

Torah SPARKS

Harav Yoizef of Liska, *Zt"l*

Half a Century Since His *Petirah* (5731-5781)

By: Pinchas Ben Tzvi

28 Shevat marks 50 years since the passing of the previous Liska Rebbe, Harav Yoizef Friedlander, *zt"l*, who, following the path of his illustrious forbears, brought the Torah and *ahavas Yisrael* of Liska to a new generation in post-Holocaust America. In honor of this anniversary, we glimpse back into his remarkable life, his holy origins that he carried with him all of his days, and the awesome legacy he left behind.



The previous Liska Rebbe, Harav Yoizef Friedlander, *zt"l*.

There is a vort that the Liska Rebbe would often repeat in the name of the Sar Shalom of Belz, zy"a, which gives us a glimpse into his guiding philosophy: The Torah states that Yosef HaTzaddik named one son Menashe because "Hashem has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home." And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, "Hashem has made me fertile in the land of my affliction." The question is, why would Yosef want to forget about his great father Yaakov's home?

The Belzer Rav explained that Yosef ended up in the land of Mitzrayim, a land of severe moral decay, a land so far spiritually from his father's home that he could have sunk into a great depression, knowing where he came from and where he was currently. Therefore, in order to prevent this from happening, Yosef HaTzaddik had to make himself forget about his father's home in order to be able to accomplish the goal to be "fertile in the land of my affliction" and establish a holy Jewish family.

This was what the Liska Rebbe kept before him con-

stantly, after the great losses of the Holocaust, when he was a lone survivor from his father's home and majestic court. But in order to rebuild and renew the majesty of yesteryear, he had to temporarily forget all this, and forge ahead to reestablish his family and court and not, chas v'shalom, fall into depression.

This understanding is a perfect encapsulation of the Rebbe's life, as he translated the teachings and the traditions of his ancestors, even as he emerged from the ashes of the Churban that consumed the life that he had previously known.

The Holy Liska Dynasty

Throughout Jewish Hungary, the name of Harav Tzvi Hirsh MiLiska, known as Rav Hershele Liska (1808-1874), *zy"a*, author of the *Ach Pri Tevuah* and *Hayashar V'Hatov*, was widely revered. He was one of the prized *talmidim* of the Yismach Moshe, and one of the earliest Chassidische Rebbes in Hungary, instrumental in broadening the Chassidic movement

in that country — and widely recognized as the leader of Hungarian Jewry during his era. He was widely renowned as a *baal mofeis*, his superhuman *tzedakah* and *chessed* were legendary and many of the great *tzaddikim* of Hungary were among his ardent Chassidim. As a *talmid* of the Yismach Moshe of Uhel, Rav Tzvi Hersh continued his *minhagim*, which are guarded by the Liska family to this day. His *tziyun* in the town of Liska, a site of great *yeshuos* for many, attracts thousands every year.

In his youth, he traveled to the great Chassidic masters of his time, such as Harav Yisrael of Rizhin, Harav Meir of Premishlan, and Harav Shalom of Belz, *zechusam yagein aleinu*. Later in life, he journeyed to the Divrei Chaim of Sanz, and enjoyed a particularly close relationship with him, visiting Sanz at least once every year. The Sanzer Rav's *haskamah* on *Ach Pri Tevuah*, in which he refers to the recently departed Rav Hershele as "*Aron HaElokim*," underscores the high esteem in which he was held.

Rav Hershele's son-in-law and successor was the Tal Chaim, Harav Chaim Friedlander, *zt"l* — widely known as a *Gaon* of epic proportions — who assumed the position of his father-in-law after his passing. His son, the third Liska Rebbe, Harav Tzvi Hirsh Friedlander, *zt"l, Hy"d*, who was named for his maternal grandfather, authored more than thirty *sefarim*. Out of all of them, he only allowed the printing of one — *Shaarei Hayosher*, which was later reprinted by his son in America. The rest would be annihilated in the great inferno that would soon consume so much of Hungarian Jewry.

