

Rav Michael Forshlager (second from left).
The Sochachover illui, yet he made all
types of Jews feel comfortable.



The Gadd

Who Kept Himself Hidden



Throughout his life,

Rav Michael Forshlager

eschewed the
trappings of greatness

One day, a Torah scholar who had escaped from Europe arrived at a row of nondescript houses on North Ann Street in downtown Baltimore.

Locating number 21, he rang the bell. After a short wait, the door was opened by a diminutive, graying man with a rolled-up beard, dressed in light clothing. After a slight hesitation, the visitor asked, “Is Harav Forshlager in?”

“Yes,” responded the man. “I am Michael Forshlager.”

The man began to laugh.

“Could you please let me in on the joke?” requested Rav Forshlager.

The visitor answered with the following story:

“Many years ago, in better times, I was a *talmid* in the *yeshivah* of Radin. My *rosh yeshivah* was the revered *gaon* Harav Naftoli Trop. It was in the early 1920s, and Harav Meir Shapira, *zt”l*, the Lubliner Rav, was traveling through Europe to raise funds and test potential students for his new *yeshivah*, Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin. Like many other *yeshivos*, we kept our *rosh yeshivah* ‘hidden’ so that Rav Shapira wouldn’t find him and ‘steal’ him away for his new institution. When the Lubliner Rav realized that the *bachurim* were hiding Rav Trop, he smiled and said, ‘You don’t have to hide him anymore. I already have a *rosh yeshivah* in mind: Rav Michael Forshlager from Baltimore.’

“When I heard this,” continued the visitor, “I was astonished. How could Rav Shapira have chosen some obscure *rav* from a place called Baltimore, in the *treife medinah*? How could he be superior to Rav Naftali? Right then and there, I decided that I must find out who this person was. After the war I emigrated to the United States, and now, finding myself in Baltimore, I

Rav Forshlager at the bar mitzvah
of Stuart Schloss, April 1951



decided to look you up.

"I was expecting to see someone with a long beard, dressed in rabbinical clothing. Seeing you, I am quite surprised! You don't have the appearance of a great *rosh yeshivah*; you look like a *pashuter Yid*!"

Who was Harav Forshlager, this small, humble man with a perpetual smile, whose unpretentious dress and demeanor led people to believe that he was nothing but a simple Jew? And yet in the course of his lifetime he would host many of the major leaders of his day, including Rav Kook, the Chief Rabbi of Palestine, and Rav Moshe Mordechai Epstein, founder and *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshivas Slabodka in Eretz Yisrael, garnering the praise of all the *gedolim* of his era.

When the cornerstone was laid for Ner Yisroel, Israeli chief rabbi Rav Yitzchak Isaac Herzog attended. When the event ended, Rav Yitzhak Ruderman introduced him to Rav Forshlager, saying, "This is Rav Forshlager, and you don't need to know more." After they had spoken and Rav Forshlager had left, Rav Herzog remarked, "I've been in Lithuania, I've been in Poland, and now I live in Eretz Yisrael, but I've never seen anything like this!"

Rav Avrohom Yitzchak Bloch, *rosh yeshivah* of Telshe Yeshiva in Europe, once declared, "When I traveled to America to raise money, I traveled the whole country from north to south and east to west, seeking out any and all rabbis, grand rabbis and reverends, to meet with them and discuss words of Torah. Among them all I found only one *gaon amiti*, a true Torah genius—namely, Harav Michoel Forshlager."

An Iluy Is Born

Born in Leuvitch, Poland, in 1884, Michoel was an extremely bright child who was born blind. At the age of two, a miracle occurred on an outing with his grandmother, when he suddenly called out, "Bubbe, I can see!" His vision would nonetheless remain poor throughout his life.

Years later his sister reported, "No sooner was his sight restored than Michoel learned how to read. When he was only three, he would sit in a corner of the house and learn. Sometimes he would go to the *beis midrash* in the middle of the night, even in the snow. And he would often have to be reminded to eat. Actually, he forgot everything else; his entire world was learning."

