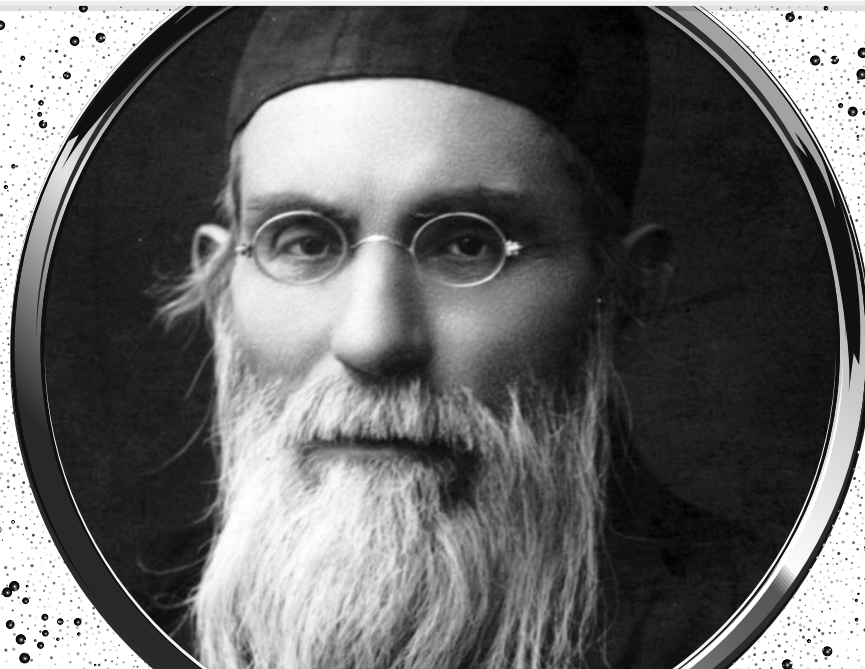


# The Alter of Slabodka

## Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel זצ"ל



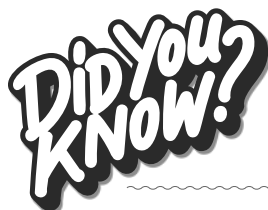
Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel was born in 5609/1949 in Rasein, Lithuania. Orphaned when he was young, he was raised by an uncle. The *rav* of Rasein saw young Nota Hirsch's potential and sent him to the yeshivah in Kelm, where he became a *talmid* of the Alter of Kelm, Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv.

Seeing that the lure of Haskalah was claiming many *bachurim*, the Alter felt that only a program of Torah and *mussar* could save the yeshivos. Though the introduction of *mussar* into the

standard yeshivah curriculum was controversial, time would prove him right. The Alter's primary focus was *gadlus ha'adam* – the greatness of man. He taught his *talmidim* that each had unlimited potential and could reach true greatness in Hashem's service. Many of his *talmidim* internalized his message and they went on to become the next generation of Torah leaders. As Rav Shach once said, "All the Torah that exists in Eretz Yisrael and America today is an outgrowth of Slabodka."

Rav Nosson Tzvi was involved in several yeshivos before opening his crown-ing glory, the yeshivah of Slabodka, in 1882. When a *machlokes* broke out, the Alter didn't want to get involved, so he left and started a new yeshivah, Yeshivas Knesses Yisrael.

In 1924, when the older *bachurim* in Slabodka were threatened by the army draft, the Alter moved with them to Chevron, where he led the yeshivah until his death in Yerushalayim in 5687/1927.



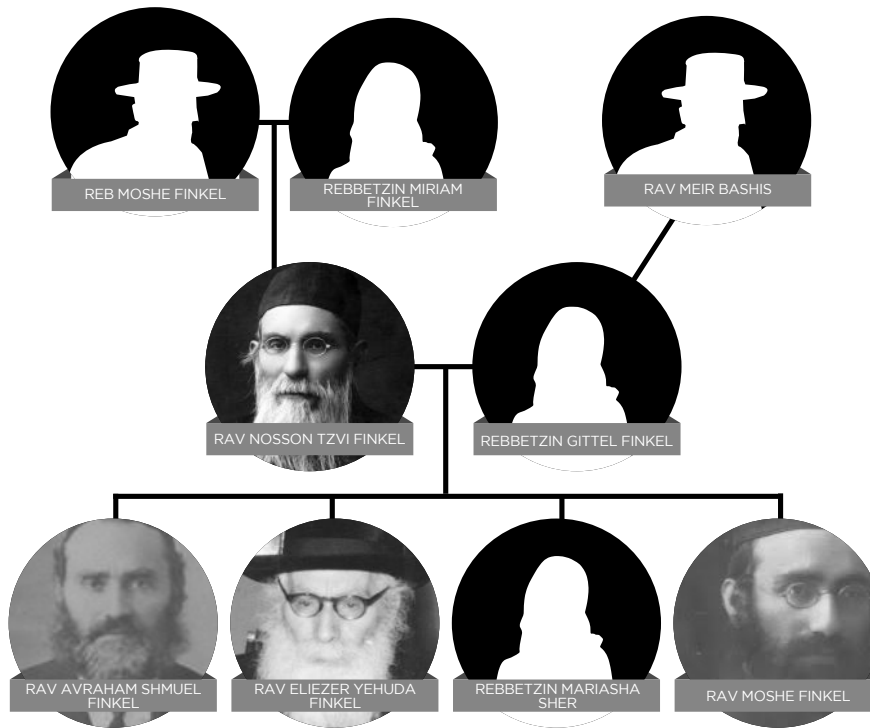
The Alter was so humble, he refused to accept any official position in Yeshivas Slabodka. His *talmidim* felt they had to address him by a title, so they gave him the name *Der Alter*.

