

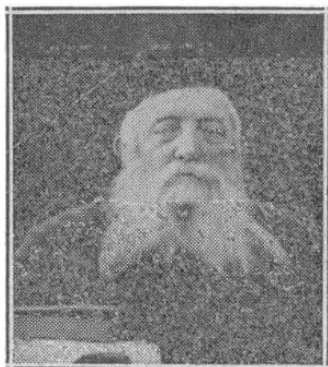
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The Rabbi and Prodigy Reb Nachum^{*} Asz ztz''l

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Częstochowa, which with its large and kaleidoscopic Jewish populace, constituted a “city and a mother in Israel” and was favoured with many things, of which other great Jewish cities in Poland could not boast. Thus, it had the privilege that, within its boundaries, was founded the first cantorial seminary. The foundation for the first world cantors’ association was also laid in Częstochowa. Both of them came about through the activity of the great man of letters and musical artist Reb Abram Ber Birenbaum z''l, who lived and studied in the city for twenty years, as cantor of the New Synagogue.

Częstochowa was also one of the first provincial Polish cities in which, very early in the 20th century, a Jewish daily newspaper was established. It was also one of the few cities where a Jewish *gymnazjum* [secondary school] was created as early as in 1917. But, of all Jewish Częstochowa’s merits, surely the greatest was to have, as the city’s Chief Rabbi, the great [Torah] prodigy and sage, the rabbi Reb Nachum son of Reb Dawid Cwi [Hersz] Asz z''l, who occupied the rabbinical office there for nearly half a century (from 1889 to 1936).



Rabbi Reb Nachum Asz was steeped in lineage. His father Reb Dawid Cwi was a great scholar and a respected merchant in Grodzisk [Warsaw region] and a fervent *Kotzker chassid*, to boot. He was a brother-in-law of the contemporary, famous man of wealth, Reb Berl Goldfarb who, despite the fact that at his disposal stood barrels filled with golden ducats (this was the legend about him), still did not wish to take any pleasure in his riches and went about poorly dressed and, literally, lived on bread and water, giving all his money away to charity. The great prodigy and righteous man, Reb Majer Jechiel HaLevi [Halsztok], who later became known as the Rabbi and *Rebbe*^{**} of Ostrowiec was also raised in this household. The Rebbe of Ostrowiec was renowned

throughout Poland for his week-long [dry] fasts, from *Shabbes* to *Shabbes*. On his mother’s side, he was a descendant of the prodigy Reb Juda Leib Landau [and his son Rabbi Yechezkel Landau,] author of *Noda Biyhudah* [Known in Judah], and [also] a descendant of [Rabbi Nathan Nata Spira, author of] *Megale Amukos* [Discoverer of the Depths].

The rabbi Reb Nachum, already in his tender youth, gained fame as a young prodigy. For several years, he studied at the *yeshivah* of the famous prodigy, Reb Awigdor Leibisz Lewental, the Rabbi of Koło. When he was not yet even fifteen-years-old, he became the son-in-law of the renowned prodigy Rabbi Szymson Arensztajn, the Rabbi of Kalisz [and] author of *Tiferes Shimshon* [Glory of Samson], who also ordained Reb Nachum as a rabbi.

He was soon invited to serve as rabbi in Sieniawa^{*} but, not long afterwards, the Jewish *Kehilla* of Częstochowa invited him to assume the rabbinical position there, which had been vacated at the

^{*} [TN: *Nuchim* in the original records, as the name is pronounced in Polish Yiddish.]

^{**} [TN: A rabbi is one ordained to serve as an halachic authority, whereas a Rebbe is the leader of a Chassidic group – the Rebbe of Ostrowiec served both as the town’s rabbi and a Chassidic master.]

^{*} [TN: In *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. I, col. 645, the name of the town is given as *Nieszawa*.]

time. This was in the year 5649 (1889) and, from then on, he was the pride of Jewish Częstochowa, until the day of his death.

