

Special Feature

Rabbi Binyamin Papermaster ז"ל

Forty-Three Years as a Rav in North Dakota Part II

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

Grand Forks Gets A Rav

An earlier article about Rabbi Binyamin (Benjamin) Papermaster (1860-1934) discussed how he was sent to North Dakota by the Kovno Rov, Rabbi Yitzchok Elchanan Spector, to serve as a Rov for the Jews of Fargo, North Dakota. However, upon his arrival, Rabbi Papermaster discovered that the Jewish community was so small that it could not support a rabbi. After hearing that there was a viable Jewish community in Grand Forks, about 75 miles north of Fargo, he went there about two weeks before Pesach in 1891, where he found about 60 Jewish families that were indeed in need of a Rov.

Most of the families in Grand Forks originally came from the Ukraine section of Russia. A few families had come from Romania and Galicia. Thus, most of the Jews in Fargo were of Chassidic background, whereas Rabbi Papermaster was a Litvak who had studied and received his *semicha* in Kovno. Rabbi Papermaster was not at all sure that the "cultural" differences between these Jews and himself could be amicably resolved. Nonetheless, it was decided that he would stay in Grand Forks for a trial period.

"As he arrived only a few days before the Passover, his entire time was taken up with last minute preparations for the holiday, providing kosher chicken and meat, providing *matzoh* and other Passover necessities; he also attended meetings of community leaders. Father was both tired and hungry by the time of the *Seder* service at the home of his host, the Greenberg family, with whom he had made his home and to which all had gathered.

"The services at an improvised synagogue in a downtown hall had been rather lengthy, as everyone had wanted to meet the new Rabbi and cantor. Upon arriving at the Greenbergs, Father quite naturally expected the host, Mr. Greenberg, to conduct the *Seder* service. Some time passed, and Father noticed that groups were whispering to one another, and finely losing patience, Father inquired of the host why he did not proceed with the *Seder* service. 'Well,' he replied, 'we are waiting for you, as the Rabbi, to conduct the service.' 'In that case,' Father replied, 'let us go to the table.'

"Pulling up an ordinary chair, he waited for everyone to be seated, and proceeded with the *Kiddush* and the orderly ceremonial of the *Seder* as recorded in the *Haggadah*, much to the delight of this host and all of the younger people present. Having been accustomed to *Chassidic* ceremonies, they anticipated

that the Rabbi would expect to be provided with a special couch, white robe, hose, *streimel* and so forth.

"Before the *Seder* service was over, it had already spread by grapevine throughout the community just what had happened at the Greenberg home, about how the new Rabbi had conducted the *seder* services. The younger people were delighted, while the older and more Orthodox members either grumbled or openly denounced him for so wanton a disrespect for tradition. At services the following morning, an extra large congregation was in attendance and a buzz of excitement prevailed.

"Taking advantage of the situation and the attendance that morning, he decided to make his position clear and understandable in his sermon to the congregation. He repeated to them the promise that he had given Rabbi Isaac Elchanan to bring [the] Judaism that he had been taught at the Yeshiva to the community where he settled, and that he would never deviate from the laws as expounded by authorities in Biblical, Talmudic, and Rabbinic interpretations, but, in addition to laws, there were also customs in Jewish life.

"He promised to do his utmost to adjust himself to their ways and practices, as was consistent with his knowledge, training, and

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views; he would do his utmost to teach and preach the Jewish way of life, as he understood it, and to make available to all Jews who shall come under his jurisdiction and guidance the services that are necessary for them to lead that kind of life."

There was no organized Jewish community in Grand Forks before Rabbi Papermaster's arrival. However, at a meeting held during *Chol Hamoed* Pesach, it was decided to establish a synagogue with the name **Congregation of the Children of Israel**. Rabbi Papermaster was unanimously chosen as its Rov. Soon plans were made to build a shul on a site within the area where most of the Jews of the town lived. Interestingly enough, the land upon which the shul was built was donated by a non-Jew, a Mr. Budge, who also donated the land that became the Jewish cemetery.



Rabbi Binyomin Papermeister's family, circa 1912.
Top row L-R: Herman Bert, George, Nathan, Rav Binyomin, Isador, Sam.
Bottom row L-R: Henry, Roy (son of Nathan) Aaron, Monesh.

Family Matters

There was one very important matter that Rabbi Papermaster had to deal with before his situation in Grand Forks was completely settled. In our first article, we mentioned that the rabbi's wife, Ethel, had passed away about three months after he arrived in America, leaving four young sons, the oldest being eight and the youngest a bit over a year old. Rabbi Papermaster naturally wanted to bring his sons to Grand Forks, and he knew that his congregants expected their rabbi to be married.

