

## Special Feature

# Rabbi Binyamin Papermaster ז"ל

## Forty-Three Years as a Rav in North Dakota

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

### 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 to assist a Jewish family with a religious matter, he had occasion to spend the night in the home of a non-Jew. On one such occasion, he came down from his bedroom and was shocked to see the farmer's wife wearing *tefillin*!

"Where did you get these?" he almost shouted at her.

"I bought them from a Jewish peddler."

He offered to buy them back.

"Oh, no," she said, "I paid \$25 for them and I'll never sell them. I saw the Jewish peddler wear them one day, and when I asked him what he was wearing them for, he said he wears them for his rheumatism. I'm troubled with rheumatism myself, so I bought them from him, and when I wear them, my rheumatism does not bother me."

Despite all of Rabbi Papermaster's efforts to buy the *tefillin*, this woman refused to part with them.

This was just one of the unusual experiences Rav Papermaster had while he served the Jews of North Dakota. The reader may wonder how and why a *talmid chacham* like Rabbi Papermaster, who had studied under the famous Kovno Rav, Harav Yitzchak Elchanan Spector (1817–1896), ז"ל, ended up settling in a place with so little *Yiddishkeit*.

### His Life in Europe

"Binyomin Papiermeister was born in the fall of 1860 in the village of Anolova, in the vicinity of Kovno, Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire. He was the seventh child of a family of nine children — four sons, of whom he was the youngest, and five daughters, of Nissen and Etel Papiermeister, as the family name was then pronounced.

Nissen Papiermeister was a concessionaire of the creamery interests of the Polish nobleman, landowner of both the village and surrounding lands. The children received their first training in the rudiments of Judaism from their parents, particularly their father, who had been a student at the famous Slabodka yeshivah in Kovno." [The reader should not confuse what Isadore Papermaster refers to as the "Slabodker Yeshivah" with the famed Yeshivah Knesses Yisrael founded in 1884 by Harav Nosson Tzvi Finkel (the Alter). It is this yeshivah that most people are referring to when they speak of the "Slabodka yeshivah."]

At age seven or eight, Binyamin was enrolled in yeshivah in Kovno. He came home twice a year, for Pesach and for the *Yamim Nora'im* and Sukkos.

"At this time, the Russian government required that certain hours of the yeshivah 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 was fluent in Yiddish and also spoke German, Lithuanian, and Polish.

At the time of my father's boyhood, the *haskalah* movement had already commenced to penetrate the walls of the ultra-Orthodox yeshivah, where even the study of the Prophets was prohibited. My father often related how he and other students would keep the *Tanach* hidden within the Talmud volume, away from the prying eyes of their teachers, in order to study these *sefarim* clandestinely. To read *Isaiah* or *Jeremiah* with the Malbim commentary was frowned upon. But my father loved it."

At the young age of 18, Binyamin received *semichah*. He was now required to report for military service in the Russian army. Through a variety of stratagems, he was able to avoid being arrested and inducted into the army until the period he was to serve expired.

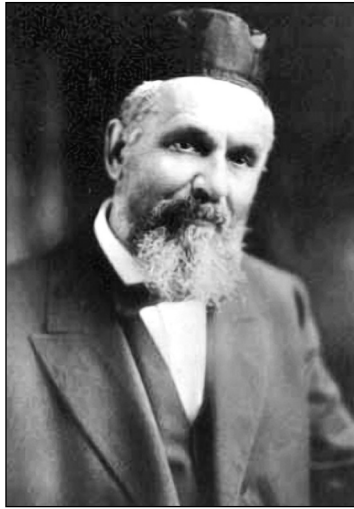
In 1880, Rabbi Papermaster married Ethel Sudarsky and was hired by his father-in-law as a *melamed* to teach his nephews. However, the income he received was not sufficient for him to support his wife and growing family. (Four sons were born to Ethel and Binyamin during their first 10 years of marriage.)

He was advised by his older brother to study to become a *shochet* and a *mohel*, and at age 24, he received his *kabbalah* in *shechitah* from the Kovno Rabbinate. In addition, Rabbi Papermaster was blessed with a beautiful voice and talent for public speaking. He was thus an accomplished teacher, *shochet*, *mohel*, *darshan*, and *chazzan*.

"Yet despite these accomplishments and talents, the matter of providing a livelihood for his growing family was still a serious problem. Thoughts about going to America, however, did not enter his mind. It was only when he reminded himself about his experiences during his few years of evading military service in Czarist Russia [that he thought about emigrating to America]. He vowed that his sons would never serve the czar. He realized that his only answer to the problem was America."

### Sent to America By the Kovno Rav

"It was in the late summer of 1890, just before the *Yamim Nora'im*, during the month of Elul, that a messenger arrived at our home in Alexote, in the province of Kovno, [to say] that my father was to report without delay to the office of the Chief Rabbinate in Kovno. The messenger, bringing no details of the reason for that summons, quite nat-



Rabbi Binyamin Papermaster.

urally created a good deal of excitement. All he could say was that the call came directly from the Chief Rabbi himself and that my father was to return with him. Fears of one sort or another were ever-present among Jewish families in 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-recognized 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 Ukraine and were on their way to Fargo, North Dakota. They had stopped in Kovno to seek a recommendation 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 candidate and suggested that he accompany this family to America.

