

Did chassidic Rebbes really prevent their flocks from coming to Eretz Yisrael, as many assume? Was their love for the Holy Land diluted by the nascent Zionist movement? Dr. Yitzchak Alfasi, world-renowned expert on Chassidus and its history, disclaims this notion in his latest book, and shows how Zion and Yerushalayim pumped like blood through their veins despite the politics. Many Rebbes encouraged their chassidim to make aliyah. The unwillingness came from the Zionists themselves

WHO STOPPED CHASSIDIC ALIYAH?

by Aharon Granevich-Granot

Dr. Yitzchak Alfasi clutches the manuscript of his new, yet still unpublished book, and reads the following sentence: "Their nationalistic spirits did not wane, even when they suffered extreme duress. Today their heartstrings still reverberate each time Zion and Yerushalayim are mentioned."

"Who do you think wrote that?" he asks.

Most likely it was taken either from an early twentieth-century Zionist journal or

from a modern settlers' magazine. But look again. It was actually excerpted from an article which appeared before WWII in the publication *Kol Machzikei Hadass* of Belz. "Every word in that journal was approved by the Belzer Rebbe, Rav Aharon Rokeach," Dr. Alfasi confirms. "Contrary to the reports that the Belzer Rebbe prevented his chassidim from settling in Eretz Yisrael, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the settlement of the land. Although he staunchly opposed Zionism, he ardently supported settling Eretz HaKodesh."

The Admor of Belz wasn't the only chassidic leader to embrace such ideas. In 1936, the third Knessiah Gedolah of Agudas Yisrael convened in Marienbad, and was attended by all the *gedolei Yisrael* of that time. During that period, Agudas Yisrael had been asked to formulate its position on a number of questions pertaining to Eretz Yisrael.

In Palestine, the Peel Commission of Inquiry had just completed its findings, concluding that Eretz Yisrael be partitioned into an Arab state on one side, and a Jewish state on the other. The commission,

headed by British lord William Wellesley Peel, was charged with proposing changes to the Mandate in the wake of the 1936 Arab revolt.

The *gedolim* who attended the Knessiah Gedolah rejected the Peel Commission's proposal with aversion and issued the following statement: "The Jewish People is eternally and deeply linked to our sacred land. Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah declares that the borders of Eretz HaKodesh were designated by the One Who apportioned the lands in His sacred Torah, and they are everlasting. It is im-

possible, therefore, for the Jewish nation to forgo the borders in any way whatsoever. All capitulations on this issue are valueless. The eyes of all Jews are directed toward Eretz HaKodesh, the land to which we all turn in prayer, with the hope that a new light will dawn on Zion and that Hashem will rule the entire earth."

This decision was enthusiastically accepted by the Knessiah's participants, who then appealed to Agudas Yisrael's members to make aliyah to Eretz Yisrael and to assist its chareidi settlement.

This statement unequivocally disproves the claims of the Zionist leaders that the chassidic Rebbes of Eastern Europe prohibited their followers from settling in Eretz Yisrael and thus caused the Holocaust. Instead, it underscores the ardent love of these Rebbes for Eretz HaKodesh, and their firm commitment to settling it.

In Defense of Satmar An all-encompassing study, which researcher and chassidic expert Dr. Yitzchak Alfasi completed after many years, demonstrates that the

Dr. Yitzchak Alfasi: the Zionists perpetrated a libel



Eretz Yisrael must not be divided: Knessiah Gedolah in Marienbad

This statement unequivocally disproves the claims of the Zionist leaders that the chassidic Rebbes of Eastern Europe prohibited their followers from settling in Eretz Yisrael and thus caused the Holocaust

chassidic leaders did not denounce aliyah, but actually encouraged it. Many of the Rebbes themselves wanted to make aliyah, but couldn't.

Herzl appeared on the scene in the prime of the chassidic dynasties' efforts to settle the land," Dr. Alfasi relates. "At first, certain *rabbanim* thought that the sole purpose of his movement was to facilitate aliyah, and supported him. However, they quickly learned the truth when, at the first Zionist Congress, Zionism was labeled a Redemption movement, replacing Mashiach. Thus, the moment they announced that in addition to spurring aliyah, they would also engage in educational issues, the firm opposition of *gedolei Yisrael*, including chassidic leaders, to Zionism was aroused and the movement's dangers exposed.

Many wonder why the chareidim didn't make aliyah en masse. Dr. Alfasi explains: "The Zionists were responsible for distributing aliyah permits, and did not issue visas to the chareidim, knowing that the chassidic Rebbes opposed them and would not cooperate with any attempts to change the character of the Jewish people. In order to justify their deeds, they falsely claimed that the Zionists did not prevent

the chareidim from making aliyah, but that the Rebbes opposed it. Despite these obstacles, many chassidim still settled in Eretz Yisrael."

