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RENAISSANCE RABBI

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Posted Jan 13 2010

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*This essay is largely based on the book *Ish Yehudi* by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, who over the years has served as mashgiach and rebbi at a number of Torah institutions.*

The term "Renaissance man" is used to describe a person who excels in a wide variety of subjects or fields. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's biography of his father, Rav Dr. Yoseph (Joseph) Tzvi Carlebach (1883-1942), provides fascinating information about the life of a man who deserves to be described as a Renaissance rabbi.

In *Ish Yehudi* (Shearith Joseph Publications, 2008) a book richly adorned with photographs and documents depicting personalities and places of historical significance in pre-Holocaust Europe, the reader learns about an extraordinary man who was the respected rav of a number of prestigious communities in pre-World War II Germany, a towering Torah scholar, a talented orator, a dynamic educator, a prolific writer, an intellectual who earned a Ph.D. in mathematics and philosophy from Heidelberg University, an expert in astronomy, a scientist, a connoisseur of the arts and humanities, and so much more.

When it came to acquiring knowledge, Rabbi Joseph Tzvi Carlebach was never satisfied.

Joseph Carlebach was born on January 30, 1883 in Luebeck, Germany, where his father, Dr. Salomon Carlebach, served as rav from 1870 to 1919. Joseph's father was a *talmid chacham* and an outstanding orator.

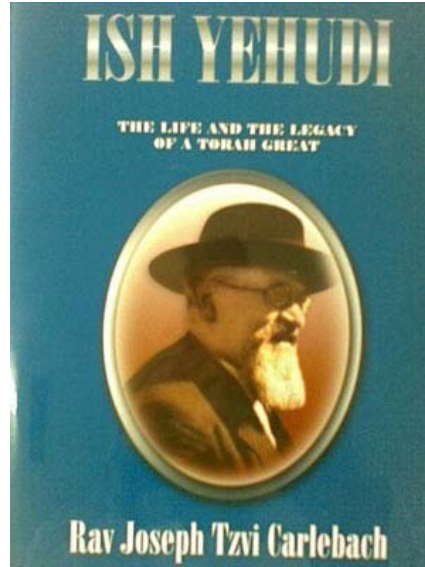
Joseph obtained his early Torah education at home from his father and from Rabbi Mordechai Gumpel (a disciple of Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger, the renowned chief rabbi of Altona and author of *Aruch Laner*), whom his father employed as a tutor for the Carlebach children.

At the age of 18 Joseph went to Berlin to study Torah at the rabbinical seminary founded by Rabbi Dr. Ezriel Hildesheimer. Simultaneously he attended the University of Berlin, where his studies focused on mathematics, physics, chemistry, astronomy and philosophy.

While at the university, Joseph came into close contact with the world-famous physicist Max von Planck, in whose laboratory he worked, as well as with the (then well-known) astronomer Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster and Wilhelm Dilthey, a respected historian, psychologist, sociologist and philosopher.

Joseph also somehow found time to be an instructor at the religious school of Adas Yisroel Congregation.

Despite his extensive secular studies, Joseph never failed to devote several hours each day to



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Torah study. The Jewish community of Berlin was blessed with many unique men who left an indelible impression on young Joseph, among them such Torah luminaries as Rabbis David Tzvi Hoffman, Joseph Wohlgemuth, Jacob Barth and Ezra Munk.

Jerusalem Years

Joseph passed his state examination in March 1905, graduating summa cum laude. He was now qualified for a high school teacher's diploma in mathematics and natural sciences.

Ephraim Cohn, principal of the Laemel Teachers' Seminary of Jerusalem, happened to be in Berlin when Joseph received his diploma. He had come to hire an instructor in mathematics and natural sciences for his institution, and an Orthodox young man, with a diploma from Berlin University in these subjects, was exactly what he needed. He offered Joseph the position.

Joseph had some qualms about accepting the job, since Jerusalem at the time was embroiled in a battle regarding the teaching of secular subjects in Jewish schools. Indeed, a ban had been signed by many of the most prominent Jerusalem *rabbanim* forbidding anyone from teaching secular subjects in Jewish schools. Those who did risked being put in *cherem*.

Joseph turned to his father for advice. After consulting with a number of Torah authorities, his father sent him a letter urging him to go. In addition, the faculty of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary unanimously encouraged him to accept this position.

