legacy of the past?



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“There are those who merit the World to Come with just one act: this is your opportunity! Assist in the rescue of the Belzer Rav!”



He was Rebbe of the province of Belz, but his influence spread far beyond. Rav Aharon Rokeach attends the installation of his brother-in-law Rav Yochanan Twersky of Rubichow before the Nazi war machine decimated his family and chassidus

The ancient Sephardic community of Halab (Aleppo) was abuzz on a cool February day in 1944. Fathers exited the *K'nees* (shul) donned in finery as they hurried along with their children, hoping to merit a glimpse of the great tzaddik passing through the city's rail junction. He would have no choice but to stop here: A mere 30 miles from the border of British-controlled Palestine, all foreign aliens arriving from Nazi-occupied territory were disembarked, rigorously searched, and interrogated by British security services. A war was raging, and anyone could be an enemy spy or operative.

According to the train's manifest, the guest in question was one "Rabbi Twersky" who was accompanied on his journey by "Rabbi Pecszenik." They were among a refugee group that had arrived from Budapest via Bucharest and Istanbul.

An agent approached and the questioning began, but the rabbi hardly responded. The more aggressive the interrogation, the less cooperative the rabbi became. Finally, the agent had enough and decided that the rabbi and his assistant would need to be taken into custody, until additional background information about him could be established.

His entourage was aghast, but their pleas fell on deaf ears, and the great Rebbe of Belz, Rav Aharon Rokeach, who had endured a convoluted and draining journey from Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe to the Middle East, was taken into custody and dragged to the local police station just one stop short of his final destination. He had come so close — but was yet so far.

An angel appeared in the nick of time. This was no simple angel but one of the great rescue activists of the Holocaust era, Israel's Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Halevi Herzog.

Rav Herzog was en route to Istanbul along with his son, future Israeli diplomat Yaacov. There they planned to beg local leaders of the Greek Orthodox Church to assist their rescue efforts.

It was Rav Herzog who had initially pleaded with the Jewish Agency's director of immigration, Chaim Moshe Shapira, to issue precious visas on behalf of the Rebbe and his brother. "There are those who merit the world to come with just one act," he told Shapira. "This is your opportunity! Assist with the rescue of the Belzer Rav."

Now, with the Rebbe's journey to freedom tantalizingly close to its finale, Rav Herzog and company had timed their journey so they could stop in Aleppo, close to the border, and be among the first to welcome the Rebbe to Eretz Yisrael. Alighting from the train, Rav Herzog was greeted by leading members of the Aleppan Jewish community. "Has the great

tzaddik arrived yet?” was his first question. He was shocked to hear the reply: “Yes, but the British have taken him to the police station for questioning.”

Yaacov Herzog immediately took action. Arriving at the police station, he witnessed a scene that shook him to the core. An emaciated Belzer Rav and his brother, Rav Mordechai, were among a group of more than twenty Jews confined to a dark and dirty basement cell, where a group of British agents began to forcefully interrogate them. Herzog immediately produced his credentials and began to negotiate with the chief of police. Little progress was made, and he called for his father who hastened to the office of the district police commander and explained that the weakened rabbi was in no position to be interrogated. Impressed by Rav Herzog’s pleas, the commander agreed to release the Rebbe into Rav Herzog’s “custody,” with the remainder of the group to be released shortly thereafter.

Yaacov Herzog then took matters into his own hands. Noticing that the weakened Rebbe — who had been practically fasting for months — was unable to walk unassisted, he gently lifted and carried the tzaddik out of the police station to a nearby hotel, where he could rest and avoid unwanted attention. Several minutes later, they were joined by Rav Herzog.

The meeting between these two giants clearly made a deep impression on famed journalist Yonah Cohen, who was present at the time and immortalized the moment in his book *To the Forgotten Million*:

The exhausted rabbi stood to honor the chief rabbi and gripped the arm of his chair; but the chief rabbi quickly motioned that he should take his seat. For a moment they both stood, the rabbi from the Land of Israel and the “king” — the Belzer Rebbe — facing one another. They met as the Belzer Rav was half erect and for a long moment they embraced each other warmly. Then the



The Rebbe’s passport. During his harrowing escape from Eastern Europe, his papers identified him as “Rabbi Twersky” – but Israel’s Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog knew the true identity of the tzaddik apprehended by the British security services



Rebbe suddenly burst into bitter sobs.

For Yonah Cohen (and practically all others) it would seem a wild fantasy that this broken survivor of a decimated Polish Jewry would ever succeed in rebuilding his lost kingdom. Yet just a few days later the Rebbe made it clear his ambitions extended far beyond mere survival. He entered the Land of Israel by way of its northern border and spent his first Shabbos there in Haifa. In honor of Shabbos Shirah, the Rebbe addressed the small gathering:

Az yashir. Rashi states that from here we see that there will be techiyas hameisim. How do we see that? Because the Jewish People sang. Shortly before the exodus from Egypt, four-fifths of the Jewish People died during the plague of Choshech. Everyone must have lost most of their family. And yet shortly afterward they were able to sing. How could the survivors sing? It must be that they firmly believed that one day the dead would rise to life once again. Only with a belief in techiyas hameisim is it possible to sing. Without that belief it’s impossible...

PART I

BORN TO LEAD

EASTERN EUROPE, 1880 - 1944

HOLY FROM BIRTH

Rav Aharon Rokeach was born on December 20th (17 Teves) 1880 to Rav Yissachar Dov Rokeach and Rebbetzin Basha Ruchama, a descendant of the Chernobyl dynasty. It was evident from a young age that Rav Aharon was different. Accounts from his contemporaries described him as an angelic figure who lived an ascetic existence, almost totally bereft of earthly pleasures. He rarely slept or ate and spent the majority of his time engaged in davening and learning.

While most believed that he was named Aharon in memory of his maternal great-grandfather, Rav Aharon of Chernobyl, his father later explained that he’d named his son for Rav Aharon of Karlin. “Just as Rav Aharon (of Karlin) accepted upon himself the *tzaros* afflicting Klal Yisrael, so too my holy son Aharon will absorb Jewish suffering,” he predicted.

Young Ahrele became deeply attached to his grandfather, Rav Yehoshua (known as the Mittler Rav), who stood at the helm of the Belzer dynasty until his passing in 1894.

Rav Yehoshua encouraged his grandson to spend his youth steeped in Torah, and nowhere in Galicia was the environment as ripe for Torah growth and development as among the *yoshvim* of the Belz beis medrash. Some of the most learned scholars of Galicia were followers of Belz, including

Rabbi Moshe Greenwald (the Arugas HaBosem) and his descendants, Rabbi Sholom Mordechai Schwadron (the Maharsham of Brezhan), and, later, Rabbi Chanoch Dov (the Cheishev Ha’ephod).

