



# The Jewish Wanderer

*The story and lesson of the Previous Rebbe's life.*

## Relocation

This week, the world is buzzing over the American proposal to relocate Gaza residents to other areas and rebuild the region. Of course, while some support the idea, others strongly oppose it.

The topic of relocation reminded me of a special anniversary today: the 75th yahrzeit of the Previous Rebbe and the day the Rebbe officially accepted leadership of the Chabad movement.

The life story of the Previous Rebbe is, in many ways, the story of the wandering Jew—forced to move from place to place, never settling for too long.

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak was born and raised in Lubavitch, under the guidance of his father, the Rebbe Rashab. In 1915, as World War I raged across Russia, the Rebbe Rashab, his son, and the entire family were forced to leave Lubavitch.

This was no ordinary displacement—it was a deeply traumatic event. For over a century, Lubavitch had been the heart of the Chabad movement; it became synonymous with Chabad. It was more than just a location; it was the center of Chabad leadership, home to the Rebbe's court, a thriving yeshiva, and a vast library. The Previous Rebbe, as the fifth generation of Chabad leaders in Lubavitch, had to watch his family abandon everything and flee, as the advancing German forces made staying there impossible.

From Lubavitch, they moved to Rostov. Slowly, they began to adjust to their new reality—until, suddenly, in 1920, the Rebbe Rashab fell ill and passed away. The Previous Rebbe was just 40 years old.

Before his passing, the Rebbe Rashab called his son and told him: "Dark clouds are gathering over Russia. To spread Torah, fear of

Heaven, and to strengthen Judaism, you will need to have literal self-sacrifice” (Toras Menachem vol. 19 pg. 27). These words were not just symbolic; they were a warning. The Bolshevik Revolution had just taken place, and the communists had declared an all-out war against religion—especially Judaism.

Until that point, the traditional role of the Chabad Rebbes had primarily been to teach and spread Chassidic teachings. But when the Previous Rebbe took on the leadership of Chabad in 1920, his mission expanded—he was no longer just the leader of Chabad, but became the leader of all the Jews in the Soviet Union.

When the Communist Revolution took hold, most rabbis and Jewish leaders, realizing that Judaism had no future in Soviet Russia, left the country. Or, more accurately, they fled.

The only one who refused to leave—the one who insisted on staying to keep Judaism alive—was the Previous Rebbe. He saw it as his mission to preserve Jewish life for the millions of Jews who remained trapped under Soviet rule.

These were dark times. Synagogues were shut down, mikvahs were sealed, holy books were confiscated and burned. Jewish schools were outlawed, and every child was forced to attend government-run Communist schools, where they were indoctrinated with atheism. The regime declared that “religion is the opium of the masses.” It was in this terrifying reality that the Previous Rebbe stepped into his leadership role, and overnight, he became not just the head of Chabad but the de facto leader of Soviet Jewry.

He dedicated enormous efforts to setting up an underground network of schools, yeshivas, mikvahs, and synagogues. But it wasn’t just about building them—keeping them running was an enormous challenge. The survival of these institutions depended on the generosity of Jews abroad, particularly through the American-based Joint Distribution Committee (the “Joint”), which funneled support to sustain Jewish life across the Soviet Union.

This underground battle for Judaism continued until the summer of 1927. That year, the Soviet secret police arrested the Rebbe, accusing him of “anti-government activities.” He was imprisoned, and it was only due to heavy international pressure—from governments like Germany, Latvia, and the United States—that the Soviets agreed to release him. But one thing was clear: he had to leave Russia.

And so, immediately after the holidays of 1927, the Previous Rebbe

left Soviet Russia—for good.

## **Poland**

The Chassidic movement as a whole—and Chabad in particular—was born and flourished in Russia. For six generations, the Chabad Rebbes lived and led from there. But now, the Previous Rebbe was forced to leave the very land that had been the cradle of Chassidus and go into exile, searching for a new place to replant the roots of Chabad.

In 1929, he traveled to the Land of Israel and then continued to the United States, wanting to assess whether this country could become the new home for Chabad's central headquarters. He spent over ten months in America, visiting major cities along the East Coast—New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Boston. Toward the end of his trip, he traveled to Washington, D.C., where he met with President Herbert Hoover.

His Chassidim pleaded with him to stay in the United States, to establish Chabad's new global headquarters there. But the Rebbe was firm—most of the Jewish world was still in Europe, and that's where he needed to be. So he returned.

Upon his return, the Previous Rebbe was now 50 years old. He reestablished Chabad's center in Warsaw, Poland—a country with nearly three million Jews of every background: Chassidic, non-Chassidic, religious, and those who were not yet observant. He had to start from scratch, founding a yeshiva and introducing Polish Jewry to the teachings of Chabad—an entirely new concept for them.

