

Upon His Yahrtzeit

Rav Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk

By Dovid Sussman



It was the winter of 1922, and the city of Dvinsk (Daugavpils) was in a panic. A large stretch of the Dvina River, which ran adjacent to the city, was still frozen, and the thick ice was blocking the flow of the river, causing it to flood the surrounding areas. Dvinsk was protected by a dam erected to contain the river, but the water was steadily rising and threatened to rise above the dam. The sense of imminent danger was palpable; if the powerful currents overflowed their confines, the entire city might face destruction. The populace of the city was at a loss as to how to contend with the threat, and even the non-Jews appealed to the *rov* of the Jewish community, Rav Meir Simcha Hakohen, to take action of some kind, in the hope that he could somehow save them from devastation.

As the river continued rising higher, Rav Meir Simcha made his way to the riverbank and began *davening* for salvation. No sooner had he spoken than the sheet of ice suddenly splintered, allowing the water to continue flowing downstream. The danger of flooding had been averted at the last possible moment.

Rav Meir Simcha humbly tried to deny responsibility for saving the city from destruction, claiming that the ice had happened to thaw at the exact moment that he had begun *davening*. However, it was clear that he had played a decisive role in the events. When a human being spends his life immersed in learning Torah, he is capable of rising to unfathomable spiritual heights, to the point that he has the capacity to perform miracles within the physical world itself.

After this miraculous incident, Rav Meir Simcha was lauded by the Jews of Dvinsk and the town's non-Jewish populace. As the *rov* of

the *Litvish* community, who shared his position of leadership with the Rogatchover Gaon, Rav Yosef Rosen, who was *rov* of the *chasidishe kehilla*, Rav Meir Simcha commented wryly, "It seems that while my fellow *rov* has *chassidim* who are Jewish, I have even acquired some non-Jewish *chassidim*."

The Childhood of a Prodigy

Rav Meir Simcha Hakohen, the legendary author of the *Meshech Chochmah* on the Torah and *Ohr Someiach* on the *Rambam*, was one of the most renowned *gedolei Torah* of his day. Born in the town of Baltrimintz, Lithuania, in the year 5603/1843, he was the son of a prodigious *talmid chochom* by the name of Rav Shimshon Klonymus Kalman. It is reported that Rav Meir Simcha's birth came about due to the *brocha* of a *tzaddik*. According to one version of the story, this was the great Rav Meir of Tiktin, who benefited from Rav Shimshon's hospitality and gave his host a *brocha* to be blessed with a son who would bring light to *Klal Yisroel* with his Torah. According to another version of the events, this *brocha* was given to Rav Meir Simcha's mother, who provided for the *rov* of their town after he was harassed by some local residents who interfered with his livelihood. But regardless of the particular reason, the *brocha* was the impetus for Rav Meir Simcha's name, which alluded to the light and joy that his parents were assured he would bring to the Jewish people.

Rav Meir Simcha became known as a prodigy at a very young age. By the age of seven, he had mastered the entire *Tanach*, and by the age of nine, he was fully conversant in the entire

Seder Nezikin and half of *Seder Noshim*. When he was thirteen years old, a prestigious *talmid chochom* visited his hometown while collecting approbations for his writings. The young Rav Meir Simcha happened to come across the handwritten manuscript in the *bais medrash* and began a thorough perusal of the visitor's writings. When the *rov* returned, he was surprised to discover that the young man had jotted down numerous comments in the margins of the manuscript. At first, he was irate, believing that the youth had defaced his writings. However, when he began to read the comments, he realized that they were brilliant and incisive. "I see that I will have to rewrite my *sefer* from the beginning," he confessed.

Unflagging Focus

At the age of 17, Rav Meir Simcha was sent to the town of Eishishok, where he learned under the tutelage of the great *talmid chochom*, Rav Moshe Danishevsky. After his marriage, he settled in his wife's hometown of Bialystok, where he spent virtually every waking moment immersed in learning for many years while his *rebbetzin* worked with great devotion to support them.