He had a phenomenal memory but refused to rely on it and studied with great *hasmadah*. In his old age he once remarked, "When I was approximately three years old, I learned *Mishnayos Keilim*...and at the age of five, all of *maseches Kiddushin* by myself...even *maseches Nedarim*, with the [commentary of] the Ra"n." He once said with a smile, "I learned all of *Nedarim* before I knew it was forbidden to smoke on Shabbos."

Even as a very young child he aspired to holiness. He once told his close *talmid*, Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Burack, a story about how he had wanted to be able to fast the entire Yom Kippur despite his tender years. On Yom Kippur morning, he approached someone in the *beis midrash* and asked him for a *segulah*. The person, apparently a *leitz*, told the young boy that the adults prepared matches and cigarettes before *davening* and would go out to smoke whenever the fast became too hard for them. Michoel, who did not yet realize that lighting a fire wasn't permitted on Yom Kippur, somehow found matches and cigarettes and put them in his pocket for later.

As the day passed and it became increasingly difficult to fast, Michoel began wondering when the adults would finally go out for a smoke. Eventually he turned to an older man standing next to him and asked when they would be heading out with their cigarettes.

"You don't know that smoking is *assur*," the man asked him, "and that everything in your pockets is *muktzah*?"

Michoel tossed everything out of his pockets and began to cry. His postscript to Rav Burack was this: "Do you know what saved me from that big *cheit*? Only one thing—*derech erez*! I said to myself, 'I don't want to be the first person to leave. I'll wait until everyone else has headed out.' That *zechus* saved me."

When he was eight years old, Michoel joined a *chaburah* of six brilliant students who were taught by a famed Gerrer chasid, Rav Pinchas Lefkowitz. He was later accepted into the *beis midrash* of the

The Bnei Israel synagogue (the "Russian Shul")



holy Avnei Nezer, Hagaon Harav Avraham Bornstein of Sochatchov. One of the youngest students ever to be accepted there, he became Rav Bornstein's *talmid muvhak*, learning privately with him for the next 14 years.

At the age of 18, Michoel Forshlager became engaged to a girl from his hometown of Leuvitch. At his *chuppah*, the Avnei Nezer offered him *semichah* but he flatly refused, insisting that he never aspired to be a *rav* and that his only desire was to immerse himself in learning. In fact, he consistently rejected offer after offer to become a *rosh yeshivah* or the *rav* of a *kehillah*. Even when he was offered a rabbinical position in Leuvitch, he could not be swayed.

When *gedolim* from all over Europe came to visit the Avnei Nezer, they would also pay a visit to Rav Forshlager, who was only in his twenties. It is said that the Avnei Nezer always showed his *teshuvos* to Rav Michoel before posting them. When the Avnei Nezer left Sochatchov and relocated to Warsaw toward the end of his life, Rav Michoel followed. The Avnei Nezer was *niftar* there in 1910, and Rav Michoel was the last person with whom he discussed Torah before his *neshamah* left this world.

Relocating to America

Rav Michoel's father emigrated to America in 1903, and after settling in Baltimore became a successful real estate broker. He was then able to send money for his wife and children to join him, but at the time Rav Michoel did not wish to go along.

After the First World War, the economic situation in Europe was dire. Following his father-in-law's financial collapse, Rav Michoel's family survived by sewing for Jewish clients, taking in piecework. When the work was finished, Rav Michoel, who was very strong in his youth, would lug the heavy bundles of clothing up many flights of stairs to deliver them to their owners and collect payment. More often than not, payment was not forthcoming, and their means of support were soon exhausted.

The Forshlagers, once a large family, were now tragically reduced in number due to sickness and starvation.

When the elder Mr. Forshlager received a letter from his son describing the family's pitiful circumstances, he immediately forwarded money to the Joint Distribution Committee, and travel papers and tickets were arranged over the next few months. In 1921, Rav Michoel uprooted himself from Warsaw, and with his wife and three surviving children boarded a ship from Hamburg bound for America. Arriving at Ellis Island, they cleared immigration and headed straight to Baltimore.

