

The RYS Daily 3/13/07 The Resting Place of RYS

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Rav Yisroel Salanter's Grave has Finally been Located

By A. Cohen

Last week we were privileged to hear some exciting news: with obvious *siyata deShmaya* the burial place of HaRav Yisroel Salanter *ztl* in the ancient cemetery of Koenigsberg was located. Those involved in this holy task these past few years could not find an adequate way of giving expression to their feelings of joy and gratitude to the Creator. "They that sow in tears, shall reap in joy."

Many years of tireless work to locate the final resting place of the founder of the *mussar* movement and guide of the yeshiva world during the last few generations finally bore fruit. No joy is as great as that of having doubts and uncertainties resolved.

However it is too early to congratulate ourselves. We now have to invest all our efforts into recruiting funds for setting up a gravestone befitting this giant figure, and building a *mokom tefilloh* for the masses who are sure to come in the future to this site, and to continue to rescue the whole of this ancient cemetery and to revive the Jewish community in this town where Rav Yisroel was active in his last years. We must do everything in our power for the sake of this *gaon*, who created a revolution in Torah and *yir'oh* in the last few generations and who "through his activities and methods of learning *mussar* saved all the yeshivos from falling prey to the *maskilim* and the accursed *haskolo*" (HaRav Shach *shlita* in his letter printed in *Writings of the Alter of Kelm and his Students*).

Strenuous efforts with a view to saving the ancient Koenigsberg cemetery, locating Rav Yisroel's grave and reviving the Jewish heritage of the local community have been taking place continuously since a delegation of senior *mashgichim*, rabbonim and roshei yeshiva left for Koenigsberg about four years ago, and witnessed the dire state of the cemetery and the yearning for a Jewish renaissance amongst local community members.

The idea of sending a special delegation of very senior figures in order to advance the activities of those working for the rehabilitation of the Koenigsberg (the modern Kaliningrad) cemetery has proven itself effective.

Local government leaders in Kaliningrad, who were impressed and amazed by the sight of these venerable rabbonim who had taken the trouble of making a long trip lasting only a few hours for the sake of saving the cemetery, promised to deal with the legitimate requests made by the delegation and undertook to authorize the activities for the rehabilitation of the area.

Since *Yated Ne'eman* first published details of these events, our readers have followed with great interest the attempts made towards preserving the cemetery where Rav Yisroel as well as other important rabbonim and community members are buried. The trip made by the delegation and the intensive activities preceding it were taken as an indication of the holy duty of the Jewish world in general, and of the yeshiva world in particular, to save this forgotten cemetery, which became severely neglected over the decades because of historical circumstances.

Members of the delegation, and especially the leading *mashgichim* of our generation who, with great self-sacrifice, came to witness the situation at first hand, were shocked by what they saw. Although they had been forewarned of the situation, they were still deeply pained by the contact with grim reality and the sight of open graves whose tombstones had been removed, some of which had already been rummaged by local vandals searching for gold from the skeletons of the deceased. The graves were covered with overgrown vegetation, bushes and trees, making it almost impossible for members of the delegation to make their way through the overgrowth.

In the course of the visit, members of the delegation heard many frightening tales from local residents about the search for gold teeth in the graves. They were told that the inhuman grave-pickers had become more "sophisticated" over the years and they now walked over the ground with a special metal detector, which signals whenever there is metal underneath the ground! As if this were not enough, the trees and vegetation crowding over the graves gave profligate local youth the feeling that this was a "park" *Rachmono litzlan*, where they could have a good time. There was also silent testimony to the fact that the *beis olom* was rapidly turning into a municipal "park" in the shape of leftover food and beer bottles thrown over the graves.

It was a depressing and despairing sight, but it did not deter the activists. They cited a well-known saying of HaRav Yisroel Salanter *zt"l*: "*A mentsch darf toen, nisht oiftoen*" (A man is obligated to do whatever lies in his power to do; he is not obligated to achieve results). It was decided to take a series of essential measures as far as possible on an immediate basis: To clear the area of overgrown vegetation, to fence off the whole area with a massive barrier, and to cover the graves in a way that would prevent unwanted elements from loitering around the area, digging into and desecrating the graves. This would prevent the disrespect for the deceased and the complete destruction of the cemetery.

