YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #02: Biography (part 1)**

**R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro of Piaseczno – A Brief Biography**

R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro of Piaseczno was born in Grodzisk, Poland, on the 19th of Iyar, 5649 (1889).[[1]](#footnote-1) His father, R. Elimelekh of Grodzisk, author of *Imrei Elimelekh*[[2]](#footnote-2)and *Divrei Elimelekh,* one of the greatest Chassidic *Admorim* of his generation, married R. Kalonymus’s mother after his first wife passed away. R. Kalonymus was the descendant of some of Poland’s greatest Chassidic masters. He was named after his maternal grandfather, R. Kalonymus Kalmish of Krakow, author of *Maor Va-Shemesh*.[[3]](#footnote-3) He was also related to R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, to the Maggid of Kozhnitz, and to the grandson of R. Chaim Meir Yechiel Shapiro of Mogielnica (the “seraph of Mogielnica”[[4]](#footnote-4)), as well as to the Seer of Lublin and R. Chaim Shemuel of Chęciny (Chentshin).[[5]](#footnote-5) His family was also related to the *Shakh*,[[6]](#footnote-6) the *Bach*,[[7]](#footnote-7) and the *Megaleh Amukot*, with a lineage going back to King David.

When his father, R. Elimelekh, died before R. Kalonymus’s third birthday (Nisan, 5652), his *chassidim* were divided. Some joined the *Admor* R. Yisrael of Grodzisk, a grandson of R. Elimelekh; others turned to R. Yechiel Brakhes of Rawa, while a third group became followers of R. Yerachmiel Moshe of Kozhnitz, who was another grandson of R. Elimelekh. Nevertheless, on the anniversary of R. Elimelekh’s passing, on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, his *chassidim* would all visit Grodzisk and their former *beit midrash*.



[Photograph: R. Kalonymus (center) at a gathering on the anniversary of the passing of the Amor of Chentshin (18th of Tevet, 5698)]

After his father’s death, R. Kalonymus grew up in Grodzisk with his mother and his brother Yishayahu, who was a year and a half younger than himself. He was influenced by his father’s *chassidim*, who nurtured him as the heir to the dynasty. He was also guided by his grandfather, R. Chaim Shemuel Ha-Levi Horwitz-Sternfeld, the *Admor* of Chentshin, grandson of the Seer of Lublin, on the occasions that he and his mother would visit R. Chaim Shemuel. Another influential figure in his life was R. Yerachmiel Moshe, the *Admor* of Kozhnitz, whose mother was the daughter of the *Admor* R. Elimelekh of Grodzisk. R. Yerachmiel Moshe took the two young orphans – R. Kalonymus and his younger brother, R. Yishayahu – under his wing, doing what he could to advance their physical and spiritual welfare whenever he came to Grodzisk.

After his *bar-mitzva*, R. Kalonymus became engaged to Rachel Chaya Miriam, daughter of the *Admor* of Kozhnitz, whose followers by this time numbered in the thousands. They married when he was fifteen, moving to Kozhnitz, where the *Admor* supported them for four years. During these years, R. Kalonymus imbibed Torah and chassidut, laying the foundations for the important positions he held later on.

On the 13 Elul, 5669 (1909), the *Admor* of Kozhnitz, R. Yerachmiel Moshe, passed away. His court then split: his son, R. Aharon Yechiel, continued the dynasty in Kozhnitz, while his son-in-law, R. Kalonymus, now aged 20, was appointed *Admor* in the small town of Piaseczno, near Warsaw, and his many followers moved there. In 1913 [5673], following the death of the rabbi of the town, R. Noach Bialer, R. Kalonymus was appointed to this rabbinical post.

On Shabbat, Piaseczno was full of *chassidim* who came to spend time with R. Kalonymus and hear the teachings that he shared at his *tisch*. There are *chassidim* alive today who still remember his singing on Shabbat night. R. Kalonymus was loved and esteemed not only by older *chassidim*, but also by youth – particularly those who had grown distant from Torah and observance of the commandments.

After World War I, R. Kalonymus moved to Warsaw, where he served as a member of the Rabbinical Association. In this position, he worked to restore the status of the rabbinate, established numerous demands of rabbis and teachers, but also supported them in conflicts with the lay community leaders, thereby earning broad respect.

At the same time, by popular demand among his followers, he continued serving as the rabbi of Piaseczno. He spent the period between *Shabbat Nachamu* and *Shabbat Bereishit* (the end of summer and the High Holidays) in Piaseczno, and he visited there during the rest of the year as necessary. The local *dayan*, R. Henokh, would answer halakhic questions in his absence, and issues of an especially complicated nature would be brought to R. Kalonymus in Warsaw.

