

**Tribute To 'A Man of Faith with an Innocent Spirit` Rav Azriel Levin zt'l**

**by Menucha Levin**



**Rav Azriel Levin zt'l**

Before Rav Azriel Levin passed away in a Toronto hospital for five long weeks he had hovered between life and death, between this world and the next, gradually slipping away from his beloved family. After a difficult struggle, his neshama left this world after Tu B'Shvat, the new year of the trees, the symbolic beginning of spring. To those who attended his funeral, shivering in the winter wind, spring seemed very far away.

Rav Azriel was born in a small shtetl in Lithuania around the year 1908, though he was never sure of the exact date of his birth. About three years later, his sister Sonia (Sora) joined the family. Like the other little boys in the shtetl, Azriel started cheder at the age of three. When he was older he was accepted at the original Ponevezh Yeshiva, founded by Rav Yitzchak Yaakov Rabinovich. The yeshiva had to relocate several times during World War I. After the Russian revolution, Rav Rabinovich returned to Ponevezh but passed away in 1919.

Then Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, a brilliant Talmud scholar, reopened the Ponevezh yeshiva the same year, whose main focus was learning Talmud. The daily schedule was challenging. The students rose before 6 a.m. and, with short breaks only for davening and meals, learned throughout the day until well into the night. Their dedication was astounding. Even when the Red Army entered Ponevezh and seized the yeshiva buildings, the students relocated from one shul to another without ceasing their learning.

Rav Azriel, honored to receive smicha from Rav Kahaneman, remembered him fondly with the greatest respect throughout his life. Rav Kahaneman was on a mission abroad when the Second World War broke out. In 1940 he settled in Eretz Israel, attempting to rescue the Jews of Lithuania from the Nazis. Unfortunately, all his brave efforts were in vain. Within three days after the entry of Nazi troops into Ponevezh in June 1941, all the students were tragically murdered. After most of his family was killed in the Shoah, Rav Kahaneman devoted himself to rebuilding a network of Torah institutions in Israel. In 1944, Rav Kahaneman valiantly established a new yeshiva in Bnei Brak, also named the Ponevezh Yeshiva, to honor those who died in the Holocaust. Beginning with only seven students, today it is one of the foremost yeshivas in Israel.

Rav Azriel, like his beloved rosh yeshiva, managed to escape from Nazi-controlled Europe before the gates closed in 1939. Rav Azriel's own escape was nothing short of miraculous. Just a few short months before the war broke out, he managed to get a precious visa which enabled him to travel across Germany by train from Lithuania to Holland. This visa, which he kept for the rest of his life, had been stamped with the Nazi symbol of an eagle and a swastika.

During the long train ride, he incongruously struck up a conversation with a German SS officer, discussing a wide variety of topics, including politics. Afterwards the Nazi thanked him for a most interesting discussion, claiming there were few such intellectuals in Germany!

Only then did Rav Azriel realize what a close call he'd had. When the train reached Holland, all the passengers disembarked, kissing the ground in gratitude for their escape from such fearful danger. Rav Azriel then traveled by ship all the way to South Africa. When he arrived, the war had just broken out and he had no further contact with his parents. For the rest of his life, he would grieve silently for them.

Still, his faith remained unshaken. Not knowing a word of English at first, he soon picked up the language without taking any formal lessons. With a talent for languages, he could already speak seven of them. English became his eighth language, and his vocabulary grew to be quite fluent. After the war ended, he married Hoda Leah Firer, and they had two daughters. He was a caring, devoted father, though understandably overprotective. Although they were aware of the Holocaust even as young children, he seldom mentioned anything about his life in Lithuania.

After the war, he tried hard to find out what happened to his parents he'd. He checked the list of names at the RIS (Relatives Information Service) and was thrilled to find his mother's name Menucha Levin listed as a survivor living in Israel. But after checking further, he was bitterly disappointed to find out it was another woman with the same name, Menucha Levin, and not his mother. His only photograph of his parents, which he had enlarged and framed, was always kept in the living room. He carefully noted their yahrzeits for years in a perpetual calendar.

Rav Azriel and his sister Sonia in Canada kept in touch by writing letters to each other. In 1961, when the political situation in South Africa appeared to grow more dangerous, his sister was fearful of another holocaust. She invited her only brother and his family to join her in Canada.

This was yet another upheaval in Rav Azriel's life to which he adapted. After a few months at his sister's home in western Canada, he obtained a position as a rabbi and Hebrew teacher in a small Jewish community in northern Ontario. The family adjusted from the warmth of South Africa to the bitterly cold climate where it snowed every month of the year except July and August. Rav Azriel was well-liked by the people of this small community in the Canadian wilderness. He succeeded in teaching two challenging boys for their bar mitzvahs; one who was developmentally delayed and the other tone-deaf. Their parents were incredibly grateful to Rav Azriel for his dedication to their sons' success. However, living five hundred miles away from the closest Jewish community was not easy. Rav Azriel and his wife had to bake their own challahs, cakes and cookies every week. Once a month they went to the train station to 'meet

their meat' as they jestingly called it, receiving their shipment of kosher meat and chicken sent all the way from Toronto. After eighteen months there, the family decided to relocate closer to a city where Rav Azriel again managed to find a rabbinical and Hebrew school teacher position. After several other moves to far-flung communities, his grown daughters wished to live in the large Jewish city of Toronto. Even when he grew older and frail, Rav Azriel never missed davening with a minyan and found time to learn. With a great love for Eretz Yisrael, his dream was to settle there one day with his family. Although that dream, sadly, was never fulfilled, he would feel gratified that both his daughters are living there now, together with several of his grandchildren, and eight of his great-grandchildren are Hebrew-speaking sabras.

Attending his funeral that cold winter day were not only his devoted family and loyal friends but also several young people from the small communities who still remembered him fondly. Engraved on his gravestone are these appropriate words: 'A man of faith with an innocent spirit.'

It was his steadfast faith which enabled Rav Azriel to survive the many challenges he had to face in his lifetime. May the neshama of Rav Azriel ben Menachem Mendel HaLevi have an aliyah and his integrity remain as a shining example to his descendants.

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### **A word about Menucha;**

Menucha Chana Levin has connections with three continents. Born in Cape Town (Africa), she grew up in Canada (North America) and now lives in Israel (Asia).

An English teacher for many years, she is now a full-time writer and the author of seven novels.

Her first novel "The Youngest Bride" (by Israel Bookshop Publications) is based on her own family history, set in a Lithuanian shtetl in the 1840's.