

## IN-DEPTH FEATURES

Dayan Dr. Yishai I. Grunfeld, zt"l

by Mrs. Anne Ruth Grunfeld Cohn

It is now thirty years since the petiroh of Dayan Dr. I. I. Grunfeld zt"l who left this world during the night between Rosh Hashonoh and Tzom Gedaliah 5736 which was to be the day that the bris of his second grandson took place — a grandson who was unexpectedly given his grandfather's name a few hours after the petiroh.

Dayan Grunfeld had suffered from an ailing heart for the last 21 years of his life, and he utilized his years of early retirement from the London Beth Din to give the world of Torah readership several important literary works. Dayan Grunfeld, with his unparalleled mastery of written English (most unusual for a German professional who had fled from Nazi Germany in 1933), introduced the educated, thinking English-speaking public to the vast intellectual and totally loyal Torah view of Judaism as it should ideally be lived and its underlying rationale and philosophy.

One of his most popular works was a masterly English exposition of the Sabbath which was a pioneering venture, at least among the United Kingdom readership at the time: *The Shabbos* (fifth edition recently published by Feldheim in 2004). Dayan Grunfeld actually penned this little jewel of a book while still at the Beth Din, encouraged and aided by Rabbi Aryeh Carmel now of Devar Yerushalayim but then living in England and teaching limudei kodesh at the Schonfeld Avigdor Secondary School's Sixth Form.

This masterly exposition of the halachic and ta'amei hamitzvos aspects of the Shabbos was inspired by Dayan Grunfeld's deep involvement with the Shabbos Observance Bureau, which was set up by the United Synagogue in the late forties and early fifties to enable employers and employees who respected the observance of Shabbos to find each other.

We have all but forgotten how many a frum Jew became an unwilling mechalel Shabbos because each Friday in the winter, having asked for permission to leave early, he or she immediately found him/herself unemployed and had to look for another job next Monday at what was then called the Labor Exchange. These early refugees from the Continent often had to choose between feeding their families and shemiras Shabbos. We do not appreciate sufficiently nowadays how difficult it was for the newly-arrived immigrants from Torah communities, both here in England and in America. Many made enormous financial sacrifices in order to be able to be shomrei Shabbos and, Rachmono litzlan, many fell by the wayside losing totally their former allegiance to shemiras hamitzvos.

## Biography

Dayan Grunfeld, born in the Bavarian little village of Tauberettesheim in 1900, was the eldest son born to Josef and Carolina Grunfeld. Mr. Moshe Grunfeld z"l, then known affectionately by his nickname of Morle, was the baby of the family. The eldest son was obviously studious and academically gifted.

Although villages in Germany were distant from the powerhouses of East European Torah learning, Hashgochoh Protis brought a famous Torah personality and mashpia to live in another of the little Bavarian villages that together formed the Landsgemeinden, namely Weikersheim. This village was but a few miles away and living there was none other than

Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Rakow zt"l, the father of the late, much lamented Gateshead Rov zt"l.

The shechitah for all that area was supervised by this great Torah scholar. The young Grunfeld felt it an enormous privilege to be allowed private lessons daily from the young musmach and so for many years he cycled to his shiurim after his secular schooling. Thus a whole new world with the most precious legacy of Eastern Europe was imbibed by young Grunfeld and his mental and emotional character formation and sense of spiritual priorities were as a result quite different from those of most of those who lived in the narrow confines of Torah-starved simple Bavarian villages.

Here at a young age his first bonds with lamdonus and the genius and intensity — not to speak of the mussar and derech of Yeshiva learning — were strongly forged in the young lad's heart and mind. Rabbi Rakow's impact was so strong that it was a major influence on the young lad's mind, illuminating it with the sparkling knowledge that the Torah learned so assiduously in faraway Lithuania linked historically to the Shalshelas Hamesorah going right back to Matan Torah.

Having been inspired by this knowledge young Grunfeld was to transcend completely the narrow confines of a small, pious but acknowledgeably limited perspective of a small hamlet in Bavaria. Grunfeld's fine intellectual potential was further honed by his stay in a Jewish boarding school in Hochberg, whence he graduated to the local secular high school in Wurzburg, there being no centers of Torah schooling reasonably close to his parental home with its six young but fast growing siblings.