The Tchebiner Rav, Rav Dov Berish Weidenfeld, frequented the court of Rav Yissachar Dov and was a close friend of Rav Ahrele. He related that even at a young age Rav Aharon was referred to as a “*kadosh mei’rechem*” (holy from the womb). He also recalled that as a bochur, the future Rebbe was already fluent in all of Shas as well as all four sections of the Shulchan Aruch. The Tchebiner Rav saw the notes on the *Ketzos Hachoshen* written during Rav Aharon’s youth and was amazed by the depth of the *chiddushim*. He recalled that the Rebbe Rav Yissachar Dov would even stand up for his illustrious son.

Rav Aharon’s adherence to every halachic stricture is best illustrated by the time when, as a young man, he took ill. The doctor instructed him to refrain from using the mikveh for the duration of his illness. Suspecting that he wouldn’t listen, his father Rav Yissachar Dov forbade him from doing so. Sure enough, Rav Aharon proceeded to the mikveh the next morning, conducted all of the regular preparations, approached the mikveh, stood on the steps and proclaimed, “I hereby prepare to fulfill the *mitzvas asah* of listening to my father

who ordered me to not immerse in the mikveh.”

CONCEALED AND REVEALED As he grew older, his ascetic lifestyle began to take a toll. He struggled to

maintain a meager weight as a teen, and his frail frame was plagued by illness and pain. His parents finally convinced him to consult with a specialist, who informed the young prodigy that he wouldn’t live much longer in his current state. As if oblivious to the diagnosis, Rav Aharon made little change to his austere habits and astonished those around him with an endless storehouse of energy. He often remained standing for hours and never slept more than a couple of hours at a time.

Though he tried to keep his virtuous ways hidden, his holiness was hard to obscure and a cadre of *talmidim* formed around him, following his every move. When in his late teens he could no longer resist their demands that he deliver *shiurim*, his students immediately regretted having asked as they watched their teacher bite his lip and grimace as he delivered *shiurim* through the terrible pain of overexertion. Yet he became a fatherly figure and assisted them in their development throughout their time under his care.

The Tchebiner Rav joined Rav Yissachar Dov and Rav Aharon in the resort city of Marienbad one summer around the turn of the century. When the trio encountered the great Rav Meir Arik of Tarnow, they entered a Talmudic debate. As the discussion grew heated, Rav Aharon stood apart from the group, as if he had nothing to add. When the conversation ended, Rav Aharon escorted Rav Arik to his lodging and casually mentioned a certain *Tosfos* that completely refuted his entire *pilpul*. Astonished, Rav Meir replied, “You knew this Tosafos all along and said nothing?!”

Later Rav Meir mentioned to the Tchebiner, “I understand that he was willing



Rav Yissachar Dov of Belz, the father of Rav Ahrele



The current Rebbe, Rav Yissachar Dov, took his uncle's mantle and mandate

and spearheaded an accompanying newspaper called *Kol Machzikei Hadas*. In 1894 he was succeeded by his oldest son Rav Yissachar Dov. A dynamic leader known as “Der Frierdiger Rav,” he presided over one of the largest chassidic communities in the tumultuous early decades of the 20th century and led the conservative opposition to the Zionist movement. Exiled during World War I, he sojourned in Hungary before returning to Belz in his last years. His son Rav Aharon succeeded him in 1926, and with his passing in 1957 there was a leadership gap for a decade following his passing. In 1966 his nephew Rav Yissachar Dov was crowned Rebbe at the age of 18. Rav Yissachar Dov, who currently serves as Rebbe, oversaw the miraculous growth of the Belz *chassidus* and its accompanying institutions worldwide.

LINKS IN THE CHAIN
THE BELZER DYNASTY

In 1817 Rav Shalom Rokeach, a descendant of Rav Elazar Rokeach, the “*Maaseh Rokeach*,” was appointed rav of the eastern Galician town of Belz in the Austrian Empire. One of the closest chassidim of Rav Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz, the Chozeh of Lublin, he was known alternatively as the Sar Shalom of Belz or “*der ershter rav*.” Aside for about a decade around World War I, Belz would remain the headquarters of the *chassidus* for well over a century until the Second World War. Almost no other chassidic dynasty could boast the stability of keeping its court in one location for such an extended period.

Belz lore has it that the post office in Lvov, one of the major cities in the region, would receive letters which the Jewish sender had addressed, “Lvov, near Belz.” It also tells of a chassid of great wealth and influence who once gained an audience with the Austrian emperor, Franz Joseph.

The Emperor asked, “To which province does your hometown belong?”

The chassid answered without hesitation, “To the Rebbe of Belz, of course.”

The Sar Shalom passed away in 1855 and was succeeded by his youngest son Rav Yehoshua. Known fondly as Rav Yehoshua’le or “Der Mittler Rav,” he was a charismatic leader of Belz and Galician Jewry for four decades. Rav Yehoshua’le waged an all-out battle against attempts to modernize Jewish observance. To that end he was among the founders of the first Orthodox political party, Machzikei Hadas,

to forgo his own honor, but why didn’t he take his father’s honor into account? People might think that the Belzer Rav has a son who doesn’t know how to learn!” The Tchebiner later summed up the difference between the Rebbe Rav Yissachar Dov and his son Rav Aharon with a clever antimetabole. “Rav Yissachar Dov concealed his holiness with Torah, while Rav Aharon concealed his Torah with holiness.”

In 1896 Rav Aharon married his cousin Malka. He continued to reside in Belz, but stayed out of the limelight of his father’s court. With the outbreak of World War I, he went into exile with his father — first to Ratzfert (Ujfeherto), Hungary; then to Munkacz, before returning to the newly emerged Second Polish Republic only in 1922. It would be another two years before their wanderings were finally over, and Rav Yissachar Dov would return home to Belz with his family and entourage. The years of exile had taken their toll, however, and he succumbed to illness in 1926.

EMBRACE, DON’T CONFRONT

Rav Aharon inherited the double crown of Rav and Rebbe of Belz from his father, though he refrained from direct involvement in the day-to-day halachic aspects of the rabbinate, generally deferring halachic queries to two local *dayanim* hired for this purpose.

It was quickly apparent that he was not entirely like the previous Belzer Rebbes. Beginning with the reign of his great-grandfather, the Sar Shalom, Belz was known to be a tightly controlled, conservative and extremely centralized dynasty. It was said of turn-of-the-century Belz, “Ten measures of zealotry descended to this world; nine went to Belz and one to the rest of the world.” Belz took an almost militant approach to combating the challenges of modernity, especially the emerging Zionist movement, which the rebbe’s father had combatted with fiery ardor.



