

# Bytes & PC's

## Pioneering Spirits

By Yitzchok Adlerstein

A young *rav* was honored by the invitation to assume the mantle of spiritual leadership in another town. He was impressed to learn that such Torah luminaries as the Magen Avraham, the Taz and Rabbi Akiva Eiger were all interred there. He accepted the offer, but quickly discovered that none of those stellar figures had ever come near the town, and for good reason. The good people there turned ignorance into an art form, and scarcely anyone could identify whether a Gemara was right side up or upside down.

“How could you lie to me? None of those *gedolim* had anything to do with your city!” he demanded of the head of the *kehillah*.

“It was no lie at all. Our Sages tell us that when people speak words of Torah, the lips of their authors move in the grave, as if they were still alive. People all over Europe daily review the words of the Magen Avraham, the Taz and Rabbi Akiva Eiger, bringing these figures to life everywhere. Indeed, the only place in which these people are truly dead is our town!”

Like good whiskey, *lehavdil* only much more so, the oeuvre of thousands of Torah scholars is appreciated even more fully as time flows further from the original source. Tragically, though, on the American scene, there were

hundreds of lesser lights who gave their lives to make America hospitable to Torah. Much of their brilliant work is not only unappreciated, but completely unknown. Many of the pioneers in the American rabbinate were masters of Torah erudition, living lonely lives in communities that had no use for their genius. They often had little success in keeping their own children loyal to the faith that animated them. They put all their aspira-

were discarded altogether.

About four years ago, Chaim Rosenberg, a young speech therapist in Brooklyn, browsed through a collection of such books, bequeathed to his *shul* by an older *rav* who had passed on. He sensed the debt we owed to the dauntless dozens who tilted at windmills of skepticism and materialism – and won! He was touched by the pathos of their life stories. Almost entirely at his own expense, he



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*Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein occasionally emerges from his *coered wagon* to direct an educational outreach program for the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, and to serve on the editorial board of Jewish Action.*

tions into their writing, publishing modest volumes at their own expense, hoping that their *divrei Torah* would become their lasting monuments. Alas, most of these works gathered dust, often remaining as lonely and under-appreciated as those who wrote them. A generation or two later, many

launched a project to gather as many of these works as he could find, preserve them, and make them available to those who might first today appreciate them in a different light. Like the Jews of the Exodus lovingly carrying forth Joseph's remains, he would bring what these *rabbanim* left behind to a

better place. We might say, in the spirit of the anecdote above, that he breathed new life into the pioneers of the American rabbinate.

Sixty works are available in their entirety at [www.hebrewbooks.org](http://www.hebrewbooks.org), or are available on a free CD. (He asks for \$5 to cover costs of production and shipping.<sup>1</sup>) The times and places themselves excite the imagination: Centerville, Iowa, 1939; St. Louis, Missouri, 1895; Portland, Oregon, 1897; Omaha, Nebraska, 1936; Burlington, Vermont, 1930. Scrolling through the titles, we are inundated with images from the past. Here there is a responsum about the marital status of a woman whose husband was lost on the Titanic, there another on the *kashrut* of the mysteriously formulated Coca-Cola (by Rabbi Tobias Geffen of Atlanta, uncle of Hollywood's David Geffen).

Often, the autobiographical material, found in the introductions, is the most poignant reading. We learn about Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Masliansky and his negotiating for a new position in New York. The president of the *shul* mockingly pointed to a wall-painter working in the room. "What? You want to earn as much as a *shmirei*?" Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch responded that if rabbis in America were likened to *shmirei* then he would not be a rabbi! Thus, he remained "Reverend" Masliansky for the rest of his career as a popular orator, although he had been ordained by some impressive sources in Europe.

We later hear his lament about the practical disappearance of Purim from Jewish life, where "places of business are kept open and the synagogues are empty, except for the few elderly people newly arrived to this country." How different it was, he reminisces, back in Europe, where the spirit of Purim broke the pall of the oppressive poverty. "Merrily and gladly did they carry the plates covered with handkerchiefs so that their contents remained unknown. And those gifts were eloquent of the real spirit of Jewish charity... The Rabbi or the teacher would send to his patron an orange and a lemon worth five kopeks, and the lat-

ter would send five or ten rubles, and no one knew anything about it except the donor and the recipient. Oh, thou sacred spirit of secret charity, thou hast flown from us along with the merriness and the joy of Purim! Will they ever come back?"

Imagine the loneliness of a *talmid chacham* who loved learning enough to gather his novellae together in Cleveland in 1906, but to have to offer this bleak picture of the role of Torah study in his community:

*"Times have changed, and with them, the ways of the people. A new earth – and a new Heaven – are revealed before us. The conditions of life have done a complete about face. When we lived in Europe, occupied the entire day in trying to provide for ourselves and our families, we still set time aside for Torah study, and looked to it as the choicest time of day. Here we have abandoned it altogether, and forgotten it like the dead are removed from our hearts... We see that in our midst... there is not one person in a thousand who sets time aside to study Torah once a week, or even once a month."*

We sense the futility that valiant defenders of authentic Judaism felt, as they saw their congregations drained of vitality by those who offered a religious practice with far fewer demands, and far more allure. Listen to the plaint of Rabbi Simon Glazer (New York, 1926):

*"The rabbi hardly comes in touch with his communicants, save only with the few leaders. To the majority of the members he remains a stranger. His whole career depends upon his ability to preach. As Israel advances in years on this hemisphere, the gradual departure from the Old Country customs becomes more conspicuous every year. No longer is the rabbi the actual head, the real teacher, more conspicuous every year. No longer is the rabbi the actual head, the real teacher, more conspicuous every year. No longer is the rabbi the actual head, the real teacher, the spiritual father of this community. Every congregation is a community by more conspicuous every year. No longer is the rabbi the actual head, the*

*real teacher, the spiritual father of this community. Every congregation is a community by itself. The system of double membership, followed by the better to do element, oftentimes affords one member to have the choice of two rabbis, sometimes two rabbis of two different schools, and of course, the comparison between the two rabbis is based solely upon the sermons."*

Rosenberg's effort thus far shows the minor imperfections that are due to all the labor falling on one pair of shoulders. The material has not been entered as searchable text, but was scanned in. It is thus displayed as graphic snapshots, and a poor quality original will produce difficult to read output. The sixty titles are not organized according to year, or in any other logical manner. Rosenberg is well aware of these flaws, and has pledged to correct them where feasible, along with greatly expanding the number of works, and including biographical material in future updates.

Of sixty titles, the lion's share are entirely in Hebrew. Three volumes of English language *denashot* give eloquent voice to the claim (*Berachot*8A) that Torah is acquired through hardship. Those who can manage the Hebrew will find even greater insight into the foundational stages of modern American Judaism.

As Rosenberg's work receives more publicity, the descendants of these authors have sought him out. Uniformly pleased to see their forebears win the embrace of history, some of them have connected with traditional Judaism through studying these family jewels with Rosenberg. How wonderful to behold words of Torah, forced into silence for generations, emerging as potent forces in a land of Torah opportunity. Many of the valiant souls who created it could never have imagined how immense would be their eventual triumph. **JA**

Notes:

1. To get a copy, send \$5 to The Society for The Preservation of Hebrew Books, 836 Montgomery St. #9B, Brooklyn, NY 11213. (347) 203-1397