Introduction

Rabbi Binyamin (Benjamin) Papermaster (1860-1934) served as an Orthodox rabbi in North Dakota for 43 years. On more than one occasion, when he traveled to a rural Jewish home and was shocked to refuse the farmer’s wife wearing tefillin!

“When did you get these?” he almost shouted at her.

“I bought them from a Jewish peddler.”

He offered to buy them back, not wanting this woman to wear them. However, he was told that the wholesaler, a non-Jew, sold them for 10 cents each.

Rabbi Binyamin Papermaster z”l

“At this time, the Russian government required that certain hours of the day be set aside for the study of the Russian language. As a result, Rabbi Papermaster learned to read and write Russian fluently. In addition, he fluent in Yiddish, Polish, German, and also spoke Lithuanian, in which he loved it.

At the young age of 18, Binyamin received a mechirah. He was then required to report to military service in the Russian army. Through a variety of strata
ges, he was able to avoid military service and to enter the Kolno yeshivah, where even the eyes of the yeshivah’s teachers, in order to study the Talmud, still adhered to the Talmud

(yeshivah that most people are
to think of as the famed Yeshivah Knesses Yisrael in Kovno, Lithuania, then part of czarist Russia, even in the case of a call from so eminent and honorable a place as the Chief Rabbinate, which in itself was also a government-recog

nized institution.)

Rabbi Papermaster immediately set out for the offices of Rav Spector, the Chief Rabbi of Kovno. When he got there, he was introduced to a Mr. Zurakov and his family, who were from the Kovno and were on their way to Fargo, North Dakota. They had stopped in Kovno to seek a recommen
dation for someone to accompany them to America and serve as their teacher, shochet, mohel, and chazzan. The Kovno Rav thought that Rabbi Papermaster was the ideal candi
date and recommended him to accompany this family to America.

Rabbi Papermaster naturally was somewhat taken aback by the suggestion and replied that he would have to discuss it with his wife before making any deci
sion. He found the possibility of going to America exciting. By going to America, he would be getting away from the hatred, persecution, and trouble he had been exposed to. He knew that his sons would never have to serve in the Russian army. This, in the end, was the deciding factor in his family’s decision to immigrate to America.

“The fact that Fargo, North Dakota was so isolated,positively decided the issue. And that it was two thou

sand miles west of New York (City), where several members of my mother’s family had already emigrated, nor that North Dakota was then a very sparsely settled country, generally did not enter his mind. All that mattered was that it was America, the land of freedom.”

When he received a personal photo and resume from Rav Yitzchok Levine, who had previously trained a rabbi, an associate of the Rebbe, he had written to him and asked him to consider the possibility of traveling to America, he was encouraged to find that there was some Jewish community in Grand Forks. He found that most of the families were originally from the Ukraine, along with a few Romanian and Galician (now Polish) families. There were only five or six families of German origin. It was also a community of people from southern Russian, Poland, and Romania who had been influenced by their Chassidic background.

The Yiddish dialect was dif
erent from the shtetl pronunciation of Hebrew was different from the Yiddish pronunciation of Hebrew. The rabbi felt that his pro

unciations of the Hebrew in the prayers and the reading of the Torah would sound as strange to them as theirs sounded to him. He even had some difficulty understanding, their ordinary daily conversations, but he deci
ded that if he was going to continue to use every available argument — language, customs, and education — he would also adjust himself to their dialect and customs — although he drew the line at their superstitions, of which I may write later, that some members of his family discouraged others from using the names of their old country. He was the only Lithuanian in a community of people of “Russians” who prided themselves on the fact that they used moshen Sphard
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