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## ***Last to Testify***

*by Yaakov Cass*

**The Maggid of Mezritch** succeeded the Baal Shem Tov as the leader of the Chasidic movement, and in turn set in motion the spreading of the wellsprings of Chasidut throughout the Ashkenazi world. The greatest of his chasidim were sent to various different countries.

The task of bringing Chasidut to Poland fell to the **Rebbe Reb Elimelech of Lizensk**. Within a short amount of time the vast majority of Polish Jews were strongly affiliated. One of his great Chassidim was **Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz**, and when he in turn became a Rebbe in his own right many great men were drawn to him. He was reputed to have had tens of thousands of followers, amongst them the renowned 'Divrei Chaim' of Sanz. Reb Chaim's eldest son, Rabbi Yechezkel-Shraga Halberstam (the 'Shinover Rav'), although born some 25 years after Reb Elimelech's passing, was brought up on his father's knees with never ending Rebbe Elimelech stories, as transmitted by Rebbe Naftali.

In his later life, the Shinover Rav began to search for anybody who had actually met Reb Elimelech. He longed to learn something new about the great *tzadik*, but the task was seemingly impossible, given that by now, Reb Elimelech had been off the physical plane for over 70 years.

One day some chasidim brought him the exciting news that there was an old man, a non-Jewish wagon driver well into his 90's living not far from Lizensk, who had actually met Rebbe Elimelech. The Shinover decided that despite the hardships of the travel and the vast distance involved, he would go to visit this man. He was determined to hear firsthand how he came to meet Rebbe Elimelech and to gain his impressions of the *tzadik*.

After many days of arduous travel, they arrived at a small village about a two and a half day's coach ride from Lizensk. Easily finding the ancient wagon driver, the Shinover asked him whether it was true that he has seen Rebbe Elimelech.

Receiving an affirmative answer, the Shinover Rav asked to hear the story behind the meeting. The old man explained that his livelihood was made by taking Jewish people from his village to Lizensk every week. Leaving on a Wednesday, they arrived early Friday morning. The Chassidim would spend Shabbat in Lizensk, and would then leave on Sunday, arriving home on

Tuesday. The following day his route would start over again. One Friday morning after arriving in Lizensk and the passengers had disembarked, he left the wagon and horses at the side of the road while he descended into a ditch to answer the call of nature. Climbing back up the bank, he saw to his horror that the horses and the wagon had disappeared, obviously stolen.

He sat on the ground tearing his hair out and sobbing hysterically when a kindly chasid passed by. After learning of the problem, he offered his assistance. The chasid suggested that they go to the famous holy man learning in the *shul* only a few meters away and ask for a blessing. He said he would explain the urgency of the situation to the Rebbe's chief attendant (*gabbai*), in the hope that the Rebbe would admit him immediately despite his very busy schedule.

The chasid took the wagon driver into the nearby *shul*, spoke to the *gabbai*, who then went into Rebbe Elimelech's inner sanctum. A few minutes later he returned with the good news that the Rebbe would see the wagon driver right away.

As the wagon driver walked in, the Rebbe looked up, smiled and said, "I can help you." He told the distraught fellow to go with him to the window. Pulling back the curtain, he pointed out a path at the beginning of the forest. "Go out of this building, walk down that path, count three small paths on the right hand side and you will see a well. Turn right, go down this path and count three paths on the left where you will see an oak tree. Turn left and count exactly 250 paces when you will see a pond. Walk around the pond and you will see the back of a barn. Go round to the front of the barn and inside you will see your two horses and wagon safe and sound.

Thanking the Rebbe profusely, the wagon driver ran down the stairs, and followed Reb Elimelech's instructions to the letter. Sure enough inside the barn were his two horses and wagon. After retrieving them, it was business as usual.

Having listened with rapt attention to the story, the Shinover Rav said to the aged wagon driver "Nu, so what do you say about the great Rebbe Reb Elimelech?"

The wagon driver responded "To this very day I have always wondered why an old venerable rabbi should be busying himself with stealing horses."

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*Source:* Lightly edited and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the original translation of Rabbi Yaakov Cass, who heard the story at a *farbrengen* (Chabad-

chasidic gathering). Rabbi Cass is a Lubavitcher chossid living in Jerusalem. Before his retirement, he was a senior official in the Israel Ministry of Health.

**Rabbi Cass adds:**

Much as we might smile at hearing the end of the story, sad to say there are still skeptics who refuse to believe in miracles. They think that the stories about the Rebbes and the *tzadikim* are exaggerated and bear no connection to reality. There is an old chasidic saying that that anyone who believes all the chasidic stories is foolish, and anyone who refutes even one of them is a disbeliever, because they could all have happened, even if not exactly as they are handed down to this generation. We should learn from this to treat all of the chasidic stories with respect.

*Biographical notes* (in order of appearance):

**Rabbi Elimelech of Litzhensk** [of blessed memory: 5477 - 21 Adar 5547 (1717 - March 1787 C.E.)], was a major disciple of the *Maggid of Mezritch*, successor to *the Baal Shem Tov*, and the leading Rebbe of the subsequent generation in Poland-Galitzia. Most of the great Chassidic dynasties stem from his disciples. His book, *Noam Elimelech*, is one of the most popular of all Chassidic works.

**Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz** [6 Sivan 5520 (the same day as the Baal Shem Tov's passing!) - 11 Iyar 5587 (1760-1827 C.E.)] became the rebbe of many thousands of chassidim. He was noted for his sharp wit and humor and his elusive sparkling aphorisms. Some of his teachings are collected in his works, *Zera Kodesh*, *Ayalah Sheluchah*, and *Imrei Shefer*. Many stories about him appear in the book, *Ohel Naftoli*.

**Rabbi Chaim Halberstam of Sanz** [of blessed memory: 25 Nissan 5553 - 25 Nissan 5636 (April 1793-April 1876 C.E.)] was the first Rebbe of the Sanz-Klausenberg dynasty. He is famous for his extraordinary dedication to the *mitzvah* of *tzedaka* and also as a renowned Torah scholar; his voluminous and wide-ranging writings were all published under the title *Divrei Chaim*. His eldest son founded the famous Sanzer synagogue in Tsfat in the middle 1800's.

**Rabbi Yechezkel-Shraga Halberstam**, (of blessed memory: 1813- 5 Tevet 1899), was the eldest son of the *Divrei Chaim*, Rabbi Chaim Halberstam of Sanz. As an emissary of his father, he founded the Sanzer synagogue in Tsfat (Safed). He served as the rabbi of Shinova from 1855 till 1868, and then again from 1881 till his passing. Many of his Torah insights into Scripture, Law and Kabbalah are collected in *Divrei Yechezkel*.

Connection: Seasonal – This Thursday, the fifth day of the Jewish month of Tevet, is the 121<sup>st</sup> *yahrzeit* of the Shinever Rav.