Arrival in America

Mrs. Ina K. Ginsburg, *z"l*, Rav Forshlager's youngest sister, recalled the arrival of her brother's family from Europe.

"Our family had settled down for the evening when there was a knock at the door. Mother went to see who it was and suddenly we heard her shout, 'Michoel!' and everybody gathered around for the reunion."

By then the senior Forshlagers had been in America for nearly 20 years; Mrs. Ginsburg had arrived as a baby and had no

memory at all of her oldest brother. While the parents had remained observant, after so many years the children were in various stages of assimilation. The sight of her brother's family, so clearly from the Old World, must have been highly unusual for them.

"How they got to our house in Baltimore from Ellis Island is a mystery we never solved," she said.

Earning a Living

Rav Michoel's father soon relocated his son's family to a nearby house on North Ann Street. While he was able to cover his son's rent, due to a downturn in the real estate business, Rav Michoel would have to earn the money to pay the rest of his family's living expenses.

To this end, Rav Michoel, who had been a known *gaon* in Europe, set out to do manual labor in America. Here, where the streets were purportedly paved in gold, he went from house to house in the neighborhood, to Jews and non-Jews alike, asking for old newspapers that he could sell to the printers for re-use.

While he was making his rounds one day, an observant Jewish homeowner



Even the simple baalei battim felt refreshed by his wisdom



Rav Forshlager (right), three months before his passing, at a banquet in Yeshivas Ner Yisroel. Back row, Rav Yaakov Weinberg (right) and Rav Herman Neuberger.

Rav Mordechai Gifter said of him, “The sefarim he had in his house, he had in his head.”

noticed his refinement and commented, “It looks as if you are a learned man. Would you be able to teach my son Chumash?”

The *gaon* answered modestly in the affirmative. After working with the boy for a while, word of his success spread and other parents sought him out. One father asked him if he could teach Gemara, not realizing that Rav Michoel had been proficient in all of *Shas* since shortly after his bar mitzvah.

Time passed, and several *baalei batim* became Rav Michoel’s *talmidim*. Less than six months after his arrival in Baltimore, he was asked by a local *shul* to give a class. The wealthy Chizuk Amuno Congregation was considered one of the seven most prominent Orthodox synagogues on the East Coast. He continued to give classes there and was *mekareiv* the *baalei batim* for over 26 years. When the *shul* decided to remove its *mechitzah* and become Conservative, he resigned, forfeiting his salary.

Running Away From Kavod

Rav Forshlager shunned honor and rec-

ognition, and steadfastly refused to accept any official position. Nevertheless, he faithfully taught a core group of *talmidim* who appreciated him greatly. People slowly began to understand that they had an outstanding scholar in their midst.

At one point the *shul* where Rav Forshlager *davened*, known as the Russiche Shul or the Pliskin Shul after its rabbi, Rav Shmuel Pliskin, *zt”l*, also asked that he give a *shiur* to its members. For this he received a weekly stipend, paid to him in cash on Monday morning before *davening*. Each Monday he also received the *aliyah* for *kohen* and would promptly give back 20 percent of his salary—despite the fact that the Forshlagers lived in abject poverty and had no savings to speak of. Any “extra” money was given away to *tzedakah*.

His *rebbeztin*, who was hard pressed to pay the bills, would contact the *shul* and beg them to stop giving her husband *aliyos*. “We’re *moichel* the *kavod*,” she would say.

Their home had neither heat nor air conditioning; the Rav refused to have the pleasure of either. “As long as my broth-

ers in Europe are suffering, *‘imo anochi b’tzarah*—I am with them in their suffering,” he would insist.

(Rav Binyomin Dinovitz, *z”l*, one of the first *talmidim* of Ner Yisrael, who grew up in Baltimore and regarded Rav Forshlager as a surrogate parent, once mentioned that after the *shiur* Rav Forshlager used to mingle with the *baalei batim*, and it wasn’t easy to tell who he was. When he became a *chasan*, Rabbi Dinovitz wanted his future wife to meet Rav Forshlager. Just recently his *rebbeztin*, *tbl”c*, recollected that based on her *chasan*’s grandiose description, she had been expecting to see an awe-inspiring figure and was nonplussed upon meeting a smiling, humble man of small stature.)