Stunned and shocked by what they had seen at the cemetery, the delegation continued on to the municipality building in Kaliningrad for a meeting with local government leaders. Heading the delegation were HaRav Nosson Wachtfogel *zt"l* and *ylct'a* HaRav Shlomo Wolbe together with HaRav Yosef Zvi Dunner, head of the chareidi communities in London (and the last *rov* of Koenigsberg before the war), HaRav Nachman Plontchik, one of the *roshei yeshiva* of Slobodke Yeshiva, HaRav Yitzchok Grodzensky, head of Toras Avrohom *kollel*, whose mother, the wife of Rav Avrohom Grodzensky *Hy"d* is buried in that cemetery, as well as descendants and members of Rav Yisroel Salanter's family, rabbonim and activists.

As we noted, the sight of the elderly *mashgichim* who had taken the trouble of a long flight for a visit consisting of a few hours with the express purpose of advancing this topic, left a very deep impression on the local officials.

During the meeting the problem was discussed with due seriousness, and Rav Chaim Boruch Druck, rabbi of the police and New York airport, presented a special gift from then- President Clinton and the Washington government, where he sits on a special governmental committee for the preservation of cemeteries and the prevention of vandalism and desecration of graves.

After the initial meeting (with only part of the delegation), a reception was held with the participation of all the guests and senior government representatives. During this event, the deputy mayor, Mr. Savanko, repeated what he had told delegation members at the earlier meeting: "My colleagues and I have been very impressed by the arrival of such important and elderly figures. This has illustrated for us the severity of the problem. We have understood that if such elderly and respectable people have flown thousands of kilometers to get here, their reason for coming must be important and very critical. We in Russia have always respected people who adhere to a cause and sacrifice themselves on its altar. This rare characteristic we have witnessed in this delegation. The city authorities hereby promise that we, for our part, will do everything to solve the problems which have brought you here."

HaRav Shlomo Wolbe's impassioned words at the special meeting made their way straight into the hearts of his audience: "Here in Kaliningrad lies buried Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, may he rest in peace, who founded the *mussar* movement, and handed down to us the elevated ethics of Judaism. He had a profound insight into the makeup of a human being, and discovered the foundations of the human soul, "psychoanalysis," decades before Freud and others. To this day we are all dependant on his writings, and attempt to perfect our personalities in accordance with his system.

"With these feelings in mind, we came to the cemetery today and were deeply shocked. The graves have almost totally disappeared. It is dreadful! We still have to work hard to locate his grave. We thank the mayors for their willingness to help, and hope that, with G-d's help, this meeting, after many years of intense activity, will lead to the desired result, for the honor of the giant of mussar and ethics."

HaRav Nosson Wachtfogel *zt"l*, who dedicated himself to this topic during his last years, said at this meeting: "On behalf of all *bonei Torah* and of the yeshivos, I would like to thank those people who have an appreciation of this matter and of the suffering of the Jewish people, and are ready to bring about the rehabilitation of this destruction."

No Time to Waste

During discussions held on that same day, in which Mr. Victor Shapira, the head of the Kaliningrad Jewish community, also took part, it was agreed that measures had to be taken urgently and costs estimated. It was felt that this auspicious moment when the local authorities demonstrated a positive attitude, had to be utilized to the full. It was decided to turn to the general public and to donors so that they could also have a part in this important mitzvah. This discussion took place at the end of a long and tiring day, but HaRav Wachtfogel *zt"l* ruled that the work had to start right away even before *ma'ariv*!

And so a series of telephone calls were made from Kaliningrad to chareidi centers throughout the world before *vehu rachum*!

The activists did not rest for a minute. They pieced together every scrap of information but were unable to pinpoint the exact location of the *kever*.

The Work Begins

After the visit, the *Yated Ne'eman* wrote, "In the future, it will be possible to try to locate the exact place of the *kever* of Reb Yisroel *ztkv'l*. There are a number of signs and general maps of the graves according to dates, but it will only be possible to use them after cleaning and inspecting the area." At the same time, those involved in the project requested that anyone who had any crumb of information -- oral or documented -- about the cemetery or had access to libraries and historical archives that could help resolve the issue, should relay the information promptly.

