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## THE MULTIMILLIONAIRE WHO REMAINED TRUE TO ORTHODOXY

**Dr. Yitzchok Levine**  
Posted Apr 19 2006

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*Note: Most of the information in this article is based upon Forty Years of Struggle for a Principle: the Biography of Harry Fischel, edited by Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein, published by the Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 1928, and the unpublished manuscript Continuation of Biography of Harry Fischel, 1928-1941. The published book will be referred to as B, and the unpublished manuscript as UB.*



MR. FISCHEL AS HE IS TODAY AT THE AGE OF SIXTY-THREE.

In 1924 Harry Fischel had occasion to visit the town of Eishishok in Lithuania. Eishishok is located a few miles from Radin, where Rabbi Yisroel Meyer Hakohen Kagan, zt"l, popularly known as the Chofetz Chaim, lived.

When the Chofetz Chaim learned that Mr. Fischel was nearby, he immediately sent an "automobile bus used for the purpose of conveying students from the station at Radin to the yeshiva, to take Mr. Fischel to Radin. Accompanying the bus was a committee of students. Mr. Fischel was met at a considerable distance from the yeshiva by the rabbi, then 86 years of age, who personally escorted him to his home and then through the Talmudical college" (B page 318).

Who was this remarkable man whom the Chofetz Chaim went to great effort to see, spend so much time with, and honor in such a manner?

### Humble Beginnings

Yisroel Aaron Fischel (later known as Harry) was born on July 19, 1865, in the small, isolated Russian town of Meretz. His father, as well as most of the residents of Meretz, barely eked out a living. His parents were admired, however, for their deep piety, and they did their utmost to instill Torah values in their children. They were successful with Harry, who throughout his life remained an Orthodox Jew strictly committed to the observance of *mitzvos*.

Mr. Fischel received a basic religious and secular education from his father and the local school. It's interesting to note that he apparently had virtually no exposure to Torah *she' b'al peh*.

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"I had no opportunity [in my youth] to acquire very much Hebrew knowledge. However, since I came to our free country 'America,' where knowledge can be acquired without any hardship and without any cost, I immediately took advantage of the opportunity and began the study of *Mishna*." (UB pages 83-84.)

"At the age of only ten years, he spent some weeks in modeling from wood, with a lowly pen-knife, a miniature replica of the

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Tabernacle [*mishkan*], so accurately designed according to the description in the Scriptures, and so carefully executed, as to excite the wonderment and surprise of the dwellers in the town. Through this bit of work, done on his own initiative, the boy developed a taste for the profession he was later to adopt." (B pages 4-5).

The aptitude Harry exhibited at such a young age would enable him to master the rudiments of architecture by the age of eighteen.

At that time all able-bodied Russian youths were compelled to serve in the army for five years as soon as they reached the age of twenty-one. To avoid this, Harry, at age twenty, made the difficult decision to leave his beloved parents and to immigrate to America.

"Their final words of admonition were, "When you reach the golden land, do not exchange your religion for gold." (B page 9.) He never forgot these words as long as he lived.

#### Early Struggles

Harry Fischel arrived in the United States on a bitter cold day in December of 1885 with only sixty cents in his pocket and the clothes on his back. He first tried to secure a job in an architectural firm, but soon saw that this was hopeless. He therefore became a carpenter's assistant, earning three dollars a week. Harry did not forget his parents after his arrival in the *goldene medina*. His commitment to the *mitzvah of kibud av v'aim* led him to send his entire first week's wages to his parents. He asked the family he lived with to extend him credit for his room and board.

"From this time on, the young man never failed to send his mother and father a monthly remittance of at least ten *roubles*, or about five dollars in American money, so budgeting his expenses and living on such fare as to make this possible, no matter how small his earnings were." (B page 15.)

#### Shmiras Shabbos, No Matter What

**We live in a time and place where laws protect the Sabbath observer from discrimination. Most businesses have a five-day workweek. While it's true that observant Jews still encounter situations in the workplace that test their commitment to *Yiddishkeit*, today's milieu is a far cry from the one Harry Fischel found himself in when he first arrived in America.**

**Harry worked for six months as a carpenter's assistant, toiling 12 hours a day and then spending two hours in night school, where he studied English and broadened his knowledge of architecture. He did not mind the long and grueling hours because he did not have to work on *Shabbos*.**

Eventually an architectural firm offered him a position at ten dollars a week. While this presented him with a great opportunity, he would have been required to work on *Shabbos*. After some soul searching, he recalled the words of his parents - "Do not exchange your religion for money" - and refused the offer, continuing on in his low-paying job.

More difficulties loomed, however. One summer day he arrived to work only to find his place of employment closed - the owner had gone bankrupt. All Harry's attempts to find another job proved fruitless, because every time he applied for a position, he made it clear that he would not work on *Shabbos*.

Finally he was hired by a firm of architects - but during the interview, he had chosen not to tell them he was a Sabbath observer. He hoped the firm would let him have *Shabbos* off based on the quality of his work and his willingness to work for five days at considerably lower wages than he'd been offered for six.

The job turned out to be all that Harry had hoped for and more. The week flew by as he applied himself in his new position. The working conditions were excellent, and he found the work interesting and stimulating. But when he approached his employer on Friday afternoon and asked if he could have Saturday off, he was told, "If you don't come tomorrow, you need not come on Monday."