A Scion Is Born

Yoizef was born in Liska in the year 1917, the youngest of the children of Harav Tzvi Hirsh Friedlander, and it was he who would carry the torch forward. Growing up in the cradle of Hungarian royalty, Rav Yoizef's greatness was foreseen in his youth. He was diligent

and he was deeply pious. In his youth, he learned under the tutelage of his illustrious father.

Once, as a young child in Liska, his father observed the way his son climbed up a tall tree and remarked: “*Yoizef kricht yetzt hoich in gashmiyus, s’vet nisht nemen lang biz er vet krichen maalah maalah b’ruchniyus*; now he is climbing high in *gashmiyus*; it will not be long before he will go very high in *ruchaniyus*.” He also said of his son that man is likened to the tree in the field; “Yoizef will fill bare trees with sweet fruit.”

He received *horaah* from some of the foremost *geonim* in Hungary, such as the Binyan Dovid of Uhel, the Mashmia Shalom of Niredhaus and Harav Eliezer Schwartz of Potok — who was also the *Dayan* in Uhel — *zecher tzaddikim livrachah*, who all lauded his Torah scholarship and his brilliance.

A World Gone Up in Flames

By the time it came time to marry, WWII was already blazing. Yoizef made his way to Budapest, Hungary. Among the other refugees was Harav Avraham Yehoshua Heshil Frankel of Hivniv-Lublin, a close descendant of the holy Chozeh of Lublin, and a *shidduch* was proposed between his daughter Nechama and the young *talmid chacham*.

Also in Budapest were the holy brothers Rav Aharon of Belz, *zy”a*, and the Bilgorayer Rav, *zy”a* (father of the current Belzer Rebbe, *shlita*). Nechama’s father asked his *mechutan*, the Bilgorayer Rav, to speak to the prospective *chassan* in learning. After testing the young man and perusing his *semichos* from Hungary’s Rabbanim, he agreed that he would be an appropriate *shidduch* for a girl from such an illustrious family, and the *shidduch* was finalized in the presence of his brother, Rav Aharon of Belz.

Then the *churban* came to Hungary, and its Jews were deported. Nechama’s father was murdered immediately upon their arrival at Auschwitz. Rav Yoizef suffered the war years in forced labor camps and disguised as a gentile in Budapest, but his extended family was deported to Auschwitz — along with so much of Hungarian Jewry, *Hy”d* — in 1944. This is where his father, brothers and their families perished *al kiddush Hashem*.

While the *chassan* and *kallah* thankfully survived, their entire families were murdered *al Kiddush Hashem*. The majority of their families were taken to Auschwitz — along with so much of Hungarian Jewry — in 1944, where their pure,

holy souls ascended to the highest place in *Shamayim*.

The story of how the *chassan* and *kallah* were reunited went as follows: After the war ended, the orphaned Nechama stayed with a family in Grossvardein, Romania. One day, the man of the house related a humorous story that had occurred that morning in shul: A young man who had also found himself in Grossvardein after the

of the prewar world — and many prominent Rabbanim of New York all came out in his honor. One *kabbalas panim* was announced by Chevrah Nachlas Tzvi on the Lower East Side. This shul was indeed founded in the name of Rav Hershele of Liska by immigrants who hailed from the Liska region and knew the holy *tzaddikim* of that court. One of them was Harav Yisroel Lebovitch, the Rav of the shul

he was returning from the *mikveh* on Shabbos morning, attired in his *shtreimel* and *bekeshe*. Unbeknownst to him, at the time no one ventured outdoors with a *shtreimel*. He encountered a Yid, broken by the war experience, who was puffing on his pipe — on Shabbos morning. The Yid, out of pure pain, was enraged by the sight of this Yid who dared to go on with his *Yiddishkeit*. He verbally accosted him and yelled, ‘I see you are the new Rebbe who moved into the neighborhood; do you want to bring Hitler here?!’ With love and patience, the Rebbe understood what pain the man was living through... and with that love, he succeeded in eliminating his antagonistic feelings to *Yiddishkeit* and bringing back a semblance of observance to that broken Yid in Boro Park of yesteryear.

The current Liska Rebbe spoke about his father’s decision to settle in Boro Park — something that was rare at that time, immediately after the *Churban* when most of the *she’eiris hapeitah* elected to go to the Lower East Side, Crown Heights, and Williamsburg. “It was very important to him to establish a shul that would stand as a memorial to his holy *zeides* whose tenure in Hungary had been brutally cut short, *Hy”d*.