Thus it was mathematics and science that brought Joseph to Jerusalem in 1905 at the age of 22. The time he spent there was to shape his entire outlook and give his worldview a new horizon.

During his three-year stay in Jerusalem, Joseph was befriended by the chief rabbi, Rav Shmuel Salant, who made Joseph feel welcome both at his *shiurim* and in his home. Interestingly enough, Rav Salant was one of the signers of the secular studies ban, but he apparently put that aside when it came to his relationship with Joseph.

Joseph met a number of other distinguished rabbis, among them Rav Avraham Yitzchok Kook, who in 1921 would become the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine.

While in *Eretz Yisrael*, Joseph acquired a good working knowledge of both Hebrew and Yiddish.

The students at the Laemel School soon realized their instructor was a man of unusual talents and methods. In addition to his dynamic classroom presentations, he would take his students for excursions around the environs of Jerusalem. They soon discovered he knew the name of every star in the sky and every plant and shrub on earth.

He knew the hiding places of the animals and would show his students how they lived and fed. He would explain how clouds were formed and he even forecast the weather. When they came upon a historic site, he would dramatize the events that had occurred there.

Furthermore, while walking he had the boys sing songs praising God for the beauty of this world and His abundance.

In 1908, when the time came for Joseph to return home to Germany, the most prominent *rabbanim* of Jerusalem expressed their deep appreciation for his work with their youth. Indeed, Rav Salant tried to persuade him to marry while he was in Germany and then return to *Eretz Yisrael*.

Back to Berlin

Shortly after returning to Berlin, Joseph was hired as an instructor for mathematics and the natural sciences at the prestigious (secular) Margareten High School for Girls. His selection for the position was a testament to his qualifications - no Jew had ever held such a post at the school, and Joseph was of course an Orthodox Jew who would be absent from classes on *Shabbosim* and Jewish holidays.

At the same time he assumed his former position as a rebbe in the Adas Yisroel School and also attended the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary. This was not enough, however, to fill the time of the industrious young man, so, from 1908 to 1910 he worked as well on his doctoral dissertation. His thesis focused on the scientific and mathematical achievements of Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344), known as the Ralbag or Gersonides.

In 1919 Joseph married Lotte Preuss, the oldest daughter of Dr. Yitzchok (Julius) Preuss, a physician and scholar of history and Hebrew literature. Dr. Preuss's *Biblical and Talmudical Medicine* was an encyclopedic work that reviewed every medical reference in Tanach, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, the Midrash, and ancillary works.

During this period Joseph received *semicha* from Rabbi Dr. David Hoffmann, rector of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary and author of halachic responsa *Melamed Leho'el* as well as a number of commentaries refuting the criticisms of those who questioned the historicity of the Torah.

Joseph was now known as *Rabbiner Doktor* Yosef Carlebach.

Rabbi and Innovative Educator

World War I began in 1914. Serving in the German army, Rav Carlebach was charged by the German Occupation Authority in Lithuania with organizing a secondary school system. After consultations with some of Lithuania's foremost Torah scholars and with their agreement, he founded a high school based on the principles of *Torah im Derech Eretz* (TIDE) that featured both Torah and secular studies in the curriculum.

The language of instruction in the Carlebach Gymnasium in Kovno (as this high school came to be known) was not Yiddish or German but modern Hebrew. Within three years the separate

boys and girls schools had a combined enrollment of almost a thousand students. Two other TIDE high schools were established in Telshe and Ponevezh within a short time.

(TIDE elementary schools were also set up throughout Lithuania where they were known as Yavneh schools.)

When Rabbi Dr. Salomon Carlebach of Luebeck passed away suddenly in early 1919, Rav Yoseph was offered his father's position. He did not know what to do in light of the fact that many of the leading rabbis of Lithuania were urging him to continue his work there. His mother pleaded with him to return to Luebeck, and her own sudden passing not long after his father's death clinched his decision. He became the rav of the city of his birth.

In order to raise the level of Torah study in his hometown, Rav Yosef convinced Rabbi Shmuel Joseph Rabinow to settle in Luebeck. Rabbi Rabinow was an outstanding young *talmid chacham* who had studied at the famed Slabodka Yeshiva in Kovno. These two *rabbonim* laid the foundations for an advanced yeshiva in Luebeck that eventually attracted a number of outstanding students.

