

2] RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL MORGENSTERN [1,787 – 1,859]

Grand Rabbi of **Kotzk** (Poland)

Yahrzeit Date - 22 Shevat, 1859

The Rabbi of Kotzk is considered to be one of the great luminaries of the Chassidic world. Although his entourage was most limited, when questioned on this point, he responded: "Other Rebbes perhaps influence hundreds of Hasidim. I myself have only twenty, but each and very one of them is able to be a full fledged Grand Rabbi in his own right!". This was true, since he repelled any adherent who wasn't an outright Talmid Haham in all of Shass.

He was a descendant of a Mitnagdim family of Rabbis. As a youth he was a great "Lamdan" and studied under the tutelage of Rabbi Hochgelernter (the author of "Mishnat Hahamim"). Historians record that he undertook to gather some smattering of secular knowledge, undertook to learn pharmacology and successfully underwent government examinations so to receive a license for pharmacy (Hebrew Encyclopedia, vol. 29 p. 476. Some of the following material we culled from that article). Nevertheless he did not practice this trade, since he married the daughter of a rich resident of Tomashov, who supported him financially so that he continues his Torah studies.

By G-d's Hashgacha he had occasion to meet the Grand Rabbi Ya'akov Isaac Horowitz, the famous "Hozeh mi-Lublin", who, as the story says, cast down his eyesight not to see anything beyond his closeby four steps. This he did for seven uninterrupted years. Following which, Chassidim retell, he had Ru'ach ha-Kodesh and could penetrate a Jew's soul, knowing even his thoughts.

It is told that a certain Jew in his period came to participate with the Yom Kippur Prayers, at the Rebbe's courtyard. But unfortunately, the Evil Inclination which plagued him all year long accompanied him even now in the Rebbe's presence. That Jew was at first abashed and down pent, how could he sin with evil, lewd thoughts on this holiest of days, and on this

spot, the holy abode of the Rebbe? However, immediately "common sense" tilted the scales. "If I am not embarrassed to tinker with dirty thoughts even in G-d's Presence, who is the world over, why should I be embarrassed to be sullied in the rebbe's presence, since he is only a human being?" And then he turned his face to the wall, to indulge in his downfall. The Lublin Grand Rebbe ("the Hozeh") had an inkling just what was going on in that Hasid's thoughts (perhaps he read his visage) and sent a lad to call him to approach him. The Rebbe censured him: "Of course G-d knows of all, even of unclean matters. But He could enter even the despicable courtyard of Pharaoh the villain (see Rashi, Shmot chap. 11 verse 4) even though Moshe himself could not pray properly in that selfsame court (as Rashi and the Midrash write, on Shmot 9, 29). The reason is that G-d is so sublime, that no base matter can disturb Him. But humans are of lesser strength. So too in your case, G-d can bear your wicked thoughts. **But I just cannot!** Please restrain yourself!" This is a picture of the "Hozeh". And it was this personality that swayed Rabbi Menachem Mendel, to forsake Mitnagdim and join the Hassidim.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Menachem could not bear the exaggeration of "miracles" alleged to the Rebbes. He wished a style more intellectual. He forsook the Hozeh and went to Rabbi Ya'akov Isaac, the famous "Jew of Pershischa". After the decease of the latter, he continued with his disciple Rabbi Simcha Bunim. When, subsequently he too departed for the Heavenly Study Halls, some of the remaining Hasidim crowned Rabbi Menachem as their Rebbe (year of 1827) in the town of Tomashov. After two years he moved his domicile to the town of Kotzk (somewhat north of Lublin).

There was a rebellion going on then against the cruel Polish overlords. Rabbi Menachem apparently aided the rebels. When they were defeated, he had to flee to Austria. After retuning, he changed his family name to "Morgenstern" (the morning star).

Many are the innovations that he shrewdly instituted. He hated hypocrisy and false cant. His keyword was "truth". He and his small circle of adherents decided to forbid receiving any and all monetary gifts (as written in the Talmud, Tractate Megilla 28a) and supported themselves as a commune. That is, all monies earned went to the communal money chest and the monies were delivered to each member as per specific need. Needless to say, by some of the members, the individual family life (wife and children) suffered somewhat. One of the important tenets of the group was to talk as little as possible. They weighed their words so to speak as briefly as possible.

Contrary to the general direction of the Baal Shem Tov's teaching, to be joyous and cheerful, the atmosphere accompanying Rabbi Menachem's presence was austere and extremely serious, even stern. It is legendary that the Yom Kippur prayer service of Mussaf they finished at about 10:00 a.m., made a long recess till 4 P.M. during which the individuals of the group spent in Torah Study. Only close to sunset did they continue the Prayer Service.

Most of the other Rebbes in Poland disputed his teachings, so too the Mitnaged Rabbi of Warsaw, Rabbi Jacob Gesundheit, the author of the famous "Tifferet Ya'akov" (several volumes, on all sections of the Shulchan O'ruch, and on Tractates Gittin, Hullin etc.). Yet it cannot be denied that some of the most famous Rebbes were his students and recognized his great erudition, such as

- his brother-in-law Rebbe Isaac Meir Alter, the head of the world famous Gerrer Rebbe dynasty;
- so too Rabbi Menachem's son in law Rabbi Abraham Bornstein, the head of the Sochachov dynasty ("Avnei Nezer", "Shem mi-Shmuel");
- so too Rabbi Mordechai Yoseph Leiner, the head of the Izbitz Rabbinical dynasty (the father of the famous Radzin rebbe, the discoverer of the Techelet).