After the 1926 levayah of Rav Yissachar Dov, Rav Aharon assumed leadership of Belz, charting a new path that upheld his ancestors’ conservative ideals along with forward-thinking innovation

Yet the newly crowned Rav Aharon stood down. Not only did he decline to engage in active confrontation with the burgeoning Zionist movement among Belz’s youth, he made it his business to try and draw them closer. When the child of a close chassid who had strayed from the chassidic path announced he was making aliyah to a socialist kibbutz, the Rebbe insisted on meeting him. Instead of admonishing the young rebel, he blessed him with a safe journey and asked him to please seek out “the true fruits of the land.”

The reputation that contemporary Belz projects as a warm, embracing *chassidus* stems from Rav Aharon. Chassidim of the era recalled the metamorphosis that he effected as leader. While Belz had previously been a seat of aristocracy, Rav Aharon felt uncomfortable being feted by the rich and powerful. His place was with the poor and the troubled, the ill and the downtrodden. His clothes were old and often tattered.

The gabbaim, accustomed to receiving large *pidyonos* (gifts), now had to adjust to a rebbe who refused to even handle money, using a handkerchief to protect himself from touching what he viewed to be the root of all evil. When wealthy chassidim would hand him money, he would leave it

on the table and instruct the next needy chassid who arrived to help himself to it. Often, he refused the funds completely, instructing the benefactor to instead establish a fund to assist the needy in his own town.

Visitors came to Belz to see the Rebbe, to experience a spiritual uplift in his presence. The Rebbe didn’t engage in lengthy or deep discourses in Torah and *chassidus* at the *tish* or any other occasion, and even what was said wasn’t recorded or published. The Torah he did cite was primarily that of his own ancestors, as well as the early tzaddikim, the Rebbe Rav Meilech of Lizhensk and Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev.

In his public leadership he was more moderate than his father and grandfather, less political in general and less vocal about contemporary issues. He participated in a gathering of the Machzikei Hadas organization (his grandfather Rav Yehoshua had been among its founders) in Lvov in 1928, but his involvement was rather limited beyond his actual presence there representing Belz. In general, he seemed to project a distinction between his personal opinions on public policy, which he kept largely to himself, and the official “*shitah*” of Belz, which he felt it was his responsibility to uphold.



“The Belzer Rebbe was a soul without a body!” Even as a youngster, he was known as an otherworldly being who barely sustained his body

The Chofetz Chaim replied forcefully, “The Belzer Rebbe’s honor is also considered an oness!”

“AN EMESEH YID”

Rav Aharon’s saintly reputation spread far beyond Galicia, garnering respect from leading rabbinic figures in central Poland and the Lithuanian yeshivah world, as well as *l’havdil* heads of state and even church officials. The mutual respect between the Belzer Rav and the Chofetz Chaim became evident when the Rebbe made an exception to his apolitical posture to join the Chofetz Chaim and a delegation of leading rabbis in Warsaw in 1930 to meet the Polish Prime Minister Kazimierz Bartel. This was part of a concerted effort to alleviate some of the pressure being placed on Orthodox Jewry to institute educational reform.

The Chofetz Chaim requested that the most prominent chassidic leaders of Polish Jewry join him for the meeting. The group ultimately consisted of the Chofetz Chaim, Rav Avraham Mordechai Alter of Ger, Rav Yitzchak Menachem Mendel Danziger of Alexander and Rav Aharon Rokeach of Belz. In the classic work *Rescuing the Rebbe of Belz*, author Yosef Israel shares an incredible episode that occurred during this visit to Warsaw:

As author of the Mishnah Berurah and leading proponent of the Vilna Gaon’s views, the Chofetz Chaim habitually was meticulous to complete the Minchah prayer before sundown, but at that meeting he twice ignored the whispered urging of his son-in-law

Rav Mendel Zaks, to daven Minchah. Only shortly before nightfall, when the Belzer Rav announced, “Men vet gein davenen Mincha,” did he stand up to secretly pray Maariv with two Shemoneh Esrehs (to compensate for his missed Minchah)!

When his son-in-law remonstrated that one can do this only after an oness (when compelled by force of exceptional circumstances), the Chofetz Chaim replied forcefully, “The Belzer Rebbe’s honor is also considered an oness!”

(Interestingly, the Rebbe never referred to him as the Chofetz Chaim, based on the halachic argument that phrases of *pesukim* should never be cited by themselves. He instead called him “The Radiner.”)

Rav Ahrele’s summer trips to Marienbad allowed other gedolim to gain a glimpse into his world. Rav Elchanan Wasserman was regularly seen in the Rebbe’s presence, observing his holy countenance. Upon returning to Baranovitch on one occasion, he described to his *talmidim* how in Marienbad he had seen “an emeseh Yid,” explaining how the Belzer Rebbe did not make a single move or action without the purest of intentions. The Imrei Emes of Gur said that even had Rav Aharon lived several hundred years earlier, he would have been a novelty.

In 1928 Rav Ahrele traveled to Berlin for cataract surgery. Among the throngs who went to meet him was the young Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the future Lubavitcher Rebbe, who was then studying at Humboldt University.

Due to his eye condition, the Belzer Rav wasn’t able to see those who shook his hand, which he customarily did through a towel draped over his hand. When the future Lubavitcher Rebbe shook his hand, however, the Belzer suddenly looked up, removed the towel, and shook his hand directly. He then asked his attendant, “*Vehr iz der yungerman? Ehr hut varemme hent* (Who is that young man? He has warm hands).”

Upon being told that it was the son-in-law of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rav Ahrele

nodded knowingly. The Lubavitcher Rebbe in turn would later speak of the Belzer Rebbe in the loftiest terms, saying, “The Belzer Rebbe was *chomer bli tzurah*, a soul without a body!”

ESCAPE ROUTE

The Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 brought an end to more than a century of the Belzer *chassidus* in the Galician town it had called home. With the German Wehrmacht approaching, Rav Aharon escaped Belz on Simchas Torah. As he prepared to leave, he requested his weekday *kopilush* headgear, stating, “*Lommer untun der klei golah* (let us don the clothing of exile).” Most Jewish families left Belz at this time, attempting to cross into the nearby Soviet-occupied eastern Poland, with the new border being solidified along the Curzon Line.

The Rebbe, his family and his entourage settled in Skola for eight months, followed by Premishlan for about a year. The Rebbe was in Premishlan when Hitler decided to renege on his non-aggression pact with Stalin, and invaded the Soviet Union with Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941. Much of his family, including his beloved oldest son Rav Moshe who was burned alive in the Premishlan shul, was killed in the initial stages of the Nazi occupation by the murderous Einsatzgruppen (mobile SS killing squads). He then endured several years on the run.

For the duration of this fraught period, he was joined by his brother Rav Mordechai Rokeach, the rav of Bilgoraj. First, they fled to Vizhnitz, and in the winter of 1942 to the Bochnia ghetto. On May 18, 1943 the Rebbe and his brother made a daring and miraculous escape from Bochnia across the border into Hungary, with the assistance of a Hungarian officer.

