

Growing Up in Brisk

— as recalled by Rabbi Chaim Leib Balgley

The Lithuanian city of Brisk is celebrated for the outstanding scholars that served in its rabbinate — from Rabbi Yoel Serkis (the "Bach") in the 16th Century, to the more recent Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin, Rabbi Yoseif Dov Soloveitchik (the "Beis Halevi"), and his son, Rabbi Chaim.

What was it like to grow up in their town? What was the nature of their leadership, their personalities? One can only guess — unless one has the rare opportunity of speaking to someone who did grow up in Brisk. Rabbi Chaim Leib Balgley שליט"א was born and raised in Brisk, where his father, Reb Mordechai Yaakov, was an intimate of Reb Chaim.

In these pages, Rabbi Balgley shares with the readers of The Jewish Observer his recollection of incidents involving Reb Chaim — incidents that he personally witnessed or heard from authoritative sources: Rabbi Chaim is celebrated in yeshiva circles for his innovative analytical approach to Talmud study — known variously as "der Litvishe derech" (the Lithuanian approach), "der Brisker derech," or "Reb Chaim's derech." His exceptional generosity as well as his uncompromising staunchness in religious matters — both in personal conduct and in communal leadership — were legendary in his day, but have faded somewhat from public knowledge in recent years. These stories reveal some fascinating aspects of Reb Chaim's personality.



Remembering Reb Chaim Soloveitchik

זכר צדיק לברכה

Sixty years since his passing: 21 Menachem Av 5678 (1918)

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A Ba'al Habayis in Brisk

REB MOSHE Guttman became a *dayan* in Brisk when he was yet a young man. After several years in the position, he was approached by Reb Chaim regarding his financial status. Reb Chaim asked him how he was managing, in view of the growth of his family. When he replied that the situation was very

RABBI BALGLEY, a native of Brisk, served as Rav in Dubinova, Poland, and now resides in Monsey, New York.

tight, Reb Chaim offered him the post of secretary for his yeshiva, Etz Chaim — which he accepted.

Reb Chaim then told him that since he would be dealing with a broader public, he would like to acquaint him with the *ba'alei battim* (laymen) of Brisk: As an example he pointed to a simply-dressed man — Mr. Zelcer, by name — standing by the bookshelves in the library, looking at a *sefer*. Reb Chaim called him over and asked him an halachic question. Mr. Zelcer answered, quoting hosts of *Rishonim* and *Acharonim* (earlier and later commentaries) — the *Rosh*, the *Rambam*, *Tosfos Yom Tov* — and went on, explaining a pertinent *Mishna* in

various ways, according to the different *shitos* (interpretations). Reb Moshe was astounded by the *beki'us* (vast knowledge) and clarity with which the man answered — as if he had just finished studying this particular subject.

Reb Chaim later told Reb Moshe: "This is our typical *ba'al habayis* in Brisk."

Brisk Recovery

IT IS well-known that when someone was sick on a *Shabbos* or *Yom Kippur*, and it was questionable as to how seriously he required medical attention, Reb Chaim would decide in favor of meeting the needs of the patient, even if it meant over-ruling the day's restrictions. (Reb Chaim would say: "I'm not lenient in regard to *Shabbos* or *Yom Kippur*. I'm stringent in the *mitzva* of guarding one's life.") In my own experience, one *Erev Yom Kippur*, when I was very young, I was on the way to the *dayan* Reb Simcha Zelig*. Reb Chaim stopped me and asked me where I was going. I replied, "I'm going to ask a *she'eila* about a weak person with regard to tomorrow (*Yom Kippur*)."

Reb Chaim listened to my description of his condition and told me, "He is permitted to eat."

Generally, Reb Chaim referred halachic queries to the *dayan*, but in his deep concern for each and every member of his community, he wanted to decide on health matters himself.

