

לעילוי נשמת  
יעקב בן אייזיק ע"ה  
נלב"ע ח' טבת ה'תשע"ז

ת"נ צ'ב"ה'

נדפס ע"י בנו  
הרה"ת ר' אלכסנדר וזוגתו  
מרת חנה ומשפחתם שיחיו  
קאלער

MIHU YEHUDI

By: RABBI MENDY  
GREENBERG

*a*  
HOLE  
*in my*  
HEART

*The Rebbe's Fight for  
Giyur KaHalacha*



# מִיָּדוֹ יֵרֵד

כֹּהֵנָא  
אֶל חֶפְרָה  
נִחְהָה

## JERUSALEM POST

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### ...STILL STALLING

Conference of the International Association in Geneva... great progress future

### 'Who's a Jew' amendment becomes law

Jerusalem Post Knesset Reporter  
The Knesset last night adopted the amendment to the Law of Return, 1950, by a vote of 51 to 14 with two abstentions. The amendment, which defines "Who is a Jew" for the purposes of the Law of Return, 1950, was passed after a heated session, punctuated often by outbursts of heckling. The amendment was defined "Who is a Jew" for the purposes of the Law of Return, 1950, by a vote of 51 to 14 with two abstentions.



The House was perturbed when Yisrael's Rabbi Menahem Porush... a prayer book current among Reform Jews, and spat upon it in a... Rabbi Porush called the Reform Party anti-Jewish, anti-Zionist and anti-God. He accused the National Religious Party of assisting Reform Judaism to take root in Israel through the law, because it would recognise conversions not performed according to Halacha. He also criticized the Conservative and Reconstructionist movements. He also said that Jews were no better than...

WAR  
Rabbi Porush... which would... insist on hal... create two cla... under the Law... the Marriage...

דני מנין שלי

# THE OPENING SHOT

Sir Patrick Geddes was a wealthy Scottish biologist, sociologist, and pioneering town planner who supported the Jewish people and was an early enthusiast for the Zionist cause. So, when a new up-and-coming town was to be built near Yaffo—soon to be famous as Tel Aviv—he was asked to design the city.

This designer of Tel Aviv raised his children devoid of any religion; he taught them to worship “humanity” and seek the betterment of society, regardless of race or creed. So, when his granddaughter Ann began a relationship with an Israeli named Binyamin Shalit, the family did not oppose the match. When Binyamin finished his studies in Scotland, they returned to Eretz Yisroel together and started a family.

The problems began when Binyamin came to register his son in the government records. The law required a person to report his “religion” (Jew, Muslim, Christian etc.) and “ethnic group” (Arab, Jew etc.). Binyamin chose “nothing” for his son’s religion—he and his wife considered themselves atheists—and Jewish for “ethnic group.”

The registration officer refused. According to the directives of the Ministry of Interior, the designation of a Jew followed halacha; if one was not “religiously” Jewish, he could not be registered as “ethnically” Jewish either.<sup>1</sup>

Shalit was deeply offended. He was an officer

serving in the Israeli Navy; his children were being raised as part of the Jewish nation, and his wife was from a Zionist family. Her grandfather had even designed Tel Aviv! How dare the government not consider his children part of the Jewish people?

The story began to make headlines. Soon, it had reached all the way to the High Court.

# THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS

The question of Jewish identity was always a hot topic of debate. According to law, every Jew had the right to immigrate to Eretz Yisroel and receive automatic citizenship. But who is a Jew? That was left undefined.

In 5718, Interior Minister Yisrael Bar-Yehuda gave a directive that “Anyone who declares in good faith that he is a Jew, should be registered as a Jew.” There was an immediate uproar. The Mafdal—the National Religious Party representing the Modern-Orthodox element in Eretz Yisroel—hotly objected and left the coalition. They would have no part in a government that rejected a basic premise of Judaism.

In light of the crisis, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion decided to write to fifty “Chachmei Yisroel”—leading *rabbanim* as well as well-known intellectuals—asking for their opinion.

In his letter, he asked what should be done when the mother is not Jewish but “both parents agree to register their child as Jewish.” He intentionally phrased his question this way instead of directly asking ‘Who is a Jew,’ because the son of

## בנימין שליט נגד שר הפנים פסק הדין שיינתן היום ע"י תשעת שופטי בית המשפט העליון יסיים שלב נוסף במערכה על „מיהו יהודי”

משפטי לממשלה, ישנם בעולם יהודים, ששפתם אינה השפה העברית והתרבותם אינה התרבות העברית, אולם אליבא דכולי עלמא הם יהודים, כיצד מתקבל אדם לאותו רוב של הלאום היהודי השוכן מחוץ לישראל. רק בדרך אחת — בדרך הגיון. לא יתכן לפתח שתי אמות-מידה שונות להצטרפות לעם היהודי. האם יכירו יהודי הגולה באמת-מידה חדשה זו?

יובהר להם כי אינם, כפי שאין הנריהם, שיוכיח לדת כלשהי. אם יחפצו להינשא לפי חוקי הדת היהודית, יהיו חייבים להתנייר, אבל מלידינו הם ילידי הארץ של היום, בחינוכם בכללים כל ערכי התרבות והדת היהודית ששיצבו עם זה, כפי שהם משתקפים בחינוך התולדותי בי מדינה. זינוכם לא יכלול כפיית דפוסי אמונה ופולחן המיוחדים לדת משה.

