

Eighty Years Later: **Four Generations of Pride**



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Sara Stock-Shemtov as a student

“I’m a Bais Rivkah girl.”

While these are common words to hear today, eighty years ago they were not. At the turn of the century, Jewish education in the United States was almost nonexistent, and there were even fewer places of learning for girls. Indeed, the matter of educating young women was stigmatized culturally. It was widely believed that girls did not need exposure to philosophy or theology; instead, any education provided was geared toward vocational skills.

This changed in 5702 (1942), but first, a little background.

Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson was a legendary chossid who moved to the United States in the mid-1920s (5680s). Several years later, he returned to Riga, Latvia, to visit the Frierdiker Rebbe. “It was a most memorable period in my life,” he wrote in a 1967 (5727) article in the *Yiddishe Heim*. “For a chossid to travel to see his Rebbe from America in those days was rare indeed.”

During his visit, he had several audiences with the Rebbe. To his surprise, the Rebbe told him of a new and encouraging development, “which he knew would inspire and affect me.”

The Rebbe told Rabbi Jacobson that in Riga there were already fifty eight girls studying Chassidus. They were divided into three groups and each group was taught by a learned chossid. Rabbi Jacobson wrote later that he was shocked to discover that girls were learning Chassidus. “Women are obliged, of course, to study and know accurately whatever pertains to the *mitzvahs* they must observe, and that in itself is a considerable amount of Torah... But women learning Chassidus, the deepest facets of Torah, the mysteries of Kabbalah...”

The Rebbe explained to him that the girls were studying texts relevant to daily life, and that they were successful in their studies. “The oldest group has shown great progress... and more so, we have seen that the learning has had a positive, beneficial influence on the attitudes and behavior of the students,” the Rebbe said.

In the United States, the Rebbe continued, this would also be beneficial. Thus, upon Rabbi Jacobson’s return, a learning group was formed in Brooklyn. The first students were daughters of Lubavitcher chassidim, who gradually brought their friends.

This was the initial effort of the Frierdiker Rebbe to expose young women to the philosophical foundations of Jewish life. It would take some sixteen years for another dramatic event to take place, one that changed the lives of countless women for decades to come.

Just after Sukkos in 5701 (1941), the Frierdiker Rebbe informed Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Isaac Hodakov that he would fund a girls’ school in Crown Heights for half a year. He requested that it be named after his maternal grandmother, Rebbetzin Rivkah, with whom he shared a close relationship.

At the Rebbe’s behest, Rabbi Jacobson joined the effort to open more classes. It was no easy matter to persuade shuls to give use of their premises to a girls’ school since it was a strange and new concept “even for observant Jews.”

The Frierdiker Rebbe penned stories he’d heard from her, and in his introduction to those memories, he wrote, “I had the great merit to know my maternal grandmother, the well-known righteous woman, ‘for as the person is, so is her strength’ [based on Shoftim 8:21] in mercy, kindness and immense knowledge. [She was] a refined woman, unparalleled in her pleasant character and unfathomable humility.”

A few days later, Rabbi Hodakov told the Rebbe



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that there were families in Crown Heights expressing interest, but there was additional demand in the neighboring community of Brownsville, known at the time as the “Jerusalem of America,” where many Lubavitchers and religious Jews resided. The Rebbe agreed and asked that the school be established as soon as possible.

Two weeks later, Rabbi Hodakov reported that a class had been opened there and that there were plans to open an additional class in Boro Park. Rabbi Hodakov wrote in his diary that upon hearing this the Rebbe was very happy.

Together with locals in Boro Park, plans were made. While the initial classes – in Brownsville, and other locations across Brooklyn – were solely in the afternoon, the Frieddiker Rebbe wanted the Boro Park

branch to operate as a full-day program. At a meeting with Borough locals, Rabbi Yehudah Goldberger and Maurice Pappenheim, the Rebbe quoted, “And your beginning shall be small, but your end shall increase exceedingly (Iyov 8:7).”

