

# OUR HEROES

## REB YITZCHOK NEMES (1924-2006)

*In honor of his yahrzeit on the tenth of Nissan*

By: Rabbi Michael A Seligson

Reb Yitzchok Nemes was a great Yireh Shomayim with refined midos. His entire life was an unbroken circle consisting of concern for others, being *mzake horabim* and involving himself in activities that sanctified Hashem's name in countries where few Jews lived. This came about as a result of his stamp business, which frequently took him abroad doing business with governments and private collectors.

He was known for his ardent devotion to *Mivtza Tefillin*, in which he would participate in any weather despite health limitations. He also financially supported different *Mivtzoim* around the globe.

Reb Yitzchok himself was a "firebrand saved from the fire". He was born into a distinguished family in Munich and spent his childhood in Helsinki, Finland. Reb Yitzchok was still a young boy when World War II broke out and his parents decided to leave Europe. His father, Reb Aharon, was a respected and influential businessman and devoted himself to helping refugees that had escaped to Finland. In 1941, the family boarded a ship for the United States.

### Miracle During World War II

The trip was a long and difficult one. The ship was bombed by the Germans and sunk. In a harrowing and dramatic rescue, passengers were picked up by small English boats and transported to Paru, an island off the coast of Denmark, the location of an English army base. On the night of the Pesach Seder, they were informed that they could leave and continue on to the U.S. Their ship was scheduled to leave on a Shabbos. And although the German bombs posed a danger to island residents, they postponed their trip and refused to board. Reb Aharon said, "Hashem has shown us great generosity until now; we only need to strengthen our *bitochon* in Hashem. We will merit leaving without the need to board a ship on Shabbos."

After two weeks, they were able to board another ship bound for the U.S. Over the course of time, it was revealed that the earlier ship had been bombed by the Germans with no survivors.

After their arrival in New York, the Nemes family merited to enter the Previous Rebbe's room for *Yechidus*. They told the Rebbe of their experiences and miraculous rescue. The Rebbe lifted up his holy hands and said that by *Hashgacha Protis* they saw revealed miracles on many occasions, in order to stress their obligation to publicize

to American Jews, the possibility of living with the eternal values for which they had sacrificed their lives in their homeland.

Reb Yitzchok continued learning in *Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim* in 770. When the Rebbe assumed the leadership, he became attached to the Rebbe with his heart and soul.



In 1957, he married the distinguished educator and communal leader, Ms. Zelda, the daughter of the *Chossid* Reb Moshe Zalman Kaminetsky, and together they built a *Chassidishe* home. Torah, greatness and many generous deeds for the benefit of the public and individuals were interwoven in this beautiful home.

### Stamp Dealer and the Rebbe's Advice

Reb Yitzchok's official business was printing and dealing in stamps. Reb Yitzchok was attracted to stamps collecting during his stay in Paru in World War II. He didn't attend school and had plenty of free time. He would visit the post office and help them stamp the letters. The governor of the island published 5000 stamps, and the director of the post office told Reb Yitzchok, "If you have money, it is worthwhile buying these stamps. In a short time they will be considered collector's items." Reb Yitzchok purchased one hundreds stamps. When he arrived in the United States, each stamp was worth \$50. In later years, their value increased. For financial reasons, the family sold the stamps at a profit. This marked the beginning of Reb Yitzchok's interest in stamps.

Although he dealt in stamps for busi-

ness, Reb Yitzchok utilized most of his days and nights for Torah and *Chasidus*, and especially for *Mivtzoim* to which he devoted himself money, body and soul. There were occasions when the Rebbe reminded him to attend to business first and then to *Mivtzoim*.

The Rebbe showed a great interest in the details of Reb Yitzchok's business. For

example, the Rebbe once advised him to travel to Paris where there was a great market for stamps. At times, when Reb Yitzchok was short of cash, the Rebbe would loan him money without a time limit for repayment. When Reb Yitzchok began his business,

the Rebbe gave him \$200 from the Previous Rebbe's fund, as a blessing. The Rebbe would ask Reb Yitzchok what he had bought and sold, would encourage him to travel to different countries, and many times advised him to increase his trips.

Through Rabbi Hodokov, chief of the Rebbe's secretariat with whom, Reb Yitzchok had a deep relationship, he would report to the Rebbe on his business trips to countries near and far. He merited receiving many directives and missions from the Rebbe. It was not only in one instance that Reb Yitzchok saw miracles and experienced *Hashgacha Protis*, Divine providence. The Rebbe once commented about Reb Yitzchok, that he was "melumad *bnisim*", well versed in miracles.