The work continued energetically. All over the world, experts searched for documents, memories, old pictures and even aerial photos taken by the German government. No effort was spared to find information leading to the grave's location. The group of *talmidei chachomim*, trained in the *mussar* approach, did not despair.

Pieces of information were added to the puzzle and a picture began to emerge. After the area was cleaned, they found signs of the cemetery's gate, which coordinated with an old picture of the cemetery's gate and the *taharoh* room. They also found a map and lists made by the old *kehilla's* Chevra Kadisha with a map of the graves.

Reb Gedaliah Olstein, a descendant of Reb Yisroel, was very helpful in finding the documents and deciphering them, step by step.

The first step was completed. The site of the grave was determined within a twenty meter radius, but the exact location had yet to be found. Some activists felt that this information was enough already to build a *matzeivoh* as it would protect the graveyard and discourage vandalism. The many visitors who would flock to Reb Yisroel's *kever* would ensure the cemetery's safety and oblige the local Russian government to keep their promises.

After consulting HaRav Eliashiv, however, they decided to wait to build the *matzeivoh* until the exact location could be found.

And then, with *chasdei Shomayim*, after a document about Reb Yisroel's *kever* and maps of the cemetery were found, esteemed activists who were experienced in such matters entered the picture. They weighed all the information and documents and reached a clear conclusion as to the exact location of the grave! However, the thick snow that covered the area the whole winter did not allow for measuring the place accurately to verify the information in the documents.

At the beginning of last week, a party from London went to Kaliningrad. They measured and investigated and with *chasdei Hashem* determined the exact location. All the pieces of information joined into one solid proof, which was corroborated: Out of respect to Reb Yisroel, the community had left a large open area on all sides of his grave, which was actually found in the cemetery. To the activists' joy, they also discovered that the grave had not been desecrated by the vandals who had wreaked havoc in the rest of the cemetery. As HaRav Aryeh Finkel, a *rosh yeshiva* in Mir said, this alone is proof that this is where Reb Yisroel is buried!

News of the grave's location spread and was met with great happiness by those who had been involved as well as the Torah world in general. As per the request of rabbonim, roshei yeshiva and communal activists in Eretz Yisroel and abroad, the *hakomas matzeivoh* will be delayed until the coming Av. A large ceremony should also arouse the local community's interest in Judaism, which was Reb Yisroel's great vision. *Yated Ne'eman*, which has covered the topic from the beginning, will continue printing updates on the special event that will be attended by adherents of Reb Yisroel Salanter, *gedolim*, *roshei yeshiva*, Jewish personalities and philanthropists from all over the world.

The Efforts for the Living: Or Yisroel to be Learned in Koenigsberg Once Again

After their visit to Kaliningrad, the *gedolei Yisroel* issued a sacred call to save the cemetery and reestablish the Jewish community. As printed in our newspaper, the issue was raised at the 75th National Convention of Agudas Yisroel of America. Rav Reuven Dov Dessler, grandson of the *Michtav MeEliahu* led a discussion there about measures to save remnants of Jewish life in Europe, through saving cemeteries and rejuvenating *kehillos* that were destroyed in the Holocaust.

On the evening of the convention, he received a letter from HaRav Shlomo Wolbe, who had visited Kaliningrad and seen its destruction with his own eyes. "We were shocked to see that the entire cemetery was completely destroyed and it is not yet possible to find Reb Yisroel's *kever*," he wrote. "When we were in the city, we were informed that 2,000 Jews who have no connection to Judaism live there today. There is no *shul*, no *shechitoh*, no education for the youth. When I was speaking to my friend Rav Raad, who was also there, we thought that if we would have been next to Reb Yisroel's *kever*, we would have felt that he was telling us, 'Take care of the Jews living in this city. They could become completely swallowed up among the *goyim* and not even have a Jewish burial. Have pity on them and save them!'"