He spent about a decade of study in various universities, learning at yeshivas and privately in parallel. In order to be able to support his family in the future, and being possessed of a fine analytical mind, he trained to be a solicitor — but he also learned in every spare moment. He studied in several universities. However he remained determined to carry with him wherever he went the Torah ethics, the strong hashkofos and a refusal to compromise in dinim wherever his new surroundings were.

He began study at the University of Wurzburg in 1922. When he lost his father at the age of 24, he took it upon himself to head the bereaved family and he assumed the mantle of fatherly guidance and religious decisions concerning all his younger brothers and sisters. He spent as much time as he could in his native village, cycling home at regular intervals to supervise the education of his siblings and give moral and financial support to his widowed mother, since Wurzburg was not far from his mother's home.

In 1925 he transferred to the University of Frankfurt. This is about 100 kilometers to the northwest, leaving his mother's home somewhat more distant, but still within an easy train ride. Dr. Grunfeld attended the Schneider's Yeshiva in Frankfurt all through his student days, totally fascinated by the derech halimmud and the trenchant personality of HaRav Moshe Schneider zt"l, who was a giant in learning and a wonderful example by his rare combination of middos. His influence on Dr. Grunfeld was deep and lasting.

For reasons that remain obscure, the young Grunfeld spent about a year at the University of Marburg around 1927.

He also spent a period at the University of Hamburg. This was located some 500 kilometers to the north, and was not within an easy commute of his home village. Feeling responsible to contribute to the upkeep of his widowed mother and younger siblings, Dr.

Grunfeld taught at a large talmud Torah in Hamburg where he also supplemented this meager income by being a Haus-Rebbe in well-to-do Orthodox Jewish families. Rabbi E. Dessler zt"l also supported himself through similar private teaching in limudei kodesh.

Around 1931 he transferred to the University of Heidelberg, again in the general area of his home. While there he had a debate with a representative of Nazi Hitler youth who tried to prove that the Talmud was against gentiles. The discussion took place in front of a rather large crowd. Apparently, Father beat this chap's arguments to pulp and to complete the job, he pointed out the Nazi was holding the Talmud upside down! That night, my Father received a rather serious "beating up" by a number of thugs in the dark. He was dragged to an alley and given a thorough "work-over." Thus the Nazis were perfecting their brutal methods even before they took power.

Dayan Grunfeld continued his Torah studies with great zeal and acumen, setting aside an immutable time for gemora study with Rabbi Rakow and with other Torah scholars in Germany. He also attended Rav Schneider's yeshiva at every opportunity.

Dr. Grunfeld graduated in Law and Legal philosophy to obtain his Doctorate with a thesis comparing Roman and, lehavdil, Talmudic Law. He worked for the German civil service in Wurzburg as a Registrar — a position at the Law Department — where he worked with decent gentiles who respected his religious views and practices in every way. He combined this with a strict daily regimen of Torah learning. Although he felt unable to leave his widowed mother alone to go to the famous yeshivas in Eastern Europe, he clearly identified with and informed himself about the great Torah giants and roshei yeshivos in the cities of the Pale.

My Father married Fraulein Dr. Judith Rosenbaum, one of the first students of Soroh Schenirer and by then well-known for her efforts in organizing and teaching in Bais Yaakov schools, in November 1932. My Mother's parents came from Budapest originally, but moved to Frankfurt when my Mother was a very little child. He was awarded semichoh from Rabbi Rakow about the same time.

The young couple lived for a time in Strasbourg, but when Hitler ym"sh came to power, it became obvious that a lawyer had no future in Germany. This was a perception that was widely shared among young Jewish lawyers in Germany, and many tried to leave at that time.

The Grunfelds moved to Palestine late in 1933. Ernest Nebenzahl z"l, who later became the State Comptroller of Israel, and Judge Chaim Cohn, who was religious at the time but later became famous for his anti-religious efforts while serving as Attorney General and on the High Court, went together with my Father to Palestine.

Dr. Grunfeld was not able to find a satisfactory position for himself and in 1934, after having spent six months in Palestine as an articulated clerk working for the legal firm of Eliash who was the first Palestinian Ambassador to the Court of St. James, the Grunfelds moved to London.

