



PIONEERS OF BORO PARK by Yitzchok Shteierman

"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 Mordechai Aaron Kaplan, Zt"l

### A Mother's Dying Wish Fulfilled in Boro Park of Yesteryear

The preceding few editions of *Pioneers* have dealt with items that were in one way or another related to the history of Bnei Yehuda, one of Boro Park's oldest shuls. We continue our journey back in time to that area of Boro Park of yesteryear — with a humble profile of a giant figure; Harav Mordechai Aaron Kaplan, zt"l, who served Bnei Yehuda and the greater Jewish community with a unique leadership that was so desperately needed in that era.

Rav Kaplan was born in the winter of 5649 (1889), in a small town called Mendewitz, in the Minsk region. When he was 11 years old, his mother passed away. Her parting words to him were to go learn in the big *yeshivos* and excel in Torah. He learned in Minsk under Harav Leib Bass, and in the yeshivos of Mir and Slutsk — where he became known as a *masmid* with a sharp mind.

He came to America in 1908, and acquired his *semichah* in Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchanan — from two *Geonim* in America of that time: Harav Shmuel Tzvi Wein, zt"l, the Wizoner Rav (later a Rav in Boro Park's Shomrei Shabbos), and Harav Avraham Aharon Yudelovitch, zt"l, Rav of the Eldridge Street Shul — both of whom lauded his oratorical gifts, something that he would soon become famous for.

Indeed, he began employing his significant gifts immediately. First in the Bnei Yaakov Shul in East New York, then a very prominent tenure in Nachlas Tzvi in Harlem — where we see so many accounts of his activism and oratory throughout that decade — and prior to Rosh Hashanah 1926 Rabbi Kaplan assumed the position of Rav of Congregation Bnei Yehuda in Boro Park.

He came with quite a reputation as an orator. Already in Harlem, his *drashos* were packed, and they were always prominently announced in the Yiddish papers. Soon after Rabbi Kaplan left Harlem for Boro Park, his friend, Mr. Yehuda Koenigsberg compiled many of his *drashos* and published them in a volume entitled *Ruach Ha'eis* — The Spirit of the Time — and he notes the special gift that



Harav Mordechai Aaron Kaplan, zt"l, as profiled in *Otzar Hatmunos*.

STAR SECTION, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1933

AID SONS OF JUDAH BAZAR



Samuel Rubin, chairman of the committee on arrangements for the annual bazaar of the Congregation Sons of Judah, 3311 162d Ave., and Rabbi Mordecai A. Kaplan of the congregation. The affair will open tomorrow night and run until Feb. 26. Proceeds are for the Talmud Torah and charitable work of the temple. Entertainment, attractive gifts and games will be features of the bazaar.

Rabbi Kaplan in 1933, together with Mr. Samuel Rubin, chairman of the bazaar to benefit Bnei Yehuda.



Rav Kaplan visiting Manischewitz bakery in 1921. (L-R): Rabbi Mendel Hochstein, Rav Hamchshir; Rav Kaplan; Harav Avraham Aaron Yudelovitch (*masmich* of Rav Kaplan); Harav Binyamin Livei, and Mr. Tzvi Hirsch Manischewitz, proprietor. The *Morgen Zornal* wrote about this visit at the time.

Rabbi Kaplan had to draw hearts toward his message.

Indeed, Rav Kaplan's oratory was a defining attribute — and he keenly understood the importance and the emphasis that America placed on communication ... and marketing, a remarkable perception for a *talmid chacham* who arrived here a poor 18-year-old lad, as he himself noted in the introduction to his compilation *Der Natzyonaler Redner* — *The International Speaker*, which was published in 1929:

"The tongue and the pen are powerful weapons in the acquisition of the economic, the political, the religious, and the national interest. The greatest business people who have ascended the ladder of success to become powerful figures in the fields of manufacturing and industry, as well as great political leaders who occupy the most influential positions — all of it is thanks to the power of the written and spoken word ... through masterfully written articles and advertisements, and also

through inspiring speeches they have acquired wealth and influence."

He goes on — the most beautiful and brilliant language — to explain how central communication and style is in American dialogue, and makes the following, brilliant observation: "Everywhere that the Jew has settled in the lands of emancipation, he has gravitated to become the 'People of the tongue' ... and not the 'People of the Book.' Where previously, they were known as Rav or Rebbe ... in America they are known as a preacher. They constantly pursue amusement and the arts. He could be the most learned man, but if he doesn't have speaking skills, he cannot make it in America."

But Rabbi Kaplan possessed scholarship and leadership as well as expressive talent in ample measure — something he used exclusively to inspire his brethren toward Torah observance.

His entire *sefer* is, likewise, brilliant, but so accessible and understandable, adapting the age-old *maamarei Chazal* for a new world. For the rest of his life, his *Shabbos shiur* at Bnei Yehuda, 4:00 each Shabbos afternoon, delivered in Yiddish, was attended by hundreds of people, packing the shul. He was short in stature, but his booming voice reached all the way to the back of the shul. His delivery was brilliant, and he knew how to strike the right chord that would truly reach the hearts of his listeners.

As noted, his gifts of oratory were only matched by his other expressive talent — his power of the pen. Everywhere ... in the *Tog Morgn Zshurnal*, in Yossele Rosenblatt's *Dos Yiddische Licht* ... his name appeared on articles that were exhorting and unapologetic about pure, unadulterated Torah philosophy.

In the next installment of this tribute to Rav Kaplan, we will examine his impressive tenure as an *askan* and leader in Boro Park of yesteryear.

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