

The RYS Daily 11/19/06 Early Life of RYS I

Someone asked me about the early life of RYS, so the next few RYS Dailies will deal with this topic. The following is taken from the Mussar Movement, Volume 1, Part 1, pages 181 - 182.

The details of his development and of his entire life are wrapped in obscurity, since he had no desire whatsoever for fame or repute, and so only such episodes as, in his mind, might bring benefit to others were recorded for posterity. Even his most prominent disciples were reluctant to reveal biographical data, unless these were deemed to have some educational or Musar value. This much was stated by R. Isaac Blazer at the beginning of his introduction to the Or Yisrael, in which he depicts "something of his (R. Israel's) ways and his holy conduct."

R. Israel was born in Zhagori (Zagare) in the district of Kovno, then Russia and today Lithuania, in 1810. Zhagori had gained renown through its scholars and rabbinic authors, commonly referred to as Chachme Zhager (the sages of Zhagori). Living on the border of Courland (Latvia), the inhabitants of the town acquired a unique blend of Latvian and Lithuanian Jewish characteristics. From Lithuanian Jewry they inherited the habit of forming firm and considered judgments, a pleasant and patient disposition, integrity, and warm, openhearted, good nature. From the neighboring Latvians, they inherited drive, broadness of view, courage and daring, self-assurance, and a natural intellectual bent. Born into this atmosphere, R. Israel spent his early youth and received his education there.

His father, R. Zeev-Wolf Lipkin (d. 1858) later became dayan in Goldingen (Kuldiga) while his grandfather, R. Aryeh, had been dayan in New Zhagori. They were descended from R. Samuel Chasid of Rossiyeny (Raseiniai) and the Vilna Gaon. R. Zeev Wolf was the author of Hagahot Ben Aryeh, marginal notes on the Talmud, Rambam and Tur — as well as of a number of works which remained unpublished, in manuscript. From the "letters of approbation" prefaced to the manuscripts, it becomes evident that R. Zeev was one of the prominent Torah scholars of the generation. R. Israel's mother, too, was known throughout the vicinity for her piety and broad and incisive knowledge of Tanach and Talmud.'

Before receiving the call to Goldingen, R. Zeev remained in his birthplace, Zhagori, where he tutored young boys, among them his own son, Israel. A child prodigy, Israel was already delivering keen pilpulistic and analytical discourses in the presence of the learned by the time he was ten years old.

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