His Precious Sefarim

A significant portion of the money Rav Forshlager earned was earmarked for the purchase of *sefarim*. Dozens of invoices from Biegeleisen’s book store on the Lower East Side of New York documented the volume of *sefarim* sold to or returned by

A Chassidische Gadol in Baltimore



Rav Forshlager. He kept them if they were needed; if not, he sent them back. He was the store's biggest customer and even wrote the owners a letter praising their good service and honesty, although he never met them.

The house on North Ann Street developed into a virtual warehouse of holy books. Its narrow hallways and the walls of its rooms were lined with *sefarim*, and Rav Forshlager's work area, of course, was piled high with them. Each *sefer* had its place and the Rav could locate each one with ease, despite the fact that his vision was impaired to the point of near-blindness. Once, a leading eye specialist informed Rav Forshlager that in order to save his remaining vision, he would have to "stop all of that studying." Upon leaving the examination room, Rav Forshlager was overheard mumbling, "What? Is he crazy?"

He ultimately acquired nearly 7,000 volumes, many of which were first editions, including some rare, out-of-print works. At the time, his collection was considered one of the most important Jewish libraries in America. Its purpose, of course, was not for show; the *sefarim* were used, learned and re-learned, memorized and dissected.

Rav Mordechai Gifter, zt"l,

Rav Forshlager's traits have to be viewed in light of the *chassidische* teachings he imbibed from his *rebbe*, the Avnei Nezer of Sochachov.

One trait that has kept him unknown for many years was his modesty. His diligence in writing *chiddushei Torah* eventually led to his leaving over 50 volumes-worth of writings. Yet modesty kept him from even thinking of publishing his *divrei Torah* during his lifetime. He would tell the members of his household, "If my *chiddushei Torah* are proper to publicize, the *Eibershter* will send his *shluchim* [messengers]...."

A small *sefer* containing a selection of some of his *chiddushim* was published a few years after his passing, but it took another 50 years for material of any size to be published, as it was this year.

The importance of his Torah—as well as his connection to *chassidus*—may be gleaned from the fact that the Satmar Rebbe, Rav Yoel Teitelbaum, who had never met Rav Forshlager, described him as "*Hagaon hachasid ha'amiti* [the true genius and *chasid*]," honorifics that the Rebbe did not give lightly.

Another indication of Rav Forshlager's genius and greatness in *chassidus* is that he was considered great among the *talmidim* of the Avnei Nezer, which included luminaries like the Chelkas Yaakov; Rav Yosef Engel;

the Klei Chemdah; the Eretz Tzvi; Rav Shaul Moshe from Varyshov, the author of *Reishis Bikurim*; and many other great *talmidei chachamim*. Despite his genius, Rav Forshlager would hide himself when he was studying in Sochachov, sitting behind the *beis midrash*

furnace, as his *talmid* Rav Preiss testified. Yet the others would seek him out there.

Rav Forshlager would learn privately with his great *rebbe*, and it was said in Sochachov that the Avnei Nezer would not send a *halachic teshuvah* out until he had shown it to his *talmid*.

Rav Forshlager wrote in a letter to the Satmar Rebbe: "I was the last who spoke with him [the Avnei Nezer] in *divrei Torah*, and I answered one Torah question for him. Afterward, his only son, who replaced him, the Shem Mishmuel, told me...that he envied me for having made his father happy, because he had had that Torah question for over 30 years, and I—with the help of Heaven—had answered it for him. This had been at the beginning of the illness that he passed away from, and I can't describe the happiness he showed in front of me because I had answered the question."

For the rest of his life, when Rav Forshlager would mention his *rebbe*, he would cry and stand fully. Every year, he would make a *siyum* on *Teshuvos Avnei Nezer*.