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In England, Dr. Grunfeld struggled to find a satisfactory position. Dr. Grunfeld asked how he could become a barrister and was told that mastery of the English language was a "must." While he was studying English, he took advantage of the fact that his wife knew

Chief Rabbi J. H. Hertz from his patronage of her fundraising visits on behalf of Bais Yaakov in the late twenties and early thirties, to try to secure a position in the rabbinate. This did not go altogether smoothly.

Once my Father was asked to give a trial sermon at a large United Synagogue somewhere in Bayswater. There was a beautiful choir. He asked the Warden what the arrangements are when the young boys' voices break. "Boys?" was the reply. "These are not boys but girls singing."

"So you have a mixed choir then!"

"Yes, indeed," came the reply.

"Do you also play the organ in shul at weddings?" asked my Father, being very sensitive to the widespread use of the organ in the Reform establishments throughout Germany. When the answer came in the affirmative — namely mixed choirs and the playing of the organ on a weekday — my Father balked and flatly refused to preach, although his sermon had been given much prior publicity.

This was duly reported to Chief Rabbi Hertz who appeared to be impressed by my Father's principled stance, especially at a time when he was without any income.

To try to help the young couple, the Chief Rabbi generously allocated the ministry of Finsbury Park Synagogue as a part-time living for the Grunfelds. In the meantime there was the constant struggle to improve his mastery of the King's English as it was spoken, minus the heavy German accent. Rabbi Dr. Hertz sent Dr. Grunfeld to study in Cambridge under a famous professor of phonetics and many were the hours that the young Dr. Grunfeld spent practicing the elimination of his Germanic pronunciation with the use of a hand mirror.

Incidentally, the Finsbury Park area has lately become more famous for a mosque which has hosted several famous Moslem terrorists. The Synagogue, a mere fraction of its former size, still exists and has a rabbi and a chazan.

One fine day Dr. Grunfeld refused to officiate at a wedding because it was summer and the ladies of the party were not modestly clad. "I do not care how the ladies achieve the required modesty but if all else fails let them cover themselves with the tablecloths where the reception is to take place," repeated this obstinate young rabbi — a foreigner dictating to the Wardens of the United Synagogue how their womenfolk be dressed. They promised to report this impudence of the German rabbinical refugee to the Chief Rabbi, but in the end the ladies had to conform to the halachic demands of Rabbi Grunfeld, as he was not prepared to perform chuppah and kiddushin otherwise.

The very next day indeed, the Chief Rabbi summoned Dayan Grunfeld to a meeting. "Grunfeld," he thundered, "I hear that after having graced you with a means of income in your unfortunate refugee position, a refugee from an enemy alien country, you have had the temerity of actually telling the Wardens of the Synagogue that you refuse to officiate and give Chuppah and Kiddushin!"

"Yes, Chief Rabbi," came the answer. "I could not perform the ceremony with its mention of the Divine name whilst the ladies' dress was so out of line with the halochoh."

"Do you dare to try and overrule us here in England with your foreign German customs?" further barked Dr. J. Hertz, who was a formidable personality and could be rather stern and intimidating. "Do you realize that you have put your whole source of income at risk? I cannot allow people like you to dictate to us on matters of dress code."

"I realize this, Chief Rabbi, but the halochoh is an overriding consideration at all times and in all places."

"Do not try and lecture me, young man, on the rule of the halochoh! However let us say that you were ill-advised and out of your depth here with our English customs. For the sake of your lovely wife, if I can talk the Wardens round into overlooking this lapse, can you assure me that you will not create a fuss the next time the Synagogue's ladies are not, to your German way of thinking, sufficiently well- covered and that you will not repeat such an ill-advised blunder?"

"No sir," came the firm reply. " I would act in exactly the same manner. I have no right to trifle with the age old rulings of our Sages of the halochoh!"

"You will not be offered such a position again and you have now jeopardized all future employment within the United Synagogue by your foolish obstinacy," said the Chief Rabbi.

"So be it. But I dare not trifle with our holy halochoh and if it costs me my job, then so be it. I regret having disappointed you but principles are principles and must be loyally adhered to under all difficulties," said the young rabbi, realizing that he had most certainly lost his so-much- needed position. The Chief Rabbi asked him to leave his office and wait outside. Dr. Grunfeld was inwardly very downcast but he did not show it.

