
Aaron Menahem Mendel Guterman, the *rebbe* of Radzymin

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RABBI AARON MENAHEM MENDEL GUTERMAN (1860–1934), the *rebbe* of Radzymin, is remembered for many things, not least among them the after-effects of his setting up a screen to separate men and women worshippers at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. He was born on 18 Elul 1860, following a very difficult and dangerous labour. He was the son of Rabbi Solomon Joshua David Guterman, and grandson of Rabbi Jacob Aryeh Guterman (1792–1874), the founder of the Radzymin dynasty who had been a disciple of Jacob Isaac Horowitz, the Seer of Lublin, Rabbi Simchah Bunem of Przysucha, and of Rabbi Isaac Kalish of Warka. Rabbi Jacob Aryeh wrote *Divrei aviv* (1824) and *Bikurei aviv* (1826), and he was renowned as a miracle-worker. Nevertheless, during his grandson's difficult birth, when it became a question of life or death and it was believed that only divine intercession could save the infant, Rabbi Jacob Aryeh was closeted in his study and the door had to be broken in. He complained, 'It is a pity that you disturbed my devotions. This infant will grow into a "great tree" but will, alas, produce no fruit' (that is, he predicted his new grandson would remain childless).

The baby was named after Reb Menahem Mendel Morgenstern of Kotsk (Kock), who had died on 22 Shevat of the previous year. The lad received instruction from his grandfather and father, and was further influenced by Rabbi Abraham ben Ze'ev Nahum Bornstein of Sochaczew (1839–1910) and Rabbi Solomon Zalman Schneersohn of Kopys (1830–1900), the author of *Magen avot*.

In 1882 Guterman married Matele, the daughter of Rabbi Jacob Isaac Rabinowicz (1843–1903) of Biała Podlaska, and he lived in his father-in-law's house for several years thereafter. When his father died, on 15 Shevat 1903, Guterman succeeded him as *rebbe* of Radzymin near Warsaw, where Jews constituted 55 per cent of the population. Much of his life was spent in the public eye; he was an educator, organizer, and tireless worker for the community. Like the *rebbe* of Radomsk (Radomsko), Guterman became affluent when many of his hasidim named him their business 'partner'.

He founded an organization called Shomrei Shabat Kodesh Vehadat, dedicated to the observance of the Sabbath, and became a familiar Friday afternoon figure, urging Warsaw's Jewish shopkeepers to close their shops for the Sabbath. His

friendly, fatherly approach and affable manner won him a wide circle of admirers. No *rebbe* was so informal in his ways, so easily accessible, or less aware of the dignity of his status.

Guterman also established Tomkhei Asirim (Prisoners' Aid Committee) to see that the Jews in Polish prisons received kosher food. It provided kosher facilities for Jewish students living in Praga (a suburb of Warsaw) as well. During the Russo-Japanese War he arranged for five railway wagon-loads of *matsot* to be sent to Jewish soldiers serving in the Far East, particularly in Port Arthur.

In 1912 Rabbi Guterman established a yeshivah in Radzymin. Known as Yeshivah Orhot Hayim, it was one of the first hasidic yeshivot in Poland, and despite his many other duties, Guterman rarely missed giving his students their daily lecture.

From 1914 on he lived in Warsaw, and his advice and help on Jewish matters was frequently sought by Polish ministers and members of the Sejm, whom he visited frequently. He vehemently protested against the law requiring Sunday rest, the Polish state monopolies, the pernicious Polonization policies, and the anti-Jewish boycott sponsored by the Green Ribbon League and later by the Endeks. The government regarded Guterman as the unofficial representative of Polish hasidic *rebbe*s, and he was even received by Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935), the leading figure in the Polish government after 1926. In 1931 Guterman urged Piłsudski to curb the antisemitic right wing of the Endecja (National Democrats) and to limit its activities.

Besides these activities, Guterman was also in close contact with Rabbi Johanan Twersky of Rotmistrovka (1802–95), Rabbi Joshua Roke'ach of Bełz (1825–94), and Rabbi David Moses Friedman of Chortkov (Czortków), son of Israel of Ruzhin. He was an active participant in the Va'ad Harabanim (rabbinic congress) discussions.

In September 1919, when Sir Stuart Montagu Samuel (1856–1926) visited Poland as the president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and as a member of the British government mission to investigate 'antisemitic disturbances that have recently occurred in Poland and in the territories under Polish occupation', Guterman attended the farewell banquet that was arranged by Dr Samuel Poznański. The *rebbe* appealed to Henryk Erlich (1882–1941), a Bundist leader who had a hasidic background and was the son-in-law of the historian Simon Dubnow, to see that the Bundist soup kitchens prepared kosher food during Passover, and he even offered to defray the cost from his own funds.

Although birthday celebrations were rare among hasidim, in 1920, when Guterman reached 60, he celebrated the day with a festive meal, justifying it from the *Midrash rabbah* (on *Toledot*): 'There is rejoicing when a righteous person is born and there is double rejoicing in the case of a righteous one who is the son of a righteous one.' As further justification, he added, 'I am following the traditions of the *rebbe* of Chortkov, who celebrated his birthday with a festive meal'.

