

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 15)

Harry Fischel (1865 – 1948)

Orthodox Jewish Philanthropist Par Excellence - II

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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** (referred to as **B**) and **Continuation of Biography of Harry Fischel, 1928 – 1941** (referred to as **UB**).*

In this article we conclude the story of Mr. Harry Fischel's philanthropic activities.

The Founding of Yeshiva College

Mr. Fischel had a long-standing relationship with the Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Theological Seminary (RIETS), which later was destined to have its name transferred to the rabbinical school affiliated with Yeshiva University. When, in 1915 RIETS merged with Yeshiva Etz Chaim to form the short-lived Rabbinical College of America, Mr. Fischel became chairman of the **Building Committee** of the newly formed institution. He then located a property on the Lower East Side and converted it into a facility that was suitable for the Rabbinical College.

It was therefore only natural that in 1923, when plans were made to open Yeshiva College, he should again play a key role in the establishment of this then new institution. As we shall see, without Mr. Fischel's involvement and leadership, there is a good chance that these plans might never have come to fruition.

Those involved differed on how much money would be required to build the infrastructure needed to establish an institution that would combine a Talmudic and secular education in a single homogeneous environment. Some said \$1,000,000 would be sufficient; others \$2,000,000. When Harry Fischel suggested that \$5,000,000 would be needed, "some of the directors took the view that he had gone out of his mind. Mr. Fischel, however, insisted that five million dollars was none too large an amount to accomplish the purpose in view, and, in order to start the ball rolling, he subscribed at once \$10,000 with the pledge of an additional subscription of \$5,000 for each million dollars collected, making his total pledge \$30,000, if the full amount was secured." (B page 343)

This substantial contribution (the reader should keep in mind that we are talking about 1924 dollars) was just the beginning of Harry Fischel's support of the campaign to establish Yeshiva College. At a fundraising dinner held on December 18, 1924, he proposed the following to Nathan Lamport, president of the Yeshiva, and Lamport's well-to-do family. Harry said he would match any amount the Lamport family would pledge. After some deliberation, the Lamport family replied that they were willing to give \$100,000. Without hesitation, Harry Fischel committed to matching this amount. To understand the magnitude of that contribution, the value of \$100,000 in 1924 was \$1,107,470.89 in 2004. (See <http://eh.net/hmit/compare/>.)

The announcement of these two large pledges electrified those present at the dinner with the result that almost \$800,000 in pledges were made at this function. The new campus that would house RIETS and Yeshiva College was on its way to becoming a reality.

However, Harry Fischel did more than just give his financial support. "From this moment on Mr. Fischel determined to dedicate his effort, his time and energy, also a large portion of his wealth, to carrying out this vast undertaking. From that day, December 18, 1924, to the present day [1928], Mr. Fischel practically divorced himself from every other activity, both his business and communal interests, to the end, except of course, that he continued to attend the meetings of other institutions with which he was affiliated." (B page 356)

When he returned from a visit to *Eretz Yisroel* in September 1927, he "found that the construction of the Yeshiva building was progressing slowly. As Chairman of the Building Committee, he took charge of the work of the building." When the President, Nathan Lamport, passed away, Mr. Fischel assumed this leadership position also. "Having the additional responsibility, my time was occupied day and night, until the building was finished," he wrote. (UB page 57).

Mr. Fischel's involvement did not cease once construction of the new campus was completed and the institution opened. The Yeshiva experienced severe financial problems in the next few years. It was burdened by hundreds of thousands of dollars in construction debts. In July 1932 it closed with no prospects of reopening in September. With great effort, he was able to settle these debts, so that the Yeshiva reopened. In 1939 he headed a reorganization of the RIETS and Yeshiva College and wrote, "The existence of the Yeshiva is now assured." (UB page 75)

Mr. Fischel was a bold thinker, years ahead of his time. He wrote, "When the new building of the Yeshiva Rabbi Isaac Elchonon was opened, there were a large number of students, among them being a number not suited either for Rabbi, teacher, or other profession. Then an idea came to me to establish a trade school in connection with the Yeshiva, so that those students desiring to learn a trade in connection with Talmudical instruction could do so." (UB page 4)

Not long after the new Yeshiva buildings were completed, he purchased a nearby site and set aside funds to erect a structure to house the trade school as well as to provide housing for the Yeshiva faculty at a low rental. However, "the Board of Directors of the Yeshiva felt that such a school would cheapen the Yeshiva, and refused my offer." (UB page 4) It is interesting to note that only in recent years have we seen the establishment of a few yeshivas that combine a yeshiva and trade school education.

By 1941 Harry Fischel had contributed a total of \$160,000 to RIETS and Yeshiva College!

***Eretz Yisroel* and the Harry Fischel Institute for Research in Talmud**

Long before it became fashionable, Harry Fischel became interested in the settlement of Jews from Russia and other European countries in *Eretz Yisroel*. This led to his first visit to *Eretz Yisroel* in 1910. Over the years he visited the Holy Land at least seven more times. One has to keep in mind that this was before the advent of air travel, so that he traveled by boat, an arduous journey that took weeks.

He became involved in a wide range of projects designed to foster Jewish immigration to ***Eretz Yisroel*** and to assist those who settled there. During his second visit to the Holy Land in 1921 he learned that, while the chief representatives of other religions occupied residences befitting their position, Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzchok Hakohen Kook, ZT"l, lived on the second floor of an old and dilapidated building, where proper reception of visitors was impossible. It did not take Mr. Fischel long to decide to build a proper home for Rav Kook entirely at **his** own expense. The dedication of the Home of the Chief Rabbi of Palestine took place on May 27, 1923.

He founded the Harry Fischel Institute for Talmudic Research (*Machon* Harry Fischel) in Jerusalem in 1931. "For decades, half of all the religious court judges in the entire country [of Israel] were graduates of this elite institution." (Maverick Rabbi, page 334)

The Measure of the Man

Harry Fischel was, of course, adversely affected by the stock market crash of 1929. He was also negatively affected by the Depression that followed. Nonetheless, in 1941 he wrote, "The ten years just past from 1930 to 1940 were the best in my life; while not financially, but spiritually." (UB page 55) At the age of 69 he began the study of *Gemara!* (His early religious education did not encompass Torah *she' b'al peh*.) He studied three times a week with a friend. After six years of this regimen they had completed five ***mesechtas***. Mr. Fischel thus gained an appreciation for true *Limud HaTorah*. At the age of 75 he wrote, "I

am now in a position to state that the Talmud became a part of my life, and is the best relaxation for the mind in times like these. I can safely state that it is the studying of the Talmud that has broadened my mind, and given me a clear vision and understanding of how to solve difficult problems.” (UB page 85)

Yisroel Aaron (Harry) Fischel, OB”M, passed away on January 1, 1948 in Eretz Yisroel. His steadfast commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*, no matter what, as well as his unprecedented devotion to an unbelievably wide range of philanthropic endeavors provide us with a challenging role model of what it means to live successfully as a Jew.