— מאת יוסף צוריאלי —

ל חיות כיהודי, עפ"י הלאום, ולא על יסוד הדתי. זו היתה בקשתה של משפחת שליט מחיי מהי בית המשפט הגבוה לצדק, שישנו בעולם הקדשה. יתכן

ONE OF THE MANY NEWSPAPER ARTICLES CARRYING THE STORY OF BINYAMIN SHALIT AND HIS FAMILY, MAKING WAVES THROUGHOUT THE LAND.



Ben-Gurion—who was himself a declared secularist—had married a non-Jewish woman. Apparently, he hoped to find a loophole to have his grandchildren recognized as Jews.

His hopes were dashed, however. The overwhelming majority of respondents—including many of the non-*rabbanim*—asserted that halacha should be the sole basis for defining Jewish identity.

The Rebbe was among the respondents. In his letter to Ben-Gurion, the Rebbe wrote that the question pertains not only to children being registered as Jews but to anyone who wishes to declare themselves Jewish.

“My opinion is absolutely clear,” the Rebbe replied, “according to Torah and the tradition handed down through the generations, declarations of intent hold no validity and cannot alter reality. According to the Torah and the enduring tradition of our people, a Jew is someone who is born to a Jewish mother or who has converted according to the precise guidelines of conversion, as detailed in the *seforim of piskei dinim* of the Jewish people from generation to generation, up to the Shulchan Aruch.”<sup>2</sup>

Within a short time, a new Interior Minister rolled back Bar-Yehuda’s changes and reverted to the halachic definition—but the law itself was never clarified. It was clear that the issue would arise again. And it did, with the Shalit case.

## THE LEGISLATION

At first, the High Court refused to hear the case. It was too controversial; they recommended that the government simply delete the “ethnicity” clause in registration. But the government refused and pressured the High Court to issue a ruling.

In the winter of 5730, the High Court ruled with a narrow majority in Shalit’s favor. They didn’t determine whether or not his children were Jewish; they simply claimed that the current law gave the parents, not the bureaucrats, the right to determine a child’s status.

As expected, the ruling created a massive uproar; non-Jews were being recognized as Jews! The issue was widely reported in the newspapers and the government realized it needed to establish a definition that would be enshrined in law.

Knowing the touchy nature of the subject and the brittle state of Israeli politics, Prime Minister Golda

Meir wanted a law that would be acceptable to the Mafdal (the other religious party, Agudas Yisroel, was not part of the ruling coalition and therefore mostly irrelevant). After some deliberation, they settled on a text. It said, “A Jew is someone born to a Jewish mother or who has converted according to halacha.”

Shortly before the final vote, the Justice Minister made a minor change; he removed the term ‘according to halacha.’ Including the term ‘halacha’ would over-complicate matters; they would then be forced to determine who determines halacha, and it would offend Reform and Conservative Jews who don’t observe halacha—and who were major donors to Israeli causes. “I do not want to establish halachic



IN THE ARCHIVES OF THE ISRAELI SUPREME COURT, THERE IS A FOLDER CONTAINING THE LETTER SENT BY PRIME MINISTER BEN-GURION TO FIFTY “CHACHMEI YISROEL” AND RETYPED COPIES OF THEIR RESPONSES. PRESENTED HERE ARE THE OPENING PAGES OF THE PRIME MINISTER’S LETTER AND THE REBBE’S RESPONSE.

rules,” he said. “Anyone who comes with a conversion certificate from any Jewish community will be accepted as Jewish.”

The Mafdal made no protest. With all facts considered, it seemed to be a victory. The secular Israeli government had largely accepted the halachic approach. True, the final clause would allow for Reform and Conservative conversions, but that seemed to be a non-issue. Non-halachic conversions were not permitted within Eretz Yisroel, and immigrants with such conversions from the Diaspora were almost non-existent. It could have definitely been much worse.

When the law passed in the Knesset on 11 Adar 5730, the Mafdal celebrated. It was a *heseg dati*, a religious triumph.

## THE PURIM FARBRENGEN

At 3:30 a.m. on Motzei Purim morning that year, the streets of Kfar Chabad were unusually active; despite the late hour, streams of people were heading towards the new yeshiva building. For the second time in history, the Rebbe’s farbrengen would be broadcast live from New York, and five hundred people gathered to listen.<sup>3</sup>

Sicha followed sicha, and niggun followed niggun. But then, as morning broke, the Rebbe began speaking with unusual emotion.

The Rebbe opened with a story from Tanach.

In the days of Ezra and Nechemia, the Persian king Koresh announced that the Jewish people were permitted to return to Eretz Yisroel. After seventy

years of exile, Yidden would be allowed to rebuild their homeland.

The response was disheartening. Many Jews had become comfortable in their new homes; the thought of embarking on a difficult journey to a destroyed region wasn’t very enticing, and they chose to remain behind. When Ezra arrived in Eretz Yisroel, he found a small, scraggly group of immigrants, doing their best to scrape by. Many of them had married local, non-Jewish women.

Ezra desperately needed to grow the Jewish community. But instead, he did something shocking. He called a general gathering where he read from the Torah and inspired the people to return to Yiddishkeit—and told them to send away their non-Jewish wives. And they did.