Budapest was considered relatively safe as it was not under Nazi occupation at this point, but chassidim of the Rebbe worldwide feared for his safety in war-torn Europe and made every effort to

arrange for his escape. In the fall of 1943 the Rebbe decided to attempt a journey to Eretz Yisrael. He and his brother were able to secure entry certificates through the Jewish Agency, with the assistance of Rav Herzog and other activists.

On January 17, 1944, after nine months in Budapest, the Rebbe and the Bilgoraj Rav left from the Budapest train station. One day earlier, Rav Mordechai of Bilgoraj delivered a farewell speech to a large group of followers in the Tiferes Bachurim Bais Medrash. Delivered in the Rebbe’s name, the bulk of the speech emphasized the necessity of assisting Polish Jewish refugees who had somehow made it into Hungary.

Since Hungary was not under Nazi occupation, it was seen as an island of refuge in a world gone mad. As noted historian Esther Farbstein has shown, there was no reason for anyone to assume that it wouldn’t remain that way. It was therefore incumbent upon Hungarian Jewry, Rav Mordechai said, to utilize their relative safety to help their less fortunate brethren. (Tragically, Hungary’s safe haven status came to an abrupt end less than two months later when it was unexpectedly occupied by the Nazis. The deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz began soon afterward.)

Several days after exiting Hungary, the Rebbe and his brother crossed the border into Turkey, and a week later they were in Damascus and then Aleppo, where Rav Herzog personally intervened to assure them safe passage.

From Aleppo the Rebbe continued south through Beirut, crossing into Palestine via its northern border on February 3, 1944. The day of his arrival in Eretz Yisrael — 9 Shevat — was commemorated by the Rebbe in his later years, and is still celebrated in the Belz community until this very day. The Rebbe would customarily gather his closest chassidim and distribute *l’chayim*, while describing the chain of events that led to that day.

PART II

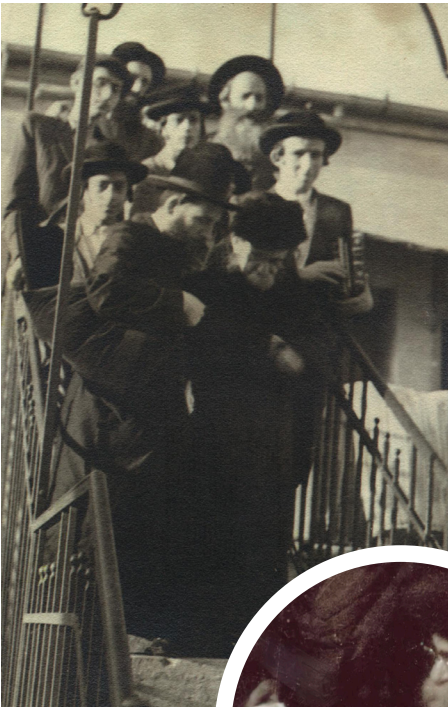
ASHES AND EMBERS

ERETZ YISRAEL, 1944 – 1957

CITY OF JEWS Upon arriving in the Holy Land, the Rebbe rent his clothing. A group of chassidim was on hand to greet him in Nahariya and they presented him with new clothing, which he refused to wear. He continued to wear his torn attire for that first week of his stay, all the while referring to it as his *bigdei galus*. (He never discarded these items and would wear them occasionally until the end of his life under his regular finery.)

The first week in his new home was spent in Haifa, before proceeding to Tel Aviv, where he was the guest of his close chassid Berish Ortner. Many of the city’s dignitaries greeted him at Ortner’s Rothschild Avenue home, including the Tchortkover Rebbe Rav Nochum Mordechai Friedman, the Sadigura Rebbe Rav Avraham Yaakov Friedman, and representatives of the chief rabbinate and the municipality. From there he proceeded to Yerushalayim, where he spent Shabbos.

On Motzaei Shabbos he informed his brother and Berish Ortner that he wished to settle in Tel Aviv and requested that they procure suitable living quarters there. Ortner found accommodations on 63 Rechov Achad Ha’am, and following the Bilgoraj Rav’s inspection and approval, the purchase was made, a contract signed, and the Rebbe moved in on April 4, 1944. Though he spent his summers in Yerushalayim, his primary place of resi-



When the Rebbe arrived in Eretz Yisrael, excitement reached a fever pitch. Then reality hit: he was a Rebbe without virtually no chassidim. The work of rebuilding awaited, but he was more than equal to the task

dence would be Tel Aviv for the remainder of his life.

Several explanations were offered for this seemingly strange choice. Ortner initially asked the Rebbe why he wanted to live in Tel Aviv, to which the Rebbe responded, “Yerushalayim is too holy.” He added that he preferred to reside in a city populated exclusively by Jews, and Tel Aviv fulfilled that criterion. The Rebbe also clarified that he also had secret reasons for his preference.

Tel Aviv at the time was a thriving hub of Torah and chassidic life. Dozens of *shtibelach* dotted the urban landscape, and almost all of the many chassidic leaders who established courts during those years chose to reside in Tel Aviv, the Imrei Emes of Gur being almost the sole exception.

Aside from the many practical considerations in preferring Tel Aviv over Yerushalayim, a spiritual explanation was often cited as well. Tel Aviv didn’t have a single church or mosque in the entire city, and as such was seen by many to hold a certain purity. (Interestingly, Rav Baruch Ber Lebowitz suggested that the lack of churches was the reason the small Kovno suburb of Slabodka merited to host two great yeshivos.)

The Rebbe encouraged his followers to join him in Tel Aviv. When a chassid expressed reluctance about the city’s lack of modesty, the Rebbe countered, “What did Jews do in *chutz la’Aretz*, in Premishlan for instance? Didn’t one stand by his store, and didn’t he interact with all types of townspeople?”

FROM THE ASHES

After losing his entire extended family, including his wife and five children in the Holocaust (three other children died before the war), the Rebbe set out to rebuild. Since he couldn’t verify the rebbetzin’s death, he obtained a *heter*

meah rabbanim allowing him to marry. Rebbetzin Chana was a daughter of the Makova Rebbe Rav Yechiel Chaim Labin, and the widow of Rav Yosef Meir Pollack of Bergsaz, who had been martyred in the Holocaust. While the new couple did not merit children of their own, the Rebbe assisted with the upbringing of her two children from her previous marriage. (Rebbetzin Chana would outlive him by more than a half century, passing away in 2013 at the age of 98.)

With his personal affairs in place, the Rebbe, his brother, and a core of devoted chassidim, set out on an ambitious task — the rebuilding of Belz.

