

## **R' YITZHAK (ITSHE) MEIR SZPIRO (THE RITUAL SLAUGHTERER)** *translated from the Hebrew by Sara Mages*

My knowledge of the genealogy of my forefathers reaches only four generations. In those days, when the desire of young Jewish men to study the Torah increased,

they asked permission from their parents and wandered to a place of Torah. The head of our family also left his family home and wandered to a "*yeshiva*" to devour knowledge in *Havayot d'Abaye ve'Rava*<sup>1</sup>, and he is R' Shmuel Leib Szpiro.

For his place of study R' Shmuel Leib chose the *yeshiva* in the city of Kutno. The city is located on the shores of the Ochnia River, a city like many others in the Kingdom of Poland, in those days. But, in those days it did not excel in great learners. Nevertheless, every father wanted to marry off his daughter to a *yeshiva* student knowledgeable in the Torah and God-fearing, so that he too can warm himself in the light and warmth of the Torah.

Such was also the successful small tax collector in the city of Kutno. He wanted to marry off his daughter, who reached marriageable age, to a learned young man who will increase his name and honor in the eyes of people. On the advice and guidance of the head of the *yeshiva* the luck fell on the best of his students, and the name of the young man was Shmuel Leib Szpiro.

I don't have a lot of information about R' Shmuel Leib Szpiro, except that he was a ritual slaughterer in the city of Kutno and had two sons and one daughter. But he did not live long and only led one son to the *chupah*, and the youngest son and the daughter were orphaned while in father's house.

After the death of the ritual slaughterer, the city's elders decided that the father's position would be given as an inheritance to his unmarried son, and that he must marry off his young sister. And the name of the young son was – R' Zusia Mordechai.

R' Zusia Mordechai is my grandfather's father. I was about two years old when my ancestor z"l passed away. About his character, as will be told below, I heard from my parents.

His way of life was regular and orderly: he set times for prayer, Torah, work and meal. Stayed away from conventional lies, was simple in his manners but earned a respectable status in society. The man he respected – he respected wholeheartedly, but if he was not honest – he did not respect him at all. He treated others honestly and fairly and asked for this virtue from others as well. When needed, he knew how to give up his will and opinion, but he did not forgive. He did not discriminate in favor of another person. A story about the Gaon<sup>2</sup> *Yeshuot Yisrael* of Kutno who added one of his grandsons to three ritual slaughterers that served in this position. Our ancestor saw this as trespassing and deprivation of livelihood. When he turned to the Gaon, the city's rabbi, he said: indeed, I accept the decree, but this is an act of robbery. I obey, but I do not forgive. Our ancestor did not back down from these words and repeated them for many years on various occasions.

He was pious and meticulous in keeping the commandments, but not jealous and ascetic. He

---

<sup>1</sup> TN: Abaye and Rava were fourth-generation Babylonian Jewish scholars and their debates are known as "*Havayot d'Abaye ve'Rava*."

<sup>2</sup> TN: Rabbi Israel Yehoshua Trunk ztz"l.

recognized his self-worth and was not of the "insulted who are not offended", and with that was careful of human dignity. However, an ignorant man, who tends to argue with knowledgeable people despite his poor knowledge, did not find his place in his company. There was a story about an "uneducated" rich man, who was respected in the community, that grandfather rebuked for his rude behavior. He did not tolerate injustice and harm to the dignity of others, and yet he knew how to give up his dignity for the sake of others. And when his niece came to visit him when he was sick, he preached morality to her that she had left a sick father at home and came to visit him. After all, honoring a father is first and foremost.



Sara Ryvka and R' Yitzhak (Itshe) Meir Szpiro z"l

He had an only son, named Eliyahu z"l – our grandfather. He was the third generation of ritual slaughterers in the Szpiro family. He followed his father's footsteps who set an example for him. Since he was exempt from livelihood worries, he was not prevented from strictly continuing the lifestyle in which he was educated. Like his father he also set time for the Torah, prayer, work and meal. Before the *mincha* prayer he studied a chapter in the daily *Mishnah*, Talmud and *Sefer Yereim*<sup>3</sup>. He studied his daily chapter in the *Zohar*<sup>4</sup> at sunrise, before the prayer he prayed with the first *minyán*. And with that he was not late to his daily work. He was meticulous in keeping his times.