In Sochachov, Rav Forshlager taught *talmidim*, as his *rebbe* had told him to, and he continued under the guidance of the Shem Mishmuel, who appointed him *rosh yeshiva* together with the Eretz Tzvi.

One section in a letter from his days in Baltimore describes both the modesty and the yearning for growth in *chassidus* that Rav Forshlager had all his life: "This is all worth nothing to me. This isn't, *chas veshalom*, modesty, which would be totally false. Rather, it's that I know my own faults, that I haven't yet started to correct myself, and the Torah that Hashem has granted me is not in accordance with my [lack of] worth at all; it is instead [given to me] in a manner of 'He pays his enemies up front....' I ask from Hashem that he illuminate on me the light of *teshuvah* like a totally simple person. Would that I now had a *rebbe* to open my uncircumcised heart in *teshuvah* like a common person of the old generation, amen!"





(Left) Rav Forshlager, at the wedding of a grandchild of the Sochochover Rebbe, in Philadelphia, 1951. This was the only time in 37 years, Rav Forshlager left Baltimore, by request of the father of the chosson, Rav Henoch Sochochover, who was unable to attend.

the legendary *rosh yeshivah* of Telshe in Cleveland, said, “The *sefarim* he had in his house, he had in his head.”

Rav Chaim Samson, *zt”l*, dean of the Talmudical Academy of Baltimore for over 50 years, once lent Rav Forshlager a *sefer*, hardly believing that he had a *sefer* in his possession Rav Forshlager had never seen. When the Rav returned it, Rabbi Samson asked if he would like to borrow it again at some later date. “That won’t be necessary,” Rav Forshlager responded with a smile. “I’ve already committed it to memory.”

Mesiras Nefesh for Learning

Rav Forshlager learned with determination in bitter cold and sweltering heat. Although many people offered to install a heating system in his house at their own expense, he refused, and in the dog days of Baltimore summers, he used to keep a bucket of ice water under the table for his feet. Even as a child he had taken *sefarim* with him to bed without his parents’ knowledge so that he could learn by the light of the moon.

In fact, he was often oblivious to his surroundings. An old friend, Rabbi Jacob Max, *zt”l*, once saw him studying on a streetcar,

holding on to one of the poles. He was so engrossed in his *sefer* that Rabbi Max wondered how he knew when to get off!

Rav Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman once told a story that illustrates Rav Forshlager’s single-mindedness and capacity for concentration. Rav Ruderman had visited him earlier in the day and asked a difficult question.

“At two in the morning the phone rang in my house. On the line was the *rav*, who told me he had found a good answer to my *kashe* and explained it in detail. When he finished, I asked him where he was calling from as I knew he didn’t have a telephone in his house. ‘Oh,’ he replied, ‘I went to a bar to use the phone. I didn’t want to leave this question unanswered.’”

A famous Conservative rabbi who had been raised in an Orthodox home in Baltimore and was well-acquainted with Rav Forshlager once wrote that because of Rav Forshlager, he believed the *aggados* in the Gemara to be true, “especially the one about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son living in a cave and learning for 13 years. That is because with my own eyes I witnessed Rav Forshlager spend his whole life immersed in learning in a work space smaller than any cave, subsisting the entire time on little more than carob and water,” he affirmed.

But Rav Forshlager was devoted not only to his own learning; he set aside precious time for Jews who weren’t observant. They in turn became his staunch friends, and there was nothing they wouldn’t do for him.

One such person was Mr. Danny Schloss, a successful businessman who used to visit Rav Forshlager to discuss science, philosophy and medical issues, and to seek his advice before every important business decision. To ensure that Rav Forshlager would attend his son Stuart’s bar mitzvah, Mr. Schloss had to promise that the affair would be 100 percent kosher.

A picture of Rav Forshlager at the event was recently obtained from Mr. Schloss, who now lives in Brazil. It’s a rarity since Rav Forshlager generally did not allow himself to be photographed.