“These women,” the Rebbe noted, “were already in Eretz Yisroel and they already had Jewish names; that’s the perfect opportunity! Find a way to make it work!” They should have been incorporated into the Jewish community! But Ezra looked into the Torah and saw that halacha said otherwise. So he didn’t argue. Neither did the husbands. And, neither did their wives.

For a full hour and a half, the Rebbe spoke passionately about the unprecedented travesty of the new law, which tore down the division *bein Yisroel la’amim*, between the Jewish people and the other nations. The Rebbe spoke with unusual intensity, explaining the terrible consequences of the law and calling for it to be changed.

It was the first “*Mihu Yehudi*” sicha.

It is difficult to overstate how painful an issue this was to the Rebbe. For then on, *Mihu Yehudi* was a staple of every farbrengen. After hours of *sichos* and *maamarim*, the Rebbe would launch into an impassioned *sicha* about the recent events surrounding the issue, going on and on, sometimes for over an hour, from the depths of his heart, expressing his profound pain and disappointment that it hadn’t yet been corrected.

Even at the Lag B’Omer parade that year, standing before the children, the Rebbe spoke forcefully about *Mihu Yehudi*. Later that evening, the Rebbe held a surprise farbrengen to finish speaking about the topic, because the time constraints of the parade didn’t suffice. On several occasions, the Rebbe stated that he could not allow a single farbrengen to pass



ISRAELI NEWSPAPERS REPORT ON THE AMENDMENT.



without mentioning the topic.<sup>4</sup>

Chassidim related in the name of the Rebbetzin that there were several issues which turned the Rebbe's beard white—and one of them was *Mihu Yehudi*. The Rebbe once expressed himself that “*Mihu Yehudi hot mir gemacht a loch in hartz*, it created a hole in my heart.”<sup>5</sup>

## A FIFTH COLUMN

A visitor in *yechidus* once argued to the Rebbe that the government could not adopt halacha as the guiding principle of the land. It would seem uncultured and backwards—we are living in the twentieth century! “They would say we are a theocracy!”

The Rebbe's answer was fascinating. “And if they won't say that?” the Rebbe asked. “Will you be able to change the reality that Hashem is in control of the world? In Greek, that's the definition of ‘theocracy!’”<sup>6</sup>

The Rebbe didn't argue whether a “*medinat halacha*” (state run according to Halacha) was good or bad. The Rebbe said that *it was the reality*. Hashem is the ruler of the world, and He included in it unmalleable divisions; as we say in *havdalah*, *bein kodesh l'chol*, *bein or l'choshech*, *bein Yisroel la'amim* (between holy and mundane, between light and dark, between the Jewish people and the other nations). There is no reality in which blurring those divisions will bring positive results; it's simply impossible and unnatural. The Torah is the blueprint for creation;

following the blueprint will bring success, and rejecting the blueprint will bring disaster.<sup>7</sup>

For the first time, the Israeli government had enshrined in law that they reject halacha. In Eretz Yisroel, the day of rest is Shabbos and the army serves only kosher food—but now, when it came to the foundation of Yiddishkeit itself, the government had declared, “*Ein lanu chelek be'Elokei Yisroel*” (we have no part in the G-d of Israel). It was an unprecedented travesty.

Many of the proponents of the law claimed that it would have a positive effect. Eretz Yisroel's population needed to grow, and laws that hinder immigration would hurt the country. They accused those who advocated against the law of lacking in *ahavas Yisroel* and not caring about the Jewish people's future. They also pointed out that according to the halachic definition of a Jew, a terrorist born to a Jewish mother and Arab father would be considered Jewish, while a heroic Israeli soldier born to a Jewish father would not. It seemed ludicrous!

The Rebbe pointed out that those last arguments were laughable. Of course, Jewish murderers must be held accountable while righteous gentiles should be celebrated—but it has no bearing on whether they are Jewish or not.<sup>8</sup> To say that rejecting non-halachic conversions shows a lack of *ahavas Yisroel* is equally ridiculous, because those people are not Jewish in the first place! Being a Jew is a *religious* status, and

therefore subjected to *religious* standards; a political government deciding ‘Who is a Jew’ is simply foolishness.

There were clear and obvious problems with the non-halachic approach. With this law, Eretz Yisroel would be left very vulnerable. The newspapers reported that there was a Nazi living in Eretz Yisroel somehow under the auspices of the Law of Return. There was a missionary with the last name Goldberg, born to a Jewish father, who used the Law of Return to further his missionary activities.<sup>9</sup> Fixing the law would, quite literally, protect Eretz Yisroel’s borders.

Moreover: The government had included another clause granting the right of return to anyone with a Jewish grandparent; there was no need to be Jewish at all. Thousands of well-meaning individuals could now immigrate alongside a Jewish family member. Granted, they were not enemies. But who were they? What would be their identity? What would happen if their home country found itself in conflict with Eretz Yisroel. Which side would they take?<sup>10</sup>

These new immigrants wouldn’t be fully accepted by society. Eretz Yisroel is a very traditional country, and many people would understand that these are not Jews. The laws of marriage and divorce follow halacha and are controlled by the Chief Rabbinate; this meant that new immigrants would be allowed to come, but not to marry! How welcome would such an immigrant really feel?<sup>11</sup>

It was simply an act of injustice. These immigrants were being fed a web of lies—that they would be accepted into Israeli society, or that their Reform conversion was qualified—only to discover later, after investing their blood and sweat in their new homes, that they weren’t worth the paper they were written on.

