

THE *CHEDER YESODEI-TORAH*

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*My father, whose life was cut off in his youth,
The head of yeshiva Yitzhak Meir Fogel
What a memory of his crystal-clear personality –
My mother held like a ner tamid
For the orphaned children –
Dedicated to the world for remembrance.*

In the treasure of Jewish legends is a wonderful story, how God for giving the Jews the Torah, demanded from Moses a guarantee that the Torah will be kept by the people. Moses tried to guarantee it on the patriarchs, then – on himself, as the leader of the nation, but the Holy One, blessed be He, answered him: "I do not want you and not the patriarchs" (*Midrash Tanchuma*). Then Moses declared: "The sons will inherit"¹ ("The children of our people will be the guarantee!").

Such a deeper and more instructive truth lies in the legend. No matter how important the famous past may be, no matter the role of glorious leaders, as important as it can be – not in this is the fundamental guarantee of the continuing existence of the people, but in being a guide for the coming generations, in the daily effort to lead one's own children on the historic paths, in this, lies hidden the mystical secret of survival of a nation.

The cutting off from Polish identity will remain for us as a wonderful example of this lesson. Our destroyed community of Kutno, is another excellent example of it.

The chaotic storm of the twentieth century tore down the walls and fortresses of traditional Judaism with destructive and misleading force. Like phosphorus-fire, which attracts lost wanderers, foreign and hostile ideals have infiltrated the Jewish camp, threatening the unity and existence of our people, the wholeness of the Jewish home and its family life, sowing disorientation in its difficult present and spreading threatening shadows of a doubtful morning.

The age-old preventive measure against the destructive forces, could be a firmly-disciplined education system, creating a concrete protecting wall around the souls of the infants of the rabbinical house, to protect the young generation, from childhood, from abusive influences, from misleading illusions and popular hostile ideals, to arm them with the eternal Jewish truths in the midst of the turbulent, relative world.

The *cheder Yesodei Torah* in our city was a fierce effort by our fathers and grandfathers in this direction.

In the midst of the looming waves of economic conflict, in the face of growing material hardship, plagued by day-to-day care, tormented by antisemitic persecutions and hooligan aggression, they managed to build a proud fortress that looked like a towering tower. An island of everyday life, and between its protective walls formed the

delicate souls of the 'guarantee' for Jewish existence, the minds and hearts of Jewish children.

The *cheder Yesodei Torah*, or as it was called – the *yeshiva*, was in fact a major pedagogical breakthrough in the old education system. We remember the old type of *cheder*, the figure of an evil or sickly teacher, who studied with students of different ages, in a home, which served for various purposes, with the accompanying figure of an evil Jew, the rabbi's embittered wife; this room has become the target for all the enlightened, for all those who, behind the pseudo-pedagogical critique of the erroneous form, sought to destroy the valuable content – the Torah education of the Jewish child.

Our fathers and grandfathers did not read the books of modern educators, but with the founding of a *cheder Yesodei Torah*, they actually carried out a pedagogical revolution, overthrowing the whole external system of education, giving continuation and new impetus to the worthy matter: the traditional education of young generation.

Considering the present, in retrospect, how our non-"modern" parents have managed to carry out such modernization of the *cheder*-system, swimming over philosophical thoughts: who knows how many obsolete forms would have been replaced by traditional Jews themselves, if the enlightened and their followers had not made them camp positions and create in our spiritual territory a belligerent 38th parallel between two worlds!...

In a positive and creative way, a group of idealistic businessmen radically changed the much-criticized *cheder* system. Instead of leaving the problem of finding a new teacher to each parent over and over again, instead of the private schoolhouse with all its unwanted side effects, the new system provided a school building that solved the problem of Jewish education within its walls. From the young child to the young man, it was ready, virtually, for a teaching permit, with a staff of teachers and *yeshiva* heads, a manager and businessmen, who all together and individually were ready for the greatest personal sacrifices, maintaining and strengthening the beloved institution.

How vivid and colorful stand before my eyes the teachers in their classrooms. Memory carries me back, through oceans of blood and mountains of martyrs, through ruins of homes and destroyed houses... again walking absorbed in well-known alleys and lanes, I come out on the unforgettable block of Senatorska Street²; in front of the majestic synagogue building, with the wide passage between the fences, the narrow sidewalk on the left – the outpost of the Jewish buildings.

As if to a legendary, romantic castle, our childish hearts were drawn to the synagogue-building. Its Gothic-shaped window-towers, which lit up together with the

¹ TN: in Hebrew, in the original text.

² TN: renamed Norberta Barlickiego St., after a Polish Socialist politician, murdered in Auschwitz during the war.

glittering sunbeams on summer evenings, stirred up our boyish fantasies. The coincidental evening shadows frightened us with the shapes of familiar corpses, which in their white gowns slunk between its massive walls... On winter nights, going past the synagogue square on the way home from *cheder*, we would anxiously listen to the squeaking snow under our feet, and with forced audacity chase the nights' darkness with our flickering lanterns. Finally, with relief and due respect, we wished the synagogue a good-night.