The rabbi Reb Nachum was a great prodigy in [Torah] study and many rabbis turned to him with responsa, to hear his opinion on certain Halachic [matters]. It is characteristic that, when he was still very young, he had already compiled annotations and commentaries on Maimonides, which were printed at the back of the four tomes of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* [Repetition of the T]. This was, naturally, a great honour for a man as young as he was at the time (in his early twenties). These annotations were later published in a separate book entitled *Tziyunei Moharan* [Notes of Our Teacher Rabbi Nachum].

But the rabbi Reb Nachum was not one of those rabbis who stayed secluded within the confines of their personal scholarly space and do not wish to know of anything else. On the contrary, he took a great interest in secular education and had an ear for the demands of the new era. He, therefore, did not hamper his children in their efforts to study and learn. Nevertheless, he was staunchly orthodox and, whilst not being a fanatic, he still demanded at every opportunity that the Jewish religion be observed in adherence to the *Shulchan Aruch* [(A) Set Table; the Jewish religious legal code], to its last word.

I had the privilege to be a regular visitor to Rabbi Asz's house, when I was invited by the Częstochowa publisher, B. Bocian, to be the editor of his newspaper, the *Częstochower Tageblatt* [The Cz. Daily].

This was in the summer of 1915, during the First World War. The Germans were then already in Łódź, which they had entered after 6th December 1914. In Łódź, at the time, the Jewish newspaper *Lodzer Tageblatt* was being published, which had appeared there since 1909 under editorship of the skilled journalist Szaja Uger. But the Germans were not pleased with his editing and I, therefore, took over the editorship of *Lodzer Tageblatt* immediately after *Pesach* 1915. At the beginning, the Germans were milder towards me, but they later began quibbling every day about something else. Ultimately, at the end of June, they completely halted the [publication of the] periodical *Lodzer Tageblatt*.

Obviously, I was left without work. Warsaw was then still in the hands of the Russians and, between Warsaw and Łódź, it was a battlefield. At the time, a new periodical appeared in Łódź - *Dos Lodzer Volksblatt* [The L. People's Paper] - under the editorship of Lazar Kahan and in which he sought my cooperation. But this newspaper was being published by the German authorities and it was frightening to work for it, because, should the Russians return, it would be considered that we had collaborated with the Germans.

At that time, B. Bocian, the Częstochowa printer and publisher of the local paper there, the *Częstochower Tageblatt*, came to Łódź to find an editor for his paper, which had also been stopped. I was pointed out to him. We negotiated and ultimately reached an understanding that I should take over the editorship of his periodical.

Shortly afterwards, I travelled to Częstochowa. It was the end of summer. We had agreed that the paper was to start being published again on 5th September 1915. This was the 26th of Elul, four days before *Rosh Hashanah*. In this spirit, a prospectus was released for the readers.

As soon as I arrived in Częstochowa, I was approached by the Rabbi's young son, Mendel Asz, who had already worked a little on the newspaper, and told me that the Rabbi requested that I come to him. I replied that I was highly pleased with the invitation and that I, myself, also desired to meet the

Rabbi but that, before *Rosh Hashanah*, this would be impossible, as I needed to produce the newspaper all by myself - four pages daily - and single-handedly writing not only the lead articles and the news, but also the other material. In honour of *Rosh Hashanah*, six pages were to be released, which I would again be forced to fill by myself, as there were no other writers (there were several local literary forces, but their items either needed to be re-written or [heavily] edited). The young Asz strongly desired that I dine with them on the holiday, but this I did not wish [to do, so] it was settled that I would come to them a couple of days later.

When I came to the Rabbi's house, it was truly a great delight for me to behold the radiant countenance of the great rabbi. He was about fifty years old at the time. His beard was then already white mixed with black but, from his sagacious eyes, a deep wisdom shone forth. At first, he thought that I was just a [secular] writer, who knew little of the small letters [of Torah] but, once he discovered that this was not the case, he already spoke with me in a more familiar manner and we soon became very close.