Father to the Foundlings

ONE *Shabbos* morning in 1910, I joined my father at Reb Chaim's private *minyan* in his house. We noticed a baby carriage in the living room and Reb Chaim seemed very concerned. The child was not Reb Chaim's own, but one that was left abandoned at his doorstep. (It was widely known that a child that would not have a normal upbringing for one of any number of

*Reb Simcha Zelig, the *Rosh Beis Din* of Brisk (head of the rabbinical court) lived in the upper flat in the Rav's house. I often saw the two studying together, with *Gemoras*, *Rambams* and countless other *seforim* spread open all over the house. The two were constantly occupied in Torah discussions, even when travelling together. As great as he was, Reb Simcha Zelig was extremely humble. He dressed simply, with a plain hat and an ordinary jacket (rather than rabbinical frock). Whenever he saw us boys coming home from school, he would come down the steps and ask us what we had learned, pat us on the cheek or hold one of us on his lap and kiss us on the brow when he was pleased with our answers. His simplicity contrasted unbelievably with his celebrated greatness.

reasons would find a warm welcome in Reb Chaim's home.) The child was ill and the *Rav* summoned a doctor, who examined the child and found him more dead than alive. He suggested that a lit candle be held close to the baby's eyes. "If the child reacts, then there is some life left in the child; if not, all is lost."

We stood by, watching. Said Reb Chaim to my father: "Reb Yaakov Mordechai, get a candle and match," whereupon my father went into the kitchen. In the meantime, Reb Chaim turned to his son Reb Velvel (who later succeeded him as *Brisker Rav*; a young man at the time) and instructed him to go quickly and bring a candle and match. Reb Velvel ran, snatched the candle and match from my father's hand and brought them into the living room. The doctor held the candle near the child's eyes and reported that there was no sign of life in the child. Reb Chaim was, of course, terribly upset.

On our way home, I asked my father, "Why did Reb Chaim tell Reb Velvel to bring a candle and match when you were already in the kitchen for the same purpose?"

My father answered: "We all know that if a person's life is in danger on *Shabbos*, *halacha* demands that we do any of the prohibited labors necessary to save him. The *Rambam* says that one should do anything that would be done on a weekday for the sick person. He says further that one should not delegate the tasks to a non-Jew, a child, or a servant, but *Gedolei Yisroel Ve-Chachomeihem* (great and wise men) should do it. One is not permitted to hesitate in such a situation. Reb Chaim realized that I was not running to bring the candle. I was calculating: First, I had heard the doctor say that this was an experiment to see whether or not there is any hope for the child — this was not a cure. Also, I knew that this child was one of those that had been abandoned at Reb Chaim's doorstep — a child of dubious parentage. But I did as I was told. Reb Chaim, with his sharp eyes, perceived this reluctance. Since one is not allowed to make *cheshbonos* (calculations) in such cases, he sent Reb Velvel and told him to run. Which he did."

The Sweetness of a Mother's Concern

THESE children that were brought up in Reb Chaim's house were cared for by hired wet-nurses. Once, Reb Chaim did not have money to pay one of the nurses and asked her to return the following day. The woman became excited and exclaimed, "Rebbei, just because you want to bring up *mamzeirim*, doesn't mean that I have to suffer!"

Reb Chaim immediately quieted her down: "One is not allowed to speak thus of Jewish children. I promise you, I'll pay you tomorrow."

The woman accepted his assurances and left. Shortly thereafter, Reb Chaim ran outside and called the woman back. Said Reb Chaim: "I see that you are excited. If you nurse the child now, it might be harmful to him. Please sit down until you calm down, and only then feed the child."

Recording the "Chiddushim"

REB CHAIM did not write down his *Chiddushei Torah* (original interpretations) himself. The task was performed by Reb Noach, one of the *shochtim* (ritual slaughterers) in Brisk — a Slonimer *chassid*, who was an accomplished *talmid chacham*. On one *Shabbos Erev Chanuka*, Reb Chaim instructed his *Shammos* to ask Reb Noach to come to his house right after *havdala*, for he had some *chiddushim* to record.

Reb Noach came at the appointed time and sat down to write. While Reb Chaim paced the floor, talking without pause for several hours, Reb Noach wrote. When Reb Noach seemed to tire, Reb Chaim gave him a glass of tea, and then started talking once again, until he had dictated a full twelve pages.

Suddenly, Reb Chaim reached over to the writing table and took hold of the notes and began to rip them into shreds. Said Reb Noach: "Give the pages to me. Why should you bother tearing them?"

