

Rabbi Itzele Rabinowitz – “The Revolutionary Sage”

by Ben-Tsiyon Klibansky

In the month of Adar 2009, we will commemorate the 90th *yohrzeit* of the well-known Lithuanian rabbi, Yitzhak Yakov Rabinowitz's death. He was known by the name Reb Itzele Ponevezher, based on the city where he was the head rabbi, Ponevezh. Four months after the Kerensky Revolution in March 1917, we find him living as a refugee in Russia, participating in a large assembly of about one hundred rabbis and community activists, who decided to found the religious federation “Tradition and Freedom”. After the first meeting of the federation in Moscow, in addition to his name, he was dubbed the “Revolutionary Sage” because of the subversive socialist ideas that he raised.

Who was Reb Itzele Rabinowitz? He was originally from a small town, Shershev, in the Grodno Province (sixty kilometers from Brisk). When he was fourteen, in 1868, he received a good match to a daughter of a rural aristocrat. Until the wedding, the talented young man lived in the town of Seltz and learned Torah with the local rabbi, Reb Yerucham Leib Perelman, who became later known as the “Great Sage from Minsk”. After the wedding in 1871, Itzele sat at his father-in-law's table, in the country estate, and studied Torah on his own. When he heard in 1879 that the known Reb Yosef Dov Soloveitchik – formerly a Talmud instructor at the Volozhin Yeshiva and rabbi in Slutsk – was chosen as the Rabbi of Brisk, a city close to the estate, he decided to go there and learn Torah from him. Shortly thereafter, Itzele was situated in Brisk, studying Torah with Hayim'ke, the genius son of the Rabbi. This continued for two years, until his friend, Hayim, was appointed Talmud instructor at the Volozhin Yeshiva alongside his wife's grandfather, the *Netziv*, Reb Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin.

Years passed and Itzele was appointed in 1888 the head of the Yeshiva of Bialystok. It was Reb Yosef Dov Soloveitchik who recommended him, as he had nicknamed him “The Young Sage”. About a year later, he was invited to be the yeshiva head in Slabodka (near Kovna) by its founder, Reb Notte Hirsch Finkel. This yeshiva was known for its Musar atmosphere, and Reb Itzele was asked to come strengthen its Talmud studies. He accepted the offer. His unique teaching style (that was later named “The Way of Understanding” and was similar to that of his friend Reb Hayim Soloveitchik) was quite successful. The yeshiva became popular throughout the whole region, and many young men joined. Finally, Reb Itzele's superior talents were well known.

Reb Itzele was the head of the yeshiva for four years. It is possible that his opposition to the Musar method is what made it difficult for him to accept the importance of its place in the yeshiva. In 1893 he left his post and was chosen as the rabbi of Gorzd, which was seventeen kilometers from Memel, East Prussia. Two years later, however, the Ponevezh community decided to nominate him for its rabbi. From then on he was nicknamed Reb Itzele Ponevezher.

It was allegedly a big honor for Reb Itzele to be appointed the rabbi of a city as prominent as Ponevezh. Unfortunately his personality didn't allow him to enjoy it; since he came from a wealthy family, he wasn't impressed by the affluent members of his community. Instead, he focused on those residents who were poor and needy. This is what was written about him at the time:

In Ponevezh he didn't have loyal students who listened to his words of Torah..., and there wasn't anyone among the "rich men" and "proprietors" who knew how to value his greatness... His words of Torah they didn't understand, and his loving kindness and devotion to helping the young learn a profession they considered a shortcoming... In Ponevezh, he was a stranger and lonely! (from the Hebrew; Zvi Rabin, "From the Diaspora of Israel", *Hamelitz*, 13 Cheshvan 1903).

Sixteen years passed until his incredible talents were put to use again. In Moscow, the wealthy Osher Bendet Gavronski died. He was the son-in-law of the famous "King of Tea", Kalman Wolf Wissotzky. In memory of her deceased husband, Liba Miriam, the widow, decided to found "Kibbutz of Learners" (study group) in 1911. The fund had enough to support twenty students annually, of which 12 were young men and eight were married. The program would last four years for each kibbutz member and at its conclusion he would have rabbinic ordination. This new Torah center would be run by no other than Reb Itzele of Ponevezh.