Rav Meir Simcha's *hasmodah* was the stuff of legend; he was capable of becoming so completely immersed in learning that he would become utterly oblivious to his surroundings. This was a characteristic that he displayed even during his childhood; according to a story that was often retold in the community of Baltrimintz, when Rav Meir Simcha was ten years old, the *gabbai* of the local *shul* arrived one morning and found him standing on a ladder, leaning

against a bookcase full of *seforim* and avidly perusing a *sefer* that lay open in his hands. The young Rav Meir Simcha had climbed that ladder the night before at the end of *Maariv* to learn from the *sefer* while he waited for the *minyan* to end; evidently, he had become so engrossed in the *sefer* that he hadn't noticed the passage of time. When the *gabbai* interrupted his focus the following morning and told him to come down from the ladder, Rav Meir Simcha looked up in surprise. "Have they already said *Borchu* at the end of *Maariv*?" he asked.

His incredible *hasmodah* did not ebb in the slightest over the following years. During his years in Bialystok, Rav Meir Simcha could often be found pacing back and forth in the *bais medrash* while poring over a *Gemara*, engrossed in learning to the exclusion of all else. It was reported that he spent 18 hours every day immersed in learning, and that he learned throughout the night every *Shabbos*. On one frigid winter night, Rav Meir Simcha was found walking through the streets of Bialystok without a coat, his gaze firmly fixed on the *Gemara* that he held in his hands. Once again, his focus had been so complete that he hadn't even noticed when he inadvertently strolled out of the *bais medrash*.

Later in his life, a visitor to his home once noticed that when Rav Meir Simcha went to answer the door while he was learning, he carried his *Gemara* with him, carefully keeping his finger on the precise word he had been about to read. When he was questioned about this behavior, Rav Meir Simcha replied, "The *posuk* in *Mishlei* states, 'If you blink your eyes at it, it will be gone.' Even a momentary distraction from Torah learning can cause it to be forgotten,

but it is prohibited to forget any part of the Torah.” This principle was the motivation behind his lifelong unflinching *hasmodah*.

The Move to Dvinsk

Rav Meir Simcha was appointed as *rov* of Dvinsk after the passing of his predecessor, Rav Reuven Halevi. It was highly unusual for a *yungerman* who had never held a rabbinic position to be tapped to lead the Jewish community in a large city, but his name was first mentioned in a *hesped* delivered for his predecessor by another prominent *rov*. The suggestion was quickly endorsed by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, the *Beis Halevi* of Brisk, and Rav Meir Simcha was soon presented with the appointment to the *rab-bonus* of Dvinsk.

Rav Meir Simcha led the community of Dvinsk for nearly forty years, turning down offers of rabbinic positions elsewhere in order to remain with his *kehillah*. In 1906, he was even offered the chance to become the *rov* of Yerushalayim, but he declined the opportunity when the community of Dvinsk implored him to remain with them. The community leaders wrote a sharply worded letter to the Jews of Yerushalayim, excoriating them for the attempt to deprive them of their cherished *rov*. Throughout his life, Rav Meir Simcha was known as one of the foremost *gedolei Torah* in the world and was revered by the leading figures in the Torah world.

Delayed Publication

Although Rav Meir Simcha published the *Ohr Someiach* before the *Meshech Chochmah*, the latter was actually the first *sefer* that he authored; this classic collection of *chiddushim* on the *parshah* was first written when he was a young man in his twenties, but its publication was shelved at the time on the urging of Rav Meir Simcha’s grandfather, Rav Chananya of Volkovisk. “If you begin with a *sefer* on the *parsha*,” his grandfather warned him, “you will have a reputation as a *darshan* or a *maggid*, and even if you publish your *chiddushim* on the *Rambam* afterward, it won’t help you recharacterize yourself.” Rav Meir Simcha accepted this advice and opted to delay publishing the *Meshech Chochmah*. Ultimately, the *sefer* was published only after his passing.

Rebuffing the Benefactor

Rav Meir Simcha lived by Shlomo Hamelech’s dictum that “he who despises gifts will live.” He resolutely received to accept gifts and even voiced his firm opposition to an increase in his own meager rabbinic salary. He would often comment that the most difficult day of the year for him was the day he left Dvinsk for his annual stay in a resort town known for its healing properties, since the leaders of the community provided him with extra funds for the expenses he would incur. He was highly averse to accepting money that wasn’t already owed to him by virtue of a contractual arrangement; however, due to his failing health, he had no choice but to accept their assistance.