## A New Career

Then, something quite unexpected happened. Chief Rabbi Hertz, having summoned Dayan Yechezkel Abramsky zt"l, now thundered, "You are in luck Grunfeld! You are just the man of principle we need here on our London Beth Din. One who will feel strongly enough to stand up to these powerful lay leaders of the United Synagogue who would wish us to compromise our holy and time-honored tradition. You now speak a good enough English and you will assist our senior Dean and Sage Dayan Abramsky and become his mouthpiece and his public relations man in all the problems we face in the Anglo-Jewish Community, where no one can explain in comprehensible English why chalitzah needs to be performed in certain cases, or why Dayan Abramsky is so intransigent about certain matters of kashrus and why certain of our Torah and halachic principles can never be compromised for reasons of expediency."

This is how the lawyer from Germany now began to devote his life to the interests and causes of Anglo-Jewry, to the Beth Din at Adler House.

The young educated Grunfeld disappointed and nonplussed his erstwhile champions with his staunch interpretation of traditional Judaism and his fiercely eloquent and fearless fighting for the vindication of halachic issues. The Chief Rabbi had been insightful and wise in his assessment of Dayan Grunfeld's masterly psychological skills and social adeptness in handling people from all walks of life. He made even initially antagonistic people realize and appreciate the deeper and eternal values of the din as conveyed by the Torah.

With his masterly command of language and his natural sensitivities to people's natures and specific standpoints, Dayan Grunfeld was able to cement the foundation of our national religious heritage and even those who openly described halachic Judaism as obsolete, antiquated and arcane, came away with reverence for the majesty and power of the halochah as the bedrock of our continued Jewishly meaningful existence. He knew how to calm the sometimes stormy scenes that occurred in issues relating to mixed marriages, divorces, the ceremony of chalitzah, conversion to Judaism and usually won the day for the traditional survival of the Chief Rabbi's Court. All his opponents respected and admired him even when they would not accept the ruling of the Beth Din.

Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld was a very close friend to that unforgettable hero, Rabbi Dr. Solomon Schonfeld zt"l. These two men discussed everything together and were on first name terms, each giving the other chizuk and treasured advice. They were as close as brothers, if not closer. Mrs. Grunfeld taught at the new Jewish secondary School originally founded by Rabbi Avigdor Schonfeld and continued by his son, Rabbi Dr. Solomon Schonfeld upon his father's untimely demise.

### Spokesman for Torah

As a member of the Beis Din, Dayan Grunfeld in his now impeccable, melodious and literary command of the English language, was able to communicate effectively in a wise, patient and fatherly way with all types who either sought his counsel or asked for his deeply humanistic and deeply Torah-committed viewpoint. He had the unique advantage of being able to combine a deep and impassioned identification with all strands of Orthodox Jewry — from his German Yekkish world to the widest spectrum of heimische, Chassidic, Yeshivische, Litvish, and even Hungarian and similar communities. These were often refugees from the former Pale where vibrant, fiercely loyal and devoted talmidei chachomim and ba'alei batim had hailed from.

Dayan Grunfeld had a special gift in communicating with young, educated and inquiring minds and, possessed of a fine psychological and humane understanding of all types and kinds of people, he was most successful in explaining and popularizing the deeper meaning and eternal wisdom and values of the halochah. He was exceptionally adept at gently, patiently and sympathetically explaining the wider implications of living Orthodox Judaism. Even those who tried to resist his reasonable presentations with intransigent, preconceived ideas of Judaism being outdated, antiquated and hopelessly out of synch with modern lifestyles and thought processes were impressed, if not won over, by his presentations.

Dayan Grunfeld succeeded in his numerous public lectures, students' seminars, and personal dialogues in presenting to hitherto antagonistic minds the majesty, immutability and eternal validity of the Jewish Laws. He was one of the pioneers in diffusing stormy scenes relating to mixed marriages, conversions, agunos, difficult gittin, and revoking of kashrus licenses from butchers and caterers who secretly tried to cheat by receiving deliveries of non-kosher supplies surreptitiously at night.

He remained staunchly firm to the principles of the Shulchan Oruch, at a time when Dayanim were paid ludicrously low salaries and the rich merchant was not above trying to "buy" his way out of exclusion. In the end, Dayan Grunfeld was often successful in convincing his erstwhile bitter opponents to accept, revere and comply with the dictates of

Jewish Law and recognize their unique contribution to the eternity of the Jewish people.

