



***Tradition and Revolution: The Story  
of the Founding of the Bais Yaakov  
Movement***

**Part 4**

**Rabbi Shmuel Leshner**

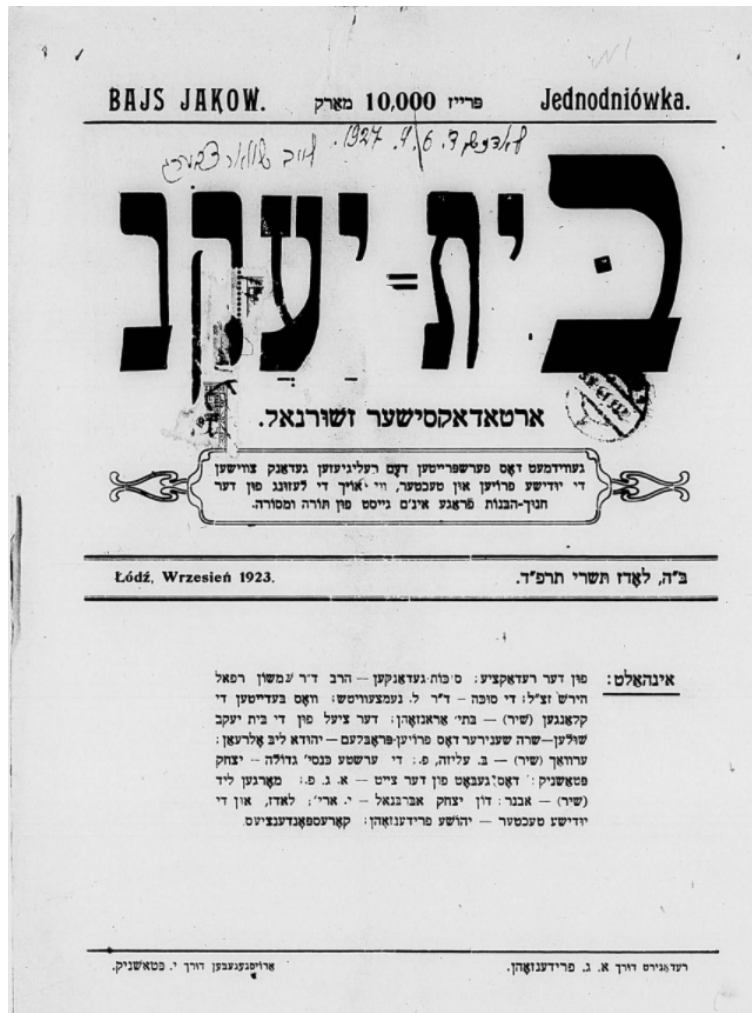
**BAYT**

## Part A

### The Bais Yaakov Journal

*The Bais Yaakov Journal* was a publication of Bais Yaakov and the Agudah. It was edited by Eliezer Gershon Friedenson, from his office in Łódź, and it appeared monthly (or sometimes more often) from 1923 to 1939.

#### First Issue of Bais Yaakov Journal - 1923



### 1) Seidman p. 123

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While 'Esther' reports that her Bnos group erred on the side of protecting its members, in the survey and other discussions it provided, the *Bais Yaakov Journal* took a more hands-off approach. The published responses to the survey indicated the willingness of the editors to let readers have their say, rather than closing off discussion by imposing Orthodox standards from above. On the thorny question of whether to avoid irreligious Jews, the editor began by noting that the question had elicited the greatest number of responses:

And no wonder. Jewish life is tangled and torn, with different ideas and contradictory world-views pushing against each other even in a single family circle. The father a hasid, the mother a pious woman, one daughter belongs to Bnos and the second is a Zionist or Bundist or a member of some other irreligious movement, and what is one supposed to do in such a case? On one hand the bonds of family or long friendship, on the other a chasm between world-views . . . The holiest institution of Jewish life is the family, from which we acquire our sense of deepest friendship, community, and kinship . . . But on the other hand when we see a friend sinking into heresy, should we really risk staying in touch with her?<sup>17</sup>

The journal made no recommendations, merely complimenting the participants for their intelligence and sensitivity in facing these issues squarely.