The Belzer Rebbe’s situation in post-war Palestine was a bit of a dichotomy. On one hand, his standing in the Jewish world was almost unparalleled — both as reigning monarch of Belz and as one of the leading tzaddikim of the time — and as such, his arrival caused tremendous excitement. But once the hype died down, the stark reality was unavoidable. The glory of Belz was essentially in ruins. The Rebbe had almost no followers, no community and no institutions. If there was any building to be done, one had to have a creative vision, and quite frankly to start from ground zero.

The dire situation of Belz was manifest in the fact that passersby on Achad Ha’am St. often had to be begged to enter the *shtibel* to join the Rebbe for a *tish*, and he frequently didn’t have a minyan in attendance. By one account there were perhaps only 20 authentic Belzer chassidim in the entire Eretz Yisrael of 1944. Most of those who came to the new Belz were more curious onlookers than chassidim. A popular aphorism heard in the months following the Rebbe’s arrival was, “While Rav Nachman of Breslov was a dead Rebbe to live chassidim, the living Rebbe of Belz is the *admor* of dead chassidim.” When an attempt was made to open a Belzer cheder in Tel Aviv in 1948, a total of five children were registered.

But soon enough the persona, charisma

and sheer holiness of the Rebbe expanded his circle of influence and the Belz community began to slowly emerge from the ashes. Cheder growth is a great barometer for a community’s success, and the Belz cheder in Tel Aviv had 180 children by 1954. Belz was expanding to other cities as well. A Bnei Brak cheder opened its doors in 1952, and a year later a Yerushalayim branch opened with five registered. By 1956 there were fifty children there.

I’VE NEVER KNOWN PAIN

When the news that Rav Aharon of Belz was alive in Eretz Yisrael reached the DP Camps after the war, many Jews began to make their way to him. Most arrived either as illegal immigrants or in the early chaotic days of the State, bereft of any relatives or worldly goods, possessing only the faith and hope that they would find new lives in the presence of their Rebbe, hoping that perhaps Belz would be able to retain some of its past glory.

Yet it was impossible for even the most optimistic person to imagine at the time to what extent the kingdom of Belz would be rebuilt. Avraham Adler, an Israeli journalist who had grown up in the town of Belz, poignantly described the scene:

These chassidim were the stumps of limbs torn out of the body of Eastern European Jewry; the sons, grandsons and great-grandsons of Jews whose whole lives had reflected the grandeur and greatness of the spiritual heritage of Israel. They, like their Rebbe, were the charred remnants of the great conflagration that had devoured the House of Jacob. Their arms were engraved with the blue numbers of the extermination camps and their hearts filled with the memories of indescribable horror... They, like their Reb Aharon’u, were orphaned and bereft of kith and kin and had found their refuge and salvation in the new State only after they had passed through the

seven stages of Gehinnom.

Perhaps the most tragic and dramatic witness to the destruction that had come upon them was the recitation of the Yizkor prayer for the souls of departed relatives. In most Jewish communities the custom is that all those whose parents are still alive leave the synagogue during the recital of Yizkor. In the Belzer synagogues in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem no one left the hall — there was no one orphaned, no one without loss.

Heads covered with their talleisim, the congregation stood and recited the memorial prayer. As the memories of how the gentiles had played havoc with their lives welled up in their hearts, they burst out in bitter weeping, which was joined by the keener wailing from behind the partition of the women’s gallery.

Only the Rebbe did not weep. No sound of mourning passed his lips. He stood, head covered by the tallis, by the “amud” and turned to face the weeping congregation. He stood there with features petrified to granite and with eyes overflowing with sorrow, almost a pillar of accusation against the terrible guilt of the German murderers and their accomplices who had wantonly destroyed the flock of G-d.

In 1949 the Rebbe’s sole relative who survived the war, his dear brother Rav Mordechai the rav of Bilgoraj, passed away at the young age of 48. Following his burial in Tiveria, the Rebbe sat shivah and was visited by the Bais Yisrael of Gur. When he rose to leave, he told Rav Ahrele, “May you know no more pain.” The Rebbe responded, “Heaven forbid! I have never known any pain.” Shouldering the collective pain of the Jewish People, he never saw occurrences through the prism of personal suffering.

In solidarity with his chassidim who never got closure regarding the fate of their relatives, he didn’t observe the yahrtzeits of his wife, children or siblings killed in the Holocaust. “I have never known any pain,” he would say. Yet he negated his own physical needs to bear the suffering for his entire people.

Arthur Hertzberg, the descendant of a Belzer family who became a Conservative rabbi, visited the Rebbe after the war. He described



Link to the future. Rav Mordechai of Bilgoraj, the trusted confidant who helped effect a revival, and whose son carries the crown of Belz

Pecsenik, he was a half-brother to the future Rebbe, Rav Aharon. Rav Mordechai was known as an extraordinary *talmid chacham* who studied daily with his father. Following his father’s passing in 1926, he was appointed rav of the Galician town of Bilgoraj east of Belz.

Rav Mordechai was a popular rav among the townspeople, and observed some customs of a chassidic rebbe, such as officiating over a weekly *tish*. He continued to view himself as a chassid of his brother, however, and turned down the prestigious rabbinical position of Lvov because his brother disapproved.

He lost his family during the war and spent most of its duration together with his brother over the course of the many stages of their harrowing journey. Both during and after the war, Rav Mordechai served as both the right-hand man and public mouthpiece of the more reserved Rebbe.

Shortly after their arrival in Palestine he married Miriam Glick, and in 1948 their only child was born and named for his father, the Rebbe Rav Yissachar Dov.

Rav Mordechai was quite active in the initial rebuilding initiatives, including the establishment of the Belz yeshivah. Together with several other chassidim, he laid the foundations of the resurgence of the *chassidus*, though he didn’t merit to reap the fruits of his labor. He tragically passed away in 1949, and his brother instructed that he be buried in Teveriah, in close proximity to the resting place of the *talmidim* of the Baal Shem Tov.

THE FAITHFUL BROTHER RAV MORDECHAI ROKEACH OF BILGORAJ

Although he never served as Belzer Rav, Rav Mordechai of Bilgoraj (1902-1949) served a crucial role in the Belz dynasty. He stood faithfully at his brother’s side during the war and the postwar rebuilding process. Most importantly it is through his son, the current Rebbe, that the Belz dynasty continues to flourish until this very day.

Born in Belz to his father Rav Yissachar Dov through his second marriage to Rebbetzin Chaya Devorah

in his memoirs how the Rebbe excitedly discussed Herzberg’s grandfather, who had been the Rebbe’s cheder rebbi, but refused to participate in a discussion regarding the tragic fate of the Hertzberg family, which had been wiped out during the war. Instead, the Rebbe diverted the conversation toward a discussion of the future and the building of the Belzer cheder in Yerushalayim. Disappointed, yet astounded, Hertzberg wrote:

“The Rebbe belonged to the realm of faith, and it was impertinent to judge him by other standards. I walked out of the room with the certainty that he would never give up. He had suffered as much sorrow as the Biblical Job (Iyov), but he was different: he had not spoken even one word of complaint, and he had not demanded that G-d explain Himself.”

