

The Rabbi and Prodigy Reb Nuchem Asz z"l



A tale is told of two Jews who once met on a train and each asked each other in what city they lived. When one answered, "I'm a Kowno [Kaunas] man!", the other inquired, "And why is your city named Kowno?" "Did you not know that the *Goen* [prodigy] Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spektor serves as Chief Rabbi there?", he replied, surprised. "And what has that to do with it?", the other continued, to which he retorted, "Is it not clear to you yet that if the Chief Rabbi is the "*Kovner Goen*", then that the city has to be named after him?"

We do not know how much truth there is behind these "questions and answers" but, what is clear and apparent to us all is that, in the years when things were as they should be, when two Jews met, be they Torah scholars, *Chassidim* or men of action - industrialists, merchants and even simple craftsmen - when they became acquainted with each other, as soon as the name of Cześćochowa was mentioned, you could immediately hear, "Yes, yes! I know it, your rabbi is Rabbi Nuchem Asz, long may he live!"

A great privilege was bestowed upon our city that an eminent rabbi served there for nearly fifty years. If our townspeople excelled in civility, charity and

goodwill, magnificent public institutions, and above all, Torah study and strengthening the religious tradition, this was, in great part, thanks to our revered Teacher's actions. Besides his genius and expertise in all Torah subjects, from the earliest sources to the very latest works, he was also a "*Sage* [which is considered] *greater than a prophet*" [Talmud Bavli, *Baba Batra*, 12a], who, in his great wisdom, knew how to influence all circles of society (and our city was blessed with various circles - great scholars and true *Chassidim*, Jewish *Maskilim* endowed with [both] Hebrew and general enlightenment, those with a European education and simple God-fearing folks). [He approached] each group according to its ways and understanding and his words were always heeded, whether to fulfil the precept of "obeying the words of Sages" or through admiration and affection for his personality and speech, which was always gentle, as was the custom of the Great Ones among the Jews in all generations.

The rabbi Reb Nuchem Asz was born in 5624 (164¹) in Grodzisk (Warsaw region) to his father Reb Dawid Zvi [Hersz] z"l, who was among the great scholars and a fervent *Kotzker chassid*, as well as the owner of large businesses. 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"].

Already in his youth, it was apparent that he was destined for greatness. He studied at the acclaimed *yeshivah* of the famous prodigy Reb Awigdor Leibisz Lewental, the Rabbi of Koło, where he gained fame as a young prodigy.

When he was still very young, the renowned prodigy Rabbi Szymson Arensztajn, author of "*Tiferes Shimshon*" ["The Glory of Samson"], took him as a husband for his daughter and, after he had studied at his study-hall for several years, ordained him as a rabbi - "*to instruct and to judge according to the laws of the Torah*"².

Still a very young man, he was chosen as Rabbi and Head of Court in Nieszawa, a position he held for only a few years because, already in 5649 [1889], when he was only 25 years old, he became Rabbi of Częstochowa.

The Częstochowa community was well aware that, in the future, its young rabbi would bring glory to his congregation and would acquire a prominent place for it among the most important communities in Poland. And this is no wonder, for who else had the privilege, being so very young, to have his annotations on Maimonides' entire "*Mishneh Torah*" ["Repetition of the Torah"; an encyclopaedic work in 14 volumes] published as an addition to these books, under the name "*Tziyunei Moharan*" ["Notes of Our Teacher Rabbi Nuchem"]?

Rabbi Asz did not just stay secluded within the confines of his personal scholarly space, for his heart was awake and his mind pondered on the demands and necessities of life, and he was able to find a way to understand and adapt, without hurting, and without forgoing even the smallest Halachic requirement.

Our Teacher z"l was always the first to act personally and urge others to action in all public affairs and, thanks to his great influence over all the townsfolk in general and the wealthy and the philanthropists in particular, we were privileged with the establishment of important public institutions in Częstochowa, which were famous throughout Poland and even abroad.

Rabbi Asz did not limit himself to only Częstochowa affairs. He was also actively involved in general public matters, as one of the greatest rabbis and Jewish public figures in Poland, and his words were heard and accepted by all participants in general Jewish conferences in Poland and [in meetings] of the country's rabbis.

When antisemitic factions in the Polish *Sejm* suddenly became "concerned" for the "suffering" of animals due to "cruel" Jewish ritual slaughter and there was a danger that Jewish ritual slaughter would be made completely illegal, Our Teacher z"l composed a booklet, in Polish, in which he proved that Jewish ritual slaughter did not bring the animals any additional suffering and should not be banned, and his words - which were widely published - had a great influence on all those who did not intend to torment the Jews.

¹ [TN: In the JRI Poland database, he appears as having been born on Jan. 15, 1858, in Wyszogrod (also near Warsaw).]

² [TN: This is presumably a quote from the rabbinical certificate with which he was presented.]

Rabbi Asz was among the first rabbis in Poland to join "*Ha'Mizrachi*" and was very active in this religious-nationalist organisation.

With great influence, he also aided fundraisers for "*Keren Ha'Yesod*" and "*Keren Kayemeth*" and always participated in their announcements, arousing those assembled with his words to give generously for the redemption and building of the Land [of Israel].

Our Teacher's prolific activity, during his time as Chief Rabbi of Częstochowa, constituted a long chain of good deeds, which our townspeople fully appreciated.

Our city's leaders proved their great affection for their eminent rabbi and teacher, when they decided at their meeting, which took place on 25th Adar 5694 [12th March 1934], that the new study-hall which was to be built, to mark one-hundred years since the first study-hall was founded in Częstochowa, would be named "*Ohel Nuchem*" after Rabbi Asz, as a sign of the esteem and admiration in which he was held by all the city's Jews.

On 21st Iyyar 5696 (13th May 1936), at the memorial ceremony of the first anniversary of the death of the Marshal Józef Pilsudski, Our Teacher delivered his last public address. That same night, he suffered a heart-attack, which brought an end to his glorious and very active life.

The Częstochowa community was orphaned and, with it, the rabbi's family - his son Reb Szmul Józef, who was among the greatest scholars and public figures in Ozorków; his son Reb Mojsze [Chil], who was also a great Torah scholar, and who published words of Torah and wisdom every week in "*Częstochower Zeitung*"; his son Mendel [Menachem Ber], who was a talented journalist; his son Dawid [Hersz], and his youngest son, the lawyer Aryje Leon [Leib] Asz, who was a public activist and a staunch Zionist. The rabbi also had four daughters - Dora, Tonya [Taube], Blima [Estera] and Fela [Fajge].

All his sons and daughters were annihilated, except for his granddaughter (Dora's daughter), who was saved and lives in Israel, married to Dr Lunski.

The pain and bereavement for our dear Teacher's sudden death were great, although he was elderly and had lived a long life of good deeds, and almost all the residents of our city and the vicinity paid him their last respects and the most prominent rabbis eulogised him fittingly.

(Just two-and-a-quarter years passed after the death of Our Teacher and all the solid institutions that had been established by his initiative and with his aid were shattered to pieces by the enemy, may his name be obliterated, and the magnificent Częstochowa community was annihilated. But the Częstochowa survivors, who mourn its destruction, will respectfully remember and remind others of their last Teacher and Rabbi - the prodigy, Rabbi Nuchem Asz z''l).