“In hindsight, there seem to be two main reasons that he chose to settle in Boro Park. He had cousins, descendants of a brother of the Tal Chaim of Liska, fellow members of the Friedlander family, who said that they would help him with a *minyán* if he would come here. The second reason is that the Rebbeztzin, who had suffered so much in Auschwitz, desired the tranquility that Boro Park offered at that time.”

Establishing his shul in Boro Park did not go without adversity. He initially attempted to rent a home, but when the owner realized that he was going to make a shul there, he immediately objected. That is when the Rebbe realized that he would have to purchase a home. There was a real estate broker in Boro Park by the name of Reb Avraham Englard, and he showed the Rebbe some houses.

“The tradition of his *zeides* of being careful with *hasagas gevul*, and to have an *ayin tovah*, was strongly inherent in his choosing a home. There were so many properties that he declined, for one reason: “There are other big shuls in this vicinity...how I can take away from them?” Only after it was explained to him that “shul Yidden” and “*shtiebel* Yidden” were very different people, did he agree



L-R: The current Liska Rebbe, *shlita*; previous Liska Rebbe, Harav Yoizef Friedlander, *zt”l*, in discussion with Harav Moshe Feinstein, *zt”l*; Harav Sholem Frankel, brother-in-law of the previous Liska Rebbe, *zt”l*.

war was called up to the Torah. When the *gabbai* called him “*habachur*,” the man insisted that he be called up as “*habachur hachassan*,” as he had been engaged. The people in the shul were all smirking; did the young man really believe that his *kallah* was still alive after the *gehinnom* of the Holocaust?

But, the father said, the *gabbai* indeed called him up as he requested, “*Habachur hachassan Yoizef ben Tzvi Hersh*.” This led to their joyous reunion. They were married shortly thereafter, in Grossvardein, on 14 Av (the *yahrtzeit* of the Ach Pri Tevuah) in the summer of 1945. Their first son, Tzvi Hersh, today’s Liska Rav, was born the following year.

Rav Yoizef made his way to America, bringing with him the old brand of *Yiddishkeit*, bridging America with Liska of yore. He was welcomed here with much anticipation as is evident from many of the *Yiddishe* papers of the time which heralded the arrival of this *banan shel Kedoshim*, a remnant

Levushei Mordechai at 636 East 6th street, who married into the Liska family, and he too asked the Yidden of New York to come and meet his illustrious cousin.

In addition, there were other receptions in the Galicianer shul in Cleveland and elsewhere, where people were invited to hear him lecture in Torah, and to relate his terrible war experiences.

Transplanting the Liska Court

In 1947 — relatively very early for a Chassidic Rebbe — he made the move to 1449 50th Street in Boro Park, where the shul remains today, and he infused those Yidden of Boro Park with Torah and *Chasidus*. But his defining attributes were overflowing *chessed* and *ahavas Yisrael* — which that broken postwar generation needed so desperately.

To this end, an anecdote is related by the current Liska Rebbe, Harav Tzvi Hersh Friedlander, *shlita*. “One of the first Shabbosos after my father moved into Boro Park,

to open. He also received tremendous support from the Chernobyl Rebbe, whose shul was around the corner. Not only did the Rebbe not object to his coming to the neighborhood, but he saw in the Liska Rebbe a necessary infusion to the growth of Boro Park — and even sent a prominent *mispallel* to Liska.

An interesting anecdote from those early days in America: When the Liska Rebbe and his Rebbetzin (who was a scion of the Belzer dynasty) went to greet the previous Skverer Rebbe upon his arrival, they noticed that he was wearing an interesting type of frock. The Rebbe explained that he had a *bekeshe*, but he would not wear it during the week. The Liska Rebbe immediately took off his *bekeshe*, saying, “I have enough *bekeshes* at home.”

Forging Hearts

The shul on 50th Street became a gathering place of healing for so many Yidden from the surrounding area. His *drashos* consisted of exhortations to a life of Torah and *yiras Shamayim*, but with his trademark love with which he caressed their souls. The first benches for the shul came from the nearby Etz Chaim Yeshivah on 13th Avenue and 50th Street.

