

CBT Library Highlights: Reb Chatzkel

Reb Chatzkel: Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein: Guardian of Torah and Mussar

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Since we have just passed the yartzheit of Reb Chatzkel, you may want to consider borrowing this book from our shul library to learn more about this extraordinary man.

This book contains two stories simultaneously. The first one is the life and legacy of one of the greatest men of the Lithuanian yeshiva world of the 20th century. The second is the narrative of one of the most unusual and unforgettable episodes of the Holocaust, the rescue of the Mir yeshiva, the only Torah institution to escape intact from Europe, and its journey across Russia to Japan and China. These two stories are completely intertwined because of the forceful presence of Reb Chatzkel and how he rose to the task of saving his institution and his students.

Reb Chatzkel, known simply at “The Mashgiach,” served first in Kletzk under Reb Aaron Kotler and then in Mir under Reb Yerucham Levovitz and Rabbi Eliezer Yehudah Finkel (with a brief stop in Petach Tikvah in between.) After WWII broke out, the yeshiva moved from place to place ahead of the invading troops. At the end of the winter of 1941, the entire staff and students of the yeshiva obtained visas of transit through Japan, issued by the now famous Chiune Sugihara, and evacuated from Kovno to Vladivostok. From there they travelled by boat to Kobe, Japan and in August 1941 had arrived in Shangai on the Chinese mainland. Shangai was occupied by the Japanese and was severely bombed by the Allies after the war in Europe ended in 1945. Surviving any one of these dangers would be considered an open miracle, and yet the Mir escaped all of them and survived through the end of the war.

Throughout the years of war, hardship, danger, and travel, Reb Chatzkel insisted on two things. First of all, right from the first evacuation from

Mir to Lithuania, Reb Chatzkel insisted that the entire yeshiva stay together as a unit, even when there were opportunities for some but not all of them to obtain papers to go elsewhere. Second, also from the beginning, he set up a rigorous 24 hour learning schedule so that some boys were studying at all times of the day and night. Miraculously, all those who stayed with the group were alive at the end of the war. The author relates Reb Chatzkel's perspective on the situation:

"The Mashgiach understood that the Divine favor and protection they received hung upon a hairsbreadth. He fully realized that any lessening or faltering in their *avodah* would have the most dire and tragic consequences and that this was the true reality in which they lived during their years of exile...he warned those who considered separating themselves from the yeshivah that they would be taking their lives into their own hands - and which individual can trust in his own merit when the Destroyer has come in to the world?" (p. 250-1)

The yeshiva stayed in Shangai after the war, hoping to obtain visas to Israel, but finally relented to come to the United States. Reb Chatzkel left for Israel in 1949 and served first in the Mirrer Yeshiva and then in Ponevezh, passing away at 90 years old in 1974. His illustrious talmidim are too numerous to mention. Those who endured the war years with him became some of the Torah giants of their generation, as if the crucible of their experience distilled them down to their finest qualities.

This book was painstakingly researched using interviews with surviving family, students, colleagues, written documents and is fastidiously footnoted. One has to conclude that the details conveyed are completely accurate. That said, the biographies of great Torah giants are known 'never to say a discouraging word' about their subjects. Some readers have even characterized the genre as 'hagiography,' that is, whitewashing. Reading between the lines, one does feel that Reb Chatzkel was a severe personality, hard on himself and others in order to strive for perfection of character. For example, he refrained from speaking unnecessarily to others, even his own family members, when

not engaging in Torah study. This approach to life is consistent with his early study in the great *mussar* halls of Europe. How different from the friendliness we expect from our leaders today. However, I feel, to his credit, that his extreme piety and emphasis on character development served him and his students well. Extraordinary times create extraordinary human beings. Without his strength of character and strict demands, he and his yeshiva would probably not have survived all the tests they were subject to before, during, and after the war in which so much of European Jewry and their Torah institutions were utterly obliterated.