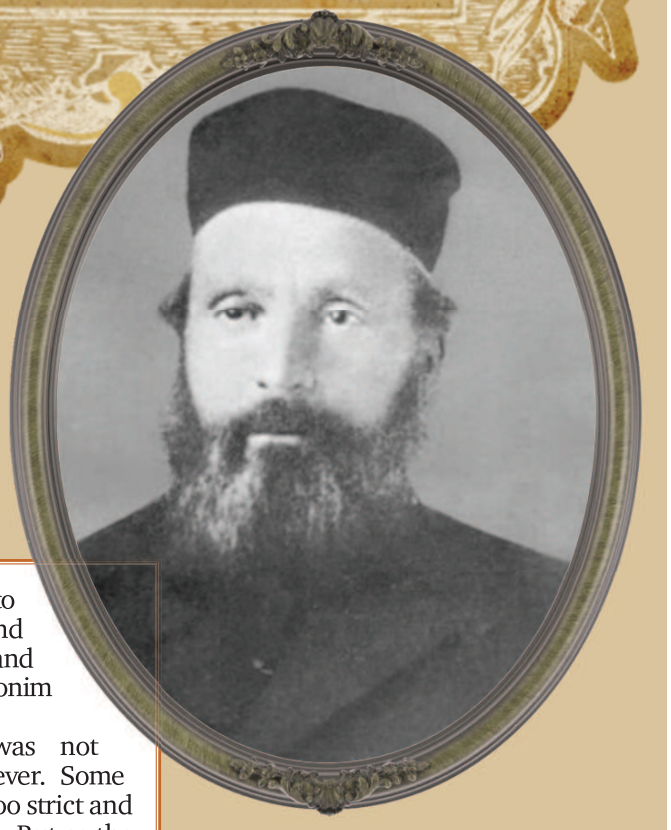
Montagu Road 125th Anniversary

Rav Eliezer (Leizer) Gordon ztl



This year marks the 125th anniversary of the consecration of Edmonton Federation Cemetery. Many illustrious figures from the Jewish community of yesteryear are buried there. To mark this significant anniversary, the Jewish Tribune is looking back at the lives of some of them.

IN 1910, the size of the Jewish community in the United Kingdom was estimated at 245,000 people. It is therefore astounding to consider that on 14th February of that year, some 50,000 members of the kehilla turned out for the levaya of Rav Eliezer Gordon ztl, who was niftar the previous day (4 Adar I 5670) and buried in Edmonton Federation Cemetery.

Rav Gordon's journey from the Lithuanian village of Chernian where he was born in 1841, to the cold and grey environs of London is a fascinating one, and one that certainly bears retelling on the eve of his 105th yohrzeit (which falls this Sunday).

From infancy, it was clear that Eliezer was no ordinary child. His father, R'Avrohom Shmuel Gordon may have been a simple tradesman, a brandy maker, but he was also a student of Rav Chaim of Volozhin ztl, who held him in high esteem and referred to him openly as 'an outstanding talmid chochom'. At the time when his baby son was born, there was no mohel in Chernian and the new-born was taken by sleigh to the nearby village of Svir for his bris. The story is told that en route to Svir, the sleigh slipped and the baby fell out, but the accident was not discovered for quite some time. Frantically retracing his route, the baby was eventually found by his father lying unharmed on the edge of the forest, with a wolf standing over him and guarding him from harm.

As a child, Eliezer continued to show outstanding promise as a Torah scholar, learning first in the Zaretz Yeshiva in Vilna and later transferring to the yeshiva of Rebbi Yisroel Salanter in Kovno. It was he who saw the makings of a Rosh Yeshiva in him, and nurtured that potential by appointing him Maggid Shiur. Rav Eliezer went on to marry Sarah Miriam, the daughter of the Rav of Kovno, R'Avrohom Yitzchok Neviazhsky, who supported them for many years. Despite Rav Eliezer being offered numerous prestigious positions as Rav in nearby towns, Rav Neviaszhsky refused to allow him to take up the roles. According to a descendant of Rav Gordon, when asked how long he would continue to support the couple for, Rav Neviaszhsky explained his insistence with the words: "I do not know if he is living from us or we living from him."

After the petirah of Rav Neviazhsky in 1873, Rav Gordon briefly took over as Rav of Kovno before departing for Kelm three months later. After some years as Rov of Kelm, he headed to Slabodka and then, eventually, moved to Telshe, or Telz, to serve as the Rov there, arriving in 1884.

Part of Rav Gordon's duties in Telz involved taking over the running of a fledgling yeshiva that had been established in 1877. Under his jurisdiction, it grew into one of the most famous yeshivos in the world.

Rav Gordon instituted many changes in the Telshe Yeshiva which are taken for granted today but at the time were considered revolutionary. Instead of having all talmidim grouped into one general shiur, he divided them into different levels so they could learn at a pace suited to their age and ability. He also appointed a mussar mashgiach to look after the spiritual development of his students. And finally, he instituted a new approach to learning, based on logic and understanding of Gemoro and focusing mainly on Rishonim rather than Acharonim.

The mussar regime was not without controversy, however. Some of the talmidim felt it was too strict and made their opposition felt. But as the haskalah movement began to take root at the turn of the century, the mussar approach was entrenched even further and ultimately its opponents were overcome.

Over the years, Rav Gordon's dedication to the Telshe yeshiva became legendary – at one point, he even used funds intended for his own daughter's wedding to ensure his talmidim were provided with their basic needs. It is not surprising therefore that when tragedy struck Telshe in 1908 and a fire broke out burning down both the yeshiva buildings and many of the buildings in the town, Rav Gordon insisted on travelling abroad to raise money, despite his own precarious health.

Arriving in London with his wife in 1910, at the age of 70, he was welcomed by the town's Rabbonim, who called a meeting of philanthropists to discuss Telshe's plight. But to Rav Gordon's deep dismay, it did not seem as though his appeal had been well received. Broken with disappointment, he suffered a heart attack that same night and was niftar shortly afterwards.

By all accounts, the Jewish community in London was grief-stricken when hearing of Rav Gordon's petira so soon after his arrival in London and, somewhat ironically, the appeal for Telshe finally took off. At the end of the shiva, simultaneous hespedim were organised in all the shuls in the East End, with a collection raising £50 for the yeshiva and for Rebbetzin Gordon. The Montagu family, founders of the Federation of Synagogues, donated a further £50 to the yeshiva.

Rav Gordon is buried in Edmonton Federation cemetery and his kever is visited by Yieden from across the globe.

This evening -Thursday 7th Adar, the Federation will mark the 125th anniversary of Edmonton Cemetery at the annual 7 Adar seudah of its chevra kadisha. Special guest for the evening is renowned author and speaker Rav Avrohom Chaim Feuer, who has flown in from Eretz Yisroel especially for the occasion. Rav Feuer's wife Rebbetzin Luba, who will accompany him to London, is a daughter of the famed Rosh Yeshiva of Telz in Cleveland R'Mordechai Gifter z"tl, and a great-great-granddaughter of Rav Leizer Gordon himself.

What's in a Name?

A week after Rav Gordon's petira the *Sheffield Evening Press* ran an article on 'The Jewish Gordons' intrigued by the media interest surrounding the levaya. They reported that the name Gordon became a familiar Jewish moniker after a Scottish doctor of that name became a physician to the Russian Tzar, and eventually, a ger tzedek. When the Russian Gordons visit London, reported the paper, they often wonder where the 'Scottish Gordons' got their Jewish name!