Presently, the Rabbi told me that he was staunchly devoted to the Zionist ideal of, once more, building a home for the Jews in the Land of Israel and, while doing so, he retrieved from the sideboard a National Fund box filled with money and said with a sigh:

What to do with those Jews who do not understand this? What to do with the Gerer Chassidim, who have complaints against me, saying that I side with the Zionists and the heretics? I have already shown them that the greatest [Torah] prodigies of the latest times have consistently championed the return to Zion, such as, for example, Reb Zwi Hirsch Kalischer. the rabbi Reb Shmuel Mohilever, the Rabbi of Kalisz, Reb Jechaskiel Lipszyc and many others. But they know only one thing - "The Rebbe is against it!". What can one say to them?

But despite everything, the rabbi Reb Nachum Asz still became, bit by bit, more absorbed with the idea of the return to Zion and devoted much time and effort to collecting money for *Keren Kayemeth* (National Fund). He did this at every religious celebratory banquet to which he was invited. Later, when the idea of *Keren HaYesod* [UIA; United Israel Appeal] arose, he threw himself into this new work with even more energy.

This was certainly not to the liking of the *Agudas* [*Yisroel* (Union of Israel; an ultra-Orthodox political party)] people who, in Częstochowa, were organised in the *Machzikei Ha'Das* [Upholders of the Religion] organisation. They, therefore, fought against him at every opportunity, from which the cherished Rabbi suffered more than a little. But, on every such occasion, he would say:

It is of no consequence! The Land of Israel is worthy enough to suffer a bit for! We Jews suffer all our lives for the Land of Israel, as we say in [our] prayers, "And, due to our transgressions, we have been exiled from our land". For our sins, we have forfeited our land and, now, we must experience much pain and suffering – until we recover our land!

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Even though the *Aguda* people and the zealots had complaints about the great rabbi for his Zionist ideas, they were still forced to recognise that he was a prodigy in [Torah] study, plus another thing - he had done much in Częstochowa to strengthen the study of the Torah and to educate the youth in the spirit of Judaism.

Immediately upon arriving in Cześćochowa as rabbi of this large Jewish community, the rabbi Reb Nachum Asz called a meeting of the most respected Jewish burghers in order to speak with them regarding the creation of an entire series of institutions, which he put before them.

The first which he proposed to create was a sort of *yeshivah ktana*^{*}, where Jewish youth would receive an education in Hebrew Scripture and also gain some knowledge of the Talmud but, simultaneously, he wished to create a school for poor Jewish children, where they would be given a warm meal every day, in addition to their studies.

The rabbi Reb Nachum z"l, twice yearly, at the [Main] Synagogue, released the official sermons a [Chief] Rabbi is required to preach, namely - on *Shabbes Ha'Godol* [The Great Saturday; the *Shabbes* preceding Passover], on the matters pertaining to *Pesach* and, on *Shabbes Shuva* [Sat. of Return; the *Shabbes* between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*], to awaken the congregation to repentance. But in addition to the official sermons, he was a prodigious orator and he spoke very often and at length about the Land of Israel, about education for the youth and in general regarding the fact that every person and every Jew must possess good traits of character and know how to interact [well] with others.



The rabbi Reb Nachum Asz was of that type of rabbi, such as Reb Yitzchok Elchonon Spektor of Kowno [Kaunas], who made it their rule to permit [something], wherever it was only possible, much quicker than to prohibit [it], and especially if it also entailed large monetary damage or if, for instance, the *Shabbes* would be ruined^{**} due to the prohibition.

In Cześćochowa, it was therefore known that, if one came to the Rabbi with a question on Friday after midday, he would exert himself to rule that it was kosher - in a question regarding a needle [found] in a chicken's gizzard, for example. In such circumstances, he used to say that the sanctity of *Shabbes* is so great that, due to that, he allowed himself to grant permission even in cases which, in the middle of the week, would not have been [rendered] kosher. But the *Aguda* people and the *Gerer Chassidim*, in particular, raised objections against him and said of him that he was far too lenient, meaning that he made kosher that which should be considered not kosher and, even if he did this for *Shabbes*, it was improper nevertheless.