### The Baal Shem Tov of South America

His activities were many and colorful. He arranged for shipments of kosher food and Matzo for many Jews, and posted *mezuzas* on many doors, in addition to visiting the Israeli consulate in every country to which he traveled. After his *petira*, one of Reb Yitzchok's contacts recalled that he sent a letter to the Rebbe about Reb Yitzchok's activities, and he described Reb Yitzchok as the "The Baal Shem Tov of South

America". The Rebbe underlined these words three times. On another occasion, when Reb Moshe Kotlarsky visited the shul in Columbia, South America where Reb Yitzchok would daven on his trips, he was shown an empty chair. "This was Reb Yitzchok's place," he was told, "and no one sits in his seat."

### Saved From an Earthquake

On one occasion, when Reb Yitzchok was planning his trip to Nicaragua, he wrote to the Rebbe for a *Brocho* but did not receive a response. It was getting close to the time of departure, and there was still no answer from the Rebbe. Reb Yitzchok discussed his dilemma with Rabbi Hodokov, and Rabbi Hodokov told him that he would personally ask the Rebbe. Rabbi Hodokov returned from the Rebbe's room and told Reb Yitzchok that the Rebbe wanted to know all the details of the trip and the locations where he planned to stay. Reb Yitzchok sent in all the details and in a short while the Rebbe answered, "He should travel - but not now." Reb Yitzchok was surprised. He had never had such a response, but as a *Chossid* who followed the Rebbe's directives, he cancelled his ticket.

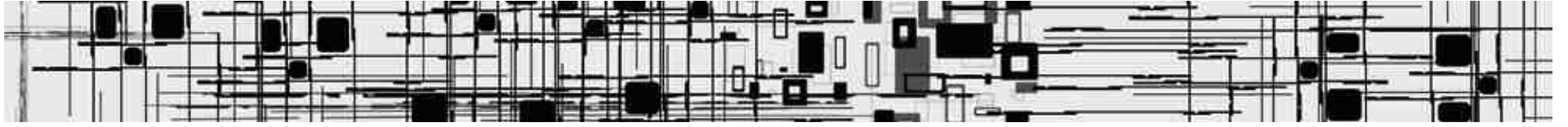
On *Motzoei Shabbos*, Reb Yitzchok turned on the radio to listen to the news and received a shock. There had been a terrible earthquake in Mangua, the capital city. Precisely on Friday night, when Reb Yitzchok had planned to stay in the hotel in the heart of the city, many quarters of the city had been destroyed. Tens of thousands of people were killed, in addition to the many wounded. After a short period of time, Reb Yitzchok decided it was time to fulfill the Rebbe's directive "He should travel", and so he arrived in Nicaragua, traveling through a city that was unrecognizable as a result of the damage from the devastating earthquake.

When he arrived at the post office, he was amazed to find it undamaged. He was greeted by the executive officer who told him, "You see what happened here. The stamp business is now secondary on our list of priorities. As a trustworthy friend, I grant you permission to go through our whole warehouse and choose whatever you want for a minimal symbolic price." Reb Yitzchok immediately filled his suitcases with precious material that he never had access to in the past.

### A dollar for Jewish soul in Guinea

An additional "Baal Shemske" story was told by Reb Yitzchok's son, Reb Menachem Mendel, as he heard it from a jeweler, Mr. Shmuel Shachne:

"I worked in jewelry in Central America. One day, I saw a religious Jew in the doorway of my office. Reb Yitzchok



was a stamp dealer and in response to a request, had come to Guinea to print stamps.

“Reb Yitzchok said that the Rebbe had given him a dollar and told him, ‘Surely you will be in the capital city and will find a Jewish soul who was born there and never left the city. Give this dollar to him.’

“Reb Yitzchok spent many days searching and remained unconvinced by the different business men who told him that there were no Jews in the city. Reb Yitzchok finally discovered a Jew named Solomon. When Reb Yitzchok entered his house, he stood still in shock. The house was full of idols and statues of all sorts, on the walls, the chests, everywhere. Some of them were owned by the husband, and a large part of them belonged to his wife, a Hindu. Reb Yitzchok invited Mr. Solomon to his hotel room, where he told him about his mission and gave him the Rebbe’s dollar and explained to him the great merit of receiving it.

“For Shabbos, Reb Yitzchok invited Mr. Solomon to share his meals in the hotel. For the first time in his life, Mr. Solomon heard Kiddush, and the Shabbos meal continued into the late hours of the night.