Only two Rebbes opposed the idea of aliyah: the Rebbes of Lubavitch and Satmar. However, while the Satmar Rebbe withdrew his ban, the Chabad Rebbes did not, even though a generation beforehand hundreds of chassidim had settled in Tzfas, and later on in Hebron where they left their indelible mark. One of those was Rebbetzin Menuchah Rochel Slonim, daughter of Rebbe Dov Ber, the "Mitteler (middle)" Rebbe. She arrived in Hebron with a large group of chassidim.

"Follow Me" Dr. Alfasi's life centers around Chassidus. The eighty-year-old veteran researcher is familiar with the names of any Rebbe and chassidic sect; even the mention of a relatively unknown chassidic group invigorates him, and he displays astonishing knowledge of the names of remote villages of Eastern Europe where certain chassidic leaders lived



Some tried acquiring plots of land in ancient Shechem

or were active. His large workroom is overflowing with books.

"Let me boast a bit," he says with a smile. "Do you see those shelves in my library? I wrote all the books they contain." Afterward, he points to another collection and says, "I also participated in the writing of these books."

An additional pile are books in which his name is mentioned. In a number of weeks, he will publish his ninetieth book, in which he discusses chassidic affinity to Eretz Yisrael, dispelling the false charges made by the leaders of the Zionist movement that the Rebbes prevented their chassidim from making aliyah, and in that manner caused the Holocaust.

"This is, of course, untrue, because the Rebbes, including Reb Aharon of Belz, encouraged their chassidim to make aliyah," he repeats and proves.

There is no doubt that the greatest champion of aliyah was the Imrei Emes of Gur, who not only encouraged it but played an active role in settling the land. Even if the Zionists wished, they couldn't deny his enormous contribution to the settlement. He sent his chassidim to Eretz Yisrael and personally visited six times. "On his sixth visit," relates Dr. Alfasi, "he planned to remain in Eretz Yisrael permanently, already having an apartment in Yerushalayim, and celebrating only one day of Yom Tov." However, in the end, circumstances forced him to return to Poland. He was on the Nazis' most-wanted list, but managed to escape to Palestine with several of his sons in 1940, remaining in Jerusalem until his passing during the siege of the city in 1948.

Upon his return from his first visit to Eretz Yisrael, the Imrei Emes dispatched a letter to his sons and sons-in-law stating his outlook on settling in Eretz Yisrael. This letter, which is referred to in Gerrer

circles as *Iggeres al Hasefinah*, the Letter on the Ship, constitutes a keystone in the attitude of Gerrer chassidism toward Eretz Yisrael. In it he writes: "I am very pleased to see that one can settle in Eretz Yisrael and still observe Torah according to the teachings of our fathers and their predecessors. I am also happy that one can earn a decent living here. However, even those who can't or don't wish to settle in Eretz Yisrael should assist its Jewish residents and enable them to purchase lands. I personally helped the group I came here with to establish a stock company, and purchase a plot of land in Jaffa for the construction of buildings and stores, and hope that others will follow suit. You surely know that at the convention of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah in Vienna, the *gedolim* decided that Agudas Yisrael would engage in the practical aspects of settling the land, without considering the political ones. I truly believe that the mitzvah of settling Eretz Yisrael is not dependent on a point in time, but rather on feasibility. Therefore we must utilize the current opportunity to achieve this aim. An increase in chareidi settlers in Eretz Yisrael will boost their influence there and result in the preservation of the land's *kedushah*."

The Imrei Emes even sent Polish chassidim to build Bnei Brak. They also built Kommemiyus, and following his passing, founded the agricultural settlement of Bnei Re'eim, named after him (Avraham Mordechai).

By then the Imrei Emes's son, the Lev Simchah, was living in Eretz Yisrael where he spearheaded the development of Gerrer chassidism. He soon became a bona fide citizen, and later on returned to Poland only in order to save his ailing father and his family. By then, the center of Gerrer chassidism had completely transferred from Poland to Eretz Yisrael. In time, Yeshivas Sfas Emes, the mother of chassidic yeshivos in Eretz Yisrael, was founded, alongside other Gerrer institutions.

When the Imrei Emes arrived in Eretz Yisrael, he was greeted by an orderly network of institutions, which had been founded under his guidelines by the thousands of chassidim who already lived there. This is why, despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of chassidim had been massacred in the Holocaust, Gerrer Chassidus still thrived and was able to absorb many refugees from other chassidic dynasties that had been wiped out.