Rabbi Papermaster naturally was somewhat taken aback by this suggestion and replied that he would have to discuss it with his wife before making any decision. He found the possibility of going to America exciting. By going to America, he would be getting away from the hated Russian czarist government, insuring that his four sons would never have to serve in the Russian army. This, in the end, was the deciding factor in the family's decision to immigrate to America.

"The fact that Fargo, North Dakota, was [the Zurakovs'] destination and that it was two thousand miles west of New York [City], where several members of my mother's family had already emigrated, or that North Dakota was then a very sparsely settled country generally, did not even enter his mind. All that mattered was that it was America, the land of the free.

When he received a personal consultation with Rav Yitzchak Elchanan, he was rather plainly told that not only must he consider this opportunity for himself, but that it was his Jewish duty to

go with these people, who urgently required the services he had been trained to render, particularly to the scattered Jewish community of America.

This, I believe, had much to do not only with his decision to go with these people, but also to remain in North Dakota for the balance of his lifetime. He often repeated this statement, which was used by community leaders later when he had opportunities to go to larger Jewish communities. He had awe-inspiring regard for the Chief Rabbi of Kovno."

Rabbi Papermaster made the decision to go to North Dakota. However, it was decided that his wife and four sons would stay behind until he got settled and then follow later. Sadly, Ethel Papermaster never joined her husband in America; she passed away a few months after her husband arrived there.

### Arrival in New York City

Upon his arrival in New York City on January 2, 1891, "Rabbi Papermaster was met by a married brother and a married sister, who objected to his continuing the trip to North Dakota. They used every available argument — the considerable distance from New York, the fact that the country was wild, chiefly inhabited by Indians, and even questioned the possibility of any Jews living there. They offered to compensate [him] for the expenses of his voyage, but it was all to no avail. He had promised the Kovno Rav that he would go with these people to their destination, and go he must.

After visiting with family and relatives, he proceeded on his way to Fargo, North Dakota, arriving there about the end of January 1891."

### North Dakota

Fargo turned out to be the Jewish wasteland that his New York relatives had predicted. While there were a few Jewish families there, there was not even the semblance of a Jewish community. There was no synagogue, and the possibility of having a *minyan* on Shabbos was unthinkable. Furthermore, there was no way that such a small number of Jews could support a rabbi.

Apparently, the relatives of the Zurakovs who resided in Fargo had exaggerated the state of the Jewish community for selfish reasons. Indeed, things were so bad that the Zurakovs themselves did not remain long in Fargo.

Rabbi Papermaster knew that he could not stay in Fargo. "But one thing he was certain of, and that was that his future was bound up with this new country, and he began to look about for the possibility of making a change. Before taking any new step, he resolved to become a citizen of the United States, and he filed for a Declaration of Intention in Cass County, North

Dakota, on March 23, 1891."

Added to his problems was the sad news that his wife had passed away on March 28. It is an understatement to say that he was now quite despondent. Nonetheless, when told that there was a thriving Jewish community in Grand Forks, about 75 miles north of Fargo, that was seeking a rabbi, he decided, despite more than a bit of skepticism, that he would go and have a look for himself.

Arriving in Grand Forks not long before Pesach, he was encouraged to find that there were about 60 Jewish families residing there who were interested in having a rabbi help them establish a viable Jewish community. Therefore, he decided that he would spend Pesach in Grand Forks and see if staying was indeed a viable option.

"He was not too certain about the possibility of being accepted there. 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. As is well known, Jews coming from southern Russia, Poland, and Romania were strongly influenced by their Chassidic background.

Their Yiddish dialect was different from his; their pronunciation of Hebrew was different from the Lithuanian pronunciation. The rabbi felt that his pronunciation 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 conversation, but he decided that if he were going to remain there, he would have to adjust himself to their dialect and customs — although he drew the line on certain superstitions, of which I may write later, that some of the families had brought with them from the old country. He was the only Lithuanian in a community of "Russians" who prided themselves on the fact that they used *nusach Sephard*."

It was with these uncertainties that Rabbi Papermaster began assisting the Jewish community of Grand Forks for the upcoming Yom Tov of Pesach, which was less than two weeks away. Would this Lithuanian-trained *talmid chacham* be able to win over these Russian Jews and serve as their Rav? Only time would tell.

to be continued

"Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from Isadore Papermaster, son of Rav Binyamin Papermaster. This document is available in pdf format from Hamodia or the author."

Dr. Yitzchok Levine retired in 2008 from a 40-year career as a professor of mathematics at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey. He can be contacted at [llevine@stevens.edu](mailto:llevine@stevens.edu).