“A few days later, Mr. Solomon told Reb Yitzchok, ‘You can now enter my home; I removed all the sculptures and have fulfilled the verse, ‘The sculptures of their G-d’s you should burn in the fire.’ When Reb Yitzchok heard these words, he immediately gave Mr. Solomon the Rebbe’s picture and added, ‘I can give you this, since it is now appropriate to hang in your house.’ Mr. Solomon began observing Shabbos, putting on Tefillin every day, and also koshered his kitchen. In addition, Reb Yitzchok instilled in Mr. Solomon the knowledge that Moshiach was on his way to redeem the whole Jewish nation, and Mr. Solomon accepted this in a very serious and sincere way.

“When Reb Yitzchok left Guinea, I once went to visit Mr. Solomon. I met his wife who was very upset with Reb Yitzchok. She said to me, ‘You think my husband is a great and righteous person? It is all a joke. I found a suitcase under the bed in which he packed a nice shirt, new pants, a passport and American money. When I asked him about this, he evaded my questions but I understood. It seems that he found another woman in the United States, and he is planning to leave me and escape from here.’

“When Reb Yitzchok was informed, he did not lose time and immediately contacted Mr. Solomon, who told him, ‘You yourself told me that the Rebbe said that Moshiach is on his way, and you told me that one needs to live with

Moshiach and that the Chofetz Chaim prepared a full set of clothing for when Moshiach comes. Is something not in order that I prepared a suitcase of my nicest clothing, with a passport and money, in order that everything should be ready to greet Moshiach?!’

“Reb Yitzchok kept in close contact with Mr. Solomon for many years. He would send him Matzo for Pesach, as well as supplying the spiritual necessities on other occasions. One day, Reb Yitzchok received word that Mr. Solomon was nifter and that he left a will to be buried in accordance with Reb Yitzchok’s directives. Reb Yitzchok verified that the closest Jewish cemetery was in Venezuela. Arrangements were made immediately to transport the body to Venezuela, financed by Mr. Shachne of Belgium. On his matzeva was engraved: ‘The forgotten Yid who was not forgotten.’”

**Prophet Eliyohu’s Intervention**

To conclude with a miracle about which Reb Yitzchok said that there was no explanation, other than the Prophet Eliyohu’s intervention. Any funds over \$10,000 need to be declared when entering the United States. Not declaring excess money can result in harsh punishment. Reb Yitzchok told of a personal experience. “I arrived in the U.S. from Luxemburg and was detained by two customs agents who found bank checks worth more than \$10,000. I was unaware that bank checks needed to be declared. The two officers screamed at me and accused me of smuggling in undeclared money. No matter how much I tried to explain that I was innocent and was known for my honesty, it was to no avail. Their next step was to transfer me to the customs judge. This whole experience was very unusual and unpleasant. First, I was going to lose the entire sum of money. Second, this would damage my credibility and hurt my business. I asked to call my wife and they agreed. I was escorted by two officers with guns, as if I was a dangerous criminal. I told my wife that she should relay a message to the Rebbe and ask for a Brocho.

“They returned me to the room. Suddenly, after half-an-hour, a top official entered the room, stared at me, asked me my name and showed an interest in my case. After he listened intently to my story, he told me, ‘Don’t worry.’ He immediately called in the customs agents and told them, ‘It seems that there was an error here. The two officers again began screaming, ‘No! He knew everything!’ The official disregarded their argument and asked for the report, which he quickly reviewed and tore to shreds. The two officers looked at him as if they wanted to kill him. He asked them where my money was and having no choice, they brought in the money.



He returned it to me and instructed me to leave. A while later he disappeared. To date, I have no doubt that the Rebbe sent the prophet Eliyohu.”

In his last years, Reb Yitzchok was ill and home bound. On Shabbos Hagadol, the tenth of Nissan 5766, Reb Yitzchok’s Neshama returned to its Creator, and the world lost a Chossid and a righteous personality.

He left his wife, Mrs. Zelda Nemes, who was nifter within the year of his petira; For long and healthy years, his sons Reb Menachem Mendel, a director of Tzivos Hashem in New York; Reb Yosef, Shliach in New Orleans, LA; his

daughter, Mrs. Risha Greenwald, the wife of Reb Peretz Greenwald, Shlucha in Long Beach, California.

Yehi Zichro Boruch! May Reb Yitzchok, a dedicated Chossid to the Rebbe’s Mivtzoim, serve as the inspiration to concern ourselves with those in dire spiritual need who are yearning for connection to Hashem, and to see the positive light in every Jew whoever he may be, igniting in him the G-dly spark to remain burning forever.

We should speedily witness “The ones who dwell in the dust will awaken and rejoice,” with Reb Yitzchok among them.

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