An incident took place [involving] one of these *Aguda* people, a *Gerer Chassid*. One Friday afternoon, the chicken [in his house] was found to have a rusty needle in its gizzard. This *Agudanik* was very scholarly himself, yet he told his daughter to go to the Rabbi and ask [him] the question. The Rabbi looked at the gizzard and said to the girl, "Kosher". The daughter went home and told this to her father. The *Agudanik*, burning with anger at the Rabbi, declared that the chicken was un-kosher and ordered that it be thrown out, even if there would be no food for *Shabbes*. His household did so at once and they, indeed, went hungry the whole *Shabbes*.

After the close of *Shabbes*, the *Agudanik* went over to the Rabbi and brought before him an argument against his ruling, and proved to him that, according to [religious] law, he should have said, "*Treifah*"^{*}. The rabbi, however, answered him composedly,

^{*} [TN: A "little yeshivah" is the religious equivalent of a secular middle school, in which the boys after bar-mitzvah (13) study until the age of 15 or 16.]

^{**} [TN: The most common contingency would be if an Halachic question arose regarding the kashrut of the food to be eaten on *Shabbes*, as shall be seen subsequently.]

^{*} [TN: Heb., lit. an animal which was "torn apart," instead of having been properly slaughtered. This term, and the Yiddish "treif" derived from it, is loosely used in reference to any food forbidden by Halacha.]

You are foolishly pietistic. If I ruled it was kosher, I took the transgression upon myself, for the sake of Shabbes. Were it not kosher, I would be punished for it in the other world [viz. afterlife], but you and your household could have eaten the bird and had pleasure on Shabbes and not, as you have done, have a disrupted Shabbes. Scripture says, "And call the Sabbath a delight" [Isaiah 58:13]. You are to have pleasure on Shabbes - what enjoyment did you have, then, if you fasted all day?

But the *Agudanik* still did not completely calm down. He travelled off to Ger [Góra Kalwaria] to the *Rebbe*, to tell him about the incident. The aging *Gerer Rebbe* listened to him serenely and then said to him:

Reb Nuchem is a great rabbi and you must rely on him. If he says "kosher", it is kosher. He knows the law just as well as your do. It is actually only a question of being willing to take it upon oneself, in order to render it permissible. If he is willing to do so, he only deserves to be thanked for it!



The rabbi Reb Nachum Asz had two daughters and four sons. The sons were Reb Szmul Josef, a renowned scholar, who later became the rabbi of a *shtetl* in the Piotrków *gubernia*; another son was called Mojsze Jechiel, then Mendel Asz, who later became known as a journalist and worked on the *Częstochower Tageblatt*, as well as in other newspapers and journals. The youngest son was Leon Asz, a barrister.

Leon Asz particularly distinguished himself in all the activities of communal life in Częstochowa. He took part in all communal undertakings and, especially, in the Ha'Maccabi sports association, of which he was Chairman. He instituted that, every Saturday afternoon, an *Oyneg Shabbes* [Delight of Sh.; a party with refreshments] be held, at which he would speak about sport and the importance of it for Jews. It is interesting [to note], that this same lawyer, Leon Asz, always read through the speech he had prepared for Saturday to his father, the great rabbi, and would make improvements according to what his father had told him. In this same manner, the rabbi, too, in the period during which in the Polish Sejm arose the debate regarding whether to forbid the Jewish ritual slaughter, wrote, with the assistance of his son Leon, a brochure in Polish, in which he proved that ritual slaughter is a humane act. This brochure was a great success throughout the whole of Poland.

The rabbi Reb Nachum Asz died suddenly, on the night of 12th May 1936. He was 72 years of age. In order to immortalise his name, the city later named the city's study-hall *Ohel Nuchem* [Tent of Nahum].