Working With the Zionists? In Adar of 1935, a delegation on behalf of the *rabbanim* and chassidic leaders of Poland visited Eretz Yisrael. It was headed by Rabbi



Rav Aharon of Belz: Heartstrings reverberate for Eretz Yisrael



The house of Rav Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk in Tiveria

They pray at Rav Menachem Mendel's grave, and then conduct a chassidic tisch. Apparently, this group consists of people who are disappointed with religious Zionism and their heroes

Yaakov Meir Biderman, the son-in-law of the Sfas Emes, and future Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivas Sfas Emes. Its other members were: Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, the Rav of Slotsk; Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, the Rav of Ponovezh; Rav Shmuel Dovid Ungar of Nitra; Rav Yitzchok Meir HaKohein Levine, son-in-law of the Imrei Emes; and Rav Alexander Zusha Friedman, author of *Ma'ayanah shel Torah*.

They toured the country for a number of weeks, during which they ascertained the needs of its chareidi residents and bolstered their spirits. In the meantime, a very sharp debate raged between Rav Shalom Ber, the Admor of Lubavitch, and the Imrei Emes regarding the latter's encouragement and promotion of aliyah.

The Imrei Shaul, the Admor of Modzitz, joined the Imrei Emes in the efforts to settle Eretz Yisrael, as did Rav Chaim Shmuel of Chenchin, whose conduct demonstrated his love for the Land.

He drank only wine from Eretz Yisrael, and used only its olive oil, as well as its *esrogim* and wheat. He set his watch according to Eretz Yisrael's time, and on Shabbos spoke only in *lashon hakodesh*.

During that period, Reb Yaakov M'eizov, the son of Rav Avraham of Tchechenov, was also active in strengthening the settlement and tried to acquire plots of land in Shechem. At that time, such a purchase was feasible, but no one listened to him. He even founded the Poras Yosef Corporation for that purpose and appealed to his fellow Jews to assist him in his efforts, hoping thereby to bring 1,000 more Jews to Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Yisrael of Piltz also sought to bring 1,000 Jews to Eretz Yisrael, and wrote the book *Shalom Yerushalayim*, which deals with settling the land. In it he said: "When *Shamayim* seems to hint that it favors aliyah, we must strengthen our fellow Jews on this point. All beginnings must originate with us." The Sfas Emes sent the Admor of Piltz an enthusiastic letter of support. However he didn't believe that the Admor would be able to recruit 1,000 Jews for that purpose.

Actually, *rabbanim* and chassidic Rebbes had always favored the settlement of the land, without any connection to Zionism. When Herzl appeared on the scene, with his plan to reinstate the Jews in

the land, he encountered no opposition, because no one was aware of his mind-set. At first, some actually considered cooperating with him. A certain rabbi even wrote: "During this period, longings to settle the land are surging in common Jews. Without a doubt these longings are sparks of the light of the Redemption."

However, this neutral or even favorable attitude toward Herzl was drastically overhauled after the first Zionist Congress, when the true intentions of Zionism became clear to the *gedolei hador*. In the wake of this Congress, the *gedolim* realized that Zionism wasn't merely a technical means to bring Jews to Eretz Yisrael, but rather a proposed alternative to the Messianic idea. One of the decisions of the Congress which particularly aroused the anger of the *gedolei Yisrael* was its determination to interfere in the *chinuch* issues of Eretz Yisrael, or as Herzl called it, "the culture."

“*Gedolei Yisrael* couldn’t cooperate with such aims, and severed all ties with the Zionist movement. The most difficult battle of the chassidic Rebbes and the *rabbanim* was the one they waged against the Mizrahi party, which collaborated with the Zionists. It was so thorny because many people felt that since the Mizrahi members were mitzvah-observant, it was possible to join them in their efforts,” Dr. Alfasi relates.

In his studies, Dr. Alfasi cites one of the most pointed articles ever penned by *gedolei Yisrael* against the Zionists. It reads: “We will ignore that foolish and mad man, and not let the Zionist movement destroy and revolutionize religion. Those who believe in Hashem and His faith are far more concerned about Eretz Yisrael’s welfare than the nationalists, and are eager to kiss Eretz Yisrael’s soil



Dr. Yitzhak Alfasi

“**Satan knows that if half a million Jews made aliyah, we would be redeemed” – Rav Yisrael of Chortkov**

and assist in its building. If you merit to plant even one tree in Eretz Yisrael, you are fortunate. But if you seek to engage in *chinuch* and culture, we cannot cooperate with you.”

The “foolish and mad man” to whom they were referring was Nosson Birnbaum, who had formulated the Zionist’s “Culture Decision.” In time, Nosson Birnbaum did *teshuvah*, and became a top Agudah activist.