Other questions asked readers whether they preferred to confide in a parent or friend; whether they enjoyed painting, drawing, music, or dance; and whether they were interested in becoming economically independent or housewives. The journal published a wide range of responses without editorial comment. To the question about hobbies, responses included both 'Jewish music' and 'going to concerts', an activity frowned upon in Bais Yaakov. Most of the readers whose answers were recorded reported that they preferred to talk with their friends rather than their parents, since 'Parents today don't understand' their children. On the question of whether the girls expected to work once they became adults, it published answers that might be called normative ('a woman's work is in the home') and as well as less normative ones: 'I am in favour of women's emancipation, so I believe that women should be economically independent. A woman must be concerned with her own destiny exactly as a man is.'<sup>18</sup>

## Limits on Dialogue

### 2) Seidman p. 125

Openness had its limits, of course. The autobiography of 'Esther' includes a pointed reflection on the nature of self-government and open discussion in Bnos culture, beginning with the suggestion that the enthusiasm in Bnos for debate owed something to the principles of talmudic argumentation. Perhaps the new culture of democracy in Poland also played a part. Describing her return to Bnos after her disappointing experience founding a small-town Bais Yaakov chapter, she relates that the group 'was not happy with' her:

First of all, I opposed what was being said there too frequently. We had a certain 'freedom' to speak out, but this wasn't what they had in mind. Rather, they envisioned the Talmudic argumentation of the good old days in the yeshivas, where even a certain number of questions regarding 'the outside world' were discussed. But all this was used as a means of showing that 'our way' was everlasting, that 'our way' was correct, that we were God's chosen people.<sup>22</sup>

'Esther' is no doubt right that the taste for passionate debate was constrained in Bais Yaakov (and Bnos) culture by unwritten rules about how far one could go. Nevertheless, these limits were not narrow: the journal included articles on such worldly topics as Gandhi, Tolstoy, Pascal, 'The Shylock Legend in the Middle Ages', and 'Dulcinea and the New Woman in Modern Literature', and published Yiddish translations of the mystical writings of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, participating along with the rest of Europe in a Tagore craze. Even Freud was not out of bounds, appearing in an article on the importance of child psychology in education.<sup>23</sup> The notion that its readers were expected to be at home in the wider world was propagated by such articles as 'Leah Halpern—The Young Artist', which detailed both the loyalty to Orthodoxy and the artistic accomplishments of a young ceramic artist in Amsterdam, whose bowls were valued at over \$200. The writer, Meir Schwartzman, declared it a 'great mistake' to think that women could not be both observant Jews and prominent in various artistic fields: 'It is useful for the young women's movement in the east to familiarize itself with various women artists in the west, who play an important role in the best art circles even while being strongly traditional and religious.'<sup>24</sup> As the journal aimed to convey to its readers, religious observance need not be an obstacle to women's worldly accomplishments, allowing even for a lucrative career in the fine arts.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Shandler (ed.), *Awakening Lives*, 341.

<sup>24</sup> Schwartzman, 'Leah Halpern: The Young Artist' (Yid.).

<sup>23</sup> See K-K, 'Pedagogical Signposts' (Yid.), 81.

<sup>25</sup> On...

## Part B

### Bais Yaakov in America

#### Vichna Kaplan and Rabbi Boruch Kaplan



## Part C

### Takeaways and Reflections on the Bais Yaakov Movement

#### 3) Rebbetzin Dr. Judith (Rosenbaum) Grunfeld

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Here among the girls, the inspiration of the chassidic life had found its way into the woman's world. It had formed its own style, softened and differently molded, but it was of the same fibre that made the Hassidim crowd round their Rebbe, made them stand for hours to catch a glimpse of him, made them unfold all their latent powers in the elevated atmosphere of chassidic devotion. No longer was the life of the Jewish daughter empty at home. She too had her community life, her school, centre and club, where there were comradeship and studies and well-organized activities—an outlet and a spur for her eager ambitions.

#### 4) Seidman, p. 221

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and Bais Yaakov, *Carry Me in Your Heart*, was her neighbour and Bnos 'sister', and also spoke of these experiences in many forums. Judith Rosenbaum, who married the prominent German-born scholar and translator of the writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch, Dayan Isidor Grunfeld, taught in Jewish day schools in London after the war and continued to write and lecture about her experiences for many decades.

