

PIONEERS OF BORO PARK by Yitzchok Shteiernman

"To understand the present you must study the past."

When one looks around at the burgeoning community — humming with Jewish life — that is Boro Park, it is hard to imagine that it wasn't always like this. Hamodia gives you a glimpse into Boro Park of yesteryear, and the personalities, institutions, and regular folk who comprised this "shtetl" in years gone by.

Harav Avraham Miller, zt"l

Leading and advocating for his fellow Jews in Boro Park of yesteryear

In November of 1925, a delegation of Rabbanim traveled to Washington. Rather than this being a matter of urgency and to fend off some *gezeirah*, the Rabbanim — some of whom were among the greatest *Geonim* that America possessed at the time — were there on a mission of gratitude.

On October 6, 1925, the President Calvin Coolidge spoke before the American Legion chapter in Omaha, Nebraska (an organization geared for army veterans) — an address that garnered headlines throughout the country under the headline "Tolerance Speech, Intolerance is Rapped at Omaha Speech."

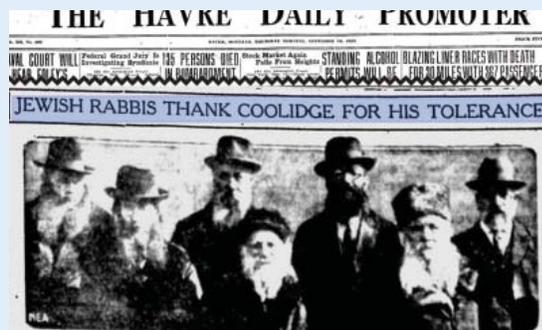
He courageously addressed members of the organization who often resorted to nationalism (and in 1930 would host Mussolini) and called for tolerance and acceptance — denouncing the Klan, which was highly active in the 1920s.

This spurred the delegation of Rabbanim, including Harav Avraham Aaron Yudelovitch, who served in the Eldridge Street Shul on the Lower East Side, and Harav Velvel Margolies, to travel to Washington to express their gratitude, and to ask him to ease restrictions on immigration for the Jews who were suffering so much between the World Wars in Eastern Europe.

The *Havre Daily Promoter*, in Havre, Montana, features a photograph of the Rabbanim under the title "Jewish Rabbis Thank Coolidge for his Tolerance," and goes on to identify them. A similar, but breathtakingly clear photograph was given to Moreshes Chachmei America by Harav Eitam Henkin, *Hy"d*, who loved Torah and Jewish history, and one of the Rabbanim — a man with a striking countenance — is identified as

Harav Eitam Henkin, *Hy"d*/Moreshes Chachmei America

A photo from the Washington Delegation: (R-L): Harav Avraham Miller, Harav Velvel Margolies, Harav Yitzchok Leifer of Nadvorna-Bronx, Harav Avraham Aharon Yudelovitch, Harav Menachem Guzik, Harav Tzvi Hirsch Dachowitz and Harav Zalman Tuvia Golubovski.



"These Jewish rabbis from New York went to Washington to thank President Coolidge for his recent 'tolerance speech' before the American Legion and to ask his support for a less strict immigration law." The *Havre Daily Promoter* reporting on the story in November of that year.

Rabbi Abraham Miller.

In its quest to familiarize itself with as many of the Rabbanim who served American *kehillos* during the earliest part of the 20th century as possible, the *Moreshes* set about its work. The first clue came from the *sefer Toldos Anshei Hashem b'Artzos Habris*, detailing notable personalities of American Jewry, published in the year 1923.

It states that Rabbi Miller was accepted as a Rav at Beth Israel in Boro Park (where it still stands at 11th Avenue and 56th Street) two years earlier, in the year 1921, after a stint in Williamsburg and other communities.

More information

reveals that he was a prominent member of the Agudas Harabanim/Union of Orthodox Rabbis, and is signed on a letter pertaining to that organization's handling of *kashrus* matters in America, alongside such other prominent members as Harav Yisroel Rosenberg, and its secretary, Harav Yehuda Leib Zelcer.

In 1927 and 1928, we find that Harav Miller, representing the Agudas Harabanim, fought a *milchemes Hashem* to preserve the honor of the deceased. The Interboro Highway — connecting Brooklyn and Queens —, was being planned. (Today it is known as the Jackie Robinson Parkway, after its renam-



'Intolerance is Rapped' headline.

ing in 1997.) And the plan called for the road, which still today cuts through Mount Carmel Cemetery, to remove hundreds of Jewish graves.

They hired an engineer who presented the city board with alternative map for this road, but it was rejected. However, their lobbying was not for naught, as the planning board did change the plan on their own, bringing the number of exhumations down from a few hundred, to 30 — as the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of January 1928 reported:

"Before putting the motions for adoption of the amended map of Interboro Parkway within the limits of the Cypress Hills Cemetery,

President McKee told Mr. Shapiro and Rabbi Miller that the Board of Estimate was most anxious to protect Jewish Law ..."

A granddaughter of Rabbi Miller was 13 years old when he passed away in 1939. She remembers visiting him at his Bronx home, where he served the congregation She'erith Yisroel on Southern Parkway.

She relates that he served numerous congregations in America, and came to America under the name Charnofsky, and indeed, the 1920 census finds him by that name in Haverhill, Mass. Records from Ezras Torah, and a letter from the White House also find him by that name, since he came from his native Kovno in 1911, until he changed it back to Miller in 1921.

Rav Avraham Miller was *niftar* suddenly in Lakewood, New Jersey on 29 Teves, 5700, at the age of 59.

Hamesilah from that month prints a small tribute to him as a *Gadol b'Torah* who did much for American Jewry, and served the communities of Salem and Haverhill, Mass, Plainfield, New Jersey, Williamsburg, Boro Park, and the Bronx — confirming the account from the family (who had not known that he ever resided in Brooklyn, but the census from 1930 lists his address as 1109 57th street, a stone's throw from Beth Israel) — and an active member in Agudas Harabanim.

He is buried alongside his Rebbetzin, Teibe, in Beth David Cemetery, remembered as an *askan* and *talmid chacham* who served his fellow Jews in Boro Park of yesteryear.

Hamodia encourages ideas and submissions to this column. Please email Boropark@hamodia.com.