

Mojsze Chaim Tiberg

Cheders, Melamdim and Their Pupils

(from my memoirs)

I wish to return to my youth and pluck forth noteworthy descriptions and events and, this time, concerning the Cześćochowa *cheders*, *melamdim* and their pupils.

Reb Majer Krakower

I now call to mind the dawn of my childhood¹ and find myself running to Father's house, with my father convincing me to stay alone at the *cheder* with the "*Rebbe*"². The *Rebbe* was much bigger than me. He had long sidelocks and a long beard, and also wore spectacles. He sat in his chair and began explaining a large page filled with eye-opening letters - our alphabet - to me. I became rather familiar with him and his "pinches", with which he honoured me quite often. He reiterated this on a daily basis, and, during every lesson, I would "learn and jump, jump and learn". I didn't tell my parents about the pinching, because I was afraid of the *Rebbe*. But once, when my mother was bathing me, she found blue marks on my body and insisted that this *Rebbe* should no longer teach me. Although I was thenceforth personally spared the ordeal, this *Rebbe* continued using his system and found other pupils, who told their parents nothing of the events at the *cheder*.

Reb Leibel Landau



Reb Juda-Leib Szaul-Menachem Landau was born in Opoczno in 1861 and died in Cześćochowa on Iyyar 10, 5698 [11th May 1938].

The *Rebbe* Leibel Landau had his own "way of teaching". He would visit his pupils' homes and check whether his charges were already asleep. If he [i.e., the pupil] was found outside his bed, he would leave his penknife or compass with him and order him to bring it to the *cheder* on the following day, upon which he was either punished with strikes from the "rod", or forced to wear the "hat" and stand at the entrance of the classroom with a broom - which was considered a great disgrace.

In his class, I started learning the Pentateuch - beginning with "*Vayikru*" [and He Called; Leviticus 1:1–5:26] and, as usual, I did well in my studies. The *Rebbe* examined me on Pentateuch during a visit to our house, in my parents' presence, and I was able to recapitulate well all that I had learnt, thus gaining the approval of both my parents and my *Rebbe* as one.

Reb Leibel Landau managed his *cheder* for decades and was renowned as a good and excellent *melamed*. He was fully able to control the urchins who, at this age, were very spoiled. He saw to it that, after his *cheder*, all were able to pray from the "*Sidder*" [Jewish prayer-book] and read well from the [Hebrew] Pentateuch. It may well be stated that the majority of Cześćochowa's children learned at his *cheder* and, at the end of his days, he took pride in the fact that he had put forth a generation of Torah scholars and rabbis, as well as doctors, lawyers and engineers.

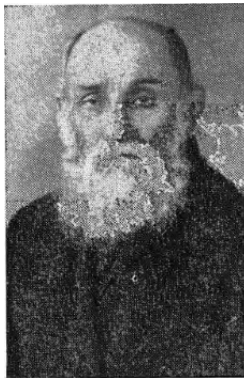
¹ [TN: In the ultra-orthodox world, children start their studies at the *cheder* at the age of 3, so the author was an infant during this period.]

² [TN: Although "Rabbi" and "Rebbe" are both transliterations of the Hebrew רבי, i.e. "My Master", the term "Rabbi" is used in reference to an ordained rabbi who functions as an official religious authority, whilst the term "Rebbe" applies both to a Chassidic leader and to one's first teachers in childhood at a *cheder*, regardless whether they were officially appointed rabbis or not.]

Over the course of time, he introduced changes in his *cheder*, by establishing “progressive rules”. The classes that learned in the *cheder* after the First World War could not believe that, in this *cheder*, there had once been different methods. Reb Leibel truly had the awareness to adapt his *cheder* to the spirit of the time. Nearing the end, it was relocated to the house of Kolchory on ul. Senatorska 7.

He was also a prominent public figure and was active in several religious and communal institutions. His activity was most noticeable as custodian of the old study-hall and of various charitable institutions, such as “*Hachnoses Kallah*”³ and “*Shomrei Shabbes*” [The Sabbath Keepers]. He was a very popular personage in the city. He died at the age of 73, on Iyyar 4⁴, 5698.

