

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 125)

The Malach

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Introduction

One of the most interesting rabbinical personalities to immigrate to America during the first half of the 20th century was Rav Chaim Avraham Dov Ber Levine Hakohen (1859/1860 - 1938), who was known as the Malach (Angel). He was born in the town of Ilya in Russia. His father, a Rov in Krisleva, was a follower of the *Mitteler* Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rabbi Dov Ber and subsequently of his son the *Tzemach Tzedek*. Although a follower of Chabad, Rabbi Levine was also close to a number of Litvishe gedolim, something most unusual at this time. The Malach was recognized as an outstanding Talmud Chocham, and at a young age obtained simcha from Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spector (1817 – 1896) at a young age. In addition to being famous for his Torah brilliance, he was also known for his ascetic tendencies.

“In Europe the Malach had been held in high esteem by Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneersohn (1860-1920), the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe. Rabbi Sholom Dovber had selected him to tutor his own son, Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (1880-1950), who was destined to succeed his father as the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe. The honor brought the Malach disappointment and frustration and led to his estrangement from the Rebbe.”

In 1923 when the Malach’s son, Reb Rifoel Zalman, immigrated to America the Malach came with him, and became the Rov of a small Lubavitcher congregation at Washington Avenue and 169th Street in the Bronx.

The Malach was indeed angel-like. He was a large man with a flowing white beard and piercing eyes. He measured his words, investing each one with an aura of significance.

Since he was an eminent sage known for his piety and learning, the Malach attracted a great deal of attention. Visitors came to hear him express his thoughts on the conduct required of a religious man; others came to seek his judgment in business disputes or his advice on pressing family matters.

The Malach was not in favor of studying secular subjects and, when he discovered that his son Rifael had acquired knowledge of biology, he nearly had a stroke. He became

white and trembled so violently his family feared for him. He made his son promise never to study biology again.

The Malach's Influence on Torah Vadaath Students

Included among the Malach's many admirers was Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, the rosh yeshivah of Yeshivah Torah Vadaath, which was then located in Williamsburg on Wilson Street. It was founded in 1914 by Orthodox Jews who wanted to match their religious beliefs to the demands of the new environment. Rabbi Mendlowitz had arrived in the United States in that same year. In 1921 at the age of thirty-four years he was appointed principal of Torah Vadaath. It was under his leadership that the yeshivah rose to its position of prominence. "An innovator and driving force in religious education, he started a *mesivta* (high school) to continue the education of students under his care, and in general helped to upgrade the level of yeshivah learning in the United States. While still a student in Europe, Rabbi Mendlowitz had become a follower of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the advocate of the Neo-Orthodox movement in Germany, who welcomed the integration of Western European middle-class culture into Orthodox Judaism. Rabbi Hirsch's philosophy was summed up in the phrase, Torah Im Derech Eretz [Torah with worldly learning]."

"While Orthodox religious principles were maintained at Torah Vadaath, the yeshivah was intended to enable the students to compete successfully in the professions and in the marketplace. The goal was to eliminate educational barriers to the acceptance of Orthodox Jews as full-fledged American citizens. In keeping with that goal, the Yeshivah Torah Vadaath offered classes not only in traditional religious subjects but also in secular subjects, and the students divided their time between religious and secular spheres.

"It was Rabbi Mendlowitz's practice to bring his students into contact with the religious leaders in the community. Each week he escorted a small number of students of the high school to visit the Malach. Although Rabbi Mendlowitz was not a Hasid, he was learned in Hasides (Hasidic philosophy), and he considered the two religious figures most influential in his life to be Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe.

"Rabbi Mendlowitz taught a class in *Tanya* himself, and he welcomed the opportunity to hear the Malach's commentary on the holy tracts for his own pleasure as well as for the education of the students. Primarily the visits provided the opportunity to introduce his students, all of whom had been born in the United States, to an example of the 'living Torah.'"

Almost everyone in Torah Vadaath went to the Malach, who was considered a spiritual mentor. However, "it had not occurred to Rabbi Mendlowitz that the Malach would become a living icon" to some Torah Vodaath students. As time went on, the Malach "began to exhort them concerning their personal beings, instructing them to allow their beards and peyes to grow longer, to give up wearing ties and other frivolous and gentile attire. He convinced them of the desirability of wearing distinct dress, such as black

kapotes [coats] and hats, and of forgetting about secular learning completely. They became absorbed with the requirements of *kashrut* (dietary laws); intense prayer and study were the primary concern of their existence. Their abrupt adherence to Hasidic ways was a revolutionary turn in belief and conduct.” He told the boys who were attracted to him that their beards would cleanse the atmosphere in the streets of New York and that their long coats and Yiddish conversations would create a holy new reality and would have reverberations for years to come.

“This radical change [in these students] left Rabbi Mendlowitz in dismay. The student followers of the Malach stood in direct opposition to his philosophy and to the standards of the yeshivah. He worried about their possible effect on the other students in the yeshivah. The members of the yeshivah governing board and most of the parents seemed to agree that the ultra-pious students set a dangerous example. They undermined the balance of secular and religious studies, and they contradicted the modern perspective of the yeshivah. Parents feared that their sons too might be influenced to return to the European manners that they on their own had so willingly discarded. “

Rabbi Mendlowitz called a meeting of the Board of Directors, and “it was decided that those who insisted on continuing to go to the Malach weekly would not be permitted to attend classes. In 1933 the followers of the Malach were expelled from the yeshivah.” In 1936, the yeshivah of the Melachim, *Nesivos Olam*, was founded.

The Malach passed away in 1938 on the first day of Shavuous. On the second day of Yom Tov he was accompanied on his final journey by just a few close talmidim as well his children, a daughter in addition to his son, and was laid to rest at the Riverside Cemetery in Lodi, New Jersey.