Even after the Alter built Slabodka, he would go back to his mentor, the Alter of Kelm, to receive *tochachah*. When asked why, he responded, "People who don't receive *tochachah* are liable to grow moldy."

The Alter went to Eretz Yisrael to establish Yeshivas Slabodka-Chevron when he was already 75! In those days, that meant a long, hard ship voyage. The Alter only let a few students know when he was coming because he didn't want a grand welcome.

He signed his name *Hatzafun*, the Hidden One, because he wanted to remain hidden and anonymous. *Hatzafun* is also an acronym (out of order) for his name: **H**irsch **N**osson (**N**ota) **T**zvi **F**inkel. After the Alter was *niftar*, his *talmidim* collected his *shmuessen* and published them as the *sefer Ohr Hatzafun*.

## Family Tree



Rav Nosson Tzvi was the son of Reb Moshe and Miriam Finkel. He married Gittel, the daughter of Rav Meir Bashis, the son-in-law of Rav Eliezer Gutman, one of the leading *rabbanim* of Kelm. Rav Nosson Tzvi and Rebbetzin Gittel's children included R' Avraham Shmuel, R' Eliezer Yehuda, Mariasha and R' Moshe.

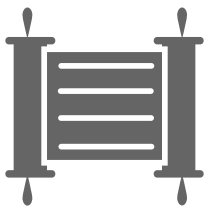
Rav Avraham Shmuel went together with the yeshiva to Chevron, where he served as *maggid shiur*.

Rav Eliezer Yehuda, commonly known as Rav Leizer Yudel, was sent with a group of other *bachurim* by the Alter to strengthen the Mir Yeshivah. Eventually, he married the daughter of the Mirrer Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Elya Baruch Kamai. After Rav Kamai's passing, Rav Leizer Yudel became *rosh yeshivah* and the Mir grew tremendously. During World War II, Rav Leizer Yudel stayed in Europe until the Mir students were able to flee to Shanghai, then he left for Yerushalayim where he re-established the Mir. After he was *niftar*, his son Rav Binyamin Beinush became *rosh yeshivah*.

Mariasha was the wife of Rav Yitzchak Eizik Sher, who took over as *rosh yeshivah* in Slabodka when the Alter moved to Chevron. After World War II, Rav Yitzchak Eizik rebuilt Slabodka Yeshivah in Bnei Brak, together with his son-in-law Rav Mordechai Shulman. Rav Moshe Finkel served as *rosh yeshivah* in Slabodka and moved together with the yeshivah to Chevron but was tragically *niftar* during his father's lifetime.

Rav Avraham Shmuel's son, Rav Eliyahu Finkel, immigrated to the United States, where his grandson, another Nosson Tzvi Finkel, was born. When Nosson Tzvi was a teenager, he met his great-uncle Rav Leizer Yudel, who convinced him to come learn in Mir-Yerushalayim. Eventually, Rav Nosson Tzvi became the *rosh yeshivah* of Mir-Yerushalayim after Rav Binyamin Beinush.

## SOME OF THE ALTER'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS:



In 1881, the Alter helped establish Yeshivas Telshe. He convinced a wealthy philanthropist to donate money and persuaded Rav Meir Atlas to start giving *shiurim* there.

In 1882, the Alter founded Yeshivas Slabodka, where he helped many *bachurim* develop into *talmidei chachamim* and leaders. Some of his students and the yeshivos they led include Rav Reuven Grozovsky (Beis Medrash Elyon), Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky (Torah Vodaas), Rav Aharon Kotler (Kletzk and Lakewood), Rav Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman (Ner Israel), Rav Yitzchak Hutner (Chaim Berlin), Rav Chatzkel Sarna (Chevron) and Rav Eliezer Menachem Shach (Ponovezh).



In 1924, the Alter moved part of Yeshivas Slabodka to Eretz Yisrael and re-established it in Chevron. This was the first time such a large European yeshivah moved to Eretz Yisrael, and it paved the way for other yeshivos to follow. (After the tragic Chevron massacre in 1929, the yeshivah moved to Yerushalayim, where it became known as Yeshivas Chevron.)



