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# THE AMBASSADOR TO THE HOLY LAND



A SPOTLIGHT ON THE INCREDIBLE LIFE OF  
RABBI EPHRAIM WOLFF ע"ה

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(Left to right) Ephraim Wolff, his father Benyomin, his aunt and his mother Breindel Wolff.

## FAMILY ROOTS

**R**abbi Ephraim Wolff was born on August 5th 1920, 21st of Av 5680, in Nuremberg, Germany, to Benyomin and Breindel Wolff. They were a distinguished family, beloved pillars of the local Jewish community and renowned for their philanthropy.

His father, Rabbi Benyomin Wolff, was a revered *talmid chacham* and wealthy businessman. With a national reputation for exquisite craftsmanship, his thriving enterprise produced rare silver artefacts.

As we shall discover, it was not surprising that rather than keeping much of his wealth, he devoted it to the local Jewish community, and for its most impoverished members in particular.

The paternal grandfather, also named Ephraim, was born in 1842, a scion of an illustrious family, tracing its roots all the way back to the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. Over the centuries, his family fled to Spain and on to a number of European countries, finally settling in Hessdorf, Germany.



The Jewish orphanage where Ephraim's father Benyomin grew up in Fürth, Germany.



The Synagogue in their city of Nuremberg (ca. 1900)

He was known as a pious and G-d-fearing Jew and earned a living serving as a *melamed*, teacher, in a number of *shtetls* in the Bavarian Wurzburg-Hessdorf area.

## CHILDHOOD

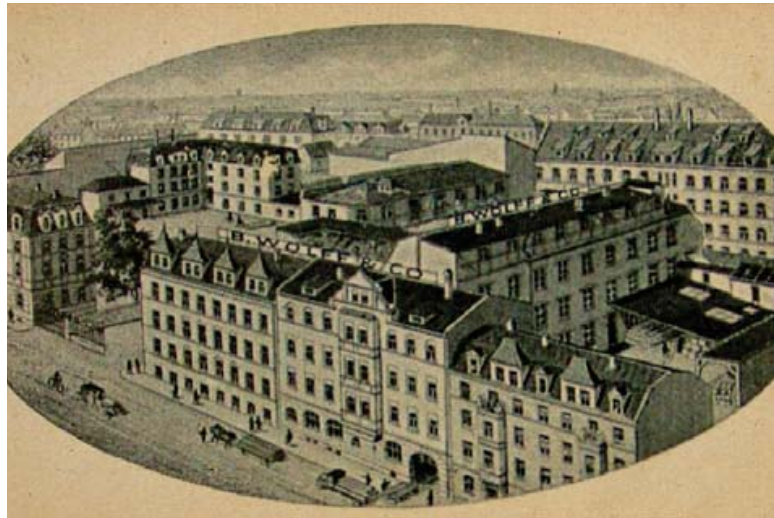
In the 1920s, the large Jewish community of Nuremberg was mostly secular. Here, the *Haskalah* movement, found footing and lured many away from observance. Witnessing the serious threats looming over Jewish education, Benyomin took great pains to ensure that his children, along with nieces and nephews (who had lost their fathers at a young age), receive an authentic Torah education. Young Ephraim made the one-and-a-half-hour daily journey to the next town to attend *cheder*, Jewish school.

At age 10, when he had already begun displaying exceptional talents and assiduousness in his studies, Ephraim left the comfort of his home for Mannheim, a faraway city, where adequate Jewish education could be sought, that would befit his erudition and skill.

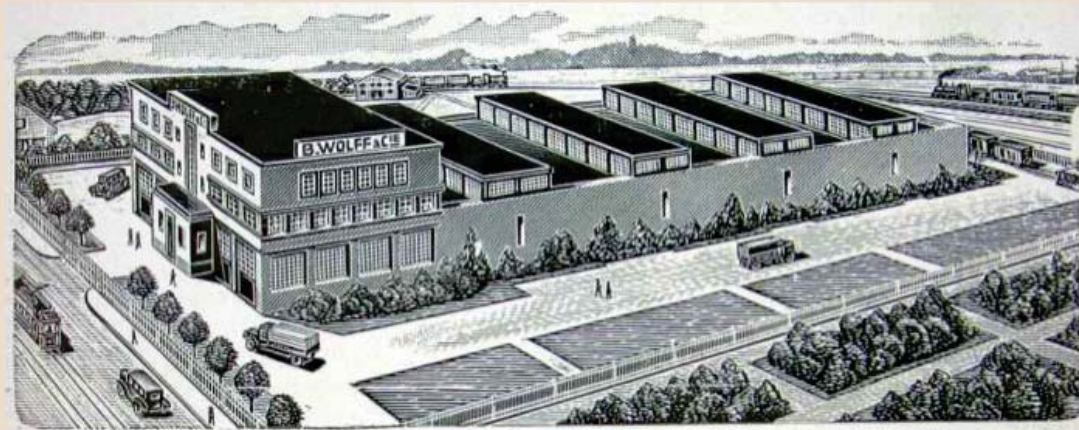
However, tumultuous days lay ahead for European Jewry. As the dark

*Over the centuries,  
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### B. Wolff & Co.: Betrieb Ostendstr. 122



B. Wolff & Co.: Betrieb Ostendstr. 122  
Aufnahmedatum 1930-01-01  
Quelle [Buch der alten Firmen der Stadt Nürnberg (1930) 50]

Top left: Benyomin Wolff (1875–1949), Top right and above: Aerial view of Benyomin Wolff's Metallwarenfabrik Estate "B. Wolff & Co." Nuremberg, Germany (1930)

clouds of Nazism choked the skies – in an almost prophetic prediction – the Wolff's saw that Germany was no longer safe. Their homeland was raging with a genocidal hatred for its Jews, signalling that the time had come to leave.

Abandoning his prosperous business and virtually everything else, Ephraim's father, Benyomin Wolff, fled with his family to neighbouring Holland, where, a short time later his wife passed away. Ephraim was only twelve years old.

The young orphan was determined to find a new yeshiva to continue his studies, and moved to Heide, a small hamlet near Antwerp, Belgium. Alone and far from family, he celebrated his Bar Mitzvah.



The Rebbe Rashab, the Fifth Lubevitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneerson נבג"מ זי"ע

*That encounter paved the way for a close connection between the extended Wolff family and the Chabad Rebbes...*

## MOMENTS OF IMPACT

**I**n Heide, Ephraim crossed paths with some of the leading Torah giants of the epoch, many of whom were later tragically murdered by the Nazis and others who rose to become leaders in the post-war.

This included several prominent Lubavitcher chassidim, who left a profound and lasting impression on the young yeshiva student.

**Reb Benyomin**, Ephraim's father, was no stranger to the mystical world of *chassidim*; some years earlier, in 1907 during a visit to Wurzburg, the fifth Chabad Rebbe, **Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneerson** had stayed at the home **Mr. Philipp – Elyakim – Wolff**, Ephraim's uncle. That encounter paved the way for a close connection between the extended Wolff family and the Chabad Rebbes; many of the letters exchanged between them are recorded in *Igrot Kodesh* – the official collection of correspondence of the Chabad Rebbes.

Nevertheless, the Wolff's took great pride in their *yekkeh* – German heritage, and the Russian chassidic way was not just about to become







Left: The famous Telshe yeshiva in Lithuania where Ephraim learned for many years. Right: Bochurim learning outside Yeshivat Tomchei Temimim Otwock, Poland, where Ephraim spent the month of Tishrei, in 1938.

their own, so when Reb Benyomin heard that his son was contemplating joining the famed Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim – Lubawitz which was headquartered in Poland at the time, he was unambiguous in his disagreement.

With no other option, and upon his father's insistence Ephraim set his compass for the famous Telshe yeshiva in Lithuania.

*But the chassidishe spark had been kindled within, and tugged at his heartstrings...*

But the *chassidishe* spark had been kindled within, and tugged at his heartstrings. Ephraim gravitated towards the small group of *chassidim* in the yeshiva studying *Chassidut*. Lessons took place under the watchful eye of **Rabbi Shmuel Levitin**, a distinguished Chabad *chossid*, who served as town rabbi in nearby Rakshik, (a *chassidic* bastion in the widely non-*chassidic* area) and who would go on to occupy several leadership positions in the Chabad court.