R. Kalonymus’s involvement in Jewish public affairs included the “Shomrei Shabbos” organization in Warsaw, of which he later served as President. Jewish-owned stores were opening in Warsaw on Shabbat, and this new situation needed to be addressed. R. Kalonymus organized a central merchants’ union, whose members were mostly non-observant Jews, and thereby managed to prevent extensive Shabbat desecration. His approach was to win over his opponents through conciliatory persuasion and entreaty, rather than rebuke and denouncements, and to deal with the problem of Shabbat desecration through a campaign of public education. He collected funds from the Jews of Warsaw and another six hundred communities throughout Poland and printed booklets in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish explaining the sanctity of Shabbat. He also organized informational gatherings on the topic,[[8]](#footnote-8) and was part of the “Tiferet Bachurim” organization, which engaged in religious outreach among young workers through Torah study.[[9]](#footnote-9) He also headed the campaign against the decree forbidding Jewish *shechita* in Poland in 1935.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The urbanization decree brought great suffering upon Polish Jewry, including the threat of pogroms and attacks on Jews of small towns by wealthy landowners. R. Kalonymus assisted wherever he could, working with representatives of the Jewish community and maintaining contact with members of the Polish Senate, drawing their attention to the injustice that Jews were suffering at the hands of the Poles.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In 1923, R. Kalonymus established the Da’at Moshe Yeshiva, which had an enrollment of some three hundred students per year and was one of the largest *yeshivot* in Poland.



[Entrance pass to Yeshivat Da’at Moshe]

He personally oversaw the entire curriculum, which included the study of the laws of kashrut traditionally required for rabbinic ordination. The goal of preparing students to assume religious leadership for Jewish communities attracted students to the yeshiva. The first group of students graduated in 1927, and all the rabbis of Warsaw, along with many of the Polish *Admorim*, attended the *semikha* ceremony.

In addition, R. Kalonymus sought to nurture a select group with whom he would delve into the modes of Divine service of the disciples of the Ba’al Shem Tov, as is readily apparent in all of his writings (and as we shall discuss in this series).

He devoted untold energy, time, and funds to the yeshiva. Most of the money he received in the form of *pidyonot* (contributions) was transferred to the yeshiva, while he and his family lived in poverty. Even when his health faltered and his doctors told him that he must visit the natural springs in neighboring countries, he refused, insisting that he needed to take care of the yeshiva. He also invested great efforts in the evening *shiurim* that he instituted in Warsaw for artisans and laborers, and which were attended by thousands.[[12]](#footnote-12)

During this period, he published the only book that appeared during his lifetime – *Chovat Ha-Talmidim* (Warsaw, 5792 [1932]). It was widely disseminated and made a great impression, appearing in several editions, and was introduced as an instructional textbook in the curricula of Chassidic *yeshivot* and Beit Yaakov schools.

R. Kalonymus was also a talented violinist. He composed *niggunim* that were disseminated among his followers,[[13]](#footnote-13) and he also read scientific literature.[[14]](#footnote-14) He was known for his astute understanding of the ways of the world, and he was consulted by *chassidim* and non-*chassidim* alike on many different subjects. He accumulated much experience in medical matters, and doctors relied on his decisions. His prescriptions for medications, which he wrote in Latin characters, were accepted by pharmacies.[[15]](#footnote-15)



[R. Kalonymus’s business card with a referral to a doctor]

R. Kalonymus supported Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel and demonstrated great love and enthusiasm for this endeavor.[[16]](#footnote-16) When his brother, R. Yishayahu (the “Pioneer *Admor*”)[[17]](#footnote-17) moved to the Land of Israel, he bought tracts of land for himself and for R. Kalonymus. R. Kalonymus sold some of his property in Poland to finance this purchase.