Rabbi Papermaster wrote to his oldest brother, Shmuel, asking for his assistance in finding a suitable wife. Shmuel's father-in-law, Shlomo Zalman Levaton, had married off his three oldest daughters to *talmidei chachamim*. He wanted the same kind of match for his youngest daughter, Chaya. Therefore, when Shmuel proposed a match between his learned brother, Binyamin, and Chaya, Shlomo readily accepted this *shidduch*. Chaya realized that agreeing to marry Rabbi Papermaster meant she would have to leave Russia and travel to a new home in America, and that she would also be responsible for four young boys. Nonetheless, she agreed to abide by her father's wishes.

"Silently, full of questions, yet dauntless and without looking back, she would leave behind the hopes and dreams she might have had as a young girl [that she might] settle into adult life in Russia She would now go with her own newly created dreams and hopes for a good life in a new home in America..."

"The brother of the Rabbi's deceased wife brought the boys as far as New York. [Another] brother-in-law, Moses Lifshitz, who was coming to America, accompanied the bride-to-be, Chaya Levaton. They all met in New York and together continued on to Grand Forks. The marriage of the Rabbi and Chaya took place on the 15th day of Shevat (Tu biShevat, the festival of trees), 1892. He was thirty-two

years old, and Chaya was twenty-four. A home was built for the family just one-half block from the site of the new synagogue.

"Rebbetzin Papermaster was remembered as a very kind person and quiet in her ways, but she managed the household very well. [Most important,] she became the able new mother to the four young boys, who fondly called her 'Muma (auntie) Chaya,' as well as a mother to her own children. A year after [the wedding], the first baby came along, but it was a stillborn, and no name was given. Dr. Burns was her doctor, and he said to her, 'Mrs. Papermaster, you'll never have another child.'

"One can imagine the personal struggle Chaya had to endure with this in mind. Having just gone through the stress of leaving her family and support system to come to a new country, [and] marrying a man she hardly knew, she obviously had many hopes and aspirations [for] good things to come out of this experience How could she overcome this seemingly shattered beginning?"

"Contrary to the doctor's prediction, she [gave birth to] George one year later, in 1894. They did not have to have a *Pidyon Haben* (ceremony for the redemption of the first-born), since she had already [given birth to a] child. Two years after George came Monesh (Manis), who unfortunately may have had rheumatic fever as a baby and consequently was an ill child. Two years later, in 1898, Leah was born. Then came my grandmother Zelda, in 1900. Two boys came along after that—Henry in 1902 and Art (Aaron) in 1903. Finally, Hazel, the youngest, was born in 1906. [Thus] there were eleven [children] altogether ..."

Rebbetzin Papermaster devoted a large amount of her time caring for her sickly son Monesh, who passed away at age 19. Nonetheless, she was a real partner to her husband in all of his endeavors to maintain *Yiddishkeit* in North Dakota. For example, it was not uncommon for couples to be married by the

rabbi in the Papermaster home. It once happened that a couple unexpectedly came to be married on a Friday. Not only did she organize the wedding and put up the family for Shabbos, but she also prepared the food for the wedding meal.

"Frequently, the Rabbi would have to travel to many communities around the state, such as Jamestown, Valley City, and Devils Lake, and to other communities outside North Dakota, such as Sioux Falls and Winnipeg. These towns and cities all had Jewish merchants and would need the services of the Rabbi as the *schochet* (ritual slaughterer) or to perform weddings, *bris milot* (circumcisions), and funerals. She would prepare extensively for these trips, ensuring that he carried enough food and clothing.

"She also kept very discreet everything that happened in the household, [cautioning] the children never [to] divulge anything concerning the community that happened in their house or was discussed This was done [to] respect the Rabbi's probity and high reputation and [to observe] the *mitzvah* of avoiding *lashon harah* (literally, evil speech but usually meaning gossip)..."

Rabbi Papermaster had the greatest respect for his Rebbetzin.

"Many of the towns that the Rabbi visited [as part of his] ministerial duties invited him to stay and take a post with the community. He always consulted Chaya ... at these times. She ... had a reasonable and levelheaded perspective on the idea and would say: 'You know what you have here, but you don't know what will be. You have a family and you're already established here. Why not continue here?'"

In our next article, we will detail the efforts of Rabbi and Rebbetzin Papermaster to maintain *Yiddishkeit* in North Dakota.

Note: All quotes in the section Grand Forks Gets a Rav are from an article written by Isadore Papermaster, son of Rav Binyamin Papermaster. This document is available in pdf format from Hamodia or the author.

The information in the section Family Matters is taken from The Legacy of Rebbetzin Chaya Levaton Papermaster, by BJ Kremen Goldman, Jews in the Heartland Reflect on American Freedom, Upper Midwest Jewish History, The Journal of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, 4, Summer 2005, pages 34 - 47. All quotes are from this source.

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