Like his father, the *rebbe* was president of the Meir Baal Hanes Foundation, which distributed funds to the needy in the Holy Land. As part of his duties for this foundation, Guterman visited the Holy Land in Elul 1928 to settle a dispute over the distribution of funds. Before his visit was over, at the end of Sukkot, Guterman became the cause of a serious incident. It was at this time that he set up a canvas screen at the *kotel hama'aravi* (the Western Wall) to separate men from women worshippers. Although he erected the screen at his own expense, he did it without any prior consultation with the authorities. Both the Muslim and British leaders were incensed: the Muslim authorities considered that it violated the status quo, and Douglas Duff, a British police inspector, instructed the person in charge of the High Holy Day services to remove the screen. When on the following morning (24 September) the screen was still in place, the police began to remove it as the congregation was intoning the solemn Yom Kippur prayers. Enraged at this desecration of the Holy Day, the worshippers attempted to stop the police, and a number of Jews were injured in the ensuing scuffle. The *rebbe's* action later served as a pretext for the Arab–Jewish riots in 1929, when 133 Jews were killed and 339 wounded in Jerusalem and Hebron.

As a consequence, Guterman took part in a protest meeting that drew close to 10,000 people. The affair became the subject of a British White Paper issued on 9 November 1928, which stated that ‘the Government considers that the removal of the screen was necessary’. The Shaw Commission, appointed by Lord Passfield, the British Colonial Secretary, was charged to ‘enquire into the immediate causes that led to the recent outbreak in Palestine and to make recommendations as to the steps necessary to avoid a recurrence’. In 1930 the League of Nations set up an International Commission under Eliel Lofgren, the former Swedish minister for foreign affairs, to resolve ‘the problem of the Wall’. It decided that the ownership of the Western Wall was vested in Arab hands and that the area was subject to certain restrictions. The use of benches, chairs, and screens was strictly forbidden.

While Guterman was in the Holy Land he met a number of notables, among whom was Meir Dizengoff, the mayor of Tel Aviv, as well as Hayim Nahman Bialik, the poet.

When his forty-year childless marriage ended in divorce in 1922 (despite his wife’s opposition), the incident aroused widespread publicity among hasidim. Two years later, Guterman married the daughter of Rabbi Jacob Moses Safrin of Komarno, but, true to his grandfather’s prediction, that marriage also remained childless.

In 1932 Guterman left Warsaw and returned to Radzymin. He was also rabbi in Nasielsk at that time.

The *rebbe* was the author of *Kuntras hinukh habanim* (published in Warsaw in 1913 and later reprinted in Israel in 1968), a work opposing secular education for Jewish youth and advising them to concentrate exclusively on the study of the

Talmud and rabbinics. Guterman pointed out that the stated position of Gentiles and secularists encouraging Jewish children to acquire a secular education so they could engage in other professions was a fallacy; it was a pretext to capture Jewish souls.

Guterman also wrote *Tsemah Menahem* (Warsaw, 1930, and reprinted in Jerusalem, 1973), a commentary on the Passover-eve liturgy, the Haggadah, as well as *Alim litrufah*, novellae on page 21a of tractate *Betsah* of the Talmud (Warsaw, 1936). This work was edited by Rabbi Joseph Eliezer Morgenstern, son of Rabbi Abraham Pinchas Morgenstern. Some of Guterman's discourses in *To'afot rom* (Warsaw, 1936) were edited by Rabbi Abraham Nierman (1853–1942, a member of the Warsaw rabbinate). *To'afot rom* also contains customs and a responsum to Rabbi Zevi Ezekiel Michelson. Other discourses written by Guterman are in Rabbi Joseph Mandelkorn's *Ma'ayan Yosef* (Jerusalem, 1972). Unfortunately, many of the rebbe's other manuscripts were destroyed in the Holocaust.

Guterman suffered from severe diabetes, which caused him to visit the spas in Truskawa, Otwock, and Karlsbad frequently. He was treated for diabetes by several doctors in Warsaw and Otwock, among whom were Drs Soloveichik, Flessberg, Goldenberg, and Wolf. While suffering from an acute attack of pneumonia (which would cause his death at 3.15 a.m. on 9 Elul 1934 in Otwock), he said: 'The Almighty is Righteous in all His ways and Pious in all His deeds' (Psalm 145: 17). Although Guterman died intestate, his estate, which included two houses in Warsaw (14 Pawia and 14 Pokarna) as well as villas in Radzymin and Vishkov (Wyszków) and two properties in Safed, was estimated to be worth half a million zlotys.

The rabbi's only sister married Rabbi Zevi Hirsch Morgenstern (1857–1927), who was the first rabbi in Lomazy, south-west of Brest-Litovsk and was later a rabbi in Warsaw. Their daughter Esther Glicka married Rabbi Nehemiah Alter, and had two daughters and two sons.

Rabbi Jacob Aryeh Morgenstern (1877–1943), great-nephew of Guterman, continued the dynasty in Radzymin. Morgenstern was also the rabbi of Vishkov and son-in-law of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Amshinov (Mszczonów, south-west of Warsaw). Rabbi Abraham Pinchas Morgenstern (1876–1943), brother of Jacob Aryeh, also helped carry on the tradition. Abraham was the rabbi in Siedlce from 1926, and, following the death of his great-uncle, who had been the rebbe in Warsaw at 7 Zamenhoffa, he became the rabbi there. In Warsaw many of the Radzymin hasidim gave him their allegiance. Jacob Aryeh, his eight sons, and his brother Abraham all perished in the Holocaust.

Rabbi Yehiel Meir Morgenstern, a relative, was responsible for publishing *Bikurei aviv* (London, 1943), the work of the Radzymin Morgenstern's famous ancestor Rabbi Aaron Menahem Mendel Guterman.

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