When one of the attendees requested the Rebbe’s blessing for the school, he answered, “There has to be concrete action that can serve as a vessel for blessings.”

In 5702, the first class in Boro Park opened in a Chabad *shul*, Tzemach Tzedek, where Rabbi Eliyahu Yachil Simpson was the rabbi. His daughters served as its first teachers.

As the Boro Park branch became more established, and support from Lubavitch was no longer necessary, the movement reallocated its support to other branches that had fewer means. The school, which started in a small *shul* on 46th Street, later changed its name to Bais Jacob of Boro Park, today one of the largest girls schools in the United States.

Soon, there were half a dozen locations of Bais Rivkah operating in the afternoon. Later, when Rebbetzin Shterna Sarah passed away, some were renamed Bais Sarah. Under the newly established Merkos L’Inyonei Chinuch, Rabbi Hodakov and the Frieddiker Rebbe’s son-in-law, the Rebbe, oversaw and directed the fledgling school.



The first full day Bais Rivkah school in Brownsville, 1946.



Establishing a Day School

The Frierdiker Rebbe wanted some of his chassidim to be further involved, and he called in Rabbi Jacobson and told him, “Yisroel, organize Bais Rivkah schools, one or two, for girls. Our mutual concern has always been the study of Torah and Chassidus with boys in yeshivos, but here in America, we have to do everything.”

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He understood their resistance, recalling his initial reaction to the Rebbe’s discussion with him about the girls studying Chassidus back in Riga. The Rebbe, he said, acutely recognized the needs of the time in light of the role women played both in the home and outside, “and the increasingly negative influence of the environment.”

Over the next three years, in New York and beyond, there were twenty-five branches of Bais Rivkah afternoon schools. Still, the Rebbe wanted more. His goal was to establish a multitude of full-time day schools for girls. After much labor, Rabbi Jacobson successfully established the very first Bais Rivkah day school in 5705, located in Brooklyn.

In 5707, a supporter of the school, Murray L. Eigenberg, wrote, “I have seen it grow from its very em-

bryonic stage when there were only several children, housed in an inadequate building, until now when our children number close to five hundred, including eight afternoon classes.”

At first, it was an intense struggle to recruit students. Rabbi Jacobson approached the Stock family, hoping they’d agree to send their ten-year-old daughter Sarah to the newly-founded day school.

Yaakov Ephraim and Feiga Stock were Amshinover chassidim who lived close to Rabbi Jacobson’s *shul* in Brownsville. Yaakov would daven there frequently during the week, and joined many *farbrengens* at the *shul*. They agreed, and Sarah was enrolled with two

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other students.

The school consisted of only a single class, so the following year, Sarah attended a school further from home. Nonetheless, Sarah would proudly declare, “I am the first Bais Rivkah girl.”

As the school continued to grow, Rabbi Jacobson increased his efforts, never settling for the status quo. Despite the financial burden, he accepted girls into the school who could not afford to pay tuition.

“Through tremendous efforts,” the 5707 dinner

On a daily basis, she looks out for students who may have fallen between the cracks and works on integrating them into the student body. She also looks for creative ways to make Chassidus more tangible in their lives.

journal reported, “hard work and stubbornness, and mainly thanks to the good and wide educational program of our schools, under the supervision of the best qualified Jewish and English teachers and principals, the Bais Rivkah Schools have made such phenomenal progress and have thus attained their present achievements.”

A New Era

In 5711, a year after the passing of the Frierdiker Rebbe, the Rebbe accepted *nesius* of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, including Bais Rivkah. During that time, the Rebbe wrote, “I join those who do mitzvos in taking part in the special fundraising for

Bais Rivkah, to rid it of debt. It is my hope that every one of my fellow Lubavitchers do the same for the institution the Rebbe established and was precious to him. He will arouse mercy for them and their families, and they should be blessed with all their material and spiritual needs.”