When the rabbonim went to Kaliningrad, they met with the local Jewish community and the members of the delegation tried to think of ways to further Jewish awareness. After speaking to the local Jews it became clear that, to a large degree, one mission depends on the other. When the residents were told about the efforts taken to save the cemetery and locate Reb Yisroel's *kever*, they were very happy to be living in the city that the world famous giant of *mussar* is buried in. They hoped that interest in the cemetery would bring other Jewish groups to the city, especially after the cemetery is renovated and the tomb located. These group would then form a connection with the community which would cause a rejuvenation of Jewish life.

The sight of a community so far removed from its roots, which did not yet merit the light of the Torah, pained the visitors. They remembered that one of the reasons R' Yisroel Salanter came to the city, like the other cities he was active in, was a desire to bring wayward youths closer to Torah and mitzvos. "And behold even more than being a *gaon* and *chossid*, he merited and caused the masses to merit and he raised the banner of Torah and *yiras Hashem* in the world, especially in our areas," his *talmid muvhak*, Reb Itzele Blazer, wrote about him in *Nesivos Or*.

Koenigsberg, like Paris (where Reb Yisroel was also active), was considered a center of universalist culture and "enlightenment." The Gymnasiums and universities in the city drew students from all over, including young Jews. One of the great philosophers of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant, as well as other gentile thinkers, had lived in Koenigsberg.

Reb Yisroel had his work cut out for him. He toiled to raise the banner of Torah and show the youths who thirsted knowledge the greatness of Torah, the eternal depth and the moral perfection in keeping mitzvos.

Here too he succeeded with great accomplishments. However, the turmoil of the stormy war years and the governments' constant changing shook the Jewish community, and most of it was destroyed by the Nazis *ym'sh*. The remnants alive today do not know anything about their Jewish heritage.

Tefillin for the First Time

The members of the delegation saw the community's spiritual thirst. Children and teenagers listened attentively and enthusiastically to a *shiur* that HaRav Dunner gave. Some of the youths said that they wish they could see *davening* in a *minyan* at least once, and they came to the delegation's *minyan* in the hotel the next morning. They put on *tefillin* for the first time in their life. Word for word, they repeated the *pesukim* of "*ve'eirasticho li le'olom.*" HaRav Wolbe explained to them that the *posuk* also refers to their laying of *tefillin*, which denotes an eternal treaty with the Creator of the world and His Torah.

The members of the delegation watched the sight and their hearts shrank. They knew that if nothing further is done, this could be the last time these youths would lay *tefillin*. Some of those present immediately began to plan what could be done and how, in addition to saving the prestigious cemetery. As one of them said, "We have to take care of the living also."

They were encouraged by the words of the Kaliningrad's minister of public relations and international connections. She had announced during the discussions that the local government maintains positive ties with the Jewish community and would graciously accept efforts to strengthen Jewish culture in this community.

Activists' visits and official contact with the community and government officials in order to save the cemetery, especially now that the *kever* was located, could act as a springboard for *kiruv* activities. Since the visit, Reb Abba Dunner of London is very active there, in conjunction with rabbonim and communal figures from Eretz Yisroel and abroad.

These Jews had been very interested in the circumstances of the visit; they saw the deep spiritual connection that observant Jews had with the past generations and were amazed at the *mesiras nefesh* of the elderly rabbonim for the honor of the dead and the honor of the Torah. They heard about the "Mussar Movement" for the first time in their lives, about its rabbonim, methods and accomplishments. It filled them with much satisfaction and inner pride to know that the world famous *gaon* of Torah and *mussar* was active in their city in his last years. "Give us books and articles translated to Russian about Rav Salanter," community leader Victor Shapira begged.

And so, the efforts to save the cemetery became a matter of "*mitzvoh goreres mitzvoh*" and began to bear fruit in *zikui horabim*, Reb Yisroel's life's mission. "*Megalgilim zechus al yedai zakai,*" even through such sad circumstances as a vandalized cemetery.

Hopefully, activism on behalf of *kovod hameis* in Kaliningrad and Jewish life there will complement each other. Ongoing efforts, experienced activists relate, will remove the threat the Reb Yisroel's *kever* and many Jews will be able to *daven* there. At the same time there will be someone who will be able to learn *Or Yisroel* in Koenigsberg and he'll learn "*mussar seder*" with fiery enthusiasm, like Reb Yisroel envisioned.