

# RABBI MALKIEL TENENBAUM

## Rav of Lomza



**I**t happened on *Shabbos Shuva*, that awesome *Shabbos* that falls between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. All of the Lomza *kehilla* had crowded into the *shul*, eager to enjoy their Rav's *drasha*, hear his exhortations, share in the blessings which he would bestow.

The crowd was so great that many were forced to stand outside the Beis Medrash Hagadol, taking their places near the open windows. Solemnly the Rav passed through the multitude and made his way to his place near the *Aron Kodesh*.

"Beloved Jews," he said, "my duty to you today is to speak words of *mussar*, words of reproach, to teach and to guide you. But if I cannot guide my own children, how can I possibly guide others? How can I fulfill my obligations as Rav? Therefore I resign my position. And may *Hashem* bless you with a *gemar chasima tova*, a good year."

Slowly he stepped down and took, not his seat on the right side of the *Aron*, but a place on a crowded bench.

A moment of shocked silence was followed by utter pandemonium. In the balcony, the sound of weeping could be heard, for if the men considered their Rav a *talmid chacham* and *poseik*, the women knew him as the *tzaddik*, the one whose prayers could intercede for

**Rabbi Chaim Shapiro**, a frequent contributor to these pages, was brought up in Lomza. He lives in Baltimore, where his stories—oral and written—evoke the rich texture of life in pre-War Europe.

them and their families.

My mother used to tell me this tale of Reb Malkiel's resignation, and the furor it caused in the town. A young girl herself at the time, she heard the story recounted endless times, in vivid detail, by her mother. She would tell of the crowd that spontaneously formed and followed the Rav to his home to implore, to beg him to reconsider.

Delegations of *ba'alei batim* went in and out of the Rav's *Bais Din Shtub*. My Zeide, Reb Chaim Velvel

Szeniak, put away the *Rambam* which he was studying, got up from his sick bed, and joined one such group. Though it was against doctor's orders, for he was very ill; and though she was normally very careful of his health, his wife, my *Bobba*, remained silent. She, too, sensed the urgency of his mission, and was ready to make whatever sacrifice necessary to keep Reb Malkiel as Lomza's Rav.

The *kehilla* saw no reason to censure their Rav for his wayward children. It was well known that Rav Malkiel's wife had been influenced by the insidious beliefs of the *maskillim*, and her children were following in her path. No, Lomza was a *kehilla* that wanted its Rav back. But would it get him?

After much pleading, the word spread through the crowd surrounding the Rav's home: "He is staying!" Such joy! Such relief! Reb Malkiel had agreed to stay on as Rav.

Such were my mother's memories of the Rav of Lomza,

Rabbi Malkiel Tenenbaum, and the universal esteem in which he was held.

### IT STARTED NEAR PINSK

**R**eb Malkiel was born in 1847 in Motele, a tiny hamlet near Pinsk. He learned in Volozhin and Eishishok and, like many a Torah scholar, married young.

When he was 26 he became Rav of Bodki, a small town in the area of Grodno. In the fourteen years spent there he pored over his *seforim*, and began work on his six volume work "*Divrei Malkiel*."

His halcyon days as scholar, author, and small town Rav ended in 1887, when the city of Lomza invited him to head their *kehilla*.

The challenge of heading a city full of distinguished *talmidei chachomim*, the vastly expanded opportunities to teach, to influence, to guide, drew Rab Malkiel as to a lodestone. It was in Lomza that his fame as *poseik* grew. Rabbonim from all over the globe sent their questions to him; in the last six months of his life alone he answered several hundred *she'eilos*!

His infallible logic and penetrating insight soon became evident. The fresh clarity of his thought can be seen in his interpretation of the custom, followed in Lomza and common throughout Europe, of burying women who had died during childbirth in a special place set aside in the cemetery.

Many people felt that the source of the *minhag* lay in the verse: "Women die in childbirth for three sins: for not

exercising care in family purity, challah, and candlelighting," Reb Malkiel, though, dismissed the notion entirely, and explained thusly:

It states, in *Mesechta Shabbos*, that Rabbi Yosi prayed for a share with those who died while performing a *mitzva*, for to do so is to die *al kiddush Hashem*, for the sanctification of G-d. Further, in *Babba Basra*, we are told that no one can stand in the *mechitza* of martyrs.

To give birth to a child, to bring the next generation into this world, is surely one of the greatest of *mitzvos*. In those days, when obstetrical care was almost unknown and childbirth fraught with risk, a woman who chose to bear children was performing an incomparable *mitzva*. And if she died in the process, was she not, then, to be considered as one who died *al kiddush Hashem*? If so, no others could be with her, and she was placed in an exclusive portion of the cemetery, buried next to others who'd performed the same valiant deed.

As for the dictum that attributes death in childbirth to violation of three sins, that refers to death at the precise moment of childbirth. The women in Lomza succumbed minutes—or perhaps days—afterwards, not at the time of birth. They were to be revered as *kedoshim*—martyrs.