He concluded by writing that he had met many irreligious groups in Israel who seemingly had the resources and momentum to overpower traditional Judaism, yet it was clear that no effort they could mount would be able to displace the spirit and sheer will that he had witnessed in that room.

CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE

The Belzer Rav intended to build his court one chassid at a time, devoting considerable energies tending to the individual needs and aspirations of those who sought his guidance. But word of his piety spread quickly, and the ensuing circles of visitors and petitioners extended far beyond his own chassidim.

Rav Yochanan Twersky of Rachmas-trivka was close to Rav Aharon and frequently visited him. Once Rav Yochanan asked for a brachah on a bochur’s behalf, so that he become a *masmid*. Rav Aharon responded, “From now on call the bochur ‘*masmid*.’” This positive encouragement

had a profound impact on him and the bo-chur began applying himself diligently to his studies.

The future Rachmastrivka Rebbe of New York, Rav Chai Yitzchak Twersky, sought Rav Ahrele’s advice prior to his marriage. The Rebbe’s sage counsel has resonated with him ever since. “Try not to get into arguments with people, even if you’re quite sure that you’re correct. Don’t let your facial expression show displeasure at one’s opinion, for this is a weak generation.”

The Rebbe was once asked to share a *segulah* to protect against car accidents. With a twinkle in his eye, he responded with two “*segulos*”: Follow the laws of the road and turn the car into a vehicle for chesed by providing rides to those in need.

His concern for his chassidim’s welfare went well beyond the accepted responsibilities of a leader to his people. One Friday night after the *tish* he urgently called over his attendant. Pointing to his throat, he requested that a physician be summoned, adding that one may even desecrate Shabbos, as it fell under the category of *pikuach nefesh*. The doctor succeeded in extracting a fishbone from the Rebbe’s trachea. The Rebbe had been enduring life-threatening, extreme pain, and yet he hadn’t interrupted the *tish* because he didn’t wish to frighten his chassidim.

In 1953 Rav Avraham Yaakov Friedman of Sadigur and Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Kopycznitz paid a visit to the Belzer Rav. During the course of the conversation, the Kopyzcnitzer Rebbe expressed his concern about the Rebbe’s eating habits. Having heard that Rav Aharon barely ate anything, he remarked that he had to watch his health and ensure that he didn’t get too weak, as the Jewish world needed him.

Four years later, shortly prior to the Rebbe’s passing, the Kopyzcnitzer Rebbe visited once again. Upon greeting each other Rav Ahrele immediately declared,



When Rav Aharon Rokeach received a royal visitor, he seized the opportunity to advocate for the Jews living in Eretz Yisrael, distinguishing between the politics of Zionism and the love for his fellow Jews



If the chassidim need a yeshivah, then a yeshivah they shall have. Rav Ahrele at the cornerstone-laying of Yeshivah d’Chassidei Belz. The current Rebbe, who was just a youngster at the time, can be seen at left

“Since you visited me, every time I eat, I take an extra spoonful in fulfillment of the mitzvah *‘lishmoa el divrei chachamim’* (to heed a sage’s instructions).”

LEADING IN NEW DIRECTIONS

The Rebbe strongly believed that education was the key to rebuilding. While he personally took a hands-off approach, his chassidim were encouraged to suggest and develop projects and then seek his blessing to implement them. With his support and vision, the edifice of Belz was being erected in all of its glory. One of the earliest institutions to be built was the Belz Yeshivah in Yerushalayim, which was to play a vital role in the community’s growth. It also personified the way the Rebbe straddled his reverence for tradition with his receptiveness to in-

novation. In Galicia, Belz never boasted a formal yeshivah institution. Renowned as a chassidic court of *lamdanim*, the *kloiz’n* in Belz had benches full of “*yoshvim*” (a term initially coined by the Nodah B’Yehuda), young men who would study full-time while basking in the presence of the tzaddik. Still, even in Europe Rav Aharon instituted some innovations: he was among the first leaders to provide students with room and board so they would not suffer the degradation of eating “*teg*” at local residents’ homes. Students in other Polish yeshivos with no dormitory facilities would sometimes procure lodging by serving as night watchmen in local shops, leading Rav Meir Shapiro to mockingly “laud” the role of thieves in the growth of the Torah world, “for if not for their nocturnal activities, where would our treasured yeshivah students lodge?”

A formal yeshivah setting was seen as a modern concept. Traditionalists viewed an independent institution with an acceptance policy, set curriculum, educational structure, and formal lectures as akin to the modern educational facilities of the non-Jewish world, and the ultra-conservative Belz chassidus certainly viewed this innovation with suspicion. Better, they felt, to leave untouched the traditional method of independent study in an informal environment. Yet the Rebbe was willing to lead in new directions. When rumors persisted that Rav Aharon was opposed to Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, Rav Meir Shapiro sent six students to spend Shabbos with him in Belz. At Rav Aharon’s Shabbos table, it was a tradition that he would call his guests by name when distributing *shirayim*. When it came to the students from Lublin, he called them the “Lubliner Bochorim”, clearly bestowing recognition upon their yeshivah. (In fact, one of the influential figures at Chachmei Lublin was a Belzer chassid named Rav Eliezer Karshuver. He was neither student nor *hanhalah* but was appointed by Rav Meir Shapiro to serve as a *d’mus*, conveying proper conduct by personal example.) After the war, Rav Aharon displayed the same openness to innovation. When Rav Mordechai of Bilgoraj and several chassidim broached the topic of breaking the long-standing tradition and opening a Belz yeshivah, the Rebbe granted approval and the project got underway. There was, however, one stipulation: It was to be called Yeshivah D’chasidei Belz, not Belz Yeshivah. To be associated with Belz itself would be too radical; Belz stood for tradition and this yeshivah was a departure from history. But the chassidim of Belz required a yeshivah, so a yeshivah they would have. In 1950 the yeshivah formally opened its doors in Jerusalem’s Katamon neighborhood. Four years later the Rebbe placed the cornerstone for the official

yeshivah building on Rechov Agripas in a joyous ceremony. The yeshivah flourished and its students provided the nucleus for the emerging community. Rav Aharon even planned to live within the yeshivah walls, and his personal apartment in the building was completed in the summer of 1957. Unfortunately, he passed away a few weeks later. But the building still bears his mark in the most literal sense: until this very day the flagship building on Rechov Agripas still proudly carries the sign Yeshivah D’chasidei Belz. DIVINELY ORCHESTRATED REFUGE Upon the Rebbe’s arrival in Palestine, a *Yediot Aharonot* reporter was present to cover the momentous occasion. The Rebbe requested that the reporter convey his blessings to the *yishuv*, adding that “Today there is no Jew in the world who doesn’t recognize the centrality and value of this enterprise of building Eretz Yisrael. If not for this undertaking, there wouldn’t be a place in the world today for the Jewish People.” In the ensuing years, this became an oft-repeated motif. He seemed to have perceived a fine distinction between Zionism as an ideal, to which he remained thoroughly opposed (albeit with less zeal than his ancestors) — and the rebuilding of the Land of Israel and its potential as a refuge for the devastated survivors, a reality that he saw in a positive light. His ideas regarding Zionism had developed over time. Back in Belz, he had penned a letter in 1928 supporting the Eidah Hachareidis position of secession from the Vaad Leumi in Palestine. This was in line with Hungarian Orthodoxy’s policy of *teilung* — splitting the community — in order to disassociate from irreligious control.

