



Rabbi Abraham Neustein and Rabbi Yechiel Mekler

TWO RABBONIM OF BETH ISRAEL

The story of a *shul* can, in a sense, be told through its *rabbonim*, and the more-than-one-century-old Beth Israel of Boro Park has had its share of dedicated spiritual leaders. Today, we tell the stories of two *rabbonim* who served the *shul* in short succession between 1931 and the late 1940s.

Rabbi Abraham Neustein

The first is Rabbi Abraham Neustein, an American-born rabbi who served the *shul* for a number of years before moving on to an illustrious career as the longtime *rov* of the Jewish Center of Brighton Beach which spanned over sixty years.

He was born in 1912 on the Lower East Side to parents who were immigrants from Austria and Galicia respectively. As a child on the Lower East Side, he would seek out the *rabbonim* and *admorim*. "A rumor would go out that a certain *rebbe* or *rov* would be arriving, and he would wait outside the house to get a glimpse," recalls his daughter, Amy Neustein, PhD., an author of numerous academic texts. "He always had great reverence for great men."

After attending elementary school on the Lower East Side, he attended MTA (Manhattan Talmudical Academy), and later RIETS, where he was a student of Rav Chaim Heller, who told him, "I am choosing you to learn with me personally." They did indeed learn together *b'chavrusa*. "He was able to understand learning with incredible depth," his daughter says.

In 1931, at the tender age of nineteen, he assumed his first rabbinic pulpit at Beth Israel of Boro Park. There, he led the *shul* with dedication and oversaw the Talmud Torah.

The first evidence of Rabbi Neustein's presence at Beth Israel comes from a *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* article from November of 1938. "Boro Park Rallies Hit Nazi Atrocities," it says. "Approximately 2,000 persons attended three mass meetings held yesterday in Borough Park to discuss the atrocities in Germany and the report of the Greater Action Committee now meeting in London. These meetings were under the auspices of the Borough Park Zionist Organization..."

A photo also exists of Rabbi Neustein with the children of the Talmud Torah in 1935.

"At the Beth Israel Synagogue, 11th Avenue and 56th Street, Rabbi Abraham Neustein of the synagogue, Dr. David Tannenbaum, president, Rabbi Israel Schorr of the Temple Beth El of Borough Park, and J.I. Rudavsky, chairman, were the speakers," writes a newspaper article of the time.

"On *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, we would have 3,000 people in the *shul*," recalls a



RABBI ABRAHAM NEUSTEIN, WHO SERVED THE CONGREGATION BEGINNING IN 1931.



RABBI YECHIEL MEKLER



CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL, FOUNDED IN 1909, AS IT APPEARED IN 1940.



RABBI NEUSTEIN WITH MEMBERS OF THE FACULTY OF YESHIVA OF FLATBUSH.

אין שול פון אינפענטס האוס, בארא פארק

הרב דר. יהואל חיים מעקלער זועט רעדען אין אנפירען מיט א שיעור אין מיטנה דעם שבת אין דער שוהל פון דער "אינפענטס האוס" פון ברוקלין, 1355 — 56טע סט., בארא פארק. דער עולם איז גער לארען צו קומען.

RABBI MEKLER'S SHIUR AT THE INFANTS HOME OF BORO PARK IN 1957.

daughter. "His weekly *drashah* was his trademark."

The sermons were described by one congregant as a "wellspring of knowledge." They began with Torah and moved seamlessly into current events. It was not uncommon for visitors to walk for miles on a *Shabbos* to hear Rabbi Neustein speak.

When he was asked by Rabbi Joel Braverman to assume the helm of his fledgling high school, he acquiesced, and in this capacity, he obtained the charter from New York State for Yeshiva of Flatbush.

For forty years, he was an honoree of the Ponovezh Yeshiva. "[The Ponovezher Rov] Rav Kahanemen adored my father," his daughter relates.

For more sixty years, Rabbi Neustein served as the rabbi of the Brighton Beach Jewish Center, impacting thousands of *Yidden* throughout the decades. He passed away in 2002 following a lifetime dedicated to *rabbonus*.

Rabbi Yechiel Mekler

Rabbi Neustein was likely succeeded by Rav Avrohom Miller, whom we have profiled here in the past, and following Rav Miller's passing in 1940, Rabbi Yechiel Mekler assumed the helm of Congregation Beth Israel.

He was born in the spring of 1894 in Maisiagala, a suburb of Vilna. Other than the fact that his father was named Shlomo, not much is known about his youth. He married Bertha Garon of Shirvint (Sirvintos), also near Vilna, and a son was born to them in Shirvint. They arrived in America in 1920, and headed to South Dakota, where Bertha had family, and they remained in the Midwest for a number of years.

Rabbi Mekler was already employed by Beth Israel in the year 1941, as we learn from his World War II draft card. He would remain in Boro Park through thick and thin, until his passing in 1981. In 1941, we find the rabbi's greetings in the *shul's* journal, in which he writes about the seeds that were sown twenty-two years prior with the founding of the *shul*.

Tragedy struck the Mekler family in 1961 when Mrs. Mekler passed away after being badly burned by fire, as we read in the *New York Daily News*: "Rabbi's Wife Afire, Saved by Woman: The heroic action of a woman neighbor yesterday saved the life of the wife of a Brooklyn rabbi who accidentally set herself afire from head to foot in her apartment at 5609 15th Avenue.

"Mrs. Bertha Mekler, 63, a grandmother and wife of a Rabbi Jachiel Mekler, was transformed into a human torch at noon while she was preparing some water for tea in her top-floor apartment. Mrs. Mekler apparently got too close to the flames of the kitchen range, setting her dress ablaze. She ran into the hallway screaming for help..."

Mrs. Mekler sadly did not survive the ordeal.

By 1957, we read in *Der Tog* that Rabbi Mekler was delivering a *shiur* in the Infants Home of Borough Park, which was located on 46th Street (where Rabbi Nachum Tzvi Josephe later served as *rov*, as we noted in our profile on him). Rabbi Mekler was the *rov* of the Infants Home Shul for many years, until his retirement.

Rabbi Mekler passed away in 1981 following decades of dedication to *rabbonus* and to his constituents in Boro Park of yore.