His living rules were conducted according to religious tradition. He ruled his meals in all their details, according to the law and custom, and a patriarchal atmosphere prevailed over him.

He was moderate, knew how to control himself and everyday events did not take him out of his inner peace. He was not an "idler," was interested in the achievements of science and technology and did not tend to get excited about the various phenomena of life. He was not even enthusiastic about the *chassidut* even though he traveled to the Gerer Rebbe. But this was mostly due to his way of his life and not from over-enthusiasm. The saying of R' Yehoshua of Kutno, which he used to say a lot, that "the chassidim among the Jews are like Cossacks in the Emperor's army – they are the worst tribe but the guardians of the kingdom," expressed his opinion nicely.

<sup>3</sup> TN: *Sefer Yereim* (lit. "The Book of those who Fear"), written by Eliezer ben Samuel of Metz, is a work on the 613 Commandments according to the enumeration of the *Halachot Gedolot*.

He was not a public activist, but more than once went out to collect donations for the community's needy. He was a member in various philanthropic associations, participated in their meetings and donated to them from his money. Grandfather Eliyahu was respected by all, allies and non-allies, old and young, chassidim and not chassidim.

Up to two years before his passing he did not know what an illness was. He was strong in body and healthy in spirit. I have never seen him worried or in a severe mood. Peace of mind and seriousness were always expressed on his face. He had a strong character and knew how to hold back his sufferings. Even the doctor, who treated him after he was severely wounded at the age of seventy by his razor (that he kept in his pocket and was used to shave the animals' neck hair before the slaughter), was deeply impressed by his endurance and added that he does not remember a patient in his practice who knew how to accept pain like him. He was eighty years old at the time of his death.

Since he was the only son to his father a generation folded in him and when I stood by his bed, I thought that in his death an entire generation had died.

### Father z"l

Father z"l was also a ritual slaughterer like his forefathers. Was involved with people and loved human beings by nature. He wanted to help, to the extent of his ability, to anyone who came in contact with him.

During the busiest time in the slaughterhouse, on Shabbat eve and holidays, his good eye knew to distinguish who among those who came were pressed for time (the one who has left his workshop and stands "on coals," or a housewife who has left her baby unattended), and tried to dismiss them quickly. So was his way with the butchers. He respected the person in them and they respected him the most. He also knew how to bring out the important qualities in them and in his company, they were gentle and noble. It seems to me that the root of this affinity for a colleague was in a deep religious experience, in the sanctity of human existence. He understood well the saying of Rabbi Akiva: "Beloved is man for he was created in the image [of God]," and as the simplicity of a person grew, so deepened his affinity to him. The warmth of this soul, which all was the love of mankind, was the righteousness of his righteousness.

He was very patient in his negotiations with people. He did not get tired of explaining and clarifying the matter for the second time to the man talked to until he understood his intention. Father invited a guest, who had to stay for the night, to our house. And if the guest was a slaughterer, father introduced him to the matters of the profession, showed him his butcher's knives, explain how he sharpens them and how he uses them. He fed the guest

<sup>4</sup> TN: The *Zohar* (lit. "Splendor" or "Radiance") is a foundational work in the literature of Jewish mystical thought known as Kabbalah.

with the best food, gave him the best bed. He was like a rising spring in his conversation with him even though father was not one of the great talkers and it was very difficult to encourage him to talk. Then his face shone and his eyes expressed kindness, for he knew he was helping his guest.

He did not spare his strength when he knew that his help was needed for his friends. He was active in *Linat Tzedek*<sup>5</sup> and *Bikur Cholim*<sup>6</sup>. Without hesitation he fulfilled the *mitzvah* of visiting the sick and did not spare his nights to sit by the bed of a sick person. During the First World War, when the typhus and dysentery epidemic broke out, father visited house after house to help, to the best of his ability, every person in need until he contracted dysentery and with him all his family. He was confined to bed for a long time, but after he recovered, he continued as before and was of great help to every sick person.