Yet a royal visit evinced a deep sensitivity to the Jewish residents of Palestine. When Prince Paul of Greece visited Poland in 1936, he was accorded a royal welcome by Polish authorities, and spent much time traveling through the length and breadth of the country. Over time Prince Paul had become acquainted with the dynasty of Belz and its standing in the Jewish world. He then surprised government officials when he asked to be taken to visit the Rebbe of Belz, and the very next day he and his whole entourage appeared in town accompanied by the district governor. Rav Aharon received them in his small study, with the added luxury of an additional chair to mark the occasion. Speaking through an interpreter, they began discussing the challenges facing Polish Jewry, and ended up by reviewing the Palestine question and the governmental policies of the British mandate. The Rebbe knew that Prince Paul was a relative of the British Royal Family, and he therefore constantly returned to the subject of the Jewish National Home and the terrible riots that had broken out at that time in Palestine as a result of the Great Arab Revolt. Ignoring the officials’ wishes to divert the conversation to a more comfortable subject, he began to tearfully plead with the Prince to intervene with the British Crown on behalf of the Jewish settlers in Eretz Yisrael. Once he arrived in the country, he not only ignored the pleas of the Eidah Hachareidis to join its presidium, he outright opposed their positions. On one occasion he remarked, “I can’t conform to their (the *kanoyim* of Yerushalayim) view. A person needs to be a *mekarev*.” This progression seems to have been compounded as a result of his experiences in the Holocaust, and his sense of responsibility to rehabilitate the survivors. A survivor sought the Rebbe’s advice about whether he should move to Israel

or to another country. The Rebbe responded, “I already stated in the Bochnia ghetto that as long as the nations of the world let the Jewish People be, they had a *zechus* that they adhered to the Will of Hashem in regard to the Jewish People in exile. But now that they are systematically exterminating us, they have lost all their rights to retain the Jewish People under their control.”

The grandson of the Rebbe’s initial host in Tel Aviv, Rav Nosson Ortner, remembered how the Rebbe reacted when he got his first view of the religious life there. “He said, ‘They tricked us when they sent messages from Eretz Yisrael that the state of Yiddishkeit is terrible (*norah ve’ayom*). As a result, I didn’t recommend that people move here. Now that we’ve arrived, I see that there are in fact chadarim and yeshivos here.’”

Rav Nosson Ortner, who later served as rav of Lod, was troubled by this statement, and asked Rav Yehoshua Mendel Ehrenberg (the head of the Tel Aviv Beth Din and a prominent Belzer chassid), what happened to the *ruach hakodesh* that tzaddikim have. Rav Ehrenberg explained that since there was a Divine *gezeirah* of destruction and loss, Hashem effected a state of *hester panim* — and this lack of clarity about the spiritual state of Eretz Yisrael was part of it.

THE REBBE IS COMING!

To be clear, the Rebbe’s embrace of life in Eretz Yisrael didn’t translate into support for Zionism, and he maintained a very conservative position on a host of issues, such as his insistence on the use of Yiddish. He even asked his wife’s daughter to desist from speaking Hebrew in the home, citing his father’s distaste for the use of modern Hebrew.

At the same time, the Rebbe saw great significance and Providence in the fact that Holocaust survivors languishing in Displaced Persons camps were welcomed into Israel. It was a miracle, he felt, that endangered Jews finally had a place of refuge. Yet he viewed it as a “*galus* miracle,” not fundamentally different from other miracles experienced by the Jewish People in exile.

This attitude led him to the revolutionary stance of supporting chareidi participation in the elections, even when Agudas Yisrael and Mizrachi ran on a joint ticket. While it seems that the Belzer Rebbe himself did not personally cast a vote, his support for voting



A living link to the holiness of the past. The Rebbe would visit refugee children and gently ask, “where are your peyos?” At his levayah, the entire nation felt bereft. Rav Moshe Mordechai Biderman of Lelov can be seen (center) along with masses of mourners

was unequivocal, and he even involved himself in the wording of the proclamation encouraging voting, which was also signed by the Beis Yisrael of Gur and other Torah leaders. This surprising position drew the ire of Rav Yoel Teitelbaum of Satmar, and a sharp dispute ensued between the two.

Rav Ahrele's support of Agudas Yisrael stemmed partially from his view that it shared the values of the Machzikei Hadas organization, one of whose founders was his grandfather Rav Yehoshua Rokeach, the second Belzer Rav. This pioneering venture was the first political organization of Orthodox Jewry. Since the Gerrer Rebbe's son-in-law Reb Itche Meir Levin was the titular head of Agudas Yisrael, the Belzer Rebbe would refer to it as "Itche Meir's Agudah."

His national leadership again came to the fore when a massive demonstration was organized for July 22, 1953, in opposition to the *Sheirut Leumi* national service law. Almost all the major Torah leaders of the time participated in this historic demonstration. However, one of the organizers of the demonstration, Rabbi Menachem Porush, testified that the community was electrified when it was announced that the Belzer Rebbe would participate in the demonstration. Everyone was shocked to hear the news: The Belzer Rebbe is coming! Such was the esteem he commanded among the wider community. The Rebbe did arrive as planned, staying in his car among the crowds.

THEY ALL ARE HOLY

At a Shalosh Seudos meal held two weeks after his arrival, the Rebbe remarked to Rav Gershon Yosef Horowitz, "When we arrived in Eretz Yisrael my brother, the Bilgoraj Rav, said Eretz Yisrael is 100 times better than we anticipated. I replied that it is in fact 200 times better."

This was in keeping with the Rebbe's general approach to ignore the negative and focus on the positive, finding only good in

every Jew — even the worst transgressors. The Rebbe once admonished his chassidim in this regard: "If you are learning and you are confronted with a difficult Rambam, what do you do? You work hard at it until you find a solution. The same should apply whenever you come across a difficult Jew. You must work hard at understanding him until you find the solution."