### The Difficult War Years

During the war, the Dayan carried on with his vital work at the Beth Din in Adler House, Euston and commuted weekly on the "London Train" that came each Sunday morning from Letchworth Hertfordshire. London was fully under siege and the nightly bombings and the destruction they wreaked were awesome to behold. Still, the Dayan stayed in lodgings until Thursday evening when he returned to his little family refuge deep in the countryside.

On one fateful day, when sirens went off during an important hearing at the Beth Din, the Dayan was so immersed in looking up what the gemora had to say that he rose from his seat to remove another sefer of reference. At that very second an enormous piece of flying metal shrapnel hit the open page of the large volume on the desk. Had the Dayan been sitting there at that moment, it would have been fatal. As it was, he escaped with being heavily wounded in the leg and was transported after expert first aid treatment all the way to Campton, his little village, by an ambulance.

In 1952 when King George VIth died, the Dayan, mainly because of his loyal monarchical sentiments and eloquent English diction, was asked to give the Royal Eulogy at Westminster Abbey. As he was a cohen, he could not enter the Abbey where many famed personalities are buried. He was granted permission to deliver his masterpiece in memory of the deceased father of the present Queen Elizabeth in the Palace of Westminster instead. His description of the nobility of the late monarch as compared with the ideal of the duties and responsibilities of Kingship as envisaged in the Torah remains a most unique piece of historical oratory to this day.

### The Postwar Years

During the very difficult postwar years, problems were being presented that seemed virtually insoluble. There was a case of a man who was totally certain that he had seen his cousin enter a death-chamber and upon this reliable testimony, the wife was permitted to remarry. Some time later, she fainted in Oxford Street because she had seen her husband on the other side of the street. The Beth Din was forced to ordain that she was now forbidden to both "husbands"! Tragedies of this order were not uncommon.

The functions of the Beth Din now increased exponentially in bulk and complexity not to speak of emotional heartbreak. It was the only religious court able to fulfill judicial advisory and cultural functions. It carried an enormous load in trying to solve problems in the very troubled immediate post World War II years, quandaries that affected individuals as well as the community.

If that were not enough, there were serious proposals concerning Calendar Reform in England suggesting that the day of rest, Saturday, would officially only occur every ten days in order to provide a longer working week. Naturally these proposals seriously affected the status of our precious Shabbos and thus the Dayan worked hard and late sitting on various international committees discussing the pros and cons of the proposed Calendar Reform.

In Israel in 1952 with the introduction of "The Law of Return," there developed a major and

dangerous political debate about the right of people wishing to settle in Israel as Jews. There were forceful arguments among powerful political personalities saying that all who wished to make the new state their home could rightfully thereby lay claim to the full status of being a Jew.

This seriously threatened the integrity and survival of the real Holy Nation and Dayan Grunfeld, fearlessly and definitely, set out very clearly the voice of the Halochoh in this contentious and highly dangerous move in his pamphlet "Who Is a Jew?" with a Foreword by the Chief Rabbi, Dr. Israel Brodie published by Ha-Ittim in 1958.

Dayan Grunfeld's time at the Beth Din and after his retirement in 1954 (as a result of a series of serious heart attacks — this was before the medical advances of heart by-pass operations) was very varied and productive within the wider Jewish community.

He was one of the founding influences on the Jewish Marriage Education Council; he was a Member and Executive and on the Education Committee of the London Board of Jewish Religious Education and a member of the Executive Committee of the Schools' Kosher Meals Service. He was the Vice Chairman of the Committee of the Status of Jewish War Orphans in Europe. He was a key member of the Central British Council for Jewish Relief and Rehabilitation, as well as in the Committee for the Allocation of the Jewish Trust Fund for victims of Nazism. Perhaps most relevant of all for today's Jewish scene, he was a leading figure in the National Council for Shechitah Board.

Dayan Grunfeld was greatly familiar and at home with all local communities. He was joyfully welcomed in local Yeshivish circles and independent minyanim of varying shades of Continental, Chassidic Austrian, Hungarian. His wise counsel and intermediary skills were widely sought and his combined Torah erudition and secular expertise were universally respected.