Reb Benjamin Wierzbicki (Litwak)



Reb Benjamin Wierzbicki
(Litwak) z"l

I was brought to Reb Benjamin Litwak’s *cheder*, [which was located] on the street of the butcher shops. He was renowned for his great severity, treating me in the same manner. He beat us almost every day. At this *cheder*, he taught me, in addition to Hebrew and Pentateuch, Russian, and I did quite well. But when he began also teaching me Polish, I was confused in recognising the letters and the *Rebbe* was cross with me.

I also began learning Yiddish with him. He had a special system for teaching written Yiddish. He filled the top line of a page in the notebook only with the letter “*Reish*” [ר; R], and we had to complete the whole page. In this manner, I filled various notebooks with only the letter “*Reish*”. He reasoned that, in [hand-written] Yiddish, many letters start with the shape ר and, if one learnt how to write “*Reish*” properly, he would be able to write correctly in Yiddish as well. And my handwriting indeed improved very much.

Reb Majer Zonszajn

Once, on a *Shabbes* in the winter of 5670 [1910], many *Chassidim*, whom they called “*Stryków Chassidim*”, came to our house after the [morning] prayer service for *Kiddush* [refreshments etc.]. Above them, towered a tall Jew, with some white in his beard and an open white shirt-collar, as is the Chassidic custom⁵. My father told me that he was Reb Majer *Piltzer* [i.e., from Pilica] and that he was to be my *Rebbe*. This striking Jew had opened a *cheder* in his house (as a rule, all the city’s *cheders* were in the homes of the *melamdim*) on ul. Garncarska and I, too, became one of his pupils. He would captivate us with Chassidic tales and treated us calmly and gently. The pupils, feeling his light hand, took full advantage of this. When the *Rebbe* went to the “*shtiebel*” for prayers and left us under his wife’s “supervision” who, during this time, would heat the cooker and prepare hot drinks for the pupils’ breakfast, we would make mischief.

Reb Jankel Triskolaser⁶ (Zombek)

(Nicknamed “Jankel the Tall”)

Studies at his *cheder* were systematic. We studied the tractate *Kiddushin* of the Talmud and, nearing the holidays, tractates pertaining to the holiday at hand, especially before Passover, when we studied the tractate *Pesachim*. He also taught us *pshetl* [Yid.; little artifice], which is a sort of

³ [TN: explained above, p.200.]

⁴ [TN: On the previous page his date of death is given as Iyyar 10.]

⁵ [TN: Those opposed to Chassidism invariably wear neckties, whilst most Chassidim consider this un-Jewish (still true in 2019).]

⁶ [TN: Native of Truskolaska.]

Talmudic casuistry [reasoning to solve moral problems], which we were required to learn by heart. We learned one page of Talmud a week and, on Thursday, each of us was called up to the *Rebbe*, who required us to recite it by heart without stumbling. The *Rebbe's* explanations during the lessons were good and clear, so that the majority of the pupils understood and knew them, barring a few with learning difficulties. Every single day, before we began studying the Talmud in the morning (the first lesson in the morning was always Talmud), the *Rebbe* would give some of us the task of recapitulating the segments we had learnt so far.

During the course of the week we also studied the weekly Torah portion, a large part of it with *Rashi*⁷ as well. On Fridays, we would read the whole section out loud, taking turns, with the cantillation [chants reading from the Torah]. We also studied the prophets - Samuel, Kings and certain parts of Jeremiah and Isaiah, and the *Rebbe* would sometimes examine us and make us tell the stories we learned in the Hebrew Bible from memory.

The secular-studies teacher was the young Mr Messer, who taught us Russian, German, Mathematics and also drawing. Once or twice a week - Polish as well. During the Polish lesson, one pupil would go outside to make sure a constable or the superintendent himself didn't pass by, because it was illegal to study Polish.

The *Rebbe* himself taught us Yiddish. He also taught us various [religious] laws and, before the holidays in particular, we studied the laws pertaining to the holiday; before the High Holidays, we also learnt the *piyutim* [liturgical poetry] and the definitions of their words. On Shabbes afternoons, we would gather at the *cheder* and, in the summer, the *Rebbe* taught us *The Ethics of the Fathers*, and, in the winter *Birchi Nafshi*⁸ ["Bless the Lord, O my soul", Psalm 104]. Afterwards, the *Rebbe* would tell us stories from books of Chassidism and morality, [then] we would pray *Mincha* and return to our homes.

