

Special Feature

The Jerusalem Rabbi Who Met President Ulysses S. Grant

Note: This article is based on the following sources: (1) *The First Rabbi: Origins of Conflict Between Orthodox and Reform: Jewish Polemic Warfare in Pre-Civil War America: A Biographical History*, by I. Harold Sharman, Pangloss Pr, Santa Barbara, California, U.S.A., 1988, pages 527 - 531; (2) *Roumania, America, and World Jewry: Consul Peixotto in Bucharest, 1870 - 1876* by Lloyd P. Gartner, *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* (1961-1978); Sep 1968-Jun 1969; 58; and (3) *Palestine and Roumania: A Description of the Holy Land and the Past and Present State of Roumania and the Roumanian Jews* by Hayyim Zvi Sneersohn, Arno Press, New York, 1977.

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

Introduction

The tradition of representatives of various communities and charities in Eretz Yisrael coming to America to collect funds dates back to the seventeenth century. One of the most fascinating of these *meshulachim* was Rabbi Chaim (Hayyim) Tzvi (Zevi, Zvi) Schneerson, who came to America in 1869.

Rabbi Schneerson was born in Russia in 1833 or 1834. He was a great-grandson of the *Baal HaTanya*, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad *Chassidus*. In 1840, he emigrated to Eretz Yisrael (then known as Palestine) with his family. "His brilliance in Talmudic learning moved the rabbis to ordain him at his bar mitzvah. By 1860, as a young man, he traveled to India, Persia, China and Australia, to raise funds for the poor of Jerusalem and Hebron; also to rebuild the walled city of Jerusalem." He also spent time in Romania. Considering the difficulties of travel in the 19th century, one has to marvel at how he overcame the obstacles he must have encountered enroute to these far-flung places.

Rabbi Schneerson possessed daring and adaptability to an unusual degree. When he traveled as a *meshulach*, he wore a white robe over a long yellow vest, a thick colorful belt, and a red oriental fez. He was a handsome man with piercing eyes. In short, as the portrait included in this article clearly indicates, he made a striking and exotic impression on all who met him.

Visit to America

In the late 1860s, Rabbi Schneerson left from Jerusalem for Paris and London, and finally arrived in New York in early 1869. However, he did not come to America to raise money. His goal was to improve relations between the United States and Palestine through his personal diplomatic intervention. On February 17, 1869, Rabbi Schneerson delivered a lecture at the New York Historical Society by invitation.

Shortly thereafter, Rabbi Schneerson traveled to Washington, D.C. As told in *Palestine and Roumania: A Description of the Holy Land*: "He lectured twice in the presence of large and appreciative audiences, among them the Turkish ambassador, members of the President's family, and several of the Ministry and of Congress. His

eloquence and fluency in the English language were generally admired, and his words made a good impression upon the audience."

He then managed to obtain an interview with Secretary of State Hamilton Fish. Rabbi Schneerson pointed out that the American Consul to Jerusalem had been mixing Christian proselytizing with his diplomatic duties. Indeed, the consul had personally tried to entice a Jewish girl to convert to Christianity. Not long after his meeting with Fish, Rabbi Schneerson was invited to meet the President of the United States.

Meeting with President Ulysses S. Grant

As told in *The First Rabbi and Palestine and Roumania*: "The story of his visit, reported in *The National Intelligencer* of the capital city, was that Schneerson, attired in his oriental costume, addressed the President. Grant then rose courteously to receive the Rabbi who thereupon said:

"Mr. President, permit me to give my thanks to the Alm-ghty, whose mercy brought me here to behold the face of the chosen by the millions of this great nation.... I come to your Excellency from the East, ... to entreat you in the name of G-d, who created all men equal, to listen to the prayer of your humble servant, standing before you to advocate the cause of his oppressed brethren in the Holy Land.