Grunfeld-Rosenbaum describes what it meant to have a Bais Yaakov 'pedigree', for instance when she joined a relief mission, along with her husband, to a refugee camp in Cyprus in 1946. A group of young women she met on the island were cold to her until she asked them whether they had heard of Sarah Schenirer, adding, 'Well, I was a friend and colleague of hers.' A spirited conversation followed, which demonstrated how high she had risen in their esteem: 'An amazing thought hit me. The fact that I was married to a prominent dayan in London meant nothing to these girls. My university degree and experience as an educator was valueless in their eyes. It was only when they found out that I was associated with Sarah Schenirer that they warmed to me.'<sup>48</sup> Sarah Schenirer had established not only a new system for educating girls, but also what would become a new form of social status, kinship, and *yikhus* (lineage or pedigree) within the Orthodox world, one passed on from one woman to another, between teacher and student rather than parent and child. The line that began with Sarah Schenirer has even reached 'granddaughters': Carolyn Scharfer ends her essay on the movement by writing that 'I myself was a student of Judith Grunfeld-Rosenbaum.'<sup>49</sup> And Leslie Ginsparg Klein cites a 1992 speech by a Chicago principal on the occasion of a *yahrzeit* commemoration for Sarah Schenirer: 'I'm her grandchild (through Vichna Kaplan)—you my *talmidos* (students) are her great-grandchildren.'<sup>50</sup>

This lineage also symbolically unites the movement as a whole as kith and kin. Vichna Kaplan's daughter and successor, Rebbetsin Frumi Kirzner, a keynote speaker at Sarah Schenirer's seventieth *yahrzeit*, spoke of what bound together the 14,000 students in attendance, noting that with Sarah Schenirer as the mother of Bais Yaakov, 'We are all sisters.'<sup>51</sup> In the fictional 'last will and testament' of the 'Ninety-Three Bais Yaakov Girls' (who committed suicide rather than be taken as prostitutes by the German soldiers), Chaya Feldman's one request is that the New York-based Bais Yaakov leader and Agudah activist to whom she addresses the letter, Mr Meir Schenkalewsky, recite Kaddish for his ninety-three 'children';

#### 5) Seidman, p. 148

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ideological indebtedness to secular movements, but its cultural and ideological adherence to the teachings of Samson Raphael Hirsch is duly recorded. It is even given pride of place as the very origin of the movement, as Sarah Schenirer credits Rabbi Flesch's sermon for inspiring her to rekindle the religiosity of Polish Orthodox girls. This inspiration continued to guide the movement, both directly in the form of German-speaking, university-trained leaders and teachers, such as Leo Deuschländer and Judith Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, and less directly, through literature. Admission requirements for prospective students at the Kraków seminary, for instance, included not only seven years of school, two letters of recommendation, and modesty in dress, but also possession of (in addition to the Pentateuch and a prayer book) Hirsch's *Nineteen Letters*.<sup>11</sup> In an article in the *Bais Yaakov Journal* in which she describes a trip to Frankfurt, Sarah Schenirer expresses with remarkable directness her own sense of what Bais Yaakov owed to Hirsch. Marvelling at the involvement of the girls in religious activities ('they go to synagogue') and the general liveliness of the Orthodox scene, she describes sitting alone in the salon of Hirsch's grandchildren, paging through a family album:

➤ The album was full of family memorabilia, but the last page was blank. I took my pen and wrote the following words: 'I know that it takes chutzpah for a stranger to insert themselves in someone else's family album, but when it comes to a spiritual mission, all the rules of polite society may be overthrown. With these lines, let it be known that there was someone who carried on the work of a brilliant person.'<sup>12</sup>

In this remarkable incident, Sarah Schenirer literally inscribes herself in the genealogy of the Hirsch family, claiming the Hirsch pedigree for her movement, and granting him the honour of parentage of so worthy a descendant, while insisting on the validity and primacy of spiritual kinship over the usual rules of both biological descent and polite society.

➤ Bais Yaakov more generally could be described as following the spiritual and pedagogical influence of the neo-Orthodox slogan *torah im derekh erets* (Torah with secular/practical education), a programme that found initial expression in Hirsch's *Realschule* and was adopted (and adapted) by Bais Yaakov. Subjects such as Jewish ethics, law, history, Hebrew grammar, and Bible were taught as discreet courses; students were graded and examined regularly; physical education, critical thought, and creative expression were encouraged; and, at the seminary level, pedagogy, psychology, and other secular subjects were taught, including Sarah Schenirer's favourites: Polish and German literature. In Weissman's summary,

<sup>11</sup> *Bais Yaakov Journal*, 55, cited in Weissman, 'Bais Ya'akov: A Women's Educational Movement', 62.