(When Rav Carlebach moved some years later to Hamburg to become the city's chief rabbi, both the yeshiva and Rabbi Rabinow also relocated there.)

Final Years in Hamburg

In 1922 Rav Yoseph was offered the position of director of Hamburg's Talmud Torah Real Gymnasium. This school had been started in 1805 by Rabbi Mendel Frankfurter, a grandfather of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.

Here Rav Joseph's full talents as a forward-thinking educator and administrator shone. Hebrew language and grammar were introduced as major subjects, as well as Hebrew literature, with special emphasis on the medieval poets and philosophers. New physics and chemistry laboratories were built. He himself gave a course in the history of the fine arts to the students in the highest grade. He was also concerned with the physical fitness of his students and made participation in swimming and outdoor sports compulsory.

One of his boldest innovations was the one- or two-week excursion to distant parts of the country. Day outings had been part of the school curriculum in the past, but Rav Carlebach took this idea to new heights. On these trips students visited museums and historical sites and were introduced to the geological and biological characteristics of the countryside.

Furthermore, each day on these excursions started and ended with physical exercise. If there was a river nearby, the day began and ended with a swim.

His students enjoyed his classes to the extent that one former student recalled, "We used to turn the clock back ten or fifteen minutes so that his classes would last longer!"

In 1926 Rav Carlebach became chief rabbi of Altona, one of Germany's oldest and most venerated *kehillos*. It was here that his extraordinary oratorical powers became known to thousands. In fact, he soon acquired the reputation of being the foremost rabbinical orator in all of Germany.

Blessed with a strong, clear voice, he incorporated his many artistic talents into his delivery. His fluent use of words was enhanced by a style of delivery that employed appropriate arm, hand, and body movements coupled with relevant facial expressions.

He never, however, misused his talents for cheap or demagogic oratory, nor did he ever give an interpretation of a biblical or Talmudic text that was either forced or artificial. He had the rare ability to speak in a manner that enlightened both learned scholars and ordinary congregants. His sermons were always a stirring experience for those who heard them, and his remarks were often the main topic of conversation on Shabbos afternoons.

Rav Carlebach also somehow found the time to publish hundreds of scholarly articles on a myriad of subjects from rabbinics to mathematics, the humanities and the arts.

On April 4, 1936 Rav Carlebach became chief rabbi of the Synagoge-Verband (Synagogue Association), in the Bornplatz Synagogue. Fourteen other rabbis, more than two hundred guests of honor, and 1,500 others attended his installation ceremony.

Despite the growing threats to Jewish life from the Nazis, Rav Carlebach refused to abandon his flock even when he had several opportunities to do so. A contemporary (name unknown) of Dr. Carlebach's described his role as chief rabbi of Hamburg:

His sermons were masterpieces of diplomacy and wisdom in the face of the increasing focus of the Gestapo. The Gestapo had frequently attended the synagogue over the years. Those who were attentive enough heard with admiration, and also often with fear, how he castigated the current situation, without provoking intervention by the Gestapo. . . .

When numerous community members were arrested in connection with the Pogrom Night of 9/10 November 1938, he asked to share their fate. The Gestapo refused as there was no order to arrest him.

The years 1936 to his deportation to Riga on December 6, 1941 became legendary. The Nazi persecution of the Jews made the Jewish community into one large family, with Dr. Joseph Carlebach as its "pater familias." He was its courageous spokesman and its tireless religious leader: he visited civil service departments, prisons, concentration camps, and hospitals, always in danger of being insulted and thrown out, but never lost the least of his dignity.

As for Rav Carlebach's last days, the less said the better. Far preferable to remember his brilliance and praise his achievements than to dwell on his martyrdom. Suffice it to say that on March 26, 1942, Rav Carlebach, his wife Lotte, and their three youngest daughters were murdered by the Nazis.

May his memory long be remembered.

(Rav Carlebach's older children had been part of a Kindertransport to England before the family's deportation. His youngest son, Rav Shlomo, the author of *Ish Yehudi*, survived after spending four years in various concentration camps.)

Dr. Yitzchok Levine served as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey before retiring in 2008. He now teaches as an adjunct at Stevens. His regular feature, Glimpses Into American Jewish History, appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at llevine@stevens.edu.

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