"The Israelites in Palestine possess no political or civil rights whatever, and oftentimes deprived of protection by the representatives of the civilized nations which the Christians enjoy, are exposed to violence and arbitrary rule. The only shelter the Israelites occasionally find is in the courts of the different European consulates, where one of their co-religionists is employed either as interpreter or deputy consul, who convey their grievances to the proper channel. This free republic, alone, whose banner covers the oppressed, whose foundation is based on equality, toleration, and liberty of conscience, has no Israelites employed near the consul at Jerusalem.

"I do pray, therefore, your Excellency, to turn your attention to the deplorable condition of my brethren in the Orient, that the principles of this Government may be truly embodied in its representatives



Rabbi Schneerson

abroad; and I do further pray that your Excellency may show me that mark of favor which will enable my brethren in the Holy Land in the hour of need to seek refuge under the Stars and Stripes, that this free country and its exalted chief should be blessed on the sacred spot of our common ancestors?

"At the close of his address, the President, evidently deeply moved by the Rabbi's sincere and feeling words, inquired with interest as to the circumstances affecting the Jews at Jerusalem which might be guarded by the American Consulate; and replied, with his wonted quick decision, 'I shall look into this matter with care.'

"The Rabbi then closed the interview with the following fervent invocation: 'Before I part from you, Mr. President, allow me to offer my fervent prayer from the depth of my heart: Alm-ghty G-d, Whose dominion is an everlasting kingdom, may He bless and preserve, guard and assist your Excellency and your family. May the Supreme King of Kings grant you a long life, and inspire you with benevolence and friendship towards all mankind.'

"At its close, the whole crowd, who had forgotten each his own personal interest in the impressive scene which was passing, were seen to be affected, some even to tears; and from some lips a fervent 'Amen' was heard in response. The President replied, with evident feeling, 'I thank you for your wishes and prayers.'

"While he was making a note for future reference, the Rabbi and his friends retired. Even office seekers seemed to say, 'That man's mission ought not to fail.' Of course, American sympathy will respond to such an appeal; and the American Government cannot refuse so humble a request as that the Israelites of our own and other

lands shall have in the American Consulate at Jerusalem, an advocate whose voice will be heard throughout Christendom, as well as at the court of the greatest of the Mahomedan powers."

Amazingly, as told in *Roumania, America and World Jewry*, "The erring diplomat was recalled, to the satisfaction of Palestinian Jewry and the delight of the *meshulach* who accomplished it. Why Grant and Fish willingly met the oddly clad foreigner is unclear, even though the global responsibilities of American presidents were not very taxing.

"Curiosity or cordiality aside, the new president, only three months in office, desired to please Jewish opinion which had shown during the Presidential campaign of 1868 that it remembered his anti-Jewish General Order No. 11 of Civil War days."

His Trip Across America

Shortly after meeting with President Grant, Rabbi Schneerson embarked upon a tour that took him all the way across America to California.

In May, he traveled to Cincinnati, where he told audiences that he felt he could discern the finger of G-d pointing to a day "not far distant, he hoped, when the great deliverance would take place and the land [of Israel] be restored to the Jewish people."

Returning to New York, Rabbi Schneerson lectured at Cooper Institute, introduced by the Christian clergyman, the Reverend Dr. Howard Crosby. He stressed the need to purchase land and erect buildings. He pointed out that Abraham too, bought land, even though it had been divinely promised to him. America, he felt, was the chosen agent for the restoration of the Jewish homeland.

He returned to New York for Pesach and then, on April 27, 1870, began the long railroad trip that would take him cross-country to California. (The transcontinental railroad was completed on May 10, 1869.) There he delivered major addresses in Los Angeles and San Francisco. As he traveled across America, Rabbi Schneerson received a number of invitations to speak before Jewish and non-Jewish audiences—such as this one, from *Palestine and Roumania*:

SALT LAKE CITY, UT, November, 1870.

RABBI H. Z. Sneersohn, San Francisco:

DEAR SIR — Your favor of 29th ult. is to hand. In reply permit me to say it will afford our citizens much pleasure to have you address them in the Tabernacle on subjects of such deep and abiding interest to us all as the past history and present condition of G-d's covenant people, Israel.

If possible please inform me, a day or two in advance of your coming, when you will be here, so that the people may be notified

through the Press of your intended visit, and the Tabernacle be prepared for your lecture.