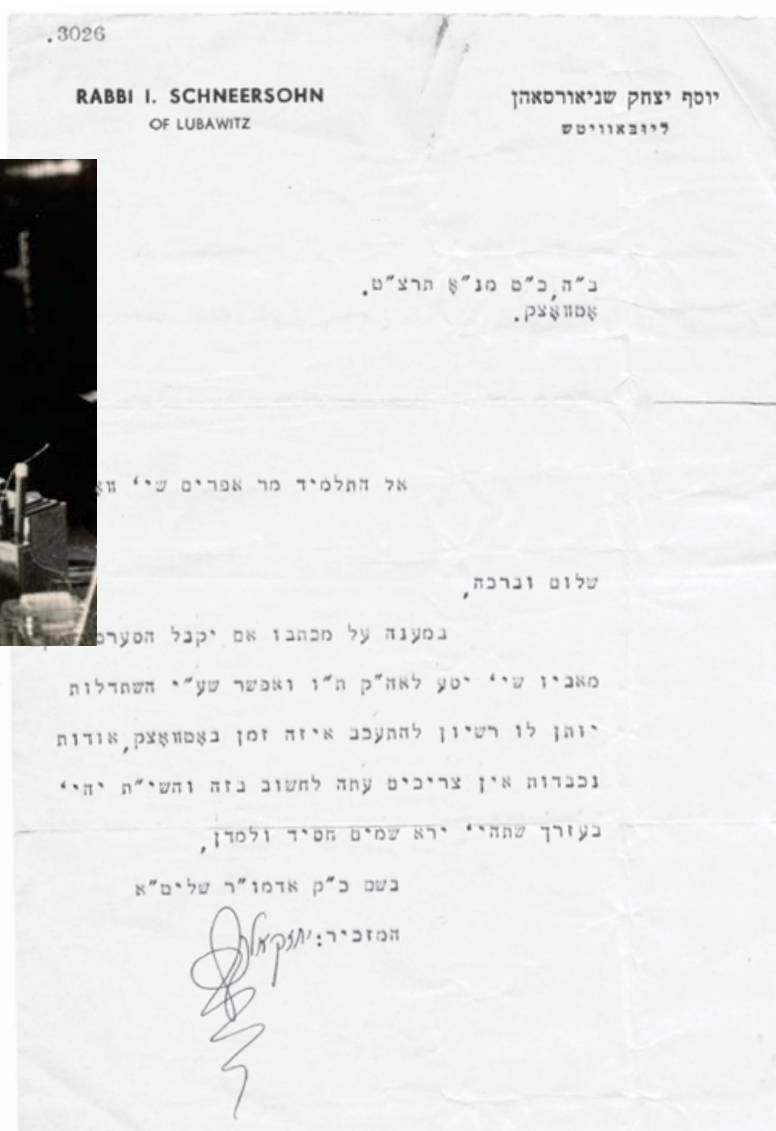
Shortly thereafter, Ephraim experienced a life-altering encounter further strengthening his connection with Chassidism. In 1938, under the directive of his mentor, Reb Shmuel, Ephraim spent the holiday month of Tishrei in the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe's court in Otwock, Poland. Here, he was also in the presence of his illustrious son-in-law, the future Rebbe, who would later ascend to the leadership of the movement and to whose work he was destined to dedicate his entire life.

The Previous Rebbe took note of this young guest from out-of-town. When told that his name was Wolff, the Rebbe inquired whether he





Letter from the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe blessing Ephraim on his journey to Eretz Yisrael, shortly before the outbreak of WWII.

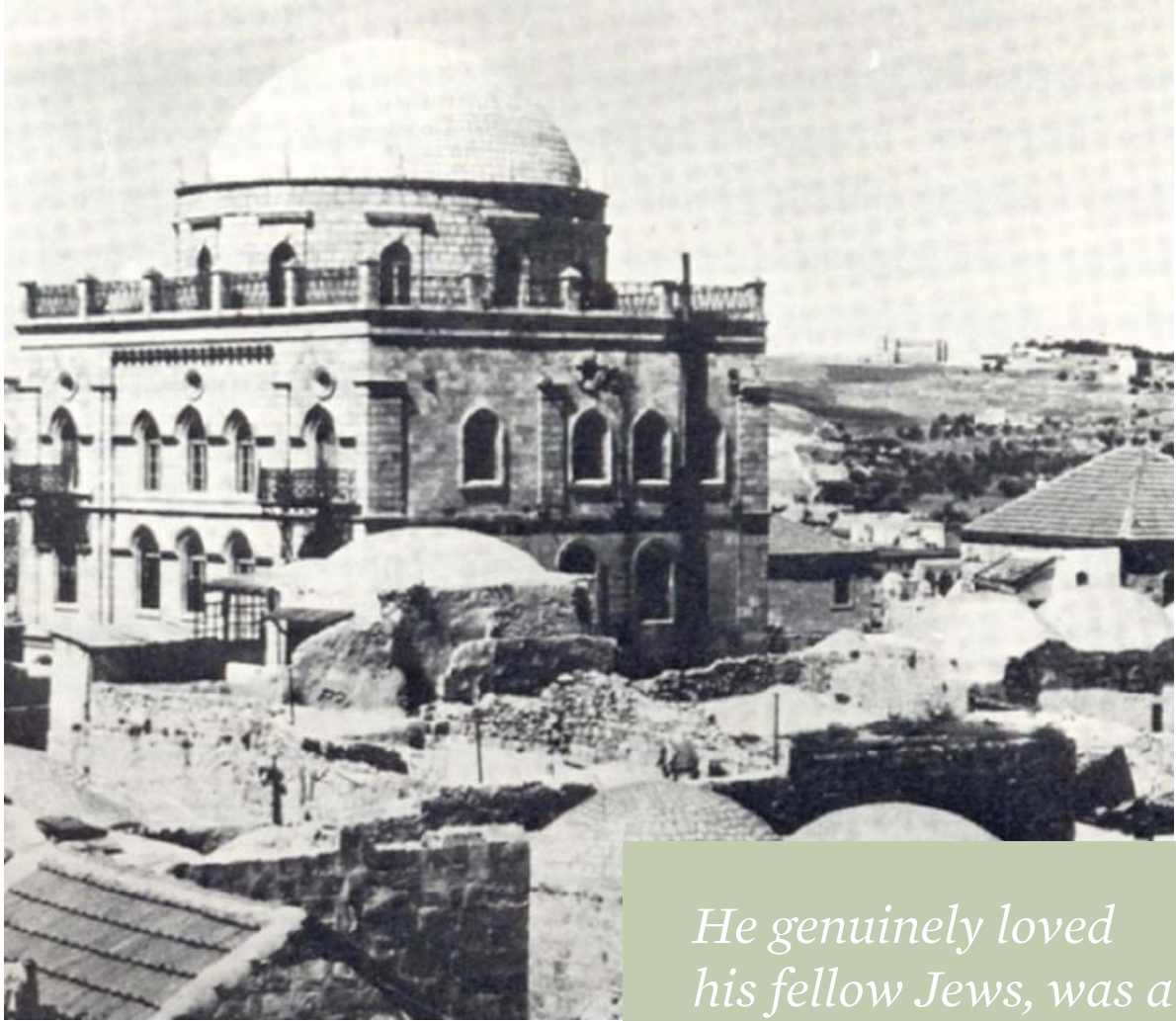


was related to the family in Wurzburg that had been so kind to his illustrious father some three decades prior. Upon discovering that he was the nephew of Elyakim Wolff, the Previous Rebbe bestowed special attention upon young Ephraim.

By the end of the High Holiday season, a deep desire burnt inside Ephraim to remain near the Rebbe and continue with his studies there. Yet his worried father, sensing that a storm was soon to crash upon European Jewry, made plans to extricate the family and resettle in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Upon receiving the Rebbe's blessings, Ephraim undertook a long and arduous expedition traversing the Torah capitals of Europe. From Vilna (today's Vilnius) to Riga, where he spent about a year awaiting his Entry Visa to the British Mandate of Palestine. By the time all his papers were in order, the harrowing flames of Nazism were already burning. Ephraim set sail from the port city of Odessa, narrowly escaping the fate that tragically met many of his relatives left behind, and, of course, millions more.





Synagogue in Jerusalem in 1940

*He genuinely loved his fellow Jews, was a conscientious worker and honest individual.*

## ERETZ YISRAEL

Upon settling in the Holy Land, Ephraim immediately resumed his studies at Yeshivat Torat Emet in Jerusalem.

Whilst learning there, the yeshiva's *mashpia*, spiritual mentor, became embroiled in a legal case. Clandestine foods had been found at his home and an arrest warrant was issued for him.