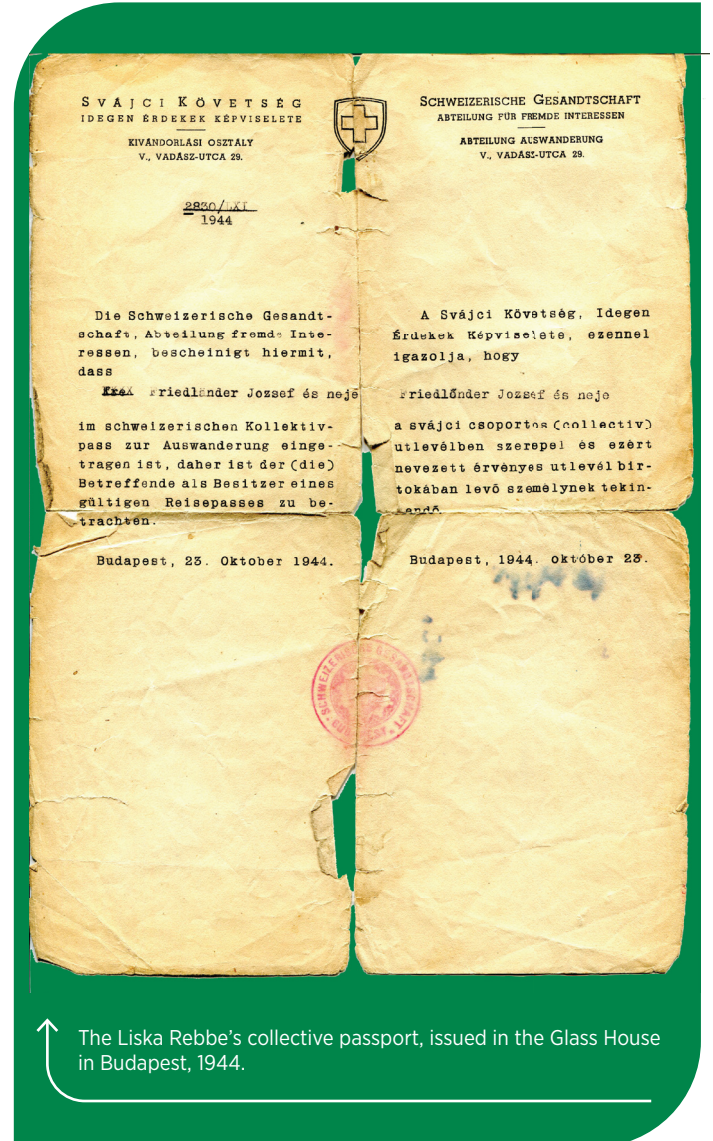
The Liska Rebbe would often reminisce about the founding of his shul: “There were two welcomes that I got when I arrived here. The first person said — forget about the old home. “You are no longer in Liska, this is America... no one is standing in line to give you *kvitlach* like they did for your father; go

get a job,” he urged. The other *kabbalas panim* was more encouraging; they said, “True, there is no more *shtetl* of Liska here, but the shul is the replacement of *shtetl*. You are now Liska Rav and you need to purchase a house with a basement where you will continue the *mesorah* of your forefathers. And perhaps as a *parnassah*, you can even sell wine like in *der heim*?” (Liska was part of the Tokay wine region.) But continuing the venerated Liska tradition of inspiring and uplifting his fellow Yidden was more important to him.

Rav Yoizef’s *tefillah* was legendary; he was an exceptionally heartfelt *baal tefillah* who warmed the hearts of all those who heard him, and immediately on those first Yamim Nora’im, several *minyanim* came to hear the Rebbe, even from the most distant areas of Boro Park.

Speaking of *tefillah*, it is important to note that Rav Yoizef — for whom the legacy of his predecessors was of utmost importance — reprinted his father’s *Shaarei Hayosher* on *sefer Tehillim* on American shores.