I remain, Dear Sir, Very Sincerely Yours,

In the cause of Israel,
BRIGHAM YOUNG.

(I have not been able to determine if Rabbi Schneerson actually accepted Brigham Young's invitation to address the Mormons.)

Efforts on Behalf of Romanian Jewry

Rabbi Schneerson visited Romania twice during the 1860s. While there, he witnessed the terrible state of degradation in which the country's 500,000 Jews were forced to live. Beginning in 1866, orders were issued confiscating Jewish property. Jewish farmers were expelled from their farms, and contracts made by Jewish farmers with either the government or private persons were annulled. Many Jews were indiscriminately arrested by the army and forced to leave Romania without due process. In short, the lives of the Jews of Romania became intolerable.

In light of his success in getting the American consul to Jerusalem removed, Rabbi Schneerson, on January 19, 1870, while visiting Chicago, wrote a long letter to President Grant on behalf of his downtrodden brethren in Romania. After thanking the President for appointing a new consul to Jerusalem, he continued:

"Therefore, I feel myself encouraged in again praying to the great American people and their chosen chieftain. Five hundred thousand souls in Roumania are ... subject to the malicious will of all. Their crime is their belief in One G-d; their sin, that they are scions of the stock of Abraham.

"The children of Israel live there as a scattered flock of defenseless sheep — as helpless orphans. None takes heed of their wailings. On all the earth, there is no Israelite the occupant of a throne or in any position of might, whence he could speak a weighty word for these unfortunates.

"The influence of the United States can be exerted in two different ways ... in the appointment of consuls friendly toward our race in that country [Romania]; but more especially would such an appointment prove efficacious ... if a Jewish citizen were sent there as consul... (*The First Rabbi*)

After his signature on this letter, he added the title "Rabbi from Jerusalem," implicitly giving the impression that his request had some sort of diplomatic status.

Behind the scenes, Rabbi Schneerson lobbied for the appointment of Benjamin Franklin Peixotto (1834 - 1890) as consul to Romania. He had met Peixotto in California and was most impressed by him.

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Discovering the HASC Center, Inc.'s Binuryni – בניורני Program

After the Monroe-based Chazak support group organizer who had been coordinating meetings in Williamsburg returned home, a couple in Williamsburg realized that there was an entire community of parents around them with special-needs children who were lacking a support system like Chazak.

Avraham Chaim and Esther Mirel Kraus had joined the support groups run by Chazak in their search for *chizuk* as they came to terms with their own young daughter's diagnosis. When the Chazak-led groups came to an end, the Krauses recognized that just as they had a need for the *chizuk* offered by this type of group, so did the many others who had attended — and so they took over and formed their own organization, which they dubbed Binuryni — “Our Young Ones.” HASC Center, Inc., a renowned not-for-profit agency that provides services for individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities and their families, graciously took on the responsibility of overseeing the organization and provided the necessary funding; and in a clear stroke of *hashgachah pratis*, Avraham Chaim Kraus is now a valued member of the HASC Center's professional team.

Binuryni of Williamsburg offers a variety of support groups that take place on a regular basis. Many are monthly, with special speakers and events scheduled periodically. At times special “lunch dates” are held, enabling mothers to bring young children or babies along with them.

“Binuryni is here to help peo-

ple, to allow parents to communicate with other parents of kids with special needs,” explains Esther Mirel Kraus. “We have events where we introduce a panel of parents to discuss certain issues, we bring doctors and other health professionals, and we do all that we can to provide both educational and emotional support to the many parents who need us. We also provide sibling support groups for elementary-school children, which was virtually unheard of before. We are there to share experiences and be *mechazek* each other and, *baruch Hashem*, we are successful.”

Last year, Bracha Lavrinoff, the young mother of an adorable little girl with Down syndrome from Boro Park, approached Mrs. Kraus and asked, “Don't you think we have enough parents in Boro Park and Flatbush to warrant our own group, so we don't have to keep shlepping to Williamsburg?”

“Certainly,” replied Mrs. Kraus. “Would you like to coordinate it?”