Quietly, Ephraim presented himself to the British police station and took full responsibility for the forbidden goods found at the rabbi's house. Placing himself in great danger, he falsely claimed that he had recently immigrated and had brought some items from home. Seeking storage space, it was he who asked the *mashpia*, Rabbi Reichman, if he could leave the goods in his home.

The authorities accepted Ephraim's account and dropped the charges. It was unnoted episodes like this that earned Reb Ephraim Wolff the reputation of exemplifying both modesty and integrity. He genuinely loved his fellow Jews, was a conscientious worker and honest individual.

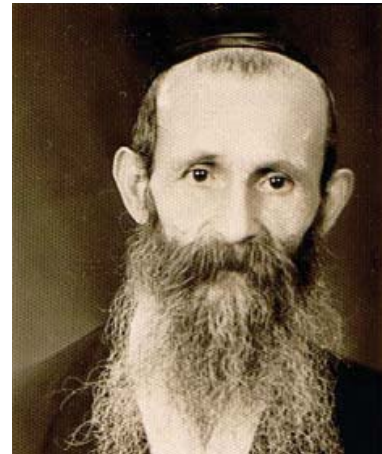
## MARRIAGE

### *'I have planted a cedar tree in the Land of Israel'*

By this stage, Reb Ephraim, a loyal *chossid*, was in close contact with the Previous Rebbe, constantly updating him with news and seeking blessings and advice. The Rebbe provided guidance for Reb Ephraim's life journey – from studies to personal wellbeing. In the autumn of 1940, the Previous Rebbe instructed the maturing young man that the time had come to search for a suitable marriage partner.

Soon after, Reb Ephraim met **Pessia Pariz**. Her father, **Reb Avrohom Pariz**, a man widely known as a passionate and zealous *chossid*, was many miles away at the Previous Rebbe's court in New York. When informed of the prospective husband for his daughter, he immediately asked the Rebbe's guidance.

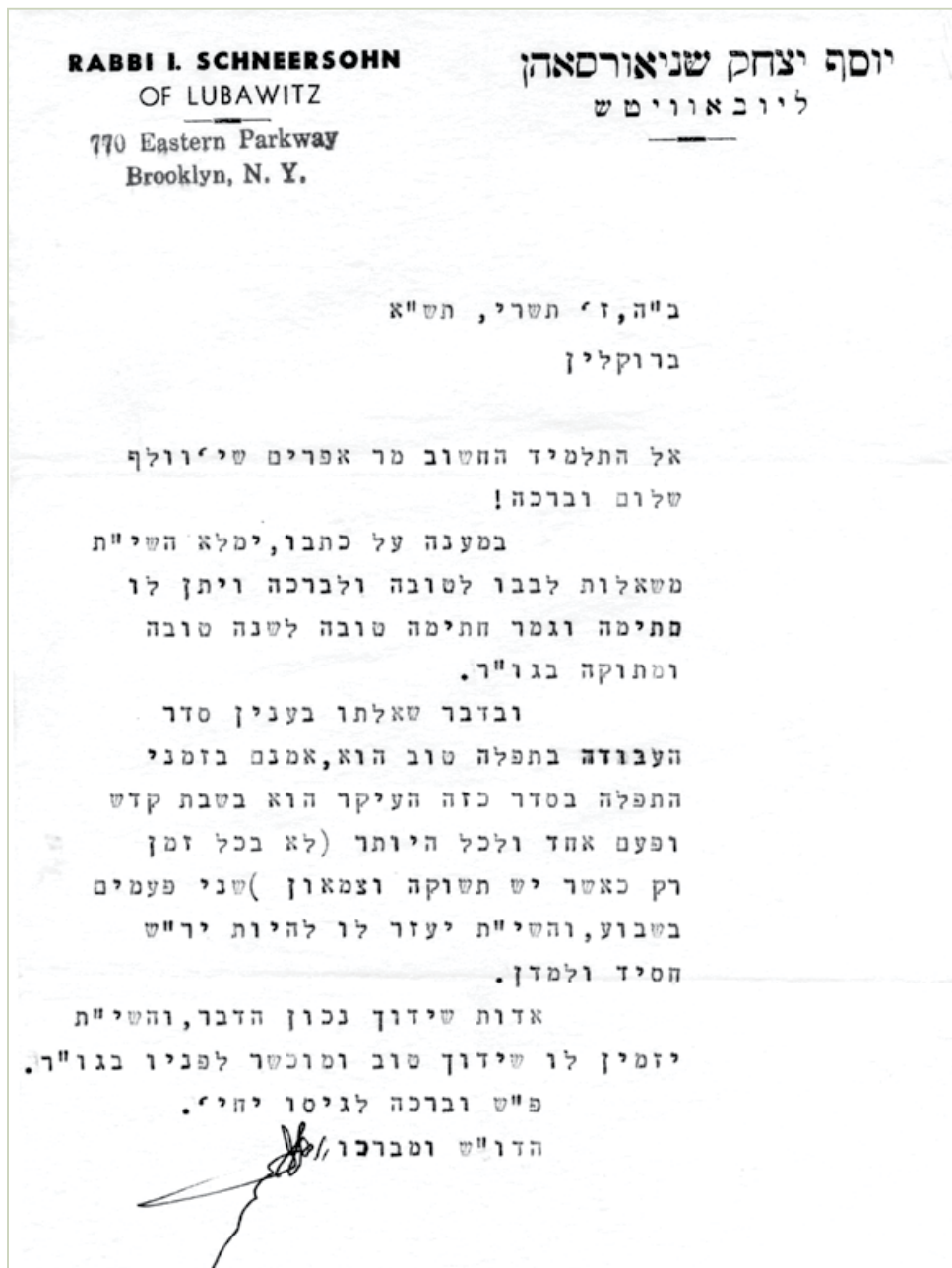
The Rebbe approved the match and went on to praise the groom, saying in Yiddish, "I have planted a cedar tree in *Eretz Yisrael*!" Rabbi Pariz needed nothing more; the young couple were engaged in the winter of 1941 and married in the spring of 1942 at the Gestetner Banquet Hall in Jerusalem.



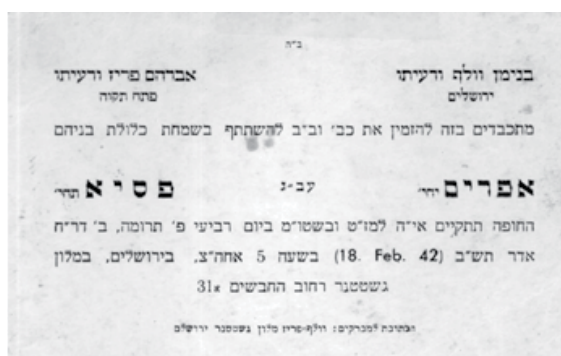
## PUBLIC SERVICE



Above: Letter from the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe to Ephraim's father Benyomin Wolff, praising Rabbi Avraham Pariz (top right) and his daughter Pessia (bottom right), and encouraging the Shidduch.



Letter from  
the Previous  
Lubavitcher  
Rebbe, exhorting  
Ephraim to find a  
*Shidduch*.



Invitation to Ephraim and Pessia's wedding in  
Jerusalem, 1942.



Wedding at the Gestetner Banquet Hall in  
Jerusalem.





Rabbi Ephraim Wolff in his office Tomchei Temimim, Lod, Israel, in the mid 1950s.

After his wedding, Reb Ephraim earned a livelihood running a courier service between Mandatory Palestine and Russia. Reb Benyomin, Reb Ephraim's father, helped support the young couple so his son could continue to devote precious time to Torah study. In his spare time, Reb Ephraim also raised funds for the needy of Jerusalem alongside his old friend, Rabbi Moshe Ashkenazi.

His entry into communal work came about quite spontaneously. It was a path that would ultimately bring him to lead almost every Chabad organisation in Israel and become the Rebbe's personal delegate for countless matters.

In 1943, as war raged in Europe, the Previous Rebbe issued a call to Jews everywhere, exhorting them to *teshuva*, to help alleviate the acute suffering. He referred to it as the 'birth pangs of Moshiach' and issued the Yiddish slogan, "*Le'altar li'teshuvah, le'altar li'geulah*", "Immediate repentance [will bring] immediate deliverance".