All these knew him personally and despite his stern and serious practices, recognized that these were due to his deep and intense search for "the Truth".

The article concerning Rabbi Menachem of Kotzk in the Hebrew Encyclopedia (volume 29 page 477) claims that unlike the classic teachings of the previous Hassidic adherents of the Baal Shem Tov, who taught of love, joy and cherishing the assets of our mundane world so to infuse them with "kedusha", unlike the above - Kotzk held a constant tension and unceasing spiritual battle against egocentricity.

Differing from the great Baal Shem Tov who taught tolerance towards all other creatures, Kotzk took a more narrow view, one of admonishment and a process of constant self-perfecting, via a strict regimen of Torah study on a high intellectual level. The fact that by this approach he could never draw the masses had no influence on the Master. Needless to say, he entirely negated any arrogance or haughtiness that an individual might feel due to this intellectual superiority. **So too** he fought bitterly against assumptions (by others) of greatness due to "Yichus" (ancestral pedigree), prevalent at the time by some other Polish Rebbes. All this, to he who recognizes, is a follow up of the Pershisscha teachings, whereby there was a rapprochement with the Lamdan elements of Lithuanian and Russian Jewry. During his lifetime, his chasidus philosophy was bitterly attacked and condemned by many other Masters. Yet shortly after his decease these theses had a wider and more receptive audience, due to the Gerrer Rebbe groups, who toned down the anti-social tenets (aforementioned), but retained the claim and drive for more Torah intellectualism.

He left behind him no literature penned by his hand. Nevertheless we have the book "O'hel Torah" (Lublin, 1909, 64 pp.) apparently collected from what others heard from him. So too we have "Amud ha-Emet" (Tel Aviv); "Emet me-Eretz Tizmach" (Tel Aviv, 1961); "Emet ve-Emunah" (1969, 128 p.); "Sefer Kotzk" (ed. A. Porat, 1961); all compiled from different sources. Upon perusing

these, we find some striking insights which show penetrating thought. Let us quote here **eleven of them**, so to give a taste of his cognitive and philosophical world.

1. The period to indulge in eating is during youth; to sleep a lot, is in the grave. To be sad and moody; never, for that is wild abandon.
2. The evil inclination of conceit is to be found by he who has already conquered the rest of the Evil Inclinations.
3. At Delivery of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the populace saw and shivered, but remained distant from the truth" (Shmot 20, 15). He commented, a person could quake and quiver (as is wont during intense Prayer), yet he may nevertheless be distant from G-d, since it is all external, without heart. So too the Kotzker Rebbe saw the Hazzalic teaching "Posh'ei Israel are full of Mitzvot just like a pomegranat" (Eruvin 19a) here we see that a person can even be full of Mitzvot like a pomegranat, yet nevertheless still be categorized as a "Posh'ei Israel", since his heart remains aloof.
4. One person told him of his habit to "finish" reading the entire book of Tehillim, day by day. The Rebbe remonstrated: "What King David accomplished in 70 years you do in one day?! It should suffice us to read a few chapters or a few verses, each day". (Emet ve-Emuna, p. 30).
5. Tehillim (128, 2) teaches "Yegia Kapecha ki tochal". Let your hands toil and labor for your finances, but your mind should not labor. Your mind should be free for thought. (ibid. p. 32).
So too he taught: He who is worthy, can have the proper intents of "Tikkun Hatzot" each time that he recites "Boneh Yerushalyim" of Birkat ha-mazon.

6. If a person personally gives monies for charities, his sons will learn to emulate him and follow his example. But if he only advises them, prompts them by word of mouth to give broadly (and without showing them a personal example); they too will learn from him to adjure their subsequent offspring to give monies to the poor, but they themselves will not comply with that, just as they witnessed by you, their father. (ibid, p. 57).
7. Concerning those who live ascetic lives, he criticized: it is easier to bear the yoke of self privation rather than the necessary yoke of G-d's service (Amud ha-Emet, p. 87).
To learn a daf of Gemarra has a purifying power, just like a mikva (ibid).
8. All of the universe and all that it contains, is valueless and isn't even worthy of a soft sigh (ib. p. 91).
9. Study of the **Maharal's works** sharpen a person's mind so that he be better qualified to understand Gemarra and Poskim (ibid).
10. Not all that a person thinks is it proper to utter.
Not all that is said is it proper to put to writing.
Not all that one finds written is it proper to publish (ibid).
11. the Kotzker Rebbe was **against** the prevalent custom of visiting the graves of the great Rabbis (ibid, p. 94-95).
So too he was against divorces by a couple who were unblessed with children. He admonished them "Do you want to have wicked children?" (As if to say, G-d has his reasons why they are barren) and advised them to remain calm in their present situation (ibid, p. 96).
So too he advised against moving a person's domicile to another area (ibid, p. 91) since each soul has its specific source (one may add: see Maharal, . "Netivot Olam", Teshuva, end of chapter five). Only for very weighty reasons did he permits moving.

We have some biographies about Rabbi Menachem and also attempts to set up his principles and understand his approaches.

- One is "**The Sneh burns at Kotzk**" (M. Urian, 1962).
- Another is "**Rabbi M. M. Kotzk**" (Y. Fox, 1967).
- Professor Abraham Heschel published a Yiddish work on the subject, in two volumes (1973).