He was now faced with a most difficult test of his religious principles. This job was precisely what he had been looking for, and it held the potential for the realization of his dream to become an architect. It appeared to be the road that would lead him from poverty to financial success.

Harry spent a sleepless night agonizing over what to do. He finally decided that he would get up early *Shabbos* morning, *daven*, and then go to work. After *davening* he headed home to change from his *Shabbos* suit to weekday clothes and go to work.

Arriving at the corner of Hester and Essex Streets on the Lower East Side, he saw that not a single store was open. The streets were filled with people dressed in their *Shabbos* finery. The atmosphere of *Shabbos* was everywhere. Harry was truly torn by his predicament. He thought of how shocked and disappointed his parents would be if they knew what he was thinking of doing. Finally, with great difficulty, he made his decision.

"He knew that neither then nor later would it ever be possible for him to desecrate the

Sabbath."(B page 19.)

On Monday he returned to his place of employment. He pleaded with his employers to let him work a five-day week, saying he would accept half of the salary that had been agreed upon when he was hired. Not only was his plea rejected, he was not even paid for the week that he had worked.

Such were the tests observant Jews faced in America at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

#### Marriage, More Job Related Problems - and Success

Harry finally found a suitable job in October 1886, as a foreman for a builder. The hours were long, but at least *Shabbos* was not a problem. On November 26, 1887, he married Jane Brass. She had immigrated to America in 1883. She came from a fine religious home. Indeed, her father, brother and grandfather were all *talmidei chachomim*.

"Thus, the young woman possessed in both her antecedents and upbringing all those qualities most likely to appeal to the young man and to strengthen and encourage all that was best in his own character." (B page 24.)

Harry's employer gave him two weeks' vacation as a wedding present. When he returned, however, he was told there was no work and he should look for another job. The newlyweds now faced a most difficult time. Harry spent months looking for a job, without success. Things were so bad that the couple was forced to pawn every item of value just to get through the terrible winter of 1887-88.

The tide turned in July of 1888. Harry was asked by Mr. Newman Cowan, a customer of his former employer, to estimate the cost of raising the roof of the building that Cowan's business occupied. The job was so large and complex that many contractors refused to even bid on it. Further, Harry had no capital with which to undertake such a job. He told this to Cowen, who replied that if the price were right he would arrange credit for him.

The work took five months to complete. Harry's cost estimates were so precise that not only did he make a good living on this job, he was also able to save \$250, a substantial sum in those days. The most beneficial outcome was that he became well-known as a successful contractor, one very much in demand.

In the year following the completion of this job, Harry had so much work that he built up his savings to some \$2,500. For the reader to fully appreciate what that amount of money represented, consider that \$2,500 in the year 1889, according to the consumer price index, had the same purchase power as \$50,883.78 in the year 2004. Or, looking at it from the perspective of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita, an index of the economy's average output per person that is closely correlated with the average income, \$2,500 in the year 1889 was equivalent to \$12,335.26 in 2004. (See <http://eh.net/hmit/compare/> for details.)

Mr. Fischel was now on his way to affluence.

"The story of the next few years [of his life] reads like a fairy tale." (B page 31.)

His abilities as a businessman and his expertise in construction and architecture led him to financial success after financial success. By 1900 he was the owner of a number of tenements and, eventually, entire buildings on Park Avenue in the most affluent neighborhood in New York City. He now had a large annual income.

In short, in little more than thirteen years Harry Fischel had gone from a condition of dire poverty to one of affluence, becoming a multimillionaire at a time when even being a millionaire was nowhere near as common as it is today.

Through all his success he remained true to Orthodox Judaism.

"Mr. Fischel's principles as to Sabbath observance went far deeper than merely refusing to work himself on that day, his religious code held it equally wicked to cause others to work and he at once met the problem, not only by closing down operations of his own buildings, but by setting an example for others by paying hundreds of men the wage they would have obtained by working the half day Saturday, in order that they might resist the temptation to desecrate the day. Not only then, but in later years, when he came to build on a very extensive scale, it is Mr. Fischel's pride that not a single Jew has ever worked on the Sabbath on any operation on which he has been engaged or in which he has been interested." (B pages 32-33.)

Harry Fischel's rise is not the only rags-to-riches story that occurred in the *goldene medina* in those times. What makes his unique is what he did with his success.

"He regarded the prosperity which had come to him as a direct answer to his prayers and considered that it imposed a definite obligation upon him to express his gratitude in good deeds. While he continued to strive to increase his holdings and to make more secure his fortune, it was mainly with the desire to place himself in a position where he might devote himself with greater zeal to his religion and might have more time to be of service to others." (B page 84.)

Mr. Fischel became involved in a myriad of Jewish causes. These spanned such endeavors as founding the first religious classes for girls in 1894, playing a key role in HIAS (Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society), serving as vice president of Beth Israel Hospital, and becoming perhaps the major figure involved in the founding of Yeshiva College, to name just a few.

(Editor's Note: There is hardly enough space here to discuss all the philanthropic concerns Harry Fischel was involved with throughout his life. His efforts to promote Orthodoxy will be discussed in some detail in Dr. Levine's next "Glimpses into American Jewish History" column, which will appear in the May 5 issue of The Jewish Press.

(The author wishes to thank Rabbi Aaron Reichel, a great-grandson of Harry Fischel and the

author of *The Maverick Rabbi*, for his assistance with the preparation of this article.)

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