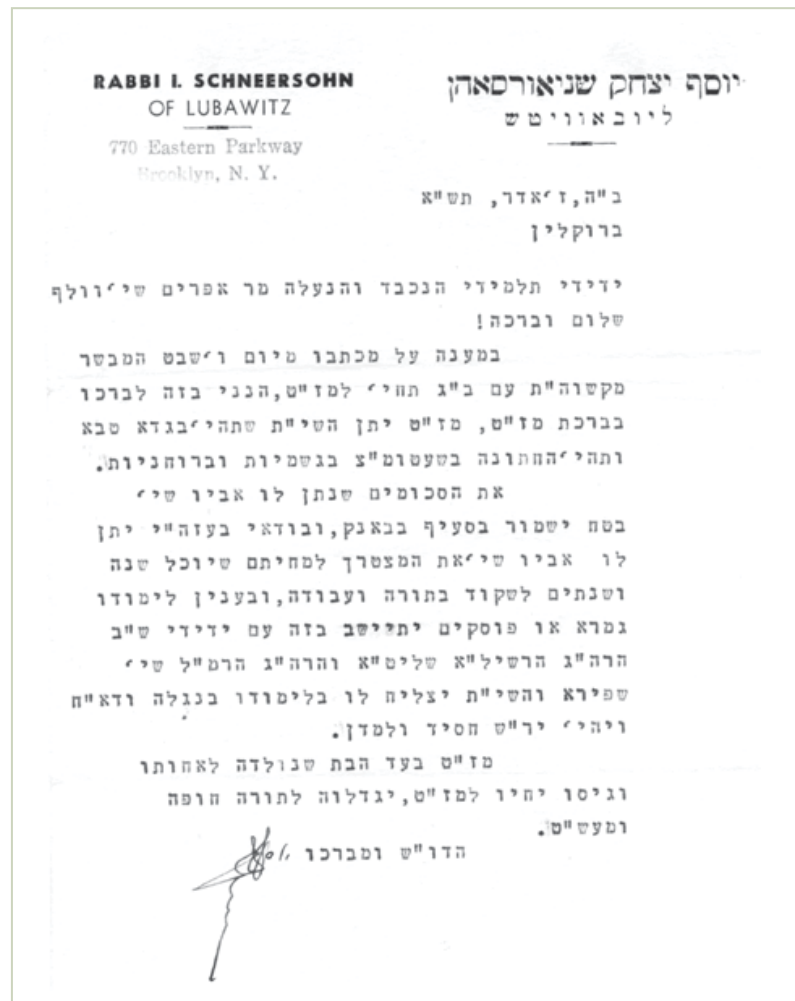
Reb Ephraim's father-in-law, Reb Avrohom Pariz, the devout *chossid* and activist, worked tirelessly to spread this positive message of encouragement. He enlisted Reb Ephraim's help to reach out to various news outlets to broadcast the Rebbe's call.

In other communal experience, Reb Ephraim also served in the *Haganah*, the Jewish paramilitary organisation during the War of Liberation in 1948.

Meanwhile, a new Lubavitch *yeshiva* was established in Lod, close to Tel Aviv, to meet the needs of the enormous influx of Jews arriving from behind the Iron Curtain and beyond. In desperate need of additional staff, the young and unassuming Reb Ephraim was invited to become the yeshiva's temporary administrator, until permanent arrangements could be made. He accepted but this was not without enormous sacrifice on Reb Ephraim's part, and especially on his wife, Pessia's part.

Reb Ephraim would set out on Sunday from his Jerusalem home, and remain in Lod the entire week, while his wife cared for the children, only to return home for Shabbos.

With a designated trial period over, Reb Ephraim reported back to the Previous Rebbe about the yeshiva's successes and challenges. He was instructed to retain the position and loyally remained at the helm of the *yeshiva* for more than a half century to follow.



Above: Letter from the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, advising him to focus on his studies for a year or two after marriage.

Left: Original location of Yeshiva Tomchei Temimim in Lod, known as the "Pardes" (Garden) since it was located in an orchard.

Top: Reb Ephraim at "Sunday Dollars" with the Rebbe, (behind the famed chossid Reb Avrohom Mayorer (center).

Bottom: A farbrengen with (L-R) Rabbis Eliezer Karasik, Ephraim Wolff, Pinchas Althaus, and the Minister of Education, Ben Tzion Binur.

## REBBE'S DEPUTY IN THE HOLY LAND

The first decade of his tenure at the helm of the yeshiva, 1949 to 1959, saw Reb Ephraim work alongside the famed *chossid* **Rabbi Avrohom Drizin** (known as Reb Avrohom Mayorer). They were both wholly committed to the establishment, expansion and overall success of the yeshiva.

The growing network of Chabad institutions in Israel counted several organizations, each of which acted independently and was directed by different talented and capable individuals.

There were schools for boys and girls, yeshivas, Colel Chabad – Chabad's charity organisation, looking after the needy and infirm. There was Tzeirei Agudat Chabad – Chabad's youth organization, the "Reshet" network of schools, and many more.

Reb Ephraim's address seemed to be a convergence point for them all. To be sure, Reb Ephraim's official business, and what he devoted most of his time and energy to was the administration of the Yeshiva in Lod, its branches in the village of Kfar Chabad, and eventually also those at

Nachlat Har Chabad and elsewhere. Yet informally he also served as the liaison for the Rebbe's secretariat in New York to all the various Chabad organisations and initiatives throughout the country.

He earned the unofficial title of "The Rebbe's deputy in the Holy Land". Upon the passing of two leading Israeli Chabad figures in the early 1960s, **Rabbi Eliezer Karasik** and **Rabbi Pinchas Althaus**, Reb Ephraim was asked to lead Agudat Chasidei Chabad in Israel – the Chabad umbrella organisation.

For several decades, Reb Ephraim held this position with distinction as the Rebbe's liaison, transmitting messages from *chassidim* to the Rebbe and conversely the Rebbe's directives to the community. His was the address where confidential, as well as public matters arrived relating to the Rebbe's agenda in Israel.

He carried these responsibilities from his modest office with characteristic precision and orderliness – largely out of the public eye.







*He carried these responsibilities from his modest office with characteristic precision and orderliness...*

Top: Reb Ephraim entertains visiting dignitaries to the yeshiva, while his son Ber'ke (C) watches on.  
Bottom: Staff and pupils of the yeshiva in the front of the original building ("Pardes"), Lod, mid 1950s.

The same man who put innumerable hours and days, locked up in his study, carrying out the sacred duties of his office in utmost confidentiality, and away from the public eye, would – if the circumstances demanded it – make his case with determinations and conviction before philanthropists and donors, something which was in stark contrast to his naturally introverted and reserved demeanour.

He was a man who didn't occupy one position or task. He wore the garb that the mission required of him at any given time. Reb Ephraim masterfully balanced his personal study routine, fundraising trips and the directorship of a myriad of organisations. Yet he also made time to listen to personal concerns and believed each deserved his attention and precious time – two rare commodities of which he hardly availed himself for his own needs.



Reb Ephraim receiving a dollar for *tzedakah* from the Rebbe

## "LOUD – BUT SO THAT OTHERS SHOULDN'T HEAR"

A small incident took place while Reb Ephraim was still a young yeshiva student that succinctly describes his nature and character.

He once asked the Previous Rebbe about engagement in prayer, *tefillah*, and was advised, "Utter the words out loud, yet so that others shouldn't hear them." Prayers weren't to be whispered – and even though they should be enunciated out loud, they shouldn't distract others from their own prayers.

*Reb Ephraim's valiant leadership, stemmed from his complete and whole subservience to the Rebbe.*

Perhaps it was this guidance that Reb Ephraim followed in his communal activities and interaction with so many people. He spoke 'loud enough' that his objectives could be achieved, yet with such discreteness and modesty, that 'others couldn't hear', never attracting undue credit, or making others feel inadequate.

Reb Ephraim's valiant leadership over so many organisations and operations, stemmed from his complete and whole subservience to his own leader and guide – the Rebbe. A tight-lipped and secretive individual who genuinely fled honour and fame as though they were fire, Reb Ephraim operated solely and entirely according to one compass: what his Rebbe wanted and needed of him.

And alongside a fast paced public life, he led – along with his family – a very simple and modest personal life, devoid of excesses or luxuries. He always made time to study Torah, engaged in long hours of *davening* and helped his fellow man.

## A CENTRAL ADDRESS

**I**n the early years of Chabad's work in Israel, correspondence to and from the New York headquarters of the movement took place via mail and telegrams.

A high volume of letters concerning sensitive affairs involving government and military officials, as well as internal communiques, private directives and much more, streamed regularly to the modest Lod house of the Wolff family. From there, Reb Ephraim would dispatch each to its intended recipient. The collection, spanning several decades of written correspondence to and from the Rebbe, has been preserved and maintained in the Yeshiva Tomchei Temimim archive.

Even a quick glance at the sheer number of matters and organisations addressed to Rabbi Wolff, is enough to shock even the most seasoned time-manager.