The Dayan spent his years of his so-called retirement from the Beth Din giving many lectures to both Jewish and non-Jewish groups and organizations. He was also active in many non-Jewish organizations. He was a trustee of international Amnesty Movement for Victims of Religious Persecution and Prisoners of Conscience, the British Red Cross, an advisory member and Honorary Lecturer of the National Association of Boys' Clubs. He was member of the advisory panel of the Wyndham Place Trust a Parliamentary body devoted to Religion and the Rule Of Law in International affairs, whose meetings at the Royal Palace of Westminster, he would attend faithfully with carefully kept beard and well brushed kapote in order to keep the public image of the Orthodox Rabbi in excellent shape.

Thus the Dayan's life of retirement was filled to the brim and he was extremely active. His most enjoyable hours were those spent in his study, learning, reading and writing. He maintained for very many years a regular nightly learning chavrusa with his colleague, Dayan Rapoport zt"l, and many were the Torah scholars and talmidei chachomim from all over the world with whom he kept up a regular connection. The Ponevezher Rov and many other Torah giants and community personalities like Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung, Rabbi Shimon Schwab, and Rabbi Joseph Breuer were frequent visitors to the Dayan's Study.

He was invited on one occasion together with Dayan Abramsky to attend Her Majesty the Queen's annual Garden Party at Buckingham Palace. The then-wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury took great offense at Dayan Abramsky's natural refusal to shake her proffered long-gloved hand. Dayan Grunfeld in his charming, genial manner was able to defuse the

situation with gentle grace.

He continued to discuss points of halochah with his close friend ylt'a Rabbi E. Schlesinger the founder of the Yeshivoh Horomoh. The Dayan had been most instrumental in helping to put this Yeshiva on its feet. There was a deep friendship between the Dayan and Rabbi Schlesinger who took it upon himself to produce a beautifully executed slim volume dedicated to the memory of his good friend the Dayan. Some of the details recalled in this tribute owe their origin to this volume, which appeared on Erev Rosh Hashonoh 1980. The debt is hereby gratefully acknowledged.

He had also developed very close ties with the Mashgiach of the Yeshiva in Be'er Yaakov, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe zt"l, as well as with the heads of the main yeshivos in Israel, like Yeshivas Mir, Kol Torah, and of course Ponovezh. His wife's first cousin, Rabbi Benzion Bamberger zt"l was mashgiach in Ponovezh.

## Publications

Many of the Dayan's publications are written in an academic style. They include The Three Generations, published in 1958, a masterly historical appreciation of the giants of Torah Jewry. This volume has been out of print for many years now but is being expertly prepared for re-publication. Also, Judaism Eternal — selected essays from the writings of Shamshon Raphael Hirsch with an Introduction and brief Biography, and The Horeb, a philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observance, prefaced by a masterly Introduction by the Dayan. This was published in 1962 by Soncino Press. The Jewish Dietary Laws — a Guide to their Understanding and Observance was published in 1973 by Soncino Press.

The Dayan's last work, intended to be an introduction to a book devoted to communal, social and family issues, marriage and its special laws, including the subject of the Jewish woman's special role as an eishes chayil, was sadly foreshortened by his passing. He only just completed The Jewish Laws of Inheritance in the summer months of 1975, which unfortunately proved to be his last days. This last book was published some eight years later by Targum Press.

## His Last Days

The Dayan's last days on earth, Rosh Hashonoh, were spent in Finsbury Park Synagogue, davening, duchening, calling out the tones of the Shofar and preaching twice. It was as if his full and multifarious life had come round a full circle. That Rosh Hashonoh symbolized as it were, his life's noblest ambitions.

This Tzom Gedaliah marked his thirtieth yahrtzeit. It was for the Dayan and his particular fierce sensitivity to the whole atmosphere of the Yomim Noraim, a typically suitable time to return Home. He lies next to his unique wife, Dr. Judith Grunfeld o"n in the Chelkas Harabbonim at Har Hamenuchos. He leaves behind a wonderful legacy, exceptional children and many wonderful descendants in London and Yerushalayim. There are quite a number of Yishais who bear his name proudly and indeed all of his descendants give him reason for immeasurable nachas and pride.

Yehi Zichro Boruch. May his memory be a blessing for us all forever!