

The Yablonek Rebbe

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Usually I write my own material. This time I am taking it from Pini Dunner, another British rabbi now living in the USA. His hobby is collecting Judaica and researching Jewish history. A while back he uncovered a remarkable story about a brilliant Hassidic Rebbe who ended up in California and abandoned his faith. It is on Youtube and was expanded into an article that appeared in Tablet Magazine this past September.

It is about a man who lost his soul and then gained it back. I am recounting an abbreviated version of it here because it is such a remarkable story, with so many twists, a moral message and a happy ending. And I love happy endings.

Yechezkel Taub was born on Oct. 7, 1895, in a small town in Poland His father, Rabbi Yaakov Taub, was "Rebbe" of Yablona, a small town near Warsaw that was home to a vibrant Orthodox Jewish community. But Rabbi Yaakov died in 1920, at the age of 60. Yechezkel, 24 years old suddenly found himself at the head of one of Poland's most prestigious and wealthy Hasidic sects.

He took his position seriously and inspired his followers. In 1924 he was persuaded by a cousin, who was passionate about the Land of Israel, that the future for Jews lay there rather than in Eastern Europe. With the support of his wealthier Hasidim, he and a few hundred of his followers moved to Palestine. They and another group of Hassidim were welcomed by Jewish officials and ended up buying land, in the hills overlooking the Jezreel Valley close to Haifa. Their settlement became known as Kfar Hasidim. The village of Hasidim. When I was in Israel in 1958, I knew of Kfar Hasidim as the location of a very non-Hasidic Lithuanian yeshiva. Its Rosh Yeshiva had come from Gateshead in England. I had no idea where the name came from.

Initially the new arrivals were feted. Notables came to see the remarkable phenomenon of Hasidic farmers for themselves. Many of the secular Zionists were skeptical and unhappy about having more Hassidim and inexperienced amateurs trying to import Polish attitudes and methods into the Middle East.

The euphoria quickly turned into disaster. Former Arab tenant farmers refused to leave their land, despite the compensation they had received. The Kishon River overflowed, flooding the valley and turning it into an unmanageable swamp. The land was infested with mosquitoes. Malaria broke out. Some of the settlers died. Bedouin marauders murdered some others. The Rebbe had to send back some of his members to Poland, because they were less able to cope. The farm failed. Despite the initial enthusiastic financial support from Yablone Hasidim in Poland, funding slowly dwindled and then dried up completely.

In 1928, the Rebbe went to the United States, to drum up support. He returned empty handed. In desperation, he turned to the Zionist organizations for help. They were not enthusiastic. But finally, he made a deal to hand over the land to the Jewish Agency. They would provide the settlers with a stipend, while JNF took care of accumulated debts. The settlement was restructured and religious Zionists from Germany and Holland who had appropriate agricultural training in Europe, eventually helped improve the farming community's fortunes.

With the situation in Poland rapidly deteriorating, Hasidim from Yabłona began turning up in Palestine, expecting to take possession of the plots of land they had paid for over a decade earlier. The Yablone Rebbe was unable to give them any land or repay them. They accused him of being a crook who had fraudulently taken their money. He was attacked, abused and locked into his own home. He managed to escape and traveled to the United States in 1938 to see, once again, if he could interest some wealthy Zionist Jews in helping.

He moved in with his niece in New York and began visiting Orthodox communities sympathetic to the Zionist cause to generate support for the expansion of Kfar Hasidim. He had some success. But it was too late. War broke out. The German army marched into Poland, and the Rebbe now found himself trapped in America. With no hope of getting back to Palestine or of supporting himself, he moved out west, where he found work in the California shipyards. He was still religious. "The Rebbe solves the problem of observing the Sabbaths without losing hours," the local paper reported, "by working overtime on weekdays."

And then news reached him that the Nazis had murdered the entire Yabłona community along with most of Polish Jewry. He had a crisis of faith. In 1944 the Yablone Rebbe, Rabbi Yechezkel Taub, removed his Hasidic dress, shaved off his beard and payos, changed his name, and filed immigration papers to become a naturalized citizen of the United States as "George Ezekiel Taub Nagel." He stopped keeping kosher, observing Shabbat and festivals and abandoned Torah. The Yablone Rebbe was replaced by an urbane Polish immigrant with slicked-back hair and a sad, faraway look in his eyes who

liked to be called George Nickel.

He avoided contact with the Jewish community of Los Angeles and then San Diego where he moved. The only link to the past was a niece in Kfar Hasidim, with whom he corresponded. Years later her son Ehud Yonay moved to California after his army service to become a journalist. He made contact with George and they established a close relationship. It was Ehud's book "Top Guns" about the US Air Force that became the basis of the hit movie Top Gun. He also wrote "No Margin for Error: The Making of the Israeli Air Force". Eventually Ehud moved back to Israel and ended up in Kfar Hasidim.

With WWII over, the shipyard no longer needed George Nagel. He borrowed money to buy plots of land, on which he built modest homes. Over time he became a wealthy man. But then George had decided to raise his game and invest in an apartment complex development. His timing was bad. The market slumped. Contractors failed him. The project and the banks foreclosed. In his 70's George lost everything. He collapsed and ended up in hospital.

There, Ehud visited him and suggested he move back to Israel. He told him that attitudes towards George had changed. Even so, after decades of self-imposed exile, George just could not see himself returning to Kfar Hasidim, the source of so much painful anguish and trauma. When he was released George decided to go back to school. He applied to San Fernando Valley State College, enrolled as a psychology undergraduate and chose to live in student accommodation. Newspapers soon reported on the veteran student living in a dorm alongside anti-war protesting students. In 1975, George T. Nagel graduated with a bachelor's in psychology. And followed it up with an MA.

In 1978, he finally felt confident enough to return to visit Kfar Hasidim. He was met by Ehud at the airport and driven to a hall packed with people who had gathered to meet the man who had put Kfar Hasidim on the map. To his surprise, one of his former followers welcomed him and told him how grateful they were to him. For without his vision and efforts they would have remained in Poland. And when the Nazis invaded, they and their children and grandchildren would not have survived to be there that day. The community owed their lives to him.

George was stunned. When he recovered his composure, he said he realized that it might be time for the Yablone Rebbe to come home to Kfar Hasidim. It didn't happen right away. He had to go back to Los Angeles to wrap up his affairs. In 1981, he settled in Kfar Hasidim for good. He was 86. He returned to religious observance. He became the Yablone Rebbe once again. And he served and taught as the Rebbe, until he died in 1986 at the age 90.

His remarkable journey from Hasidic leader, to Zionist pioneer, to reviled failure, to war refugee, to shipyard worker, to successful real-estate developer, to bankrupt, to geriatric college student, and back to his roots as a revered Hasidic Rebbe, is surely one of the most astonishing Jewish stories of our time. It is a story of despair and redemption. Of losing faith and rediscovering it. Of realizing that however far we may drift. But we can still return.