

First of the Series of Fascinating Jewish Characters:
HaRav HaGaon Reb Moshe Eliezer Gavrin

April 4, 1928

As the first in our series of fascinating characters, we honor **HaRav HaGaon Reb Moshe Eliezer ben Reb Moshe Eliezer Gavrin**, who resided at 771 Crown Street in the Eastern Parkway neighborhood. He was a *zaken* (elder) in years, in Torah and in wisdom, an imposing figure with patrician Jewish *hadras ponim* (splendor of countenance). His photograph, which can be seen here, reflects his greatness. He was crowned with the title Gaon Charif (Incisive Genius) and was fluent in Shas Bavli and Yerushalmi, the Poskim with all of the commentaries and Responsa. He nevertheless refused to accept a rabbinical position neither in Europe until the age of 55, nor in America even in his old age when he was close to eighty. Last month, in Teves, he reached the age of 79.



As an eleven-year-old boy, in his birthplace, the shtetl Zemel (located in Grodna Gubernia), when he presented a *pilpul* (Talmudic discourse) on a difficult *sugya* (section) in Gemara, he amazed the Gaon Rav Eizel Charif, the Slonimer Rov. Later in the Zettler Yeshiva in Vilna, in the shul of the Vilna Gaon, he was called an *ilui* (genius).

As the style was in Lita at that time, when he was eighteen, a wealthy, philanthropic Jew Reb Binyomin Mintz together with his wife, the righteous woman Leah, of blessed memory, took him as an *eidem* (son-in-law). They gave him their daughter as a wife, together with a dowry and ten years of *kest* (free room and board). During these *kest* years, the *eidem* Gavrin deeply immersed himself in Torah, swam in the sea of the Talmud, and conducted extensive correspondence with the Gaonim of that time, Rav Boruch Mordechai Lifschitz, Rav Yitzchok Elchonon [Spector], Rav Lippe'le Mirrer, the Minsker Gadol, and others. After the *kest* years, as a young married man, he entered the world of commerce, but never, G-d forbid, abandoned his Torah studies. Rav Gavrin unified [in one man] the Zevulun (businessman) and Yissachar (diligent Torah scholar). His home was filled with Torah and tzedokoh. He was an exceptional *davener*. He became renowned as the Jew in whom was seen "Torah and greatness in one place." He conducted business throughout the Russian regions Grodna, Vilna, Kovna and Minsk, and was revered by businessmen and customers as well as even gentile noblemen. Wherever there was a difficult Din Torah, an arbitration, or a Jewish communal issue, he took part in the matter.

Such a distinguished Jew should have lived out his years in serenity, together with his wife Miriam Rivka of blessed memory, their six sons and four daughters. Unfortunately, however, the family suffered bitterly under the decrees of the wicked enemy Alexander the Third, may his memory be blotted out,

who confiscated all the Jews' sources of livelihood. In this time, also, the Russo-Japanese War broke out. Fearful that his sons would be forced to serve in the army of the Russian Czar, Rav Gavrin went to America in 1904 with his entire family. With his remnant of capital, he purchased a pharmacy, a business which his sons maintain till today.

Of course, such a lofty Jew did not want to earn a livelihood from being a professional Rabbi; he preferred to remain humble and unknown. He was a shadow of his former self when he was a proud, successful businessman. He even concealed his Gaonus (genius) in Shas, and only in private did he silently refresh his spirit learning from his holy Torah Seforim. In order to follow the directive to learn and also to teach Torah and do mitzvos, he participated in the Yeshivas Rav Yaakov Yoseph in Williamsburg and in the founding of a Gemilas Chessed Society, where he gave of his practical talents and of his great generosity of heart.

He resided recently on Crown Street with one of his daughters and two unmarried sons. In that neighborhood, he helped found the Yeshivas HaGaon Rav Yitzchok Yaakov Reines. We obtained Rav Gavrin's photograph and his short biography from his sons, and also from Brownsville resident HaRav Benzion Eisenstadt, who included the biography in his book describing past generations of his family.

In a short personal interview which we had with him, in the room where he sits and learns, we pushed forward our question, but he tried to avoid answering. "We cannot question Hashem's actions. What the Ribbono shel Olam wills, He will do. I am too old to debate the topic. I debated about it enough in the past, with my *mechutan* (in-law) the Gaon Rav Reines, ztz"l.

His biography in short is as follows:

Born on the 26th of Teves 5609 (January 20th, 1849). His father, Reb Moshe Eliezer, died three months before his son was born, and so he was named after him. He was brought up by his grandfather, Reb Naftoli Hertz, one of the esteemed Jews in Slonim.

When he was aged eleven, his wealthy grandfather died, and he and his little sister were left as heirs. The Gaon Rav Eizel Charif, the Slonimer Rov, came to organize the inheritance funds and to deal with who should raise the orphans, Gavrin and his little sister. It was suggested that the children's uncle, Reb Notte, should supervise the inheritance funds and raise the children. Rav Eizel Charif asked the orphan boy Gavrin if he was satisfied with that arrangement, and the child answered "I am surely satisfied, but Rebbe! It is contrary to the Gemara which explicitly states *Ein moridin Karov LeNichsei Katan* (A relative is not sent down to administer the property of a minor [*Bava Metzia 39a*]). The ensuing *pilpul* (Talmudic dispute) began, and Rav Eizel was amazed at the child's acuity.

As a young married man, in Vilna's Chassidische *kloiz* (synagogue), the Gaon and Tzaddik Rav Yisroel Slonimer ztz"l invited him to learn the Masechta Zevachim, which the Tzaddik was learning at the time. In his later years, the elderly Gavrin would be proud to have been Rav Yisroel's talmid.