It would also have a disastrous effect on the

country. Eretz Yisroel is a land surrounded by enemies; its people sustain themselves with the knowledge that they live in the Jewish homeland, given to them by Hashem in the Torah. Overwhelming the country with immigrants who don’t share those values would undercut the idealism that helps it survive.

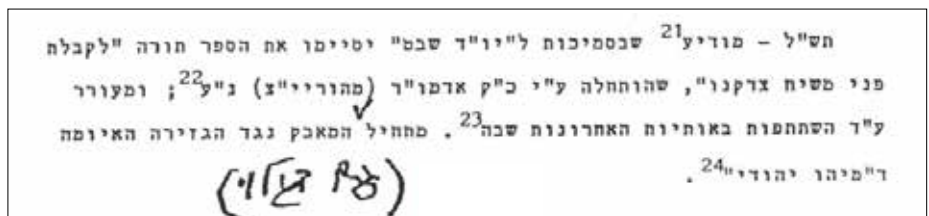
Ultimately, the Rebbe said, the Jewish people are Hashem’s *Am Segula* (special people); as Rashi explains, we are like a treasure of precious stones and pearls. Precious stones and pearls, the Rebbe pointed out, are always few and far between. The Jewish people are a small nation, and making Eretz Yisroel awash with non-Jewish immigrants would not change that reality.<sup>12</sup>

## HANGING ONTO CHAIRS

Much of the Rebbe’s criticism was directed towards the Mafdal, the National Religious Party which remained part of Golda Meir’s government (and the subsequent ones) while this law remained in effect. At that time, they held 12 seats in the Knesset, and five of their members served as ministers or deputy ministers. It was staffed by religious Jews, many of whom had a connection to the Rebbe. Their leader was a *musmach*, Dr. Yosef Burg, who was married to a descendent of the Alter Rebbe and had visited the Rebbe in *yechidus*.

Some fifteen years earlier, their party had left the government in protest when Bar-Yehuda tried to include gentiles as Jews, but this time they remained silent. Each silence, of course, came with an excuse, and many of the Rebbe’s *sichos* would dwell on those.

Once, for example, Golda Meir threatened to remove marriage from the auspices of the chief rabbinate and establish civil marriage if they insisted on



IN THE “SHALESHELES HAYACHAS” (BIOGRAPHIES OF THE RABBEIM) PUBLISHED AT THE BEGINNING OF HAYOM YOM, IT IS WRITTEN THAT IN THE YEAR 5730 THE REBBE “BEGAN HIS CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE TERRIBLE DECREE OF MIHU YEHUDI.” THE REBBE ADDED A PARENTHESIS AFTER THE WORD “BEGAN”—(גם) “ALSO PUBLICLY”. I.E., THE REBBE PRIVATELY FOUGHT AGAINST THE DECREE BEFOREHAND.





SOVIET IMMIGRANTS ARRIVE IN ERETZ YISROEL, 5731.



A MEETING OF THE 'MAFDAL' KNESSET MEMBERS IN 5734.  
DR. YOSEF BURG IS SEEN THIRD FROM THE LEFT.

*giyur kahalacha*. The Rebbe laughed at the suggestion; civil marriage wasn't a possibility because the Muslim and Christian religious authorities would never allow it—and the government was always careful not to offend them.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it was quite ironic; the government would never dare legislate “Who is a Christian,” or “Who is a Muslim”; it was obvious that religious matters be left to religious authorities. But somehow the Knesset (with its collection of Muslims, Christians, Communists and what-not) felt itself worthy enough to determine “Who is a Jew.”<sup>14</sup>

The Rebbe once retold a cynical line that was said by one of their representatives, a play on the *possuk* “*Hashamayim Kis'i v'ha'aretz hadom raglay*” (the Heaven is my seat and the earth is my footstool): “*Hashamayim?* Should I care about Hashem? *Kis'i!* I care about my seat! *Ha'aretz?* Should I care about the *shtachim* (the Jewish people's hold on the territories)? *Hadom raglay!* My position is more important!”<sup>15</sup>

The term *heseg dati* which they initially used to describe this law was derisively repeated by the Rebbe countless times. It became almost synonymous with “*chilul Hashem*.” Whenever there was a development in Eretz Yisroel that contravened halacha, the Rebbe would say, “and now we have a new *heseg dati*...”

Ultimately, these politicians were forced to drag their beliefs in the dirt in the hope of retaining their seat at the government table. “What type of chair is it?” the Rebbe said, “It's not a chair that a person sits on—it's a chair that sits on the person! Usually, the person is in control of the seat, but in this instance, the chair is gaining full control over their person.”<sup>16</sup>

## VAAD L'MAAN SHLEIMUS HA'AM

After the Six Day War in 5727, Kfar Chabad hosted its first famed Bar Mitzvah for children of fallen soldiers.

It was a very impressive event. It was attended by top members of society, had a wonderful Chassidic atmosphere, and was a profound experience for the children.

