

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF THE DUBNER MAGGID¹

Rav Yaakov Kranz, known as the Maggid of Dubno, was born *circa* 5501 (1741) in Zietil, near Vilna. His father, Rav Zeev Kranz, was a prominent rabbinic figure known for his piety. His mother Hinda, daughter of the *Av Beis Din* (Chief Judge of the Jewish Court) of Kobrin, was a saintly figure as well. It is thus clear that the Maggid grew up in an environment steeped in Torah learning and sanctity.

At the age of eighteen, the Maggid moved to the Lithuanian city of Mezeritch² (near Brisk) where he studied Torah in the Beis Midrash of the city. He gained a reputation there, and was surrounded by a gradually increasing crowd of people seeking to hear his words of wisdom. Finally he was appointed as a *maggid* (sermonizer) in the Beis Midrash. After a two-year sojourn in Mezeritch, he moved to Zolkiev, and from there to Dubno. He lived in Dubno for eighteen years, and thereby became known as the Maggid of Dubno. He then spent some time in Vilna, at the request of the famed Gaon of Vilna. At the time, the Gaon was suffering from an illness which kept him from his usual Torah studies, and so he invited the Maggid to Vilna to expound on Torah topics before him.

After leaving Vilna, the Maggid passed through Vlodava (near Lublin), where he served as a *maggid* for one year. He was then engaged as a *maggid* in Chelm for two years. Following that, he served as a *maggid* in Zamosch for fifteen years. Over the course of his life, the Maggid traveled widely across Lithuania, Poland, and Germany. He was greatly renowned for his oratory skills. He was particularly noted for his use of astute parables from everyday life to explain deep Torah concepts. The Maggid passed away in Zamosch on 17 Teves 5565 (18 or 19 December 1804). We have thus recently passed the 200th anniversary of the Maggid's death.

The Maggid was not only an extraordinary scholar, but was also extremely devout. He would arise, like a lion, at midnight every night, Shabbos and Yom Tov included, and proceed to the Beis Midrash. There he recited the *Tikkun Chatzos*,³ crying bitterly over the destruction of the Holy Temple. He then studied Torah for the remainder of the night. At daybreak, he immersed in a *mikveh* (ritual pool) and donned his tallis and tefillin for the morning prayer. He prayed with great fervor, like the very saintly men of former times. Although he was heavy-set, he would stand bent over for the entire prayer service like a servant before his master. While praying, he refrained from the slightest unnecessary motion. His customary place next to the eastern wall of the shul was perpetually covered with a pool of tears, even on Shabbos and Yom Tov. Indeed, throughout the entire day his eyes were almost constantly flowing with tears. He wore his tallis and tefillin all day long.

After the morning prayer, the Maggid would study Mishnah and Gemara until midday, when he would return to his home for a modest meal. He covered his tefillin while walking outside and uncovered them again when he arrived home. After eating, he returned to the Beis Midrash to learn. It was his daily custom, in the middle of his

¹ This overview is based primarily on the following sources: the preface by Rav Avraham Beirush Flamm to the Maggid's *Sefer HaMiddos*, the prefaces by the Maggid's son Yitzchak to the Maggid's *Kol Yaakov* and *Ohel Yaakov*, B. Heinemann's English anthology *The Maggid of Dubno and His Parables*, 4th ed. (Feldheim, 1978), and the Halperin *Encyclopedia L'Beit Yisrael*.

² This Mezeritch is not to be confused with the Ukrainian city associated with the Chassidic master, the Maggid of Mezeritch.

³ Midnight prayer lamenting the desolation of Jerusalem and entreating for its restoration.

afternoon learning session, to recite several chapters of Psalms with great weeping. He then gave a lesson on the *Tur*.⁴ This was his daily routine throughout the year.

During the Maggid's lifetime, people did not fully understand why he wept so much. But at the Maggid's funeral, the *shammes* (sexton) of the Beis Midrash of Zamosch put forward an explanation. The *shammes* reported that the Maggid had asked him secretly to inform him of any hardship befalling any member of the community. The *shammes* suggested that it was over these hardships that the Maggid cried. Before his death, the Maggid stated that from the age of eighteen, he never slept past midnight and never missed fasting on Monday and Thursday. When *erev* Rosh Chodesh (a day on which the pious commonly fast) would fall on Sunday or Tuesday, or on Wednesday or Friday, he would fast for two consecutive days.