Whenever he had the option to turn down a gift or handout of any kind, however, he would be sure to do so. A wealthy member of the Dvinsk community once offered to refurbish his home, replacing its old, shabby contents with new furniture in much better con-

dition. Rav Meir Simcha politely but firmly declined the offer. “There are many people in this city who are needier than I am,” he insisted.

During the turbulent period of the First World War, Rav Meir Simcha was often entrusted with relief funds by agents of the Joint, who relied on him to distribute the money to the needy members of his community. A representative of the Joint once visited Rav Meir Simcha in his home and was shocked to discover that the *rov* himself was leading the life of a pauper. The visitor insisted that Rav Meir Simcha take some of the funds for himself, but the *rov* vehemently refused. When the visitor refused to back down, Rav Meir Simcha agreed to allow the Joint to deposit a sum of money in the bank under his name—where it remained untouched until the end of his life.

There was another occasion when Rav Meir Simcha felt that he had no alternative but to accept a gift, but in that case, as well, he managed the outsmart his would-be benefactor. A wealthy resident of Dvinsk once insisted on giving Rav Meir Simcha the hefty sum of 45 rubles in gold coins, and due to the man’s status in the community, Rav Meir Simcha knew that he would be unable to refuse the gift. Nevertheless, he put the money aside and refrained from using it throughout the ensuing years, even in times of immense financial hardship. After his death, it was revealed that he had specified in his will that the coins should be returned either to the original owner or to his heirs.

On a related note, Rav Meir Simcha was once walking through the streets of Dvinsk with a visitor when they passed a large, palatial house. “Whose home is that?” the other man asked, indicating the impressive-looking edifice.

“It belongs to an expert attorney who is at the top of his field,” Rav Meir Simcha replied.

“But the *rov* is likewise an outstanding Torah scholar at the top of his own field; why don’t you have such a luxurious home?” the visitor asked flippantly.

Rav Meir Simcha looked at him and replied, “The lawyer earns his money from *Klal Yisroel*’s troubles, while my livelihood comes from the Jews’ good fortune. As you know, the Jews’ troubles today far outweigh their good fortune....”

This was but one of many occasions on which Rav Meir Simcha demonstrated his capacity for quick and scintillating response. On a couple of other occasions, he used humor to gently rebuke people who pursued positions of public leadership for the sake of their own honor. On one occasion, a *gabbai* who was not reelected to his position began bitterly protesting his rejection by the community, to the point of fomenting discord with the people who had dismissed him. When this man visited Rav Meir Simcha during the latter’s illness, he observed that the *rov* appeared to be in great pain.

“Yes,” Rav Meir Simcha said. “In fact, it’s even worse than not being a *gabbai*!”

Another such individual, who had set his sights on a position of communal leadership for his own self-aggrandizement, was in the habit of warning the community that he would suffer a heart attack if he were not reelected. After hearing the man make that assertion, Rav Meir Simcha gently made light of it by chiding him, “You should at least say ‘*bli neder*’!”

A man once came to Rav Meir Simcha in a panic and informed the *rov* that he had dreamed that he would die three days later. Rav Meir Simcha responded, “In that case, you should actually be calm. After all, the rest of us have no guarantee that we will live even for one more day, yet you have an assurance that you will remain alive for three days!”

Faith Under Fire

Rav Meir Simcha’s dedication to his community, coupled with his powerful *emunah*, played a critical role in preserving the Jewish community of Dvinsk during the turmoil of the First World War. As the danger grew more acute, many of the more affluent Jews fled from Dvinsk, leaving behind the poorer members of the community, who could not afford to leave their homes. Although Rav Meir Simcha could have left Dvinsk, he refused to abandon his community in their time of need. “Even if there were only nine Jews remaining here,” he declared, “I would remain with them to complete the *minyán*!”