Original buidlings of the Vocational School in Kfar Chabad, mid 1950s.

### **Here are some examples:**

- Opening of Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim in Lod, Kiryat Gat, Midgal Ha'emek and Nachlat Har Chabad.
- Opening of the Vocational Trade School in Kfar Chabad
- Absorption of Yemenite, Georgian, Bukharian and Russian immigrants
- Opening *kolels* for married men
- Renovations of the Tzemach Tzedek synagogue in Jerusalem after the Six-Day War





Top left: Reb Ephraim shows some visitors newly published literature.

Top right: Newly constructed Vocational Trade School in Kfar Chabad.

Bottom left: Rabbi Wolff accompanying Rabbi Shmuel Chefer on a visit to the newly-built institutions.

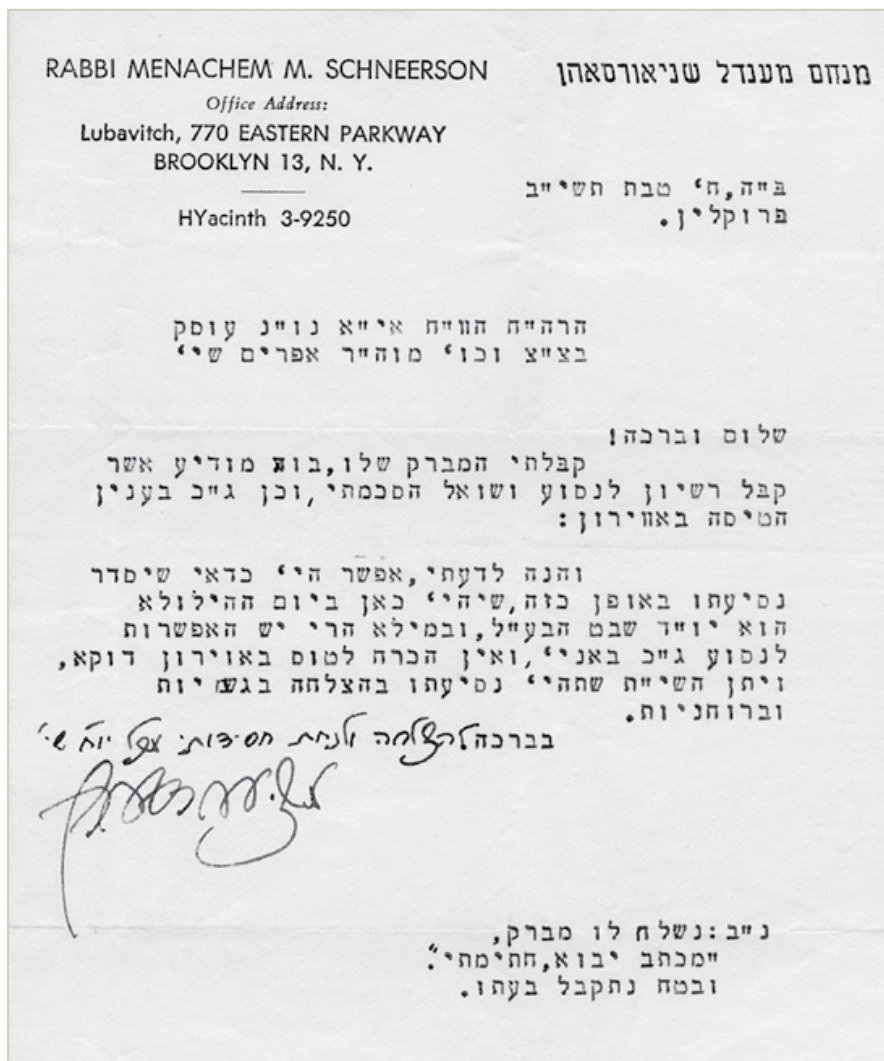
Bottom right: Jewish Scottish Philanthropist Sir Issac Wolfson visits the Printing School.

- Establishment and expansion of the Chabad neighbourhoods in Lod, Kiryat Malachi and Tzefat
- Lobbying for the “Who is a Jew?” campaign
- The “Mitzvah Campaign”
- Dispatching Shluchim across the country
- Commission for writing the “General Torah’s for Jewish Unity”
- The campaign for the daily study of Rambam
- *Irgun Gag*, Chabad umbrella organisation
- *Igud Talmidei Hatmimim*, Central Union of Yeshiva Students

He also monitored the traditional collection of *maamad* moneys among *chassidim*, as well as several other charitable funds. Reb Ephraim supervised outreach work on army bases with members of the armed forces and oversaw the printing and proliferation of Chabad literature.

In addition to administrative duties, Reb Ephraim also managed pecuniary interests on behalf of the Rebbe’s secretariat relating to many charity funds. Often he’d be appointed to extend significant sums to individuals who arrived at his door with nothing but a directive from New York. He would comply without as much as a question.

Beyond his already overloaded portfolio of responsibilities, Reb Ephraim worked on much more, about which books have been published, and perhaps more still can be written.



A 1952 letter from the Rebbe to Reb Ephraim. In his own handwriting, the Rebbe added: "להצלחה ולנחת חסידותי מכל יוצא חלציו שי"י" "[with blessing] for success and *chassidishe nachas* from all your descendents, may they live and be well."

## HIGHEST ACCOUNTABILITY

A cursory browse through the archives of the yeshiva containing the written correspondence between the Rebbe and Rabbi Wolff, will show a sharp decline in frequency somewhere in the 1960's.

This is due to the fact that at this juncture, Reb Ephraim initiated a daily routine which he maintained for many years. Each day he would compile a detailed report of news in the Holy Land, in particular the Chabad movement and would send this to the Rebbe. In the evening, he would converse via telephone with the Rebbe's chief secretary, **Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Aizik Hodakov**, who would communicate the Rebbe's responses to matters highlighted within the report.

Sometimes he received instructions on a given issue, or specific messages relating to others. The Rebbe often requested more information on a particular matter or event. Reb Ephraim would meticulously transcribe the directives and store a copy for his records, while sending another copy to New York. Keeping in mind this occurred daily, and in addition to all the above-mentioned activities, it makes one wonder where Rabbi Wolff found the time...

## SPECIAL MENTIONS

Reb Ephraim's outstanding devotion, skill and loyalty to his mission and to his Rebbe, earned him some extraordinary mentions from the Rebbe.

The Rebbe could hardly be said to have been lavish with flattery and encomium, so when he would commend and praise a *chossid* at a public *Farbrengen*, or even in personal conversation, it was a badge of honour – honour which Reb Ephraim fled and shied away from.

One such expression of praise occurred in 1960 in conversation with a *chossid* from Tel Aviv, to whom the Rebbe said, "The only one I can rely on in the Holy Land is Rabbi Ephraim Wolff."

Here is another fleeting incident that affords us a glimpse into the high regard the Rebbe held for Reb Ephraim:

During the enormous influx of Russian *chassidim* into Israel on occasion, the Rebbe extended invitations to visit him in New York. One such invitation was offered to **Rabbi Yosef Kanievsky**, who accepted and travelled to the U.S. with his wife to visit the Rebbe. When their time for a *yechidut*, a private audience with the Rebbe came, the Rebbe noted the conspicuous absence of their daughter, whom they had left behind in their new home. When asked, they told the Rebbe that at the time, having recently emigrated, they could not afford another airfare and were thus forced to leave her behind.

"I have a friend in the Holy Land," the Rebbe responded, "his name is Rabbi Ephraim Wolff, go to him, and he will see to it that all your needs are met".

*The Rebbe said,  
"The only one I  
can rely on in the  
Holy Land is Rabbi  
Ephraim Wolff."*



Reb Ephraim with a group of guests in front of the Yad Hachamisha Printing School, established in memory of five students and their teacher tragically murdered in a terror attack in Kfar Chabad in 1956.





Israeli President  
Zalman Shazar and  
Sir Issac Wolfson  
sign a guest book  
during a visit to  
the newly opened  
Vocational Trade  
School in Kfar  
Chabad.

## THE DIRECTOR

Although Reb Ephraim's door was a crossroads for so many operations across the vast spectrum of Chabad activities, his prime responsibility was running the Central Yeshiva Tomchei Temimim and its branches across the land.

Alumni of the yeshiva recall how the light in his office was always on late at night. Staff reminisce about his open-door policy – he always offered his time and attention.