One distinguished newspaper correspondent was deeply touched. Yehuda Paldi had grown up as a *yeshiva bochur* in Hungary, but the Holocaust had shaken his *emuna*. Now, after attending the event, he found himself on a plane to 770 and on a journey that would bring him back to Yiddishkeit. Reb Yehuda, or Harav Paldi as he soon became known, became very devoted to the Rebbe's causes. When the issue of *Mihu Yehudi* arose and *Vaad L'maan Shleimus Ha'am* was established, the Rebbe suggested to Reb Efraim Wolff that Rabbi Paldi stand at its helm.

The Vaad wasn't officially a Lubavitch institution; the Rebbe wanted the fight for *Mihu Yehudi* to be a Klal Yisroel endeavor, not associated with a specific group. The Vaad drummed up support among other organizations like Agudas HaRabbanim in America and Agudas Yisroel in Eretz Yisroel, and worked hard to keep the issue on the front burner.

Rabbi Paldi's right hand man was Rabbi Yitzchok Yehuda Holtzman, currently the Vaad's director.

“Rabbi Paldi was a professional,” says Rabbi Holtzman. “He knew exactly how to use every opportunity to draw attention to *Mihu Yehudi*.”



## RABBI PALDI

Rabbi Paldi dedicated the rest of his life to tirelessly campaigning for *giyur kahalacha*.

One incredible moment occurred at the Yud-Tes Kislev farbrengen in 5737. After speaking about *Mihu Yehudi*, the Rebbe announced that present was a Jew who deals with this issue with *mesirus nefesh*, and asked that he say a few words; “As the local *minhag* is to announce, ‘*git men dem vort tzu Reb Chaim Yehuda...*’” In a scene that rarely repeated itself, the Rebbe handed over his microphone to Rabbi Paldi.

During his speech, Rabbi Paldi made subtle hints regarding the monetary burden that the committee was carrying. When he finished, the Rebbe said, “It seems that he is a *greener* (an uncomfortable immigrant) and therefore only hinted about the money,” so the Rebbe reminded everyone about the importance of giving *tzedakah* to the cause.

On 26 Cheshvan 5743, Rabbi Paldi passed away, and his *matzeiva* included, “He dedicated his life for Yiddishkeit, and especially for *Mihu Yehudi*.”

When the Rebbe saw a picture of the *matzeiva*, he commented that *Mihu Yehudi* had a negative connotation; if the *rabbanim* would deem it halachically permissible to change it, the Rebbe recommended “*giyur kahalacha*” instead.



RABBI PALDI SPEAKS AT THE REBBE'S FARBRENGEN, 20 KISLEV 5737

“One time, for example, we prepared an elaborate presentation in the Knesset to show how Reform rabbis perform intermarriages alongside priests. In those days, videos were generally only shown in movie theaters, but we invested immense efforts to show the Knesset a video of a Jew and gentile marrying under the auspices of a rabbi and priest. The images shocked everyone, including the most left-leaning members of the parliament.

“We once orchestrated a collection of one million signatures to present to the government supporting the call for *giyur kahalacha*. We once held a massive rally at the Binyanei Ha’uma, attended by the Gerrer Rebbe, protesting the law. Most importantly, we pushed and pressured politicians of all parties to take on this cause; to present bills to change the law, and to pressure the Prime Minister to support them.”

## WHEN NOBODY CARED

Reb Shmuel Chefer, another member of the Vaad, was once part of a delegation to obtain the signature of an elderly *Poilisher* rebbe on a statement regarding *Mihu Yehudi*. To see him, they needed the approval of his son, who later became rebbe himself.

“We came to the Beis Midrash where the son was giving a shiur, and asked for permission to meet with his father, the rebbe. He lifted his head, rolled his eyes, and said, ‘There’s no need; it’s not *unzere fleish*.’”<sup>17</sup> It was of no concern to him, because it would not affect his own community.

This essentially reflected the stance of many *frum* Jews at the time. *Poilisher* Chassidim were apathetic because there was minimal risk of it affecting their own insular communities; *misnagdim* were in the time-period where they began opposing anything that came from the Rebbe, and the Mafdal party argued that the situation could have been far worse.

It would soon become evident that the “minimal risk” was a falsehood.

Reb Yisroel Grossman was the Rosh Yeshiva of Karlin and Tomchei Temimim in Kfar Chabad. He was once scheduled to do a *siddur kiddushin*



1. AN APPEAL TO RABBANIM WORLDWIDE TO PROTEST THE DECREE OF "MIHU YEHUDI" SIGNED BY DOZENS OF JEWISH LEADERS IN ERETZ YISROEL, UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE VAAD.
2. A NOTICE PUBLICIZING ONE OF THE MANY RALLIES HOSTED BY THE VAAD L'MAAN SHLEIMUS HA'AM.

when he received an anonymous note, advising him to check the *yichus* of the *chossan*, a student in a *chasidische* yeshiva in Meah Shearim. The note sounded absurd, but it kept bothering Rabbi Grossman until he called the *chossan's* father and asked to speak with him.