This practice was already his hallmark back in Belz. When a townsman informed the Belzer Rav that a barber wasn't closing his shop on time on Erev Shabbos, he fined the barber for keeping his shop open, the informer for slandering him, and himself for having believed the negative report.

But the task was especially difficult in the tinderbox that he encountered in Eretz Yisrael: it was a land where estranged Jews loudly and proudly defied halachah and tradition in their quest to mold the homeland of the "new Jew."

Rav Aharon's chassidim once reported that members of a kibbutz in Northern Israel had begun raising pigs, thinking that such blasphemous news would surely emit scathing criticism from the Rebbe. His response surprised them: "The opinion of the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh is that during the days preceding Mashiach, the world will be uplifted to such a higher spiritual plane that pigs, the most unclean of all non-kosher animals, will become permissible to be eaten. Apparently, our fellow Jews in Israel believe so strongly that Mashiach is imminent that they are making final preparations!"

My (Dovi's) grandfather, Reb Aron Meyer Safier, was a devoted Belzer chassid. He would proudly relate the story told among the Belz community about the Rebbe's first Shabbos in Tel Aviv. Gazing out the window and observing all the cars driving on Shabbos, Rav Aharon refused to say a negative word about another Jew, so he remarked, "I didn't know there are so many doctors in this neighborhood."

When he was told that a chassid had purchased ice for his ice box on Shabbos



Would it all come to an end? The sole remaining descendant of Belz’s royal family, nine-year-old Yissachar Dov, visiting his uncle’s gravesite at the close of the shivah. An entire nation’s hopes rested upon his young shoulders

afternoon, he sent a message to this fellow that he arranged the delivery of a refrigerator to him — a prohibitive expense during Israel’s period of austerity.

On occasions where the Rebbe felt that rebuke was necessary, he’d deliver the rebuke subtly and would even apologize for it beforehand. To a clean-shaven acquaintance who had come to welcome him when he arrived in Haifa he said, “The Chasam Sofer unquestionably permits shaving with shaving cream.”

“*Kulam kedoshim*, all are holy,” he would say about the Jews of Tel Aviv. He refused to call Jews who didn’t observe Shabbos “*mechalelei Shabbos*, — Shabbos desecrators”; instead he referred to his neighbors as “*shochechei ikar Shabbos* — those who forget the principle of Shabbos.” In the presence of Rav Aharon, chassidim learned to refer to non-observant Jews as “Yidden who don’t put on Rabbeinu Tam’s

Tefillin” (the second pair of tefillin that chassidim don after davening).

While walking home one Shabbos morning, Rav Aharon spotted a Jewish doctor who wasn’t Shabbos observant. Upon seeing the Rebbe from afar, the doctor hastily discarded his lit cigarette. Another Rebbe was present and said derisively, “Here are your righteous ‘forgetters of Shabbos!’ If he truly ‘forgot’ that today is Shabbos, why did he throw away his cigarette when he saw us?”

“Because the moment he saw us wearing our *shtreimelach*,” Rav Aharon responded, “he remembered that it’s Shabbos!”

**BELZ
WILL YET
SURVIVE**

On Leil Shabbos of 19 Av 1957, the Rebbe led his usual weekly *tish*. Addressing his beloved chassidim, he returned to three

themes that he’d often expounded upon throughout the post-war years: educating the next generation, sanctifying and elevating the body to attain holiness, and the mitzvah of living in the Holy Land. Focusing on the words “*l’maan yirbu yemeichem vimei veneichem*,” the Rebbe repeated his father’s explanation that the good deeds of one’s offspring continue to be of great merit to the deceased even when he is in the next world.

Several hours after the *tish* he collapsed, never to recover. Late on Motzaei Shabbos, he passed away across the street from the Belz Yeshivah, in the Shaare Zedek hospital. That Friday night speech had become his last will and testament.

The blow hammered the small Belz community just as they’d barely managed to take the first steps to rebuilding. The Rebbe left no living descendants and to some, it seemed that Belz was once again

consigned to history.

Among the 50,000 strong gathered at Har Hamenuchos for the *levayah* was a nine-year-old boy adorned with a traditional *kasketel* on his head. Whispers could be heard from the crowd. The more brash ones even pointed fingers. He was Yissachar Dov Rokeach, the only child of Rav Mordechai of Bigoraj. Following the passing of his brother, Rav Aharon had taken his young nephew under his wing, often expressing admiration for the boy they called “Berele,” once remarking, “What do I have left in this world? This child is my whole life!”

As the traditional *hakafos* were completed after the burial and the Yud Gimmel Middos were recited in the presence of the greatest *admorim* and rabbanim of the time, all eyes were trained on the little boy. If sobs were words, they would be asking, would Belz merit yet another rebirth?

That Shabbos, the Rebbe’s gabbai Shalom Fogel placed the challah in front of Rav Yosef Greenwald, the Pupa Rav. A grandson of the Arugas Habosem, he had been a prominent rabbi in Pupa, Hungary before the war, as well as a close chassid of the Belzer Rav, who remained a faithful follower after the war as well. Upon the Rebbe’s passing, he made the trip from Brooklyn and was now charged to fill his role at the *tish*. The Pupa Rav refused to cut the challah, however, and called over the Rebbe’s nine-year-old nephew, ordering him to cut it. The message was clear. Belz would endure.

Belz continued to grow, and the current Rebbe emerged as a capable successor of his uncle, leading Belz to new heights, following Rav Aharon’s trailblazing approach of adherence to tradition along with receptiveness to innovation.

Rav Aharon did not merit many years in Eretz Yisrael, but the impact of his leadership during that precious period was immensely powerful. Amid the hardscrabble lifestyle; against the political jockeying, petty conflicts, and growing

pains; he stood out as a glowing figure, an exalted tzaddik who embodied Torah and holiness to a struggling generation. As Rav Nosson Ortner explained:

“The young post-war generation merited to see a Kadosh Elyon for thirteen years. That sight impressed upon them and their descendants that all the wondrous things said about the Rebbe Rav Meilech of Lizhensk and others like him are true, because they saw something similar in their own time. This tangible belief is something that can be transmitted to subsequent generations.”

For the chassidim and other admirers who watched Rav Aharon build, guide, and breathe new life into a decimated *chassidus*, that is his lasting legacy. A person more angel than man, a living example of the holiness of prewar Europe — yet a keen thinker who understood the realities of the present, a Rebbe who could extend warmth and love to estranged Jews while never budging an inch from his own standards, a visionary who could mold institutions and establishments to meet the needs of the people. This was the leader they venerated: a leader who constructed a bridge from a vanished world to a kingdom built anew. ●

This article is dedicated in memory of a devoted chassid of Belz, Reb Aron Meyer Safer, a witness to a world bygone, who experienced its destruction and merited to see it rebuilt.

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