Our father was the *gabbai* in *Chevra Kadisha*<sup>7</sup> because the *mitzvah* of true charity was the most precious *mitzvah* to him.

I remember that a poor childless woman died in our neighborhood. Father bought a stone, engraved her name on the gravestone with his own hands and erected a marker for her.

He was a craftsman, by himself made the wooden cases for the butcher's knives and engraved all the necessary seals *Kosher*, *Glatt Kosher*, *non-Kosher*, etc. He also engraved the *shiviti*<sup>8</sup> in front of the lectern. He bound the sacred books in his library with his own hands and saw this work as if he served in holiness and enhancing the *mitzvah*.

In monetary cases, the poor stood before him, those who lived from the labor of their hands and with great toil supported their families. And if the poor man's animal needed further examination to remove the defect in the lung, and not determine that it is not kosher and cause a financial loss to the animal's owner, father took the responsibility on himself and was among the lenient and not the strictest. He did not save work and effort and with his trained hands separated the lobes of the lungs which had stuck together. He removed the lungs membranes very carefully and did not cause the damaged area to rupture or puncture, because there was a chance that the animal would not be kosher.

On the other hand, our father acted with all the severity of the law if someone deceived him in matters of religion. I remember that once father asked a butcher to show him the omasum<sup>9</sup> for further examination. When the butcher took out the omasum, he noticed that a nail was stuck in one of the sides and cunningly cut it out to deceive my father. But father, who was a great expert in animal

anatomy, noticed it. He informed about it the city's rabbi and demanded that the butcher shop be closed. And indeed, the butcher shop was closed for six months by order of the rabbi and he was banned from entering the slaughterhouse for two years.

In his free time father read *Sefer Yereim*, the Gemara, *Poskim* and the *Tanach*. He mostly loved the *Tanach* and therefore he suffered greatly when he saw his sons reading secular literature instead of studying sacred books. Indeed, great was his pain when he saw his sons leaving the path of tradition and not continue to follow his way of life. He tried to talk to our hearts, to influence us, but he was not angry at us. Such was his character. He knew how to control his anger even though the matters that angered him caused him sorrow and great suffering. He was good-natured not only with his sons but with every person. He did not tolerate quarrels. He moved away from them. He was honest by nature, did not approve quarrels, factionalism and "high politics." Before him always stood his goal and anything around it was of less importance to him.

Great loneliness descended upon him at the end of his days. His sons scattered to the four corners of the world. His loneliness greatly bothered him and intensified his grief. He toyed with the hope that he would get to see them again, that his sons would return to their home, but his prayer was not accepted. In loneliness, when his sons were far from him, father passed away in purity.

Father was sixty-four at the time of his death. Many came to pay their last respect to his place of eternal rest. The man was loved by all and everyone respected and admired him. May his memory be a blessing!

### Mother z"l

Mother was the daughter of R' Moshe David Landau z"l, a descendant of HaGaon Rabbi Rafael HaCohen [Susskind] ztz"l, president of the rabbinical court and chief rabbi of three communities Altona, Hamburg and Wandsbek, and author of the books: *Torat Yekutiel*, *Marpe la-Nefesh*, *Veshev HaCohen*, *Daat Kedoshim*. HaRav Rafael was the son of the sage, the Kolliel Gaon, Rabbi Yekutiel Susskind, president of the rabbinical court in the country of Liefland<sup>10</sup>.

The historian, R' Aharon Marcus wrote in his book "*Chassidut*": "Rabbi Rafael left his high position, the rabbinate, in Altona, Hamburg and Wandsbek, four years before his passing, in order to immigrate to Jerusalem. When he arrived in Hamburg, the Napoleonic War broke out and the country was tightly closed and there he died and was buried."

in synagogues and Jewish homes as a reminder of God's presence.

<sup>9</sup> TN: The third compartment of a stomach of ruminant animal.