Rav Meir Simcha also strove to boost the morale of the remaining members of the community, urging them to maintain their *emunah* in the face of their frightful circumstances. “Every bullet or bombshell has an address dictated from Above,” he repeatedly reminded them. “No harm can come to any person if Hashem does not wish it.” In fact, when a shell penetrated his home and lodged itself in the wall of the room where he learned, Rav Meir Simcha refused to allow the police to remove it. “If Hashem wanted it to harm me, it would have exploded,” he insisted. This concrete demonstration of faith instilled a powerful sense of calm and security in the remaining Jews of Dvinsk, and his efforts enabled the community to maintain its cohesion throughout those challenging times.

An Answer from the Ground

Rav Meir Simcha was once asked to adjudicate a *din Torah* in which two people laid claim to the same parcel of real estate. He attempted to broker a compromise between them, but both litigants remained inflexible, refusing to renege on even one iota of their claims. Finally, Rav Meir Simcha announced, “I would like to see the piece of land in question.”

The men dutifully led him to the disputed land, and Rav Meir Simcha tapped on the ground with his walking stick. “Listen to this,” he said to the sparring litigants. “Each of you is claiming that this land is yours, but the land has a claim of its own: ‘Both of these men are *mine*.’ One day, you will both be buried in the ground, and your petty financial disputes will be meaningless.”

Duly chastened, the two men agreed to settle on a compromise.

A Blessing in Disguise

Rav Meir Simcha’s prodigious immersion in Torah learning seemed to have endowed him with abilities that transcended those of an ordinary human being. People would often come to him for *brachos* for all sorts of reasons, whether they were seeking to be blessed with children, *parnossah*, or any of a wide variety of other things, and his *brachos* always seemed to be effective. Rav Meir Sim-

cha would modestly maintain that he had no influence over the fortunes or well-being of others, and that he accommodated the requests for *brachos* simply because it brought joy to those who sought his blessings. But in spite of his protestations, people regularly lined up outside his door to receive *brachos* or advice. In fact, the Rogatchover Gaon, his counterpart in the *chassidish* community of Dvinsk, would often advise people who came to him seeking *brachos* to “go to the *kohein*”—in other words, to bring their requests to Rav Meir Simcha.

Rav Meir Simcha also appeared to have been endowed with an uncanny degree of prescience. When he advised businessmen on how to conduct their affairs, his guidance always proved to be exactly on target. Those who heeded his suggestions invariably prospered, while those who ignored his advice later regretted their choices.

One day, a man from Dvinsk came to bid farewell to Rav Meir Simcha before leaving town on a business trip. To his surprise, the *rov* struck up a conversation with him and began chatting about various matters, seemingly oblivious to the fact that his visitor was in a hurry. The man tried to hint that he was about to miss his train, but Rav Meir Simcha blithely continued their conversation, making it impossible for his visitor to leave. When the *rov* finally indicated that their visit was over, the man hurried to the train station but discovered that the train had indeed departed without him. At first, he was distraught over this seeming misfortune—until he learned that the train had suffered a crash and many of its passengers were killed. The *rov*’s apparent indifference to his schedule, he realized, had saved his life; the delay that Rav Meir Simcha had deliberately engineered had been a blessing in disguise.

“I Will Join You This Year”

In the summer of 5686/1926, Rav Meir Simcha’s *rebbetzin* passed away. At her burial, he whispered into her grave, “I will join you later this year.” He was hospitalized in the city of Riga shortly thereafter.

On the third day of *Elul* 5686/1926, Rav Elchonon Wasserman visited Rav Meir Simcha in his hospital room and offered to send urgent telegrams to the various *yeshivos* of Europe and to ask the *talmidim* to storm the heavens with *tefillos* for Rav Meir Simcha’s recovery. However, the ailing *rov* rejected the idea with a dismissive wave of his hand. “The *Zohar* states that a person should not seek to be singled out for special attention, since it might cause his *aveiros* to receive special focus in *Shomayim*,” he said. “Let me be included in the *tefillos* for the community as a whole.”

On the following night, the fourth of *Elul*, Rav Meir Simcha returned his pure soul to its Creator. His *petirah* took place on a Friday night, and his *aron* was brought back to Dvinsk on Sunday morning for a massive *levayah*. Rav Meir Simcha had been predeceased by his only daughter and his son-in-law, leaving him with no living descendants. His passing was mourned by all of *Klal Yisroel*.

Yehi zichro boruch.