Right in front of the picturesque long windows of the synagogue, the hospitable building of the *Beit Midrash* spread out. Broad and short stairs led to the wide-open doors.



Chaim Tyber – Blowing the shofar

Here, inside, was the true and only impartial House of the People of Kutner Jews. On narrow benches, at long tables, noble boys enthusiastically swayed over thick *Gemaras*, and by the gleaming coals of the primitive square ovens, the simple, the poor, the local and visiting guests warmed themselves. Near the Holy Ark, the proud rabbi taught his sharp lesson and at the table, near the sink, vagrants counted their collected groceries and ate their poor meal. Excited preachers gave punishing sermons to the masses and semi-enlightened youths led skeptical debates at the speaker's box. For each of them, the *Beit Midrash* had its own corner and a warm home; at the right of the entrance to the *Beit Midrash*, between its eastern

wall on one side and a row of half-sunken pillars on the other side, was the passage to the *cheder*.

To the rear, the north wall of the Synagogue towered, and to the front laid the wide, square courtyard overlooking the green fields of the gentile "*doliskes*"³, which were immediately beyond the last Jewish "fortress" – the *mikveh*.

Here was the "empire" of the *cheder*. Here made noise, at the time of "pause", children of all ages; small half-tearful alphabet-learning, wild naughty *Chumash* boys and dreamy thoughtful youngsters with commented *Gemara*.

Children of all classes and strata of heartfelt Kutno Jewry, here in the spacious courtyard between the Synagogue and the *mikveh*, surrounded by the *Beit Midrash* and the guest house, among the dozens of simple Jewish families with the janitor as sole gentile, the Jewish children felt safe with all their mischief. Only when some, quite daring, run along the last Jewish line to the small river, did it happen, not infrequently, that one came back with a bleeding head. The Polish students, whose huge school building was located in the middle of the sun-drenched fields of vegetables, could not stand the "insolence" of the Jewish *cheder* boys who dared to enjoy the shared meadows and local hills.

I visualize the teachers: the generous young boys' teacher, David Lustman; the permissive, tender-hearted *Chumash*-Rabbi Moshe-Leib Goldberg; the *Mishna* and *Gemara* teacher Alie Gershon Klingbajl, a short man, with a long, gray beard, who surprised us children by always wearing a heavy winter coat thrown on his sick shoulders, complaining in the hot days of Tammuz, that he was cold...

After that: the head of *yeshivot* – the tall, vivacious Chaim-Hersh Hiller, who explained the most difficult *tosafot*⁴ with subtle sharpness and youthful lightness. In the summer evenings he also used to study the Bible with us and with a heartfelt longing he revived for us the patriarchal figures of the biblical prophets, made ringing in our ears their fiery punitive speech against the rebellious lords of Judea and Samaria; Two head-*yeshivot* from Żychlin have also studied here. From their positions, they were not really able to feed their families, who waited in neighboring towns for months for the unpaid pensions, but instead provided spiritual food for the upper classes in the Kutner *yeshiva*, including the most complex topics in Talmud and in commentaries; The first, R' Asher Majnwald, a broad-boned, shapely Jew, with a carefully groomed bearded beard, was, of course, a well-to-do man who did not make a fuss, but while studying he used to take us for long walks, introducing us between the poems of Talmudic *Shakla ve'Tariya*⁵, weaving us in a web of *pilpul* and contradiction, then, with a victorious smile in his benevolent eyes, leading us on wide, royal path of clear *halacha*. His townsman, the small-sized, black-haired R'

³ TN: probably a Russian word, meaning "plots".

⁴ TN: Hebrew, Talmud commentaries.

⁵ TN: Aramaic, "negotiation".

Gershon Łęczycki, was the exact opposite in appearance and character.

Each of them gave its unique color and style, all of them were the pedagogical staff, which shaped the soul of the *yeshiva* student, from a small child to a mature young man; They made an immortal contribution to the shaping of the Kutner Jewish youth between the two world wars.

Like a foreign island in the middle of a sea of religious learning, was the group of teachers who came for several hours a day to teach secular studies. There were three of them: the tall, slender Afelos⁶, the son of a poor Jewish woodworker, who had acquired a teaching rank through self-education, but was not officially recognized by the Polish Board of Education. Szapszewicz, a grandson of a Kutner *dayan*, who made every effort to create the impression of a born-lady's man. And the fat, hard-nosed Klapper, an assimilated Jew who earned the rank of director of the Jewish-Polish public school. The latter was the leader of the triumvirate, who came to bring "education" to the stronghold of "fanaticism".

There have been episodes in memory of how teachers, who were not paid their pensions for months, spoke bitterly about the "privileged" group, which law required to be paid regularly. But even the alienated triumvirate felt part of the *cheder* system and often showed a warm interest in the course of life. Out of sympathy for the teachers' plight, they even tried to organize and convince others of a strike in order to be paid regularly. They simply did not understand why the teachers did not want to interrupt the study in any case...

One time, when a brother of Klapper's was seriously ill, he demanded that we, the *cheder* boys, recite a collective psalm for his healing... and was filled with gratitude after that, as his brother healed.

At the very top of it all, stood the manager.