This *Rebbe* had a brother, the *Rebbe* [i.e., *melamed*] from Sulmierzyce, who visited Częstochowa once or twice a year. Great preparations were made approaching his arrival, for he would test us on our studies and we properly made ready in advance. After the examination, he would discuss with us topics we had not learned.

No vacations were instituted at the *cheders*, barring the weekdays of the *Pesach* and *Sukkos* festivals. During those days, we were allowed to play different games which, all year round, we played without permission. The games were varied: hide-and-seek, tag, ball-games, ice-skating. We also played conkers, "classes" [?] and the like.

On Purim, we did not attend *cheder*. The "job" I then received at home also helped me a little with the *Rebbe*. It was my task to deliver the Purim baskets to those closest, and especially to the *Rebbe*. When I brought him the basket, he received me well. And this was worth more to me than anything else. For some time after Purim, we noted a certain radiance in the *Rebbe*, which we attributed to the Purim baskets.

Despite the fact that the First World War had begun, nothing changed at the *cheder*. The same arrangements and customs remained in place. The front was relatively far from the city. The transposition of armies, that was so common then in the region, did not affect us, because the Germans, who had entered the city the day after the onset of the War, did not leave it until the end of the War.

⁷ [TN: See above, p.278.]

⁸ [TN: This psalm is recited on Shabbes, as part of the afternoon prayer service.]

Reb Jankel *Triskolaser* had different ways of instilling fear into his pupils, especially into the mischievous among them, and the children indeed feared him very much. He had a very specific strategy for dealing with theft at the *cheder*, with which he would unmask the thief. This strategy was shrouded in mystery and he only used it in extreme cases. Meanwhile, we grew in years and in schooling and we had no longer room left for progress in this *cheder*.

Reb Herszel *Wolbromer* (Besserglik)

I was sent, on the day after Pesach, to Reb Herszel *Wolbromer's cheder* on ul. Mostowa. This *cheder* had two classrooms. The *Rebbe* himself taught in the first classroom and in the second, a gracious young married man, Reb Josel Frank. The pupils at this *cheder* were older and, therefore, the studies encompassed a wider scope. An atmosphere of study prevailed there and we saw ourselves becoming more serious.

At this *cheder*, we studied much more Talmud and it was the principal [discipline]. Every so often, I was sent on *Shabbes* to a Talmud "examination". I usually went to my uncle Reb Chaskel Fiszal, on ul. Nadrzeczna, or to his son-in-law, Reb Wowczy [Wolf] Petrykowski. After the "*verhören*" [oral exam], we would receive fruits and sweets in honour of the *Shabbes*. After *Shabbes*, when my father met with the examiner, he also heard, among other things, the clever answers I had given during the "test" to the questions which I had been asked.

We liked the *cheder's* second *Rebbe*, Reb Josel Frank, very much. He captivated us with his calm and gentle way of teaching. We found in him both a *Rebbe* and a friend. He particularly enthralled us with the study of Joshua and Judges, in the Hebrew Bible. For this lesson, he had a special sing-song which was so uplifting and mesmerising, that we perceived nothing else around us. We could sit like that all day long, listening to him without pause. We were learning the tractate *Chullin* at the time. We knew many pages from it by heart and we progressed well.

Our *cheder* was considered among the best in the city, at the same level as the *cheders* of Reb Fajwiesz Kurland and Reb Faywel Fajwlowicz and the like, and we were so proud of that. We enjoyed this *cheder* very much and also took away pleasant memories from it.

By then, we no longer did "childish things", for we were already "grown". On Fridays, we sometimes went to bathe in the Warta River, at the little shacks on ul. Krakowska. Occasionally, when we were a large group, we allowed ourselves to also bathe at the "Zawadzki field", outside the city. There, the water was good for bathing and, at this place, it was also free.

(I have written these lines in order to bring to memory a very small portion of the experiences from the *cheders* in our city, but all this was destroyed during the Holocaust. Woe is me! How we cherished those *melamdin*. With what awe and fondness we treated them when we met them after we had grown up. Where are they and their tender pupils? May these words serve as an everlasting monument to them, for us and for the generations to come!)