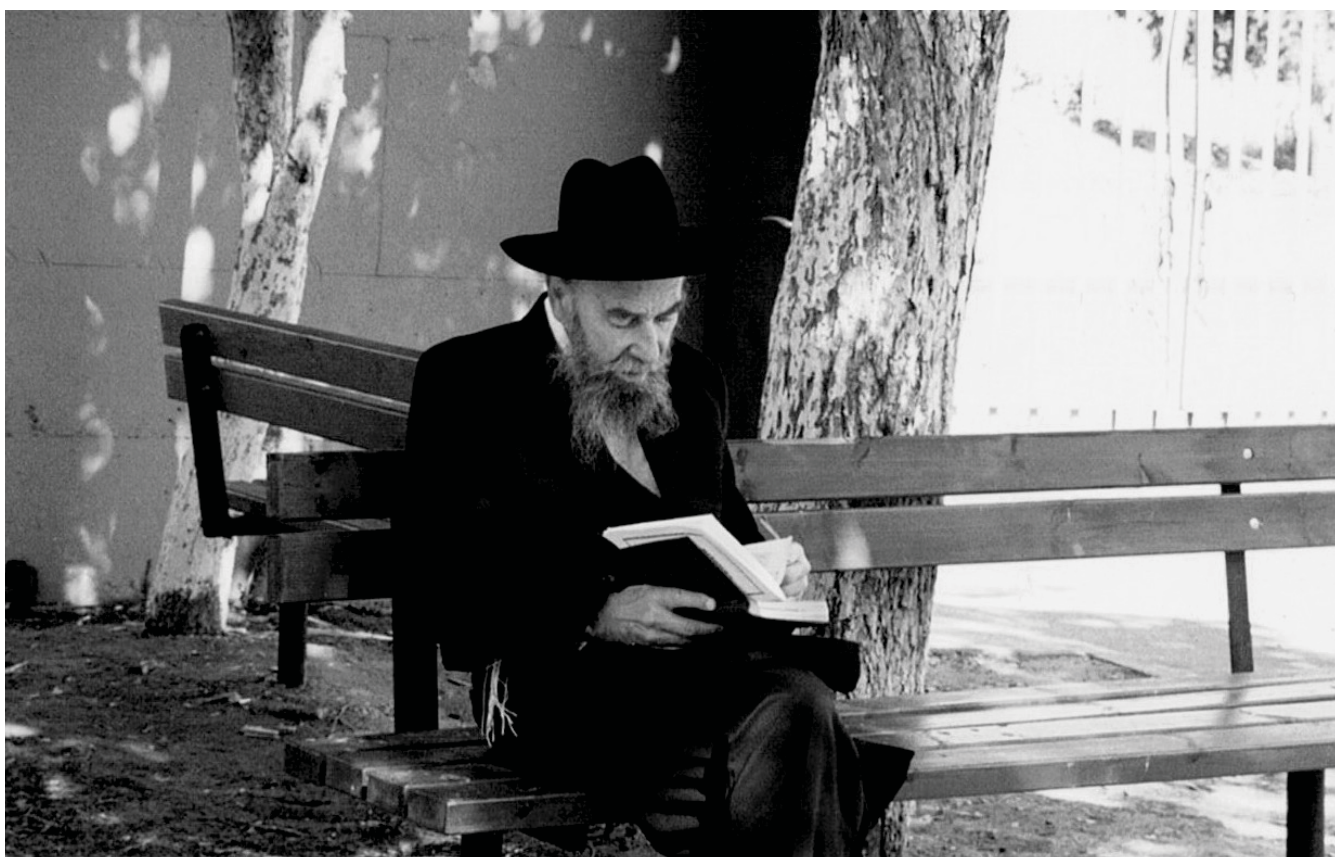
There were times of satisfaction, seeing the *beis hamidrash* filled to capacity, with young men studying diligently.

There were times of immense gratification when headmasters of the various divisions of the yeshiva would report back about the most recent progress and milestones of the pupils under their care.

There were times of pride when the vocational schools, or *Beit Sefer Li'mlacha* had been filled to the capacity the Rebbe had wanted to reach, thereby affording a Jewish education to thousands who likely would not have gotten one.

Yet Reb Ephraim's day-to-day affairs were taxing and the line between a work-life balance was often blurred. He undertook laborious journeys around Israel and the world, raising funds to run this mammoth operation. This against a backdrop of ever-changing laws and regulations about non-profit organisations and hundreds of students, married young men, as well as the many who staffed the yeshivas depended on him for, quite literally, the bread on their tables.

Through it all, Reb Ephraim never despaired. He silently persevered with determination and diligence. He perceived himself as a soldier who doesn't shy away when the going gets tough...



Rabbi Ephraim Wolff — a moment never wasted.

## A WINDOW INTO HIS SOUL

**R**eb Ephraim possessed a discreet demeanour and yet there are countless stories about the extraordinary impact he had. Following is a short, powerful collection of gems.

### **Frugality**

In the early years of the yeshiva's operation, many new immigrants arrived in Israel. Populating the country was needed, yet the nation's infrastructure was only in a fledgling state. As a consequence, few resources were available for their absorption. This, in turn, put a severe strain on the yeshiva, forcing extreme budgetary measures. At the time, the yeshiva provided at least one meal per day for its students. Yet in these circumstances, whenever a heaped plate was brought to him from the yeshiva kitchen, Reb Ephraim refused, advising that for his meal, the yeshiva boys' leftovers would suffice.

In later years, as the situation improved, Reb Ephraim remained adamant about not consuming yeshiva supplies, which, in his determination,

were only for students and staff. He said this even though he spent the entire week away from his family to care for the yeshiva – and it was he who raised all the necessary funds to purchase those very supplies!

## Order

Despite occupying a plethora of important positions, Reb Ephraim often humbly attended to simple and unglamorous tasks.

His *yekkishe* roots instilled a preference for order and organisation. Every so often, a strange ‘miracle’ would take place in the yeshiva, when, following a busy day the study hall was left in disarray, it would mysteriously be in impeccable order the next morning – even the floors had been mopped to shine! For some time, the mystery baffled everyone, but after a few days it was uncovered that the anonymous cleaner was, in fact, the director, Reb Ephraim.

## Personal Care

Despite juggling donors, governmental affairs and transatlantic phone calls, the personal wellbeing of students did not escape Reb Ephraim’s watchful eye. On one occasion in the 1950s, a yeshiva student suffered a leg injury that required immediate medical attention. The yeshiva’s driver took the young man to the nearest hospital. At that time, complicating matters, a widespread medical-personnel strike was underway, and after visiting several hospitals, the poor boy returned to yeshiva late at night, still in pain and untreated.

Reb Ephraim was at his desk and heard about this predicament. He personally took the boy to Shmuel Harofe Medical Centre in Be’er Yaakov and headed straight for the operating theatre. He instructed the boy to lie down and then informed the medical staff that he refused to leave until the boy received the care he needed. And he did! Perhaps the combination of sincerity, determination and genuine concern won over the striking doctors...

*Perhaps the combination of sincerity, determination and genuine concern won over the striking doctors...*

## Taking The Prerogative

He was a young man, as was the country, and Chabad was yet to fully settle in the Holy Land. After the war, many within the community were still nursing their fresh wounds, and rebuilding may have been a dream that seemed so elusive.

Reb Ephraim wasted no time and got to work. He knew what needed to be done – thousands of square miles lay empty, waiting for buildings to be erected, entire villages required schooling, nourishment, and basic living necessities.



He didn't wait to receive orders from the Rebbe, nor did he wait to secure all the necessary funds. He marched forward building neighbourhoods and yeshivas, schools for boys and for girls, absorbing new *olim* from north Africa as well as eastern Europe.

## Torah Study

Somehow, among his endless list of commitments, he found time each day to sit and religiously learn Torah in a *chavruta*, sometimes with students several decades his junior. This way, over the course of many years, amongst other achievements, he concluded the entire *Shas* several times.

Upon meeting distinguished government officials or philanthropists, he always shared a word of Torah, giving the encounter a deeper dimension beyond its intended purpose. At times, these brief exchanges opened the door for prolonged engagement, as in the case of **Mr. Tzvi Itzkowitz, Mayor of Lod**, who would keep a daily *chavruta* with Reb Ephraim in *gemara* for a full hour.

*Reb Ephraim defied the common distinction between lay leader and rabbi.*

Reb Ephraim defied the common distinction between lay leader and rabbi. Externally, he was a successful fundraiser, speaking eloquently and delivering impassioned sermons in the halls of power. Behind closed doors and away from prying eyes, Reb Ephraim disconnected the phone lines and spent several hours steeped in Torah. His staff knew that interruptions needed to be kept to a minimum. A Torah scholar of the old order, Reb Ephraim was proficient in *shas* and *poskim*, well versed in early

chassidic writings as well as contemporary *chassidut*.