Even before the conversation began, the father burst into tears. During the war years, he quickly admitted, he had hidden with a non-Jewish family. One of the daughters wanted to marry him, and out of loyalty or gratitude, he could not refuse. They moved together to Eretz Yisroel and settled in Meah Shearim. He was too ashamed to reveal her origins, and so she never converted. The *chossan* was a *goy*.<sup>18</sup>

During many *sichos* of *Mihu Yehudi*, the Rebbe hinted to this (or perhaps a similar) story. "*Ba dir in Yeshivah lernem goyim!*" (you have non-Jews studying at your yeshiva), the Rebbe cried out.<sup>19</sup> How could you say it won't affect you, if even Meah Shearim had a gentile Yeshiva *bochur* unbeknownst in its midst? An open door policy for non-Halachic converts would—over time—create an unmitigated disaster for *yuchsin*, one which would ultimately affect everyone.

That disaster wasn't long in coming.

## THE TRAIN CONVERSATION

Reb Shloimke Maydanchik was a legendary *chossid* in Eretz Yisroel. Always with a bright smile and a witty saying, he was a key activist in all the Rebbe's endeavors, beloved by politicians, *rabbanim* and simple people; he was the mayor of Kfar Chabad, and all



A MILLION SIGNATURES PROTESTING THE DECREE BEING PRESENTED TO PRIME MINISTER YITZCHAK SHAMIR. LEFT TO RIGHT: REB ZUSHE WILMSKY, REB BERKE CHEIN, REB SHMUEL CHEFER AND REB BERKE WOLFF.





REB SHLOIMKE MAYDANCHIK IN HIS TRAIN CONDUCTOR UNIFORM SPEAKS WITH MR. MOSHE SHARETT ON A VISIT AT KFAR CHABAD.

the while, also a full-time train conductor.

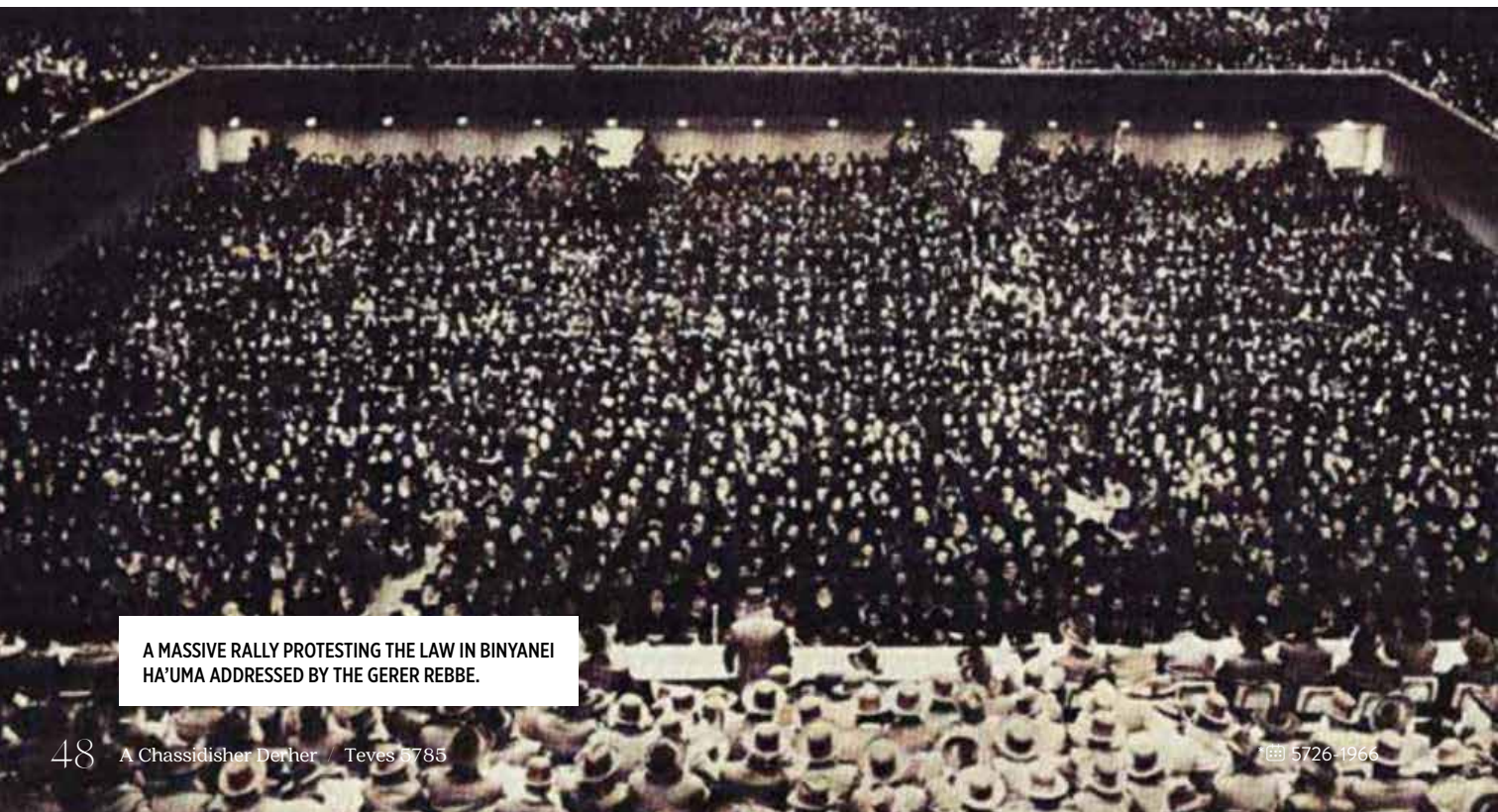
One day, Reb Shloimke was given a new assistant, a recent immigrant from Russia. Reb Shloimke was Russian himself, and as they chatted in their native tongue, the new assistant told him the story of his wife's conversion:

When they first arrived from Russia to Vienna (where many of the new immigrants were processed), he mentioned to the official that his wife was not Jewish, and the official replied, "No worries; let's just record her as Jewish, so we won't have issues later..."<sup>20</sup>

This was one of the earliest indications of a controversy that became known as "*Giyurei Vienna*."