Chabad was a “Russian” Chassidus—one that emphasized deep intellectual study and service of G-d with both the mind and heart. This approach was unfamiliar to Polish Jewry, and introducing it was an uphill battle. But slowly, the seeds took root. The community grew, the institutions expanded, and more and more Jews became drawn to the Chabad teachings. And then, World War II erupted.

On September 1, 1939, when the Nazis invaded Poland, the Previous Rebbe was still in Warsaw. As the city was mercilessly bombed, he—confined to a wheelchair—had to be carried from one shelter to another. In a matter of days, Warsaw became a living nightmare.

After tireless efforts and the intervention of the U.S. government, the Rebbe was miraculously rescued from the Nazis. On 9 Adar II, 5700 (February 19, 1940), he arrived in the United States. He disembarked from the ship seated in his wheelchair.

Thousands of Jews gathered at the port to welcome him. There was immense joy—he had survived the inferno of Europe. But this was now the third time in his life that he had to start over. At age 60, partially paralyzed, he was once again faced with the monumental task of rebuilding everything from the ground up—this time in America, a country where Judaism, especially in the 1940s, was struggling to hold on.

## America

On his very first day in America, the Previous Rebbe made his mission clear: He had not come to enjoy the comforts of the New World. He wasn't here to indulge in its prosperity or take advantage of its abundance. His purpose was one thing only—to build Jewish institutions, spread Torah, and strengthen faith in G-d.

That very night, from his hotel in Manhattan, he called a special meeting—the founding assembly for the first Chabad yeshiva in America. He announced that he was establishing an authentic yeshiva just as they had in Europe—one that would be infused with the spirit of Chassidism.

Later that evening, two of his most devoted followers—Jews who had already been living in America for many years—came to visit him. They had been at the meeting, and now they felt obligated to warn him. They told him with deep concern:

“Rebbe, we were at the gathering today where you announced the opening of a yeshiva. But we must make you aware of the reality here in America. With all due respect, your noble ambition to build Jewish institutions like in Europe is simply not practical. We feel it is our responsibility to warn you—to save you from what will be a disastrous failure, for your sake and for the honor of your holy ancestors, the Chabad Rebbes before you.”

The Rebbe later recorded in his journal how deeply he was affected by their words. That evening, his first night in America, when he recited *Shema*—tears poured from his holy eyes.

But surrendering was never an option. The Previous Rebbe refused to listen to the voices of doubt. He was not deterred by the pessimism of those who insisted that America was a spiritual wasteland.

Within just ten days, he opened the yeshiva—with ten students. And the rest, as they say, is history.

(Based on the Rebbe's talk on 10 Shevat, 5734, *Toras Menachem* Vol. 75, p. 337.)

## The Lesson

What we learn from the life of the Previous Rebbe is that no matter how devastating the loss, no matter how many times everything crumbles and one is forced to flee, there is never room for despair. Even when a person arrives in a completely foreign country, among people who think differently, speak differently, and live differently—the mission remains the same. You do not surrender. You rebuild.

And if, once again, the journey continues—if one must flee to America, a place where Jews had long given up on living a fully observant life—where the common saying was “*America iz andersh*” (“America is different”)—where people insisted that keeping Shabbos and raising children with strong Jewish values was impossible, the Previous Rebbe came with a message that shook the very foundations of Jewish life in America:

“*America iz nit andersh*”—America is NOT different. The same G-d that we serve in Europe is present here as well. And therefore, not only *can* we establish true, authentic Judaism in America, but we *must*.

This idea is reflected in Parshas Beshalach, where the Jewish people leave Egypt and begin a long, uncertain journey into the wilderness. They leave behind a settled land and enter what the Torah describes as a vast, desolate desert—dangerous and dry, filled with snakes and scorpions, a place with no water (Devarim 8:15).

But right at the beginning of this parsha, we see that they were never alone. The Torah tells us that Hashem leads them, providing a pillar of cloud during the day to guide their way and a pillar of fire at night to illuminate the darkness. These pillars never leave them for a moment, ensuring that wherever they go, they are under divine protection (Shemos 13:21-22).

The Gemara (Shabbos 23b) notes that even as the day turned to night, there was no gap between the two—before the sun had fully set, the fire was already in place. The transition was seamless, showing that Hashem's guidance never left them, even for an instant.

At the end of Sefer Shemos, the Torah emphasizes this point again: throughout all their travels, Hashem's presence remained with them. “For the cloud of Hashem was upon the Mishkan by day, and fire was

on it by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys.” (Shemos 40:38).

The Rebbe explained that “throughout all their journeys” also means every journey of the Jewish people throughout history. No matter where Jews have been exiled, Hashem’s presence has gone with them, protecting them in *all* their journeys—until the final journey, when we will return to the Land of Israel with the coming of Moshiach, may it be very soon.

This is the lesson of the Previous Rebbe’s life. There is no such thing as giving up. There is no place where Judaism cannot thrive. And no matter where the Jewish people may find themselves, they are never alone.