When R. Kalonymus’s wife passed away in 1937, his daughter-in-law took on the responsibility of running his household. We glean something of his wife’s character from R. Kalonymus’s letter of response to the condolences he received upon her passing. Among the other traits and qualities that he enumerates, he writes that his wife would study Torah for several hours each day, including *Tanakh*, midrash, kabbala, and *chassidut*, and that she was also immersed in Divine service “of the heart, of the body, and of the mind.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. This chapter is based mainly on biographical details collated from the following sources: A. Sorasky, “*Toledot* *Ha*-*Mechaber* *HGH*”K *R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro ztzvk”l, Hy”d*, *Ha-Admor mi-Piaseczna, ba’al* *Chovat Ha-Talmidim* *Ve*-*She’ar* *Sefarim*,” *Chovat Ha-Talmidim* (Tel Aviv, 5752), pp. 257-297; N. Polen, *The Holy Fire – The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, The Rebbe of* the *Warsaw Ghetto* (London, 1994), pp. 1-14; L. Bein, *Mi-Pinkaso shel Itonai-Chasid*, M. Salifoy (trans.) (Jerusalem, 5727), pp. 27-35; E. Farbstein, *Be-Seter Ra’am: Halakha, Hagut U-Manhigut Bi-Yemei Ha-Shoah* (Jerusalem, 5768), pp. 429-454; Zilberschlag and Frankel, *Zikhron Kodesh* (their book collates articles about R. Kalonymus from different sources, both Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as some of his letters); Y. Alfasi, *Encyclopedia Le-Chasidut 3* (Jerusalem, 5768), pp. 639-649; Don Yihya Shabtai, *Admor Chalutz: Aliyato shel R. Yishayahu Shapiro* (Tel Aviv, 5721), pp. 23-51; D. Reiser, *Derashot Mi-Shenot Ha-Za’am*, vol. 1(Alon Shevut, 2017), pp. 13-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The genealogy of the author of *Imrei Elimelekh* (Warsaw, 5636) is recorded at the beginning of his book: “R.… Elimelekh *shlita*, Av Beit Din of the community of Grodzisk, is the son of the esteemed holy and renowned… R. Chaim Meir Yechiel…, head of the *beit* *din* of the community of Kozhnitz and Mogielnica, and great-grandson and grandson of our holy teacher, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, and… the holy R. Elimelekh…, author of *No’am Elimelekh*, son-in-law of the holy [R.] Yerachmiel… son of the holy Jew of Przysucha, may their merit protect us and all of Israel, Amen.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See H.D. Bacan, *Ha-Maor va-Shemesh* (*Yad Maor Va-Shemesh*, Bnei Brak, 5746), pp. 273-386. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Shabtai, *Admor Chalutz*, pp. 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See ibid., pp. 23-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Shabtai Kohen is known as the “*Shakh*,” the acronym denoting the title of his work, *Siftei Kohen*, which is one of the most important and authoritative commentaries on the *Shulchan Arukh,* *Choshen Mishpat*. He was active in Vilna until forced to flee during the Chmielnicki Uprising of 1648–1657. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Yoel Sirkis is better known as the “*Bach*,” the acronym for the title of his work, *Bayit Chadash*, a commentary on the *Arba Turim*. He died in Krakow in 1640. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. L. Bein, “*Ha-Admor Mi-Piaseczno*”, in Zilberschlag and Frankel, *Zikhron Kodesh*, pp. 83-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For more on the organization, see *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, p. 1072. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bein, “*Ha-Admor Mi-Piaseczno*,” p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bein, “*Mi-Pinkaso shel Itonai-Chasid*,” p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. L. Bein, “*Ha-Admor mi-Piaseczno*,” p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. L. Bein, “*Mi-Pinkaso shel Itonai-Chasid*,” p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. According to the current *Admor* of Piaseczno, Rabbi Kalman Menachem Shapiro, grandson of R. Kalonymus’s brother, R. Kalonymus also apparently knew Latin and read works on medicine and psychology. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bein, “*Mi-Pinkaso shel Itonai-Chasid*,” p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In a letter he wrote to his brother. R. Yishayahu Shapiro, in 5683 (1923), R. Kalonymus revealed his intention to relocate to the Land of Israel: “One important matter that I forgot to write to you, my dear, is that it appears to me that Satan is placing great obstacles on my path to the Holy Land, and I see no way of moving there… Therefore, I thought – and I have already consulted with R. Levi Epstein – of taking the practical step of traveling to the Land right now for a few weeks or months. It may be that once I cast off all my distractions for some time and live in the Land of Israel, perhaps our mother, the holy land, will hold me by the locks of my hair and not allow me to leave and stay permanently outside of it, so that finally God might show me a way of making a living there. Although the costs involved will be considerable, if I do not do this, I see no way of making this desire of mine a reality. Therefore, please let me know whether you have the funds available, such that if I travel you could send them for expenses, and if not all of it, how much of it remains. Of course, none of this involves reducing your income or the sustenance of your household…” (Zilberschlag and Frankel, *Zikhron Kodesh*, part II, p. 18). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Don Yihye Shabtai; Y. Shapiro, *Alenu Ha-Melakha Ligmor* (Beit El, 5752). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 446-448. For more on R. Kalonymus’s wife, see U. Fuchs, “*Miriam Ha-Nevia Ve-Eshet Ha-Admor: Derashot Ha-Admor Mi-Piaseczno al Miriam Ha-Nevia*,” *Massekhet* 3 (5768), pp. 65-76; Y. Levin, “*Le-Achar Ha-Histalkut – Chadal Le-Nagen Ha-Kinor*,” *Hatzofeh* newspaper, book review supplement, June 30, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)