On this post there has been changes every couple of years. The first was Abraham Boms, a hard-working Jew who, after leaving office, earned an income by delivering milk to the homes. He was also later a member of the Workers' Association for Israel. He was replaced by the energetic, merchant Itshe-Meir Zaklikowski, whose family troubles distracted him from his work. In his place came David-Melech Koper of Grodzisk⁷, an elegant, well-groomed young man, strict and energetic, he kept a watchful eye on everything. After he returned home, the quiet and modest Yechiel Węgrówer became the manager. In the end, until the Holocaust, the manager was Shlomo Meir Liberman.

An extremely heavy burden was placed on the shoulders of the volunteer businessmen, the members of the committee for the *cheder*. These were a group of scholars and community leaders, who constantly worried about the *yeshiva's* ridiculous budget, over which there was always a question as to whether it could be reopened.

The home of my grandfather, R' Leibel Mamlok z"l, has always been involved in the problems and worries of the *yeshiva's* existence. The complaints of the teachers who asked the hard question still ring in my ears:

— How long can one feed one's own wife with excuses instead of with livelihood? — helplessly, he spreads his hands and exclaims: — "If there is no flour, there is no Torah", and they complained that "water has reached the soul"⁸, one can no longer continue... and the quiet confidence-filled answers of my grandfather, that God will not abandon us, the community will not let go of the *cheder* and his appeals that the teaching should not, God forbid, be interrupted for a single hour...

Many times, it has seemed that the end was coming, that the *yeshiva* can no longer exist; that all means were exhausted, all is about to be closed.

From where did such Jews as Abraham Fishel Zandberg, Shlomo Meir Liberman, Leibel Mamlok, Meir Zandberg, Shlomo Bechler and many others got their strength and resources, their energy and their confidence during those hard times and difficult years? This is a secret which they have taken into their holy tombs! The fact is that the *cheder Yesodei Torah* existed and did its sacred work until the last hours before the Holocaust.

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Main entrance of the Great Synagogue

⁶ TN: probably Chil Apelast, from Gąbin/Gostynin.

⁷ TN: probably Grodzisk Mazowiecki, about 90km east of Kutno, 20km south-west of Warsaw.

⁸ TN: Hebrew (Biblical), meaning "the situation is critical!"

One event remains in my memory and comes up like a thorny plant in the middle of a sunny vegetables field of memories.

It was approximately in the years 1925/6. A group of "secular workers" had decided that the *cheder* "*Yesodei Torah*" was a stronghold of reaction in the midst of "advanced Poland", and one must see to it that obstacles in the way of Jewish "progress" are removed.

It is not worth mentioning any names, here. The people themselves were victims, blinded by the deceptive phosphorus-fire, from which the very idea of the *cheder* "*Yesodei Torah*" room was to guard the Jewish street against them; the martyrdom by the German Amalekites placed them in the same line as all the victims. This episode is only mentioned here as an instructive proof of where "modern fanaticism" can lead and seduce!

Had it been a matter of making changes to the *cheder* system, introducing more time for secular studies etc., it would have been understandable, but the ax was raised on the very existence of the *cheder*.

The mood then, especially on the Jewish street, was a revolutionary one and the slogan of the time was: in order to build the new, one must first destroy, destroy the existing... as is expressed in the famous lines: "And on the ruins... will proudly stride, we the..."⁹

I remember a summer afternoon. All day long, the manager (at the time, Yechiel Węgrówer) was tense. Over his fine, red beard lay a shadow of deep concern and an uneasy feeling came out of his Jewish eyes. He seemed so helpless to us that day, as if expecting our help. The teachers were very upset and sighed all the time. We, *yeshiva* children, got no pleasure out of the loose discipline that had developed. The freedom wasn't

welcome to us. We were talking about a danger that lurks on everything and everyone.

However happy we would have been for a break in our daily routine, we realized however that this was too serious a matter and we shared the fears and hopes of the adults.

And, behold, they came. I can see so clearly the closing scene: the Polish inspector stands with a stoic calm, with a thin, black file under his arm. Next to him stands the representative of the "secular" who argues something with force. In front of them, without a hat and only a kippah on his head, stands the manager, outwardly dominating, he is but entirely overwhelmed with Jewish trembling. From the side stand the teachers. So do the children. Next, the strange dialogue sounds so clear to my ears: the representative of the "secular" group clarifies for the goy inspector, how stifling the *yeshiva* walls are, how medieval is the whole system and, pointing at a boy (he was the eldest son of the previous manager, Zaklikowski), he explains to the inspector that the child's weakness is a result of sitting for so many hours in the *cheder*, where there is no sun and air, and that the walls of the *yeshiva* drain the blood of the children... The manager, barely controlling his contempt and anger, tries to explain to the inspector that this child is very healthy, only he is by nature very pale.

Probably there were still more words and counter-words. All these years, I remembered only the eloquent image of a traditionally dressed Jew being forced by his "secular" brother to defend himself against a gentile inspector and to prove, that no blood of innocent children is shed between the walls of a Jewish institution...

⁹ TN: no correct translation can be suggested here.