Beginning in 5726, a very slow trickle of Jews had begun to emerge from the Soviet Union, but as the Rebbe's campaign for *Giyur Kahalacha* began, the trickle became an overflow. Over the next few years, tens of thousands would arrive in Eretz Yisroel, and the question of Who is a Jew became more relevant than ever.

News began to trickle to Eretz Yisroel that non-Jewish immigrants were undergoing conversions during their short stay in Vienna. But who was behind those conversions? Nobody seemed to know. The Vaad L'maan Shleimus Ha'am began to investigate, and many of their reports to the Rebbe



A MASSIVE RALLY PROTESTING THE LAW IN BINYANEI HA'UMA ADDRESSED BY THE GERER REBBE.

are published in the *Yimei Temimim* series.

At first, they were claimed to be under the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate. When Chief Rabbi Unterman published a denial, claims were made that there were local *rabbanim* involved. Everything seemed very suspicious. New immigrants reported going through a conversion process they themselves didn't understand, and some—like the wife of Reb Shloimke's assistant, skipped the process altogether.

It quickly became evident that the Rebbe's warning was coming to fruition. Immigrants with non-halachic conversions—which the Mafdal had claimed were almost non-existent—were now arriving in massive numbers.

## THE PRESSURE CAMPAIGN

As the early 5730s progressed, the Mafdal politicians began to feel the heat. As the only religious politicians in the government, they held the key—by threatening to leave the coalition, they could compel Golda Meir to support *giyur kahalacha*, or at least demonstrate their own personal commitment to Torah with a refusal to be a part of such a travesty.

They didn't appreciate the limelight, and neither did Golda Meir or the rest of her government. Until then, Chabad was very popular in Eretz Yisroel. Many politicians and leaders

### A KEY VOTE

One key moment in the fight was when an amendment was proposed by Knesset member Shlomo Lorincz of Agudas Yisroel to put "*kahalacha*" back into the law. The vote was scheduled for the eve of Rosh Chodesh Av 5732.

Mafdal was under tremendous pressure from the entire Jewish world to vote for the amendment, but Golda Meir insisted that they adhere to their coalition agreement to support the government's decisions. The day before the vote, Mafdal held a marathon twelve-hour meeting to decide what to do. Knesset member Professor Avner Shaki, who served as Deputy Minister of Education, presented a ruling from the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Unterman that they were obligated to vote for the amendment. In response, several other members sought a ruling from the Sephardi Chief Rabbi Nissim, who permitted them to abstain.

Ultimately, eleven of Mafdal's twelve Knesset members abstained, but Avner Shaki voted for the amendment. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported, "His defection was considered a moral victory by the amendment's supporters. Dr. Shaki and Herut's Menachem Begin drank a vodka toast after the vote, the vodka sent by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in New York."

The government and Mafdal responded ruthlessly. They quickly fired him from his position, and he was removed from the party list before the next elections.

He was evicted from his government-owned apartment, and he lost his car and driver. But he became an immediate hero among the amendment's supporters.

Dr. Shaki had never before visited the Rebbe, but he was now invited to come for *yechidus*. The Rebbe showed him much attention for his courage, and supported him for many years.

His removal from power had an interesting post-script.

Dr. Shaki was convinced that his political career was over, but the Rebbe didn't agree. The Rebbe told him that his "step away" from politics was like taking a step back before jumping a great leap. He would ultimately return, and reach even higher than before.

Incredibly, he was asked to return to the Mafdal in 5744, and in 5748 he was elected to lead the party.



PROFESSOR AVNER SHAKI VISITS THE REBBE FOR DOLLARS.

CHAIM BARUCH HALBERSTAM MA JEM 2620





THE KNESSET HOLDS A VOTE ON THE ISSUE OF MIHU YEHUDI, 5743.

enjoyed visiting Kfar Chabad and also coming to the Rebbe for *yechidus*. Just three years earlier, the entire country had read front-page reports about the Rebbe's calming messages before the Six Day War. But now, Chabad was taking a real stance on issues they didn't like. They began to threaten to stop funds that were helping Chabad in Eretz Yisroel grow.

In the *sichos*, the Rebbe addressed the threats—and laughed at them.

“I was born and raised in a Communist country,” the Rebbe reminded them, “and as the eldest son of the Chief Rabbi of Yekaterinoslav, I would occasionally need to spar with the Yevsektzia, who liked to harass, insult, and offend and so on. But I wasn't *nispoel* from them, and I won't be *nispoel* now either. In fact, no matter how hard they try, they will never achieve the Yevsektzia's level of diabolical creativity...”<sup>21</sup>

During one Shabbos farbrengen, the Rebbe revealed that things were so far gone that a new ‘threat’ had arrived: “Since I ‘*koch zich*’ (am passionate about studies) in Rashi, and they say I introduced a new approach to learning it and it is very meaningful to me, someone—who based on his age should have a white beard and is considered a leader—threatened that if I continue to raise the issue of *Mihu Yehudi*, he will refute my explanations of Rashi!”