The Procession from Mohilov The Hungarian *gedolim* were particularly staunch in their anti-Zionist activity. Shortly after the Congress, they publicized a manifesto calling on “*chareidim l’dvar Hashem*” to found an independent association to handle the issue of settling Eretz Yisrael and, in its logo, to disclaim its connection to the Zionist and Mizrahi movements.

Rav Yisrael of Chortkov also published a lengthy article praising aliyah. In it, he writes: “If Jews settled in the land, they would accelerate the *Geulah*. Satan knows that if half a million Jews made aliyah, we would be redeemed. Therefore he has brought many opponents of religion to Eretz Yisrael who, with their culture plans and rebellions against religion, will cause the chareidim to retreat and not to settle there. Chazal foresaw this with their *ruach hakodesh*.”

At the initiative of the first Rebbe of Bohosh, Jews settled in Eretz Yisrael and founded the Rosh Pinah settlement. “Actually, chassidim and chassidic

Rebbes were attracted to Eretz Yisrael due to the presence of the Baal Shem Tov and his disciple,” Dr. Alfasi explains. “Chassidus has always regarded settling Eretz Yisrael as one of its primary principles. The Baal Shem Tov himself tried to make aliyah, but was deterred by Heavenly decree.”

Various reports state that Rabbi Nachman of Breslov had also arrived in Eretz Yisrael, but for unclear reasons was forced to leave. Even the students of the Vilna Gaon who settled in Tiveria under the leadership of the Gaon’s disciple, Rav Yisrael of Shklov, encountered the chassidic community there, and were forced to accept its authority. This, though, caused them to split from the community and move to Yerushalayim.

In Yerushalayim, the Gaon’s students had to disguise themselves as Sephardic Jews and to wear the *djoba*, national Sephardic costume. This was because the Turks did not allow Ashkenazic Jews to enter Yerushalayim, due to the debts incurred by Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid. In time the Gaon’s students gave up this dress, while Hungarian chassidim such as the Reb Areh’lach adopted it.

Many disciples of the Baal Shem Tov settled in Eretz Yisrael. One of them was Rav Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, author of *Pri Ha’Aretz*. He was a close confidant of Chabad’s founder, Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, and one of the heads of the Jewish settlement in Tiveria.

Rav Menachem Mendel’s *yahrtzeit* took place on Rosh Chodesh Iyar. For the

past few years, members of a group who don large and thick knitted yarmulkes known as Givonite yarmulkes have visited his gravesite. They pray at Rav Menachem Mendel’s grave, and then conduct a chassidic *tisch*. Apparently, this group consists of people who are disappointed with religious Zionism and their heroes, and are searching for sincere and G-d-fearing Jews who built the land without any connection to the Zionist movement and its values. Many point to Rav Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk as such a personality and regard him as the father of the Jewish settlement in Tiveria, and the father of the chassidic settlement in Eretz Yisrael.

In 5537/1777, Rav Menachem Mendel led the largest group of pioneers to Eretz Yisrael since the time of Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid. Rav Menachem Mendel’s convoy, which consisted of 300 people, set sail to Constantinople from Mohilov in Adar, and passed through the Romanian city of Galatz in small boats. From there it headed to Acco, which it reached in the beginning of Elul of that same year. From there, its members traveled by donkey to Tzfas, which they reached a few days later.

In Tzfas, they were persecuted by the Turkish governor as well as by its age-old Jewish community, and were forced to move to Tiveria, where Rav Menachem Mendel settled. In recognition of Rav Menachem Mendel’s greatness, Rav Boruch of Mezhibuzh sent a special covering for the *aron kodesh* in Rav Menachem Mendel’s shul, as well as a letter praising him.

Other great chassidic leaders who came to Eretz Yisrael with their followers were: Rabbi Avraham Dov of Abritch, Rabbi Avraham Shimshon of Rashkov, Rabbi Yaakov Yokel of Mezhibuzh, Rabbi Chaim of Charnowitz, Rabbi Shimshon of Shipitovka, Rabbi Aryeh Leib of Walktshisk, and Rabbi Yaakov of Karlin.

Some travelers who had come on their own settled in Yerushalayim. But groups could not do that, because they feared that the Arabs would demand that they pay the debts incurred by the Ashkenazic settlers during the period of Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid. These groups settled in Tzfas, Tiveria, and even Hebron, with the help of Chabad chassidim who had come there from Tzfas.

What would have happened had the Zionists not denied visas to the tens of thousands of chassidim who sought to settle in Eretz Yisrael? Wouldn’t Eretz Yisrael be different today, if these chassidic Jews had been permitted to come? Wouldn’t history have changed? ■