Reb Itzele began to search for students. This is what he wrote, for example, to the rabbi of the town of Palangen, Hayim Yitzhak Korb:

Right now, I have striven to look for young men who are worthy of it, talented and G-d fearing... I am requesting from you, my friend, that if you have any knowledge of a young man with strong abilities, to let me know because I can trust your testimony... (from the Hebrew; letter from 7 Shevat 1911, in: Yitzhak Yakov Rabinowitz, *Zecher Yitzhak*, Jerusalem 1949, p. 204).

In the end he chose the talented students to his group, which was referred to as "The Kibbutz of Excellence in Yeshivas". The large monthly stipend they received earned them the amusing nickname "rich poor-boys".

Reb Itzele wasn't able to enjoy his group of students for long. World War One broke out, and on May 15, 1915 the commander of the Russian army decreed an evacuation order to remove 120,000 Jews from Kovna Province, and amongst them the Jews of Ponevezh. Reb Itzele and his students went onto the train to Dvinsk and from there they managed to get to a small town called Lutzin in the Vitebsk Province. There he continued teaching regular Talmud lessons to his students. Coincidentally, the well-known accountant Yakov Mark lived in the same town for a period of time and in his book he described Reb Itzele's lessons:

It was a true spiritual experience and pleasure to hear him lecture and teach. His inventions were fascinating and brilliant and it felt like one of the "tosfot writers" was standing before

you. His explanations were hard to follow since his brain moved faster than his tongue... his outlook was superhuman.

Mark continued with his impressions of the great sage: "Several times I myself noticed how he would skim the largest newspapers in few minutes and not miss a thing. He even would question the editor, who contradicted what he had written the previous day..." (from the Yiddish; Yakov Mark, *The Greats of our Times: Monographs, Characteristics and Memories*, New York 1927, p. 133).

During the course of 1915, due to the developments on the war front, Reb Itzele had to leave Lutzin and again wander with his group of students. This time he passed southern Russia and arrived in the city of Mariupol in Yekaterinoslav Province, adjacent to the Sea of Azov! Even there, Reb Itzele continued his lessons and received the regular monthly support from Moscow for his students, while he himself barely managed.

As previously mentioned, in July 1917 a large group of well-known rabbis assembled in Moscow, many of who were refugees from Lithuania. Amongst them was Reb Itzele who had made his way there from Mariupol. The agenda was to form a religious federation. At this point Reb Itzele implored the group to include in the platform not just an educational initiative but also a Russian-political aspect. He stressed: "The political angle is critical; through it we will attract the younger generation and the common man to our federation. We see that the Jewish people want this – therefore it's the will of G-d" (from the Hebrew; Yehuda Leib Graubart, *Memorial Book: Records from the Last War – Various Views and Letters*, Lodz, 1926, p. 107). In his remarks he emphasized the "agrarian question". He claimed that according to Jewish Law, the new Russian government had the right to agrarian reform, to take the lands from the nobility, the "thieves" of old, and divide them amongst the poor farmers. It is possible that his ideas were influenced by Marx's "Capital", since in his past, Marxism made a strong impression on him, even though at the time, he didn't agree with its ideas. Either way, the assembly didn't approve his "revolutionary" position.

After the Bolshevik Revolution and in the middle of the Civil War between the White and Red Armies that tracked blood all over Russia, he managed to return to Ponevezh in 1918 with only one student. The Soviet regime in the city, which was familiar with Reb Itzele's views, treated him well, but they didn't allow him to reopen the Student Kibbutz. At the same time, a severe typhoid epidemic broke out, and as a result of going from house to house cheering up the sick, he fell ill and died a short time later.

While looking at Reb Itzele's past, it is impossible to avoid the impression that his unbelievable talents didn't reach their full potential nor did he manage to leave his proper mark on Jewish history. May this short article be a stepping stone into the unfinished building, perhaps ninety years too late.