When on the road or in a waiting room, he wasted no time, and always had a *sefer* on hand to avail himself of at any spare moment. When at *simchas* or other public events, Reb Ephraim sat with a *Yad Hachazakah* or *Mishnayot*, taking advantage of the time.

His *Keviut Itim LaTorah*, or set times for learning Torah, were non-negotiable and a permanent fixture on his schedule, no less than meals and sleep, were. On one occasion in 1980, he shared a concern with the Rebbe – Reb Ephraim was worried that his Torah learning may start to slip his mind due to his many communal commitments. Intriguingly, the Rebbe advised him to take on an additional *chavruta*! So on top of his nightly study sessions, Reb Ephraim could now be seen poring over a *gemara* with a yeshiva student between 1pm and 2pm daily.

What is most remarkable about this story, is that notwithstanding the enormous load on his shoulders, a multimillion-dollar budget to manage and hundreds of people's work— at his innermost point, what

truly bothered Reb Ephraim, and what stole his sleep was the concern that he might forget his studies...

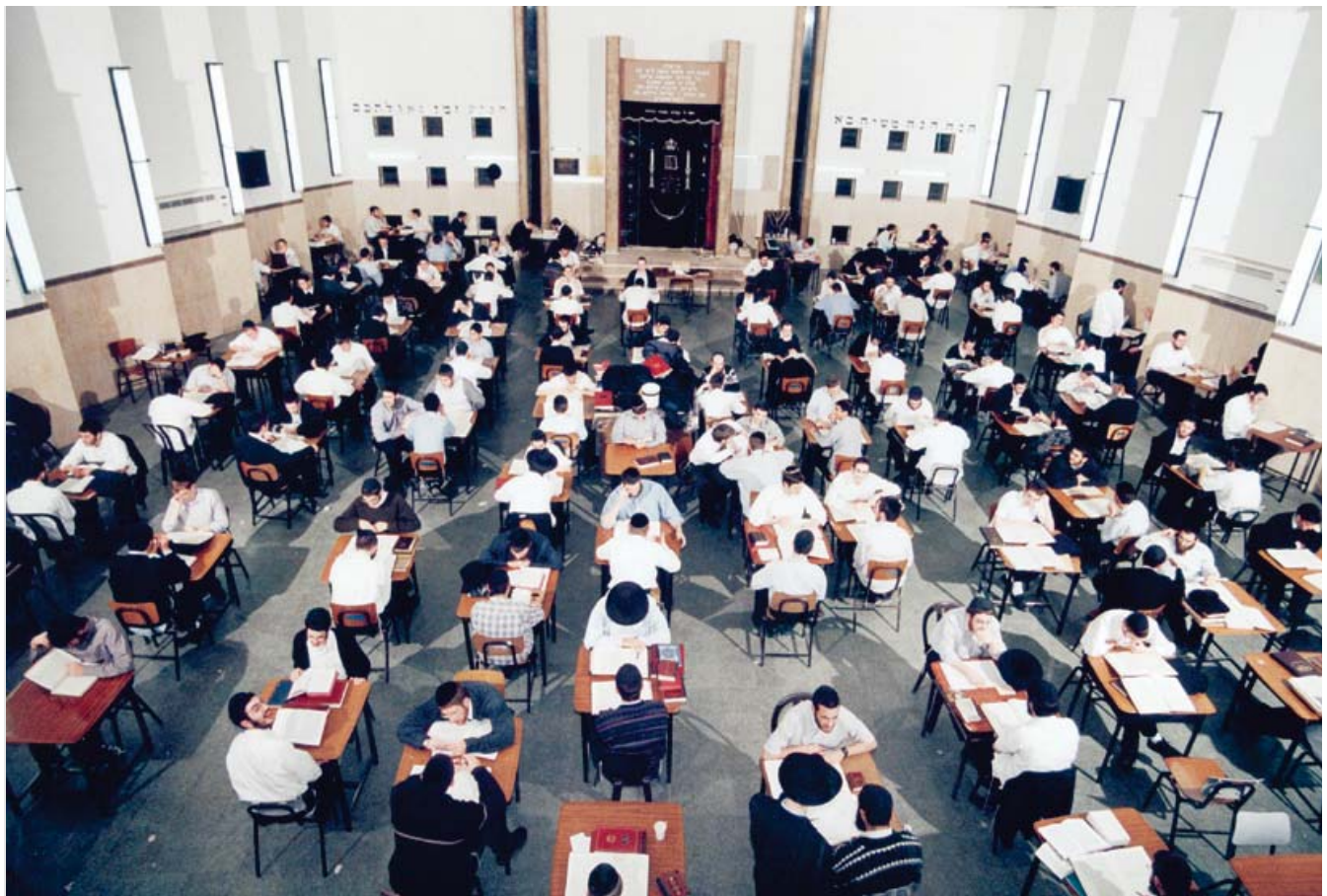
## Exuding Truth

The Wolff family's physician was a well-known doctor. One day, the doctor approached his patient, Reb Ephraim, with a request. He explained that he had been married for several decades, but the union had never been consecrated with a *chupah* and *kiddushin*. The couple now wanted a Jewish wedding and asked for guidance and practical assistance from Reb Ephraim. Shortly thereafter, the *chupah* of the doctor and his wife was celebrated in the yeshiva's office, with **Rabbi Yurkowicz**, the neighbourhood rabbi, officiating.

Why was this suddenly important? The doctor advised, "Seeing the authentic truth that always radiated from Rabbi Wolff, I felt like I couldn't continue in a union that was not in accordance with *halacha*".

## No Mitzvah Too Small

Alongside his administrative work which kept him behind a desk, or opposite someone else's, Reb Ephraim did not shy away from personally exercising what he so passionately inculcated into all those he met.



Students learning in the study hall of Tomchei Temimim in Lod, in the 1990s



*For over thirty years he and his wife Pessia would visit the Shmuel Harofe hospital...*

Reb Ephraim helping a fellow Jew don *tefillin*.

At the core of Chabad ideology is the concept of *hafatzat hama'ayanot*, the notion that one must spread Torah wherever one is, and encourage and enable the performance of *mitzvos* among his or her surroundings.

Indeed, during the very first meeting that Reb Ephraim kept with the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Hodakov, in 1952, Reb Ephraim was instructed to harness every mundane business meeting he would hold, though far from mundane his 'business' actually was, to a greater cause, by exchanging some words of Torah with his interlocutors and offer them the opportunity to perform a *mitzvah*, which he certainly did, as previously mentioned.

When in 1967, the Rebbe launched the (now famous) *tefillin* campaign.



He called on his followers, indeed on all Jews, to encourage one another to don *tefillin*, offering those who may not otherwise have the possibility to perform this great *mitzvah*. Reb Ephraim immediately hit the streets. It never entered his mind for a moment, that being the busy executive he was, and busy with lofty and important endeavours no less, perhaps the Rebbe's call didn't apply to him. He was a foot soldier, and foot soldiers heed commands.

For over thirty years he and his wife Pessia (may she live and be well), would visit the *Shmuel Harofe* hospital each Friday. Here he would engage the men with *tefillin*, while she encouraged and assisted women with the *mitzvah* of kindling Shabbos candles.

*Reb Ephraim took great care to see that harmony reigned in the community.*

### **Kindness was his language**

Although preoccupied with communal needs, Reb Ephraim stayed focused on individual pressing issues at a micro level. A tireless *rodef chesed*, he dedicated much of his precious time to the ill, destitute and broken-hearted.

In his youth, as war raged in Europe, Reb Ephraim made friends with a young and underprivileged man, who like himself, was trying to obtain an entry visa to the Holy Land. At the time, a visa was akin to a chance at life. It represented a door to safety and the cost to obtain one was astronomical. Reb Ephraim arranged funds for his desperate friend and soon he too, was able to escape Europe to safety.

Reb Ephraim took great care to see that harmony reigned in the community. This is demonstrated by the following story, shared by one of his sons.