And then there were his deeply impassioned and inspiring *drashos* and *shalosh seudos Torah*, geared to that unique postwar generation. Only the Liska Rebbe — who had witnessed and experienced the greatest possible loss — could identify with the brokenness that his brethren felt, and yet encourage them to remain strong in their *Yiddishkeit* and establish families in the way that their families did back home.



The Liska Rebbe’s collective passport, issued in the Glass House in Budapest, 1944.



Left: The previous Liska Rebbe, Harav Yoizef Friedlander, with his son, the Hivnover Rebbe.

Right: Harav Yoizef Friedlander dancing with *ybl”c* his son, the current Liska Rebbe.



The Rebbetzin

As noted, Rebbetzin Nechama was descended from the Chozeh of Lublin; but in addition to this, she counted among her ancestors the Kedushas Levi, the Maggid of Koznitz, the Apta Rov and the Rebbe Harav Elimelech of Lizensk, *zechusam yagein aleinu*, among others. She was a true pillar at the side of the Liska Rebbe in all their years together.

The following story occurred as the war reached her family, when they were in Munkacs, and is a testament to her love and selflessness. It was 1944, and the Frankels knew it was only a matter of time before they would suffer the same fate as their brethren across Europe. Nechamah managed — for a price — to join a car ride that was escaping Munkacs; its passengers intended to head for Romania, and eventually, England. Nechamah paid the smuggler with an expensive coat and bid her father farewell. She left home and watched as her father waved goodbye in the doorway, and she stepped into the car. Shortly after they began driving away, Nechamah became overcome with emotion, remembering her father standing in the doorway and waving goodbye. She asked the driver to turn around immediately and take her back home.

As she entered, her father looked up, and said, “*Chumele, vus tist di? What are you doing?*” She replied, “*Ich ken nisht iberlazan di Tateh alein; vas vet zein mit di Tateh vet zein mit mich: I cannot leave Tateh alone; whatever will happen to him shall happen to me, too.*”

Incredibly, after the war, the driver of that car returned Chumele's coat that she had left behind.

She grew up in Vienna, a big city, so she had a very broad-minded, cosmopolitan view of the world, and she spoke many languages. Yet she was a classic Rebbetzin of yesteryear, and always remained steadfastly true to her upbringing. She was very proud of her lineage, and always had the image of her forebears in front of her.

The Liska Beis Medrash was the center of the Rebbetzin's life. She was very protective of the Liska name, and did all she could to ensure that Liska would continue to serve *Klal Yisrael* in America as it had as a Chassidic dynasty in pre-war Europe. The shul was her life. She cared for it with a sense of responsibility and love.

For her, the clock stopped ticking on the day her husband passed away. For the next 47 years, everything in her life was centered on



Left: Harav Yoizef Friedlander as a *bachur*.
Right: Harav Friedlander in the early days after the war in Boro Park.

her memories of her late husband, and even her discussions with her children were centered on keeping the memory of her husband alive.

Indeed, upon her passing three years ago at the age of 101, she was buried alongside the Rebbe on Har Hamenuchos.

The Liska Legacy Continues

The Liska shul on 50th Street continued to serve as a magnet for Chassidic warmth for more than two decades of the Rebbe's lifetime. Rav Yoizef dedicated himself wholeheartedly to his mission. This is illustrated by a story that his daughter, Rebbetzin Perel Gittel Leifer, relates: “A neighbor who was moving out of the area offered the Rebbe to purchase his home as an investment. The Rebbe responded: ‘I am in *rabbanus*, not real estate.’ Such was his singular devotion to his mandate, and his reverence for his forefathers’ court.”

50 years ago, on 28 Shevat, Harav Yoizef of Liska, returned his soul to his Maker, after suffering a sudden heart attack, leaving behind a legacy of Torah, *avodah*, and *ahavas Yisrael*. His son, Harav Tzvi Hirsh Friedlander, *shlita*, succeeded him as Rebbe of Liska, and continues to carry on the legacy of his forbears, as does Harav Yoizef's other son, Harav Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, the Hivnover Rav, *shlita*. They are the bridge from a rich and holy legacy begun by their ancestor, the Ach Pri Tevuah, and brought to America by their illustrious father, Rav Yoizef of Liska, *zy" a*.



Kivrei Tal Chaim, the Ach Pri Tevuah.