



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 voice of education and inspiration in Boro Park of yesteryear

In the first part of our profile on Harav Kaplan, we focused on his unique perception of the Jews in his adopted country, and his exceptional gift of expression — which he used to inspire the young and the old around him.

He was a tremendous activist. In the minutes of Agudas Harabanim — of which he was a prominent member — Harav Kaplan is noted as bemoaning the ignorance of some of the lay people who cannot discern between serious, learned Rabbanim and the pretenders; for this reason, he insisted, the Agudas Harabanim must make itself heard.

He had a hand in numerous endeavors for the *klal* — including *kashrus*, *taharas hamishpachah*, Jewish education, and *shemiras Shabbos*.

Reb Shmuel Goldstein, of the legendary Boro Park Goldstein family, in an interview with Dr. Phillip Kipust, z"l, written up in his column *I Remember Boro Park*, recalled "...periodic visits to the school (Yeshiva Toras Emes) by Rabbi Mordechai Aaron Kaplan, spiritual leader of Cong. Bnei Yehuda and chairman of the schools' board of education. The Rabbi would visit the classrooms and deliver talks to the children.

One granddaughter recalls, "I remember him vividly until this day (65 years later)! He was the kindest, gentlest man, and we would always see him learning at home. He lived around the corner from the shul." She fondly remembers her grandfather studying *Chumash* with her, and relating to her the stories from *Tanach*; he was a dominant presence in her life and in the lives of his congregants.

Mr. Joseph Schlesinger grew up on the Lower East Side, and when he came out of the army following World War I, he came to Boro Park and opened Schlesinger Butcher Shop on 16th Avenue and 55th Street. His son, Reb Moshe, recalls going to Rabbi Kaplan's house with all the *she'eilos* that occurred in the shop.

"We had a special knife that we would use for these occasions... if the chicken turned out to be



Harav Mordechai Aaron Hakohen Kaplan, zt"l, a prominent voice in the American Rabbinate.



Rabbi Kaplan at 58 years old, two years before his untimely passing, at the bar Mitzvah of Moshe Schlesinger, held at Cong. Beth El of Boro Park in 1948.



The Resting place of Rav Kaplan in the Bnei Yehuda section of Montefiore cemetery. Note, his defining quality inscribed; peh mapik margoliyos, a mouth that flows forth pearls.

treif we would throw it away. [The Rabbi] was exceptionally knowledgeable, and he always greeted me with a friendly demeanor, and spoke to me in a charming accented English..."

"The last *she'eilah* that I ever brought to him, he peeked inside and immediately said, tell your father to take it back to the chicken market and they'll know what to do with it. (There were two where he would shop: 15th and 61st Street—where Rabbi Greenberg was a *shochet*; and on 39th Street and 13th Avenue.) This was because the live chicken markets had an arrangement where they would take back a *treife* chicken and give a live one in exchange."

Mr. Schlesinger recalls the Shabbos when the Rav introduced a grocery owner who agreed to close on Shabbos. He was located in a small market, where the Lakewood *minyan* is located today, together with Katz's Butcher, and another fish store. Katz, was of course closed. But this man was taken in by Rabbi Kaplan's efforts, and he lauded him publicly for his courage and conviction.

No matter how vociferous and forceful he was about *Yiddishkeit*, it was always done *b'sever panim*, with his sterling *middos*. It was his kindness and understanding that really reached people.

Rabbi Israel Schorr, Rav of Beth El for over 60 years, recalled com-

ing to Boro Park, and asking Rabbi Kaplan to introduce him to his new community. He remembered thinking that someone as great as Rabbi Kaplan would probably not agree. But he was such a *baal middos*, that he graciously came and introduced the Beth El flock to their new shepherd. When Rabbi Kaplan's daughter passed away, Rabbi Schorr noted that this was one way that he could repay his mentor who was so kind to him.

On his mother's side, Rabbi Kaplan was related to Harav Mendel Krawiec (the father-in-law of Harav Hillel David) and an *alter Mirrer*. When he arrived, Rabbi Kaplan saw to it that he immediately got an apartment and a Rabbinic position in Sea Gate, NY.

In the arena of *kashrus*, we have noted in the past that he was involved in this, and wrote strongly about the *hefkerus* of the butchers. He gave a *hechsher* on Skilowitz's Deli (on 13th Avenue between 49th and 50th), and another business on 2nd Avenue in Manhattan. He was also the Rav of Israel Zion Hospital.

In 1944, Rav Kaplan was awarded lifetime tenure at the helm of Bnei Yisroel, an opportunity that allowed him to strengthen the Talmud Torah Tiferes Elchanan of the shul. Sadly, Rav Kaplan passed away at the age of 60 in the year 1951.

An article in *Hapardes* upon his passing notes that the *levayah*—which shut down the entire 16th Avenue—saw 3,000 people in attendance, led by the preeminent Rabbanim of that time.

Among those who were *maspid* were Rav Krawiec, Harav Shimon Sher in the name of the Vaad Harabanim of Boro Park (an uncle of this writer, a prominent Telsher *talmid*, and Rav of Kesser Israel. The *levayah* was attended by many more prominent Rabbanim—bidding an early farewell to a voice of fearlessness, compassion, an eloquence that rang forth in Boro Park of yesteryear.

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