*"It was the morning of Erev Yom Kippur, 1956. As per tradition we arose early to perform Kapparot at the crack of dawn. As we concluded the service, I noticed that my father had disappeared. Upon his return, I inquired where he'd been – he dismissed me with a vague response.*

*A number of days passed and my father finally revealed to me what had happened that morning. There were two gabbaim of the Shule who had become entangled in a difficult quarrel with one another. Reb Ephraim was keen on restoring peace. He realised that the eve of the holiest day of the year was a propitious time to act, people are in an elevated state of consciousness and therefore, perhaps more prone to forgiveness and reconciliation. He approached them in those early hours and ensured that the two men settled their differences before returning home."*

Many people are capable of giving, but what made Reb Ephraim's

generosity exceptional, was his way of sharing the burden and genuinely feeling the anguish of those who sought his help, or better yet, those whom he helped unsolicited:

**Mr. Meir Tzikoshvili** served as Reb Ephraim's personal driver for many years. On one occasion he entered Reb Ephraim's office, finding his boss on the phone crying.

*"After he hung up the phone, I asked him what had happened. He said that a woman he'd never met or heard of had just called and said that she didn't have food for her children. They were hungry, but she didn't have money to feed them." Mr. Tzikoshvili recalled. "He wrote a cheque for a substantial sum and instructed me to go to the bank and make a deposit into the lady's account."*

*He genuinely loved  
his fellow Jews, was a  
conscientious worker  
and honest individual.*





Reb Ephraim assists an IDF General don *tefillin*

## "FEAR OF G-D IS HIS TREASURE"

(YESHAYA 33:6)

**T**here are so many dimensions to Reb Ephraim, yet it is important to highlight his unyielding *yirat shamayim* – Fear of Heaven.

This served as the source for his love of each and every person; his sympathy for their trouble, his empathy, human touch and work ethic.

One time, Reb Ephraim was drafted into the military during the *shmittah* year, (during which the Land of Israel lays fallow as per *halacha*). With the very real possibility that some of the food available at the military base may contain some forbidden *shmittah* produce, Reb Ephraim refrained from ever partaking in it. Instead, he arranged for his wife to send food from home, through an acquaintance who travelled from their town to the base daily.

Just before one particular Shabbos, Reb Ephraim extended his *shacharit davening*. Because of this, he was disciplined and ordered to remain on base over Shabbos, rather than with his family at home as usual. Food from his wife could not be procured so Reb Ephraim chose to refrain from eating the entire Shabbos.





Reb Ephraim and Pessia Wolff with their six children, and some grandchildren at a family *Simcha*.  
(Our own Rabbi Levi is on the bottom row to the right).

## FAMILY MAN

If the litmus test for great people is whether they can maintain the rhythm of the simple folk, engage in commonplace behaviour and not lose touch with the pure beauty of life, Reb Ephraim passed with flying colours. He mastered the skill to stay true to his family, simultaneously juggling important work at the macro level.

Reb Ephraim and his devoted wife Pessia were blessed with six children: Nosson – ‘Nuske’; Sholom Dov Ber – ‘Ber’ke’, of blessed memory; Menachem Mendel – ‘Menny’; Elyokim; Benyomin – ‘Benny’ and Breindel.

When any of his grandchildren around the globe celebrated a birthday, he would personally call and extend his wishes for a good year, offering words of inspiration and Torah. Given the blessed size of his family, he had a number of calls to make nearly every week! And many were

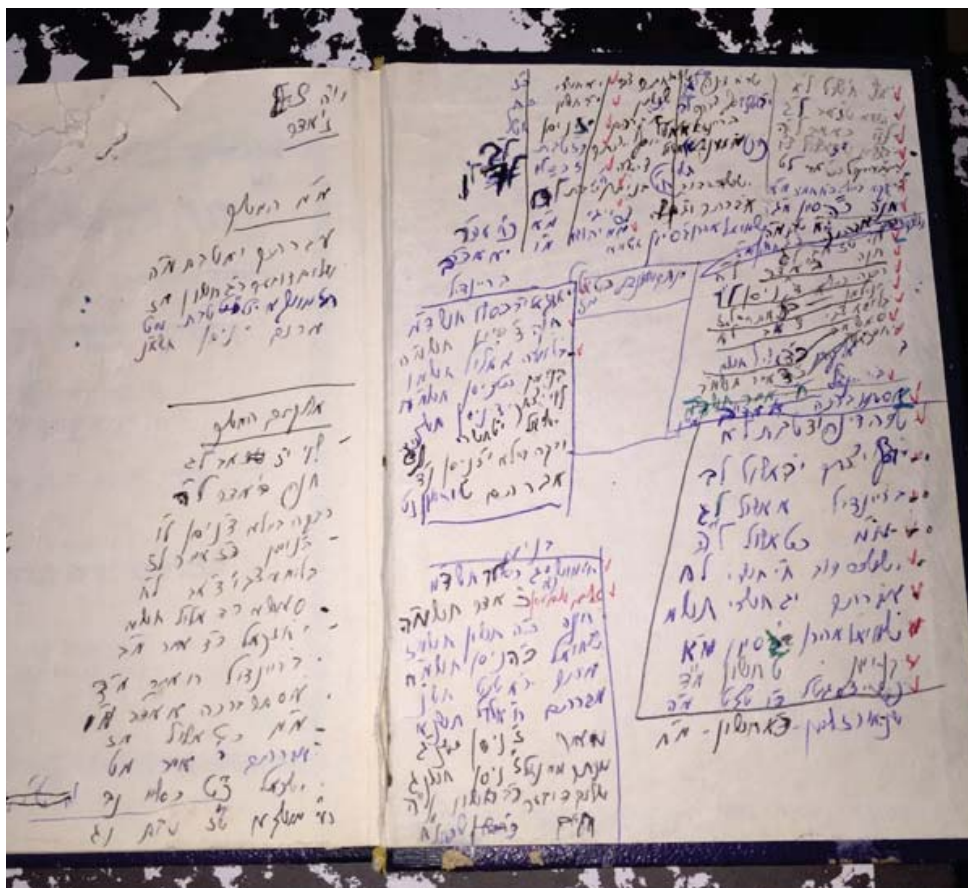
located in far-off destinations, as his grandchildren grew up to emulate his example, each embarking on their own mission to spread warmth and light in new outposts.

He also made sure to recite the specific chapter of Tehillim corresponding to the age of all of his children and grandchildren on a daily basis. A labour of love which, alone, could've kept one busy for hours.

Our very own Rabbi Levi, recalls that every year on his birthday, he would receive a letter in his mailbox in the USA from his grandfather in Israel. Reb Ephraim always took care to calculate the time it took the postal service to deliver his letter to a given grandchild's home, thus ensuring it would reach its destination either *on* or *before* their special day.

The tremendous respect he harboured for his wife and life partner, Mrs. Pessia Wolff (may she live and be well), through their long and celebrated story, was indescribable. Truly as our sages in the Talmud write, he “respected his spouse more than his own self” (Yevamoth 62b).

*When any of his grandchildren around the globe celebrated a birthday, he would personally call and extend his wishes for a good year...*



Reb Ephraim kept a handwritten log of all his grandchildren's names and birthdays.









Reb Ephraim Wolff with his son Ber'ke, of blessed memory, who served as the official spokesperson for Chabad in the Holy Land.

## A STAUNCH CHOSSID UNTIL THE END

**I**n autumn of 2000, tragedy befell the Wolff family. On Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan, his son and trusted assistant Ber'ke, passed away. It was a heartbreak from which Reb Ephraim would never recover; a mere two months later, Reb Ephraim fell ill.

As he went in and out of emergency hospital visits, his uppermost concern was that his wife and children not be overburdened. After she'd spent long days at his bedside, Reb Ephraim would selflessly insist that his wife Pessia go home to rest, claiming he felt well and was able to look after himself.

Even in his declining health, Reb Ephraim continued to serve on his posts, even attending the *bris* ceremony for his grandson in Ukraine, some two months before his passing.

In the early morning hours of Wednesday, 29th January 2003, 26 Shevat 5763, Reb Ephraim returned his soul to her Maker at the venerable age of 84 years old.



The Rebbe hands a bottle of vodka to R' Ber'ke with instructions to give to his father.



The Rebbe's secretary Rabbi Binyomin Klein, of blessed memory, speaking at a memorial service for Reb Ephraim.

Rabbi Ephraim Wolff is survived by a large and loving family, located all around the globe.

At a memorial for Reb Ephraim, marking his *shloshim*, Rabbi Binyomin Klein, a member of the Rebbe's secretariat, reminisced on the long-standing friendship he had enjoyed with Reb Ephraim, and the exceptional trust the Rebbe placed in him.

He shared a final thought:

*"Perhaps the greatest quality I witnessed in Reb Ephraim was the very fact that most people never really uncovered his virtues. He was discreet and had an elegant poise in his avoidance of the limelight. He viewed himself merely as a soldier in the service of a greater good – nothing more..."*



***May his memory be a blessing.***