The Maggid had a most penetrating mind. When he discussed the Gemara with the commentary of the *Tosefos*, he frequently would explain a difficult passage in the *Tosefos* with an incisive parable. Once he was asked for advice on a case involving a woman whose husband's whereabouts were unknown. Upon hearing the facts, he presented a parable clarifying the difficulties of the case. On the basis of his explanation, the woman was permitted to remarry.

The Maggid was also a very powerful orator. Once on a visit to Jaroslav, he delivered a series of sermons. The Maggid's scholarly host attended these sermons with great interest, along with his study partner, also an accomplished scholar. Before the final sermon, the Maggid suggested to these two gentlemen that they should forego attending this last sermon. He told them that it was his custom to conclude a series of sermons with a particularly soul-wrenching speech designed to move the listeners to weeping. He warned the two gentlemen that they probably would not be able to endure such a powerful speech, but they decided to attend anyway. One of them burst out crying just from the Maggid's appearance as he ascended to the pulpit, even before the sermon began. The other held out during the speech for about a quarter of an hour, whereupon he succumbed to a bout of wailing that left him physically shaken.

The original printing of the Maggid's *Emes L'Yaakov* includes copies of two letters that the Vilna Gaon wrote to the Maggid.⁵ In these letters, the Gaon extols the Maggid in the most glowing terms, and implores him to visit Vilna again. One of these letters, dated 15 Kislev 5551 (22 November 1790), reads as follows.

Greetings to my beloved friend, the wondrous and extraordinary Torah scholar, renowned in praise, our revered teacher HaRav Yaakov, *Maggid Meisharim*⁶ of the holy community of Dubno:

Having given you a fitting greeting, my beloved friend, I ask you to come visit me. I wonder why you have not paid me a visit for the past thirteen years. I urge you now to do so, as a true friend who takes an interest in your well-being and welfare.

Eliyahu, son of Rav Shlomo Zalman

⁴ Early code of Jewish Law, a precursor to the *Shulchan Aruch*.

⁵ Both letters are reprinted in the recent edition of *Sefer HaMiddos* prepared by M. Yaffe and H. Kuperman (Blum Press, Jerusalem, 1993).

⁶ The title *Maggid Meisharim* may be translated roughly as "sermonizer on religious ethics."

The other letter, dated 14 Sivan 5556 (20 June 1796) is along similar lines.

The Maggid's works are as follows: *Ohel Yaakov* on the Torah, *Kol Yaakov* on the Five Megillos, *Kochav MiYaakov* on the *haftaros* of the year, *Emes L'Yaakov* on the Passover Haggadah, and *Sefer HaMiddos*, a work of ethics and practical philosophy. Of all these works, only the *Sefer HaMiddos* was actually compiled in book form by the Maggid himself (and this only in rough draft). The remaining works were compiled after the Maggid's death, under the initial direction of the Maggid's son Yitzchak, from notes that the Maggid left behind. These notes were generally only sketches of sermons, which the Maggid prepared for his own use. Thus considerable effort was required on the part of the compilers to put the material into book form. Rav Avraham Beirush Flamm carried out the bulk of the editing work, including that for *Sefer HaMiddos* and *Ohel Yaakov*. The work *Kol Yaakov*, of which the work translated here is a part, was compiled partly by the Maggid's son-in-law and partly by another scholar.⁷ In the compilation of *Kol Yaakov*, the Maggid's son himself played a central advisory role.

The Maggid of Dubno was a highly influential figure. His famed parables illuminated profound Torah ideas for both the simple Jew and the eminent scholar. He was a legend in his own time, and his name has gone down in Jewish history as one of the greatest of the great *maggidim*.

⁷ This statement follows the Maggid's son's preface to *Kol Yaakov*, which I was able to find in a copy of the 1834 Vilna printing. The other scholar, who apparently did the bulk of the work, is not identified there by name. A number of sources indicate that the Maggid's son was the sole compiler of *Kol Yaakov* (Rav Flamm's preface to *Sefer HaMiddos* seems to suggest so), but this appears to be a misunderstanding.