When Reb Chaim heard this, he tore the pages into even smaller strips, to make sure that they could not be pieced together later. Reb Chaim wanted to start dictating again, but the hour was late, and Reb Noach was without the strength to write anymore.

Said Reb Chaim: "False Torah explanations are not permitted to exist. The world needs only true, authentic Torah."

In view of the scrupulous attention Reb Chaim gave to every word written it is not surprising that his published *chiddushim* earned the recognition of being *Toras Emes*.

Yom Kippur Rescue

THE Jewish "Bund" had played a large role in the 1905 laborers' revolt against the Czar's government. The Czar suppressed the revolt and had all the offenders shot. Furthermore he issued a decree, that if a "proclamation" should be found in anyone's possession, that person should be shot on the spot.

Once, *Erev Yom Kippur*, two Jewish Bundists were caught, bearing "proclamations" on their persons. They were arrested and placed in jail. Their trial — and

certain death — was scheduled for the next day. When Reb Chaim learned of this, he immediately contacted some wealthy men who had connections with the army, instructing them to arrange for food to be given to the prisoners; in addition, they should use all their contacts, and make every effort to save these youths.

The men did as Reb Chaim requested, and notified him that there was a possibility of freeing the men with 10,000 rubles. Where does one get 10,000 rubles — a huge sum of money, especially in those poverty-stricken times? Time was running out, and the lives of these unfortunate youths were hanging in the balance. Reb Chaim dispatched messengers to all *shuls* and *yeshivos*, *Botei Midrashim* and *shtieblach*, to convene a meeting of the *Gabboim* (trustees). At the meeting, Reb Chaim established a fixed amount for each *shul* to raise by that very same evening, and also decreed that *Kol Nidrei* not be said until he would give the word.

That evening, the money was brought to Reb Chaim's house. When they had collected the entire amount, Reb Chaim sent the *Shammos* to notify the various *shuls* that *Kol Nidrei* could be said ... and the boys were, of course, freed.

Boundless Generosity

AN UNCLE of mine who was in a business had once made a large shipment deep into Russia. Through some mishap, his merchandise was apparently lost, which could throw him into bankruptcy. He sought help from Reb Chaim, who advised him on whom to see and what to do to recover his money. My uncle followed Reb Chaim's suggestions and he succeeded in recovering his money.

On his way home, my uncle stopped in to thank Reb Chaim, who was extremely happy with the results. My uncle took out a large sum of money, placed the gold coins in a kerchief, and gave it to Reb Chaim telling him that it was *ma'aser* (a tithe of his gains). Reb Chaim thanked him and then shared a *Dvar Torah* with him. In the midst of their conversation, a poor man came by and told him of his desperate need for a large sum of money, asking for a donation. Reb Chaim took out the entire sum of money and gave it to the poor man.

The End of Days

REB CHAIM noted that after the Torah enumerates the curses of the *Tochacha*, which will befall *Klal Yisroel* if they abandon their covenant with G-d, the Torah tells us: "And the last generation — your children ... and the stranger from a distant land will say

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... 'Why did G-d punish this land so?' (Devarim 29:21, 23).

Reb Chaim asked: If the person who asks is a "stranger," why describe him further as coming "from a distant land"? It would seem to be redundant. He answered: The Torah is describing the situation that will prevail during *Ikvesa de'Meshicha* — the era just prior to *Moshiach's* coming, when ignorance will be so prevalent in the world that a Jew will ask the same questions as a Gentile from a far off country. A Gentile that lives among Jews knows that Jews do not work once a week, on *Shabbos* ... that they have a festival in which they do not eat bread ... one when Jews leave their homes and erect huts, to eat and sleep in them. However, a Gentile from a distant corner of Asia or Africa probably never saw a Jew in his life. He has no conception of their customs. Thus, the Torah describes the time just prior to *Moshiach's* arrival: There will be such ignorance in the world that "The last generation — your children" the Jewish people will be so far from Torah, as to be comparable to the "stranger from a distant land" — a Gentile that never lived among Jews, and is totally ignorant of their customs ... This is what the *Gemora* means when it says: "Torah is destined to be forgotten from Israel."

Unfortunately, we have seen much fulfillment of this prophecy — may G-d have mercy on us and speedily usher in the next era. 15

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