Mrs. Lavrinoff considered it, and then decided it would be a fitting *zechus l'iluy nishmas* her son, Pesach Aharon ben Naftali, z”l, who was *niftar* last year. And so, Binuryni of Flatbush and Boro Park was born.

At this time, Binuryni of Boro Park and Flatbush has three different support groups: one for parents of children with Down syndrome, one for parents of children with autistic-spectrum disorders, and one for parents of children with multiple disabilities. Each group currently has one evening meeting per month.

Apart from the regular meetings she arranges, Mrs. Lavrinoff also coordinates special events, such as an upcoming gathering on June 17 that will feature Jason Kingsley and Mitchell Levitz, two young men with Down syndrome who penned the book *Count Us In: Growing Up With Down Syndrome*.

This year's annual *melaveh malkah* was a combined event for the Williamsburg and Boro Park-Flatbush Binuryni groups, featuring (alongside other entertainment) renowned *mashpia* Harav Binyomin Eisenberger, although Mrs. Lavrinoff says that as her groups grow, they will likely hold their own annual events. While the support groups at this time are for women only, the *melaveh malkah* was for both men and women.

“These events are not fundraisers,” stresses Mrs. Lavrinoff. “HASC Center completely covers all our expenses, and our meetings are held in the HASC Center building at 42nd Street and Ft. Hamilton. These evenings are solely to provide *chizuk* to our parents.”

When asked how parents find out about the meetings and when and where to attend, Mrs. Lavrinoff explains that due to issues of confidentiality, she cannot contact parents at the request of friends or family members, but she does ask therapists of various agencies to inform their clients about Binuryni's services.

“It's basically word of mouth, although if I'm walking down the street and I see someone with a child who has Down syndrome, at first I'm surprised, because I thought I knew everyone with

special children in Brooklyn!” Mrs. Lavrinoff laughs. “Then I'll approach them and explain that I, too, have a child with Down syndrome, and I'll give them the information about our meetings and tell them I hope to see them there.” Not everyone takes her up on it, but so far no one has seemed to mind the gesture, and she usually receives an extremely positive reaction.

“Our last meeting was for parents of children with Down syndrome up to age 5, and we had fourteen mothers show up,” says Mrs. Lavrinoff. “And our last group for parents of autistic children had thirteen attendees. Each group meets once a month, so at this point I'm organizing three meetings a month on a regular basis.”

Mrs. Lavrinoff says she never saw herself running an organization of this kind, but she adds, “Obviously, the way *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* has directed my life has had a lot to do with it. As with everything, *hashgachah* has played a clear role, because I have a master's degree in rehab counseling, which I earned long before I had any children. Hashem was good to me and gave me that background so that I am successfully able to run group meetings.”

Is there any marked difference in the parents as a result of the meetings?

“Definitely. We're clearly filling a void, providing *chizuk* where it is desperately needed. The meetings provide a forum where parents can just sit and exchange information and benefit from feeling that everyone around

them understands where they're coming from.

“One of the hardest things people in trying situations have to deal with is feeling that the general public doesn't understand them. In our meetings, they can share the small — and large — accomplishments they may have achieved, and feel secure in the knowledge that the others truly feel what they're feeling. We share experiences and are *mechazek* one another. In that way, we're providing a tremendous *chesed, baruch Hashem*.”

Will Binuryni expand its target group anytime soon?

“I'm definitely willing,” Mrs. Lavrinoff replies. “I recently had a call from a woman who heard about the autism-spectrum group and was looking for a support group for parents of children with Asperger's syndrome. I told her that if she gets a group of people together, I'd be more than happy to run it.”

It is a well-known dictum that Hashem distributes life's *nisyonos* according to the way He deems those on the receiving end can handle them. Avraham Chaim and Esther Mirel Kraus and Bracha Lavrinoff have not only met the challenges dealt them with grace and dignity, they have risen above their personal situations to provide *chizuk* and support to an entire community.

May they continue to go *mei'chayil el chayil*, until a time when there is no longer a need for organizations like Binuryni.