<sup>10</sup> TN: Archaic German name for Livonia, a historical region in the Baltic, south of the Gulf of Finland, now divided and constituting southern Estonia and northern Latvia.

<sup>5</sup> TN: *Linat Tzedek* – tending to the sick at night.

<sup>6</sup> TN: *Bikur Cholim* – visiting the sick and fulfilling their needs.

<sup>7</sup> TN: *Chevra Kadisha* (lit. "Sacred Society") is an organization of Jewish men and women who see to it that the bodies of deceased Jews are prepared for burial according to Jewish tradition.

<sup>8</sup> TN: A decorative plaque inscribed with the Hebrew verse "I have set the Lord before me constantly" (Psalms 16:8), hung

Our mother, Sara-Ryvka, was born in 1863 to her father, R' Moshe David Landau, a known merchant and a scholar whose place of residence was Łęczycza. Our grandfather wasn't a chassid but a religious Jew with knowledge of the Torah. His home was an "advanced" home. He was well versed in world's affairs and was one of the first to subscribe to *HaTsfira*<sup>11</sup>. His children were educated on the Torah but they also did not neglect secular studies.

Public service was inherent in my mother's nature. When her children grew up and she was able to free herself, to some extent, from homemaker's worries, she looked for an area of activity to satisfy her social sense and help others. About fifty years ago she founded the organization "*Ezrat Nashim*" to help needy women and, first and foremost, to sick needy women who couldn't afford the necessary treatment. A kitchen was established and provided forty to fifty lunches daily. The meals were brought to the sick women's homes by their family members and when the sick women were lonely without relatives, the food was delivered to them. But the organization had many expenses because its activities were not limited to the supply of meals. In many cases the sick women needed to be hospitalized or even be sent to a spa town (Ciechocinek and Karlsbad). To do this, every member was required to pay a monthly fee. My mother z"l set up an executive committee that headed the organization and was one of its members. The committee occasionally met to give an account of what has been done and to plan future activities. Mother's characteristic feature was her refusal to take on the role of treasurer. This position was mostly given to hands of other members.

When the organization became established and reached the state of "self-supporting" institution, she began to expand its activities so that it would not only provide help to needy women. It began to take care of the distribution of winter clothes for the needy, especially to the babies. In addition, the organization "unofficially" took on itself the *mitzvah* of *Hachnasat Kallah*<sup>12</sup>. When one of the needy came to talk about her troubles before my mother, she listened closely to her words. Although it was not often discussed at the members meeting, my mother volunteered several times to collect special donations in order to fulfill this great *mitzvah* called *Hachnasat Kallah*. Distinguished members were recruited, mother joined them and they took it upon themselves to solicit donations from wealthy families. Considerable amount was collected for the "dowry," wedding expenses and the rest of the bride's needs. There were also cases of counseling women whose domestic peace has been disrupted. She knew how to thoroughly examine the "cases" and find a way to settle the dispute. She was endowed with an extraordinary talent of persuasion, the couple reconciled and the domestic peace was restored.

In the last years, before she left Kutno, she was very active in the matters of the school for girls, "*Beit Yaakov*," which was founded by the ultra-orthodox.

Also here, in Israel, mother did not sit idly by. Mother very quickly examined the state of affairs at the place, managed to find ways to the institutions and her blessed cooperation was like a source of life for them. She worked in charity funds, devoted much of her time to the nursing home in HaAvoda Street [Tel Aviv], established a kitchen in one of the city's *yeshivot* and gave it most of her time until her last day.

Mother passed away in 5702 [1942] and was buried in the Jewish Cemetery on Mount of Olives.

May her memory be a blessing.

Inherited from Daniel Leib SZPIRO,  
sent to printer by Zusia and Gad SZPIRO.

---

<sup>11</sup> TN: *HaTsfira* (lit. "The Epoch") was a Hebrew-language newspaper published in Poland in 1862 and 1874–1931.

<sup>12</sup> TN: *Hachnasat Kallah* (lit. "Bringing in the bride"), refers to the *mitzvah* of providing the bride and groom with all that they need to get married.