Hearing the outlandish threat, the entire 770

burst out laughing, and the Rebbe continued. “I also laughed when I first heard this, but later I realized it was not a joke; he actually meant it! But at least, I'll have some benefit—to refute my explanation, he will actually have to learn Rashi...”<sup>22</sup>

## THE LATER YEARS

Sadly, as the years progressed without the correction of the law, more and more non-Jews immigrated to Eretz Yisroel. Meanwhile, the government became occupied with a new “achievement” — giving away land to the Arabs.

From the late 5730s, when the Camp David accords began to take shape, the Rebbe's *sichos* about Eretz Yisroel pivoted towards *Shleimus Haaretz*. The issue of *Mihu Yehudi* was still mentioned by the Rebbe many, many times, but it didn't occupy the same central place it had in the early 5730s.

In later years, the Rebbe instructed Shluchim to avoid the issue altogether. The Reform movement and Jewish Federations were using *Mihu Yehudi* as fuel in their fights with some Shluchim; local Jewish newspapers would argue that “Chabad doesn't think you are really Jewish.” In a *sicha*, the Rebbe said that it was not the role of Shluchim to fight the wars of Yiddishkeit in Eretz Yisroel. There are many good and necessary things, the Rebbe explained, but as the



ONE OF THE LAST PUBLIC MENTIONS OF MIHU YEHUDI WAS TO REB SHMELKEH HALPERT AT DOLLARS IN 5750. PICTURED HERE, REB SHMELKEH SPEAKS WITH THE REBBE ON 26 ADAR I 5752.

(Russian) saying goes, “*pan tu pan, no nye moi*, the master is a master, but not mine.” A shliach has one responsibility: to spread Yiddishkeit in his hometown *b’darkei no’am uvidarkei shalom*.<sup>23</sup>

There were even instances where the Rebbe specifically told Israeli politicians to focus on *Shleimus Haaretz*. When Cabinet Secretary Elyakim Rubinstein came to see the Rebbe by dollars, the Rebbe spoke to him at length about *Shleimus Ha’aretz*. When he raised the issue of *Mihu Yehudi*, the Rebbe smiled and responded, “For you, it’s better not to be involved in *giyur kahalacha*. Leave that to others. Your job is to make sure that *af shaal*—not a single inch—is relinquished, not spiritually and not physically.”<sup>24</sup>

One of the last mentions of *Mihu Yehudi* was in a conversation with Reb Shmelkeh Halpert, a Knesset Member from Agudas Yisroel. When he mentioned the thousands of non-Jews who had arrived from the former Soviet Union, the Rebbe replied, “Lots of things have since happened, and כיון שננטעה נטמעה”

referring to the Rambam’s statement that Eliyahu Hanavi will identify who is a Kohen or Levi, but not those who have a problematic status like a *mamzer*; those are considered “lost” into the Jewish people.

The Rebbe continued:

“*Ze velen dos fardinen*, they will gain, because Eliyahu Hanavi will come to be *mekarev*, not the opposite; *mamleches kohanim v’goi kadosh* refers to every Yid.”<sup>25</sup>

However, the *Vaad L’maan Shleimus Ha’am* had the Rebbe’s clear directive to continue the fight. “Instead of fighting in the Knesset,” says Rabbi Holtzman, “the Rebbe told us to continue the fight through pressuring the Chief Rabbinate. The fight is not over; today, when the country is flooded with non-Jews registered as Jews, everyone can see how true were the Rebbe’s holy words—calling for *giyur kahalacha*.” **T**

1. Manitoba Law Journal 53, 1970, “WHO IS A JEW?”

2. Igros Kodesh vol. 18, p. 209.

3. Yimei Temimim vol. 4, p. 354.

4. Toras Menachem vol. 70, p. 9.

5. As heard from Reb Shmuel Chefer.

6. Toras Menachem vol. 62, p. 354.

7. Toras Menachem vol. 60, p. 400.

8. Toras Menachem vol. 59, p. 388.

9. Toras Menachem vol. 71, p. 234.

10. Toras Menachem vol. 59, p. 386.

11. Toras Menachem vol. 59, p. 383.

12. Toras Menachem vol. 61, p. 37.

13. Toras Menachem vol. 69, p. 168.

14. Toras Menachem vol. 69, p. 68.

15. Sichos Kodesh 5734 vol. 1, p. 417-8.

16. Toras Menachem vol. 75, p. 327.

17. Interview with Menachem Zigelboim, 23 Iyar 5767.

18. Ki Karov Magazine issue 46, p. 9.

19. Toras Menachem vol. 65, p. 76.

20. Yimei Temimim vol. 5, p. 66.

21. Toras Menachem vol. 66, p. 378.

22. Toras Menachem vol. 68, p. 411.

23. 24 Teves 5749.

24. 21 Cheshvan 5750.

25. 2 Shevat 5750. For explanations on the application of this ruling, see Kovetz Ha’aros Boston, 11 Nissan 5750 p. 17.