For further information, please call Binuryni @ HASC Center, Inc. at (718) 599-4272, ext. 2203.

Jerusalem Rabbi Who Met Pres.

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Peixotto, a descendent of colonial Sephardic Jewry, was the grandson of Moses Levi Maduro Peixotto (1767 – 1828), who served as Hazzan of Congregation Shearith Israel of New York from 1816 to 1828. His father was Dr. Daniel Levy Maduro Peixotto (1800 – 1843), a well-known physician.

There were other contenders for the position and few expected Rabbi Schneerson's efforts to be successful. However, on July 8, 1870, the *Jewish Messenger* reported Peixotto's confirmation by the Senate in this unsalaried post.

Peixotto left San Francisco on November 2, 1870, and sailed from New York seven weeks later. He finally arrived in Bucharest on February 11, 1871. Rabbi Aaron J. Messing of San Francisco trumpeted the diplomatic feat achieved in Washington in the European Hebrew and Yiddish press. His words must have been music to Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Schneerson's ears, for he had again accomplished what many thought impossible! Rabbi Schneerson was given full credit for the historic appointment.

The First Proto-Israeli Diplomat

Rabbi Schneerson eventually returned to Jerusalem, becoming an American citizen before his departure from the United States. He died in South Africa in 1881 or 1882 while on a mission to collect funds for the needy in Israel. He had one son, Moshe, and two daughters. There is no record of any grandchildren.

In most of his talks, Rabbi Schneerson stressed the idea that the Jews would soon be given control of Eretz Yisrael. He proposed plans for the return of the Jews in large numbers to Eretz Yisrael and for the building of viable Jewish agricultural communities there.

At the time, many felt that his proposals were mere dreams, but we know from a historical perspective that his proposals were indeed achievable.

Rabbi Schneerson became convinced that “the Stars and Stripes would be a banner protecting the oppressed people of Israel.”

His success in influencing the appointment of a new consul to Jerusalem and a Jewish consul in Bucharest, Romania, made him the first proto-Israeli diplomat.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine is a professor at the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, N.J. He can be reached at llevine@stevens.edu.

Yeshivah Bonim Lamokom Brings in Prominent Doctors

By Mindy Schlafrig

This year, Rabbi Moshe Klein, a secular studies teacher at Yeshivah Bonim Lamokom, launched an exciting science project called “About the Human Body” with his special-education students. Hoping to give his students a new awareness of the wonders of their own bodies, Rabbi Klein also intended to provide important lessons about safe and healthy living. Little did he know just how far this project would take them!

The project started off with classroom posters and review sheets. It then took a huge leap when Rabbi Klein began contacting a number of prominent physicians, asking them to find time in their heavy schedules to visit the students and bring their studies to life. To his delight, these generous doctors were eager to participate in the project.

Ear, nose, and throat specialist Dr. Anthony Vastola of Maimonides Medical Center visited Bonim Lamokom and gave the students a general review of the functions of these organs, along with safety precautions. The doctor established a wonderful rapport with the boys and enjoyed showing them some



Students from Rabbi Klein's Class at Yeshivah Bonim Lamokom with Chief Pediatric Pulmonologist, Dr. Gerald Loughlin.

tools of the trade, such as an endoscope, a lighted instrument that is used to look into the nose and throat.

Psychotherapist Moshe Zwolinski, a recognized mental health and addictions expert, explained the role of the nervous system in a person's daily functioning and demonstrated how the brain sends messages to all parts of the body. Dr. Zwolinski was noticeably impressed with the boys' attention and absorption of the material.

Another special guest was Dr. Gerald Loughlin, a leading authority on children's respira-

tory disorders and chief pediatrician at New York Weill Cornell Children's Hospital of New York-Presbyterian Hospital. The boys learned a lot about the respiratory system that day, and the esteemed pulmonologist remarked that he was inspired by their interest and infectious enthusiasm.

Rabbi Klein plans to call in other physicians when the boys finish their study of the heart and digestive systems. He and his students are very grateful to the kindhearted medical professionals who took the time to make a significant contribution to their curriculum.