Doing for Others

These wealthy contacts proved to be invaluable, although not for Rav Forshlager personally, since it was a known fact that he never took money for himself. Instead, he used his connections to perform acts of *chesed* and to help the institutions he supported.

In his later years, even though his health was poor, he would accompany the Ponevezher Rav when he came to America and introduce him to his well-to-do “*chasidim*,” who would pledge thousands of dollars out of gratitude to Rav Forshlager. When his family tried to curtail his activities, he would insist that he never felt surer about his health than when he was out collecting for the Ponevezher Rav.

These contacts also proved instrumental in the establishment of Ner Israel Yeshiva in Baltimore. When Rav Ruderman, who was a *shaliach* of the Rabbinical Seminary

Rav Aharon Kotler said, “[Rav Forshlager] is the greatest gaon who has stepped foot on American shores.”

of Cleveland, came to fundraise in the early 1930s, Rav Forshlager asked him to remain in Baltimore, open a *yeshiva* and serve as its head. Rav Forshlager pledged to guarantee Rav Ruderman's salary. Indeed, Rav Forshlager's devotees continued to help support the institution for many years.

A Time to Write

About 15 years before he passed away, Rav Forshlager told Harav Preiss, z"l, of Toronto that he no longer had the *koach* for *avodas Hashem* that he had had in the past. Instead, he decided to write down what he had learned.

The result of those years was an estimated 20,000 folio-sized pages elucidating some of the most difficult areas of Chumash, Rambam, *Bavli*, *Yerushalmi*, Midrash, *Rishonim*, *Acharonim*, *nigleh* and *nistar*. The writings also include chasidic thought as well as personal reminiscences of the Avnei Nezer, Shem Mishmuel and the Chelkas Yoav, almost 50 manuscripts in all.

In his modesty, it never dawned on Rav Forshlager to publish them. He always said to his family, “If the *Ribbono Shel Olam* wants my *chiddushei Torah* to be published, He will send His emissaries.”

Rav Forshlager was *niftar* in 1958. Several years ago, a *talmid chacham* named Rabbi Bentzion Bergman, along with Rav Forshlager's grand-nephew Rabbi Avraham Moshe Friedmann, founded the Avnei Choshen Foundation for the purpose of publishing and disseminating his works. Its first project was *Michael B'achas*, a biographical *sefer* and compilation of letters written by Rav Forshlager. Already in its second printing, it has met with great demand in America, Europe and Israel, with 2,000 copies sold in a period of two

months. The Torah world is fascinated by Rav Forshlager.

The foundation is currently looking for sponsors to help publish additional volumes.

Never to Be Forgotten

At the 1989 Agudah Convention, Rav Gifter, zt"l, after quoting what his rebbe Rav Avraham Yitzchak Bloch of Telshe had said about Rav Forshlager, said, “If you learn your entire life, maybe you'll achieve one iota of [Rav Forshlager's] ability to be immersed in learning.”

Rav Yisroel Gustman, zt"l, the great *rosh yeshiva* and *posek*, revealed that he answered “easy” *sh'eilos* himself but addressed the difficult ones to Rav Forshlager in Baltimore.

Rav Aharon Kotler, zt"l, founder of Lakewood's Beth Medrash Govoha, commented, “[Rav Forshlager] is the greatest *gaon* who has stepped foot on American shores.”

Rav Michael Forshlager, zt"l, was one of the least well-known Torah giants of his generation. The brownish-red gravestone in Bnai Israel Cemetery in Baltimore gives little indication of the greatness of the man buried beneath it. The epitaph reads, “*Dovev sifsei yesheininim*, He moves the lips of those who are asleep.”

With the help of Hashem, the voice of this hidden *tzaddik* will be audible to our generation as well. ●

Rabbi Avrum Friedmann, the great-nephew of Rav Forshlager and founder of the Avnei Choshen Foundation, has lived with his family in Israel for 25 years. He also redeems and sells land in the Galil for the Buy a Piece of Israel project. Rabbi Friedmann may be contacted at rabbiamf@gmail.com or at machonrf@gmail.com.

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