In 1897, the Ridbaz, *rav* of Slutsk, Russia, asked the Alter to establish a yeshivah there. The Alter sent 14 of his best *talmidim* together with one of the Slabodka *roshei yeshivah*, Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer. This *chashuv* group became known as the *Yad Hachazakah* (the *gematria* of *yad* is 14). Eventually, Rav Aharon Kotler, a student of the Alter and son-in-law of Rav Isser Zalman, became *rosh yeshivah*, moving the yeshivah to Kletsk, Poland, due to the Russian Revolution.



In 1921, the Alter founded the Slabodka Kollel, with Rav Eizik Sher as *rosh kollel*. Anyone who wanted to join had to agree to learn for five years and then look for a position as a *rav*. This *kollel* drew top *yungeleit* from all over Europe, including Rav Dovid Leibowitz, Rav Shmuel Leib Svei (father of Rav Elya), and Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky.





**THE ALTER LOVED** his *talmidim* like a father. Once, he was having a conversation with one of his *talmidim*, Rav Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman, when his own son Rav Leizer Yudel came home after a long absence. The Alter nodded at his son but continued speaking to his

*talmid*. An astounded onlooker said to the Alter, "Didn't you notice?! Your son came home!" The Alter responded, "But this *talmid* is also my son."

The Alter tried to hide his *tzidkus* as much as possible. However, his *talmidim* got glimpses of his greatness. During World War I, the Alter fled to Kremenchug with most of the yeshivah. Once, the Alter was davening while there was heavy fighting outside. In the middle of *Shemoneh Esrei*, a large chandelier crashed down to the floor. After the Alter finished, he turned around, saw the chandelier and asked what had happened.

A short while after the Alter's move to Chevron, he faced tragedy when his beloved son Rav Moshe became sick. He was taken to Shaarei Tzedek Hospital in Yerushalayim before Sukkos, and the Alter

spent Sukkos in Yerushalayim to be with him. On Chol Hamoed, his son passed away. The Alter's *talmidim* tried to hide the bad news from him, but he grew suspicious and took down a *Shulchan Aruch* and concluded that it was forbidden to cry. He then summoned the strength to stay calm and happy throughout the rest of Yom Tov, even leading the *bachurim* in song on Simchas Torah. Right after Havdalah, he broke down sobbing.

Toward the end of his life, the Alter was only able to eat soft foods. His students took turns preparing a special porridge he could eat. Once, when one of his attendants was away, another student tried to prepare the

porridge, but he didn't know how to cook it properly and the Alter wasn't able to eat it. When the first student came back, he immediately whipped up a new bowl of tasty porridge. The Alter took one bite and spit it out, screaming that there was poison in it. No one could understand what had happened.

A few hours later, the Alter explained that it had contained the poison of *ga'avah*. The first student

had felt smug and superior over being able to prepare it properly after the other student had failed. That tasted like poison to the Alter!

*The first student had felt smug and superior over being able to prepare it properly after the other student had failed. That tasted like poison to the Alter!*

## Try This!

The Alter of Slabodka taught his students to dress in a dignified and neat manner. Since they were created *b'tzelem Elokim* and focused on studying *dvar Hashem*, they had to carry themselves with the dignity appropriate for their exalted role.

The same applies to you! You're a *ben/bas Yisrael*, which makes you royalty and gives you unlimited potential. Before you start your day, make sure your clothes are clean and your hair looks neat. Stand straight and get ready to start your day learning Hashem's Torah!

### THE ALTER'S DVAR TORAH

#### *Giving According to Their Greatness*

Many people understand *chessed* as fixing another's problem. When someone looks sad, it's an opportunity to make him happy. However, *chessed* is really treating others according to their greatness. When someone is truly important, deep inside he wants to receive kindness from others like an important person would. Our job is to see others for who they really are and give them (to the extent that we can) what they want deep inside – even when the other person does not think he needs so much.

The *mishnah* (*Bava Metzia* 83a) relates that someone hired Jewish workers and agreed to provide them with food. Rabi Yochanan ben Masya noted that Jewish workers deserve the very best, because they are descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Therefore, if one commits to give them "food" without specifying what kind, there is no end to the delectable foods they should be getting. And even though poor workers would be happy with just a small meal, deep down, due to their true greatness, there is a desire for more, and *chessed* means one should fulfill that desire.

Similarly, when Avraham Avinu was visited by the three *malachim*, he served them extremely generously (*Bava Metzia* 86b). Even though these *malachim* appeared to Avraham as idol-worshipping travelers, Avraham knew that they were created in the image of Hashem (see *Avos* 3:18). It was Avraham's job to see who they truly were, understand what they would want, and give them according to their true worth.

(*Sefer Ohr Hatzafun*, "Chessed HaTorah")