Five years later, in 5716, Sarah Stock became engaged to Mendel Shemtov, son of legendary chassidim Rabbi Bentzion “Bentche” and Rebbetzin Esther Golda, shluchim in London, England. The matchmaker was Rabbi Shlomo Aaron Kazarnovsky, whose daughter married Sarah’s brother. From a distance, when the Shemtovs learned their son was dating an American girl from a non-Lubavitch family, they were not pleased, fearing that she was too modern.

After Sarah met several of her fiancée’s relatives in the New York area, they gave good reports to his parents. In addition, Sarah wrote them a letter in Yiddish, and they were impressed with her beautiful handwriting and manner of expression. “Imagine what the world was hearing about America at the time,” they said, “but we realized Sarah must come from a special family after receiving her eloquent letter.”

When it came to their daughters’ education, Mrs.



First grade class, 1964. Standing on the left is Mrs. Teichtel, and Mrs. Feiga Duchman is top row, third from the right.

Duchman says, it was a given that she and her sister Bassi Treitel would attend Bais Rivkah. She cherished her time at the school. Despite the diversity among the student body – girls with American, Russian, or Polish parents, including students from non-Lubavitch or marginally traditional homes – their class was unified and friendly.

The school was still expanding and soon moved to Church Avenue. She fondly recalls many of the teachers, but the most memorable was Morah Chana Gorovitz. “She was so devoted and had mesiras nefesh for the school. She knew everyone and everything. She was, in a positive sense, a powerful woman.”

In all her years of learning at the school, she says, Morah Gorovitz rarely missed a day. Mrs. Duchman recalls how shocked the students were when Gorovitz returned to teaching after her son’s bris, a mere eight days postpartum.

With this knowledge, she wholeheartedly sent her daughters to the same institution.

One daughter, Chevy Kogan, lives today in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where her brother Rabbi Levi Duchman is a shliach.

While her husband is a businessman, Mrs. Kogan is a Rebbetzin at the local Chabad House. “I am a Bais Rivkah girl so naturally I got involved in the community,” she says. “Even if you are not on official shlichus, you automatically assume that responsibility.”

Her education in Bais Rivkah, Mrs. Kogan says, provided the foundation for who she is today. “The Bais Rivkah graduate,” she noted, “is well-rounded, high energy, and has a very positive outlook on life.”

Her sister, Mushy Stambler, says that at the school she learned to be accepting of everyone, despite their background. This, she said, is the impact of women learning Chassidus, as the Frierdiker Rebbe so desperately wanted. “Chassidus makes the world a positive place, and this message was something Bais Rivkah constantly encouraged.”

Today, all of Mrs. Duchman’s daughters have graduated the school, setting out on *shlichus*, and it is now her grandchildren attending. Shani Azimov of South Brunswick, New Jersey, was a student at Bais Rivkah High School.

As a student coming from a small school, she says, the transition was drastic and intimidating, but as a proud, fourth-generation Bais Rivkah girl, she was committed to making it work.

While she was always involved in shlichus, Bais Rivkah, with its hundreds of students, was “a happening, eventful, exciting place. There was always something going on, and always an opportunity.”

At Bais Rivkah, she says, you are not just a student; you are a leader and a project manager. Now, as one of twelve official student shlucho, she is giving back to the high school, which has grown to six hundred and fifty students. On a daily basis, she looks out for students who may have fallen between the cracks and works on integrating them into the student body. She also looks for creative ways to make Chassidus more tangible in their lives.

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With countless guests frequenting her home, she says that Bais Rivkah girls stand out. “The school has a special *bracha*,” Mrs. Duchman remarked. “It was, is, and will always be very special. Honestly, it is a big *zechus* for our family to have had four generations educated there.”

We can do this. In a world of entitlement and self-centeredness, let us help our children develop the traits that truly define a Yid and a *chossid*: א חוש מיט א געשמאק א איד א טובה טאן ■

1. *Sefer HaSichos* 5699 p. 339

2. *Sichos Kodesh* 5741 Vol. 4, p. 144

3. *Shabbos* 31a

4. *Tanya* Ch. 32

5. *Based on teachings of the Baal Shem Tov*

6. 8 *Menachem Av*

7. 6 *Adar I*