

RABBI ABRAHAM YESHAYA KARELITZ

Author of "Hazon Ish" series of books

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Every generation has its venerable sage. The author of "Hovot ha-Levavot" teaches that G-d has so provided that never is there a gap, but continuously we have wise Talmidei Hachomim who guide and direct their contemporaries (section of Teshuva, chapter six). In the period immediately preceding the initiation of the Israeli State, and for a few years afterwards, we enjoyed the benefit of the "Hazon Ish", dwelling in Bnei Brak. His name is hinted at in the above appellation, "Ish" being the acrostic of "Abraham Yeshaya".

First we begin with some biographical material.

He was born (1879) in Lithuania and shortly before the first World War moved to Wilna, dwelling under modest circumstances in a small attic. For a lifetime he was always on the brink of poverty since he made it a matter of principle not to accept gifts from others (See Tractate Megilla 28a). He earned his livelihood by selling the twenty three Torah works which he penned. However, wary of those donors who wished to "grant" him surplus monies, he never agreed to receive sums surpassing the allotted price which was set for each volume (decided by the amount of pages of that volume).

So too he was careful not to sell more than one copy to any one purchaser, so not to profit mundanely from his spiritual efforts.

After arriving in Israel (year of 1933) one admirer from Chicago erected his simple house in Bnei Brak, giving it to the Hazon Ish as a gift. Nevertheless the recipient made a firm condition that he wouldn't dwell there if the donor would not accept a rental fee as was the standard for dwellings of that size.

Understandably, in his list of points of advice for Bnei Torah (Letters, vol. one, para. 20) he adjures "not to get involved in taking loans", since this would distract from ability to study unfettered. So too he mentions (there) not to do any action (of Hassidut) which is considered odd by the bystanders.

Upon arriving in Bnei Brak, his house was a beacon of light, with many people coming constantly to ask for advice. The Hazzon Ish was childless, yet he was a doting father unto each and every Jew. Although he personally was entirely engrossed in his studies, as will be elaborated upon further on, yet he had constant interruptions, never sending away anyone without an answer.

He developed a widespread correspondence, reaching over 400 items which have been collected and published ("Letters"). Many of them are short pieces of encouragement to young Yeshiva students, advising them to pay attention to their study even if barren of "Hiddushim".

So too he taught that to study for an hour or so and interrupt intermittently, does havoc to understanding the topic at hand. He himself had a study day of 14 hours daily (so attests his brother in law (in the biographical work "Pe'er ha-Dor", vol. one p. 192).

He never had a set time to "break off", to go to sleep at such and such an hour. He would study assiduously, only stopping under great fatigue. Then he would recline on the divan for a nap, sometimes this would be for three or four hours. This he did during all sundry hours of the day or night, so that many a time he slept by day and studied by night or the contrary.

Needless to say, he had not the custom of changing clothes for a pajama, since his sleep overcame him as unprepared. Only on Shabbat did he make a set time for sleeping in his bedroom. This was due to the Halachic regimen of "Sheina be-Shabbat Ta'anug".

When resting up for a three week period at a relatives house (in Wilna) he was repeating again and again the first Mishna of Mikva'ot, until (it is told) three year old infants of the household sang after him the opening words "Shesh ma'alot".

The book "Pe'er ha-Dor" (vol. one, page 192) writes that he could study one Daf of Gemarra for a hundred days running. According to the testimony of his associates, when in Wilna he studied the first chapter of Tractate Eruvin for eight months running. When subsequently he wrote on the subject, scholars comment, there is the taste of the Wilna Gaon in his deliberations, precision and clarity, not only authoritativeness.

At the end of many issues he habitually writes a short resume' "Hadinim ha-Olim" which show his great concern to learn only Halacha le-Ma'aseh.

He had no time for barren debate. He writes (Orlah 17, 11; so too "Letters", book one para. 28) that most people are set in their accustomed approaches to grasp Talmudic issues and it is therefore most difficult to sway them so to be free from preconceived notions.

Upon closely examining the topics that he explains, we find that he was well proficient in Astronomy, Botany, Mathematics and a bit of Medicine too.



Let us now repeat several points of wisdom, brought up in his books.

During his day the farmers had not the automatic milking machine and therefore had the problem not to desecrate the Shabbat by milking the cows. Of course due to the discomfort of the animals at the increasing milk, it is permissible to milk towards the ground and the milk goes to waste, or to gather the milk in cheese urns, so to be used for cheese only. But many farmers had not the spiritual stature to be able to lose profits due to Shabbat observance. The simple answer that the Hazzon Ish proposed was that they employ Gentile (Arab) labor, who would do the milking. But due to the wild attacks of that population on their Jewish neighbors, there was antipathy to this move. Therefore the Hazzon Ish composed a most modern tract (On Orach Ha'im, page 82a) teaching that one should not hate his enemies. True we are permitted to curtail their criminal activities, but we must understand that they sin due to a moral weakness, due a sort of illness. Hate should not participate in our emotions. In another instance he taught that when one chastises another person, one should not be joyous at the other's downfall (as is sometimes the case, that the person dishing out To'chaka feels "holier than thou") but one should feel chagrin at the low state of a brother ("Letters", book two, 90).

To all willing to listen, he advised to get married at an early age; not to be tardy and pass the age of 20 unmarried ("Letters", book two, 135).

He also permitted saying "Loshon ho'ro" when checking the reliability of Rabbis. As well-known, not all Rabbis have the same measure of reliability. All are willing to notify ritual laws, but not all are expert on each and every subject.