### THE RAV'S DECISIONS:

**I**n 1904, during the Russo-Japanese War, thousands of Jews were drafted into the Tsar's army and shipped to the Far East. Since the Russian army's casualty reports were sketchy, incomplete, and unrelia-

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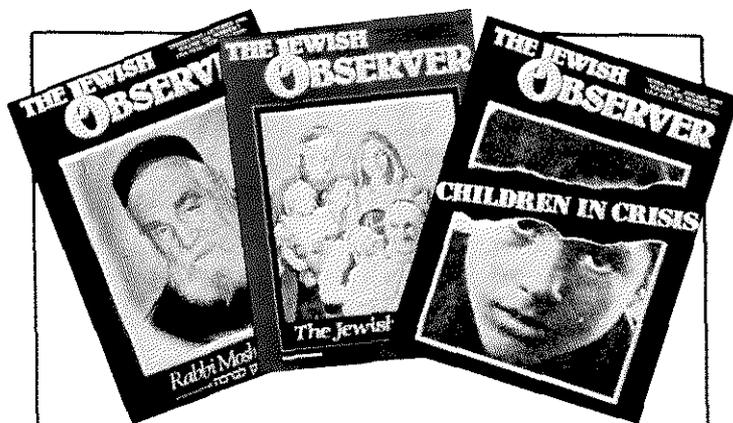
ble, large numbers of women faced the grim prospect of living out their lives as *agunos*. To avert this catastrophe, Reb Malkiel set up a text for a *get* that every married soldier gave to an agent, to be delivered to his wife in the event that he had not returned by a certain time. If, by some miracle, the man would return after the *get* had been accepted, he could always remarry his former wife. Because a *kohein* was not permitted to marry a divorcee, even if she had been his own wife, Reb Malkiel also drafted a conditional *get* especially designed for *kohanim*. In a short time, Rabbonim from all over Russia were using his text.

During the Second World War, when many Jews in Palestine volunteered for the British Army to fight the Nazis, it was Reb Malkiel's text that was used by all married soldiers as protection for their wives.

Interestingly enough, Reb Malkiel, the Litvak, spent many hours studying *Kabbala*, and he would sometimes cite the *Zohar* in his *p'sak halacha*. *Zohar*, he felt, could be used for *p'sak*, except in those instances when it actually contradicted the *Gemora*.

His interest in *Kabbala* had unexpected repercussions in Lomza. For years, the town's *maskillim* had tried, in vain, to receive the permits necessary to open a school of their own. The School Superintendent, however, refused to grant permission unless the town's Rabbi approved the scheme; *Haskallah* being anathema to Reb Malkiel, approval was routinely withheld.

After a few years, though, the *maskillim* received their coveted permit from the Russian official. Everyone in town was certain that the *goy* had accepted a bribe, but the truth soon came out. It seems that one of the canny *maskillim* had shown the Superintendent one of the *Rav's* Kabbalistic writings, translated into Russian. For one uninitiated into *Kabbala*, the Hebrew and Aramaic



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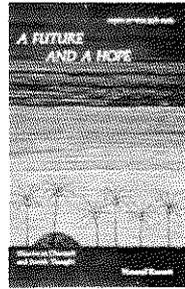
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text can sound obscure and strange; in Russian it was practically incomprehensible! The School Superintendent ruled that one who wrote such "*chapookha*" (non-sense) should not be arbiter on a school's permits!

### FAREWELL JOURNEY

In 1910 a conference of *Rabbonim* was convened in Petersburg. Among those attending were Rav Chaim Soloveichik of Brisk, Rav Dovid Friedman of Karlin, Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, Rav Yitzchok Zelig Morgenstern, the Rebbe of Sokolov, and Rav Malkiel of Lomza.

As they rode the train homeward, the Rebbe of Sokolov was horrified to see his seatmate, Reb Malkiel of Lomza, lurch forward and fall into his arms. There on the train, on the 5th day of Nissan 5671 (1910) the Rav of Lomza was *niftar*. He was only 63 years old.

When the train pulled into the nearest station of Rezice, the *kehilla* there expressed their desire to bury the Rav in their town. But the townspeople of Lomza protested vehemently: Let the Rav be brought to his home of 23 years!

The train arrived in the station of Czerwony-Bor, 14 kilometers from Lomza, in the evening. The road was lined with Jews reciting *Tehillim* and weeping. They bore their beloved Rav upon their shoulders that dark long night, and finally brought him to his place in the *Beis Medrash*, the place where he had learned so much Torah, *paskened* so many *she'eilos*, *davened* such fervent prayers. The weeping crowd eulogized their leader and asked his forgiveness.

The memory of Reb Malkiel illuminated the city of Lomza like a beacon for many years after his *petira*, and those who had known him never forgot the image of their beloved Rav. ■

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