Therefore just as a person may inquire to verify who is a skilled shoe-repairer and who isn't (this is called "Lo'shon Ha-roh Le-Toelet", see "Hafetz Ha'im, klall 9 para. 10), so too must know who is a reliable Rabbi and who is not (who is unprecise) ("Letters", book two, para. 133).

The "Hazzon Ish" suffered from a constant state of weakness, since not only was he born with a weak constitution, but he ate most sparsely and as abovementioned pushed his body against all odds so to extract the most out of the hours he was able to spend in Torah study.

During the Simchat Torah communal dancing with the Sifrei Torah, during which there is a prohibition to sit, since the Sifrei Torah are in constant movement, the Hazzon Ish had a remarkable innovation. He took one Sefer Torah and sat with it (as well known, a person guarding the Sefer Torah is exempt from standing) and thereby he could remain present in the room, even though people dancing with the Torah surrounded him for hours.

Within a short period of the erection of the Israeli State, the government considered drafting girls to the army (excusing themselves as due to defense measures). The Hazzon Ish took a most stern stand against that, notifying all that every female should rather die than be drafted, since he considered it "Gilui A'rayot" (See the p'sak of Rabbenu Yonah, Avot, chap. 3 mishna 11). See Hazzon Ish's "Letters" (vol. one, para. 112).

His leadership position was so unquestioned, that the Prime Minister Ben Gurion took the time and effort to meet the Hazzon Ish, asking an appointment in the latter's residence in Bnei Brak. Ben Gurion was known for his rabid anti-religion opinions. After an hour of discussion, Ben Gurion still stubbornly continued on his draft plan; nevertheless he conceded that any religious girl could declare conscientious reasons and thereby be released from service. This move was strongly censured by the Kibbutz movement, yet it reveals what a strong impact the Hazon Ish made even on such a rocky antagonist.

The biographical book "Pe'er ha-Dor" relates that the Hazzon Ish preceded the meeting by taking off his eye-glasses, since it is prohibited to look at the face of a great villain (Tractate Megilla p. 28a).

Nevertheless he had to be careful to honor properly the Head of the State, by tendering him tea and cookies. But what to do if the guest should refuse to say the proper benedictions? (see Shulchan O'ruch, Orach ha'im, end of chapter 163 and Mishna Brura there). The Gaon Hazzon Ish overcame this problem by curtly preceding the statement "Make a B'rocho" and then turning his face in another direction, not checking whether the guest complied with the request.

His educational position was that one cannot rely on "stories" concerning Halachic decisions of our predecessors. He explained that there were particular conditions applying to each and every situation, of which we are at present ignorant, therefore each "story" is unreliable as a precedent (This goes entirely counter to current secular judicial practice, which does rely on precedents).

He also taught ("Letters", one, para. 46) that one must be wary of books written by scoffers (epikursim) even if the content matter is clean of forbidden opinions. The reason, he explained, is that any topic in the world is colored by the position of the author, no matter if it is fiction, or history or whatnot. Lacking the first clause of our servitude to G-d, the interpretation of any fact will be warped or altered from its Torah True values. Of course such books which give data alone (such as science, medicine or geography etc.) have not this drawback.

He educated others that they should be in a constant state of joy, being fully content with the understandings of the Torah Truths of life. To quote him: "There is no dismal moodiness at all for he who perceives the great Lights of the Truth" ("Letters", one, para. 36). One should battle stubbornly against any and all worries ("Letters", book two, 127).

From this point we proceed to understand his unique lesson concerning what is true "Bitachon" (trust in G-d's Providence). It is not only that G-d will do as the trusting Jew prays and requests, but it is that no matter what may eventually occur, all is "for the good" (see Tractate Berachot, 60b, the words of Rabbi Akiva).

One must know that no matter whatever may occur on the human scene, G-d transforms it in the consequences to be to the best results. This is G-d's glorious Fatherhood to the human race. (See the book of the Hazzon Ish, "Emunah u'Bitachon", Part Two).

His famed nephew, the Gaon Rabbi Ha'im Kanyevisky, has recorded for posterity some of the Hazzon Ish's directives which he heard from his mother (the sister of the Hazzon Ish) in his book "**M'lechet ha-Mishkan**" (p. 108).

- One point there is that a Kadish recited has its power of pardon only if the son recites for his deceased father, but not any other relative doing the reciting.
- So to he adjured each Jew to purchase land (or a house) in Israel, because dwelling there without ownership of land, is not the proper fulfillment of the Mitzva.
- He also ruled that a newspaper is Muktzeh on Shabbat (due to financial notices).
- When advising young parents who were uncertain of what name to give to a new born child, and both father and mother had a debate as to the prerogative, he said that coupling together two names (from two grandparents) was not identical to the original (one name) of the deceased and therefore lost the effect. So too one who abbreviated to choose one out of the two names that the deceased person bore, once again had lost by that the remembrance of the original name.

He did not utilize on Shabbat the electric current supplied to the houses by the electric company, due to the Hillul Shabbat involved. On Yom Tov too he was zealous to observe Se'uda Shlishis and Me-Laveh Malka (not only on Shabbat itself). He did not rely on the Eiruv in order to carry objects in the public domain on Shabbat.



We cannot hope to give an ample survey here of his many Hidushim and many beautiful habits. May it suffice to say that the world renown religiosity of Bnei Brak, and its avid studiosness (i. e. Yeshivat Ponevez etc.), is due to a great extent to the great impact of his presence here in his period.

May his merit stand to our stead.