<sup>12</sup> Schenirer, 'In Frankfurt am Main' (Yid.), 61.

## Part B

### A Balancing Act: The Role of the Community and Rabbinic Leadership

#### (6) שולחן ערוך יו"ד קיב:ב

יש מקומות שמקילין בדבר ולוקחים פת מנחתום העובד כוכבים במקום שאין שם נחתום ישראל מפני שהיא שעת הדחק (וי"א דאפילו במקום שפת ישראל מצוי שרי) (ב"י לדעת המרדכי וסמ"ק והג"א ומהרא"י ואו"ה ריש כלל מ"ד) אבל פת של בעלי בתים אין שם מי שמורה בה להקל שעיקר הגזרה משום חתנות ואם יאכל פת בעלי בתים יבא לסעוד אצלם: הגה ולא מיקרי פת בעל הבית אלא אם עשאו לבני ביתו אבל עשאו למכור מיקרי פלטר אע"פ שאין דרכו בכך וכן פלטר שעשאו לעצמו מיקרי בעל הבית (כך משמע בב"י):

#### (7) ש"ך שם

וי"א כו'. במרדכי כתב הטעם לפי שאותן מקומות הנוהגין היתר היינו משום שלא נתפשט איסור פת של עובד כוכבים בתחלת הגזירה באותן מקומות לפי שפת של עובד כוכבים לא פשט איסורו בכל ישראל ולפ"ז משמע דאפילו פת של בעלי בתים מותר דהא לא נתפשט כלל איסור פת של עובדי כוכבים באותן מקומות וכן מוכח עוד במרדכי שם ע"ש ואע"ג דבירושלמי פא"מ אוסר פת של בעלי בתים וכן סוברים יש פוסקים הא אינהו נמי אסרי פלטר עובד כוכבים בדאיכא פלטר ישראל והיינו משום דס"ל נתפשט האיסור בכל המקומות אלא דחזרו והתירו משום חיי נפש פלטר עובד כוכבים היכא דליכא פלטר ישראל אבל מאן דס"ל דלא נתפשט האיסור באותן מקומות כלל בכל ענין שרי ובזה ישבתי שם על נכון מה שהתרעם הב"י על מ"ש הטור ולדעת א"א ז"ל אין חילוק כו' ושוב מצאתי און לי במ"מ ע"ש אבל מדברי האו"ה ריש כלל מ"ד והרב והעט"ז מבואר דאפילו אותן שנהגו היתר בפת פלטר אף בדאיכא פלטר ישראל אסורים בפת של בעלי בתים:

#### 8) Leslie Ginsparg Klein, "A Traditional Revolutionary: Sarah Schenirer's Legacy Revisited," *Jewish Action*

One of the most important lessons we can learn from Sarah Schenirer is how to successfully and appropriately balance tradition and innovation. On the one hand, Sarah Schenirer was reconnecting girls with the past and reinstating tradition. Her students and Bais Yaakov publications stress how she embodied traditional Jewish values such as *tzeniut* and followed *da'at Torah*. On the other hand, Sara Schenirer went about reinstating tradition in a very modern way. She challenged convention after convention in a highly conservative society. She called for change in an anti-innovation culture. Modest. Radical. Traditional. Revolutionary. Can all these traits exist in one person?



**Dr. Leo Deutschlander's Eulogy for Sarah Schenirer**



## 9) Seidman, p. 141-143

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That Bais Yaakov was led by a woman who was unmarried for most of the interwar period—and who played the role not of mother, daughter, or wife, but rather of leader, activist, and Torah giant—was something that those writers who preferred a bourgeois domestic discourse had to address. In a fascinating eulogy delivered in the seminary, Leo Deutschländer responded to the challenge posed to Orthodoxy not by modern feminists but rather—perhaps more powerfully—by a pious woman leader like Sarah Schenirer. Giving her credit for creating, *ex nihilo*, ‘an enormous achievement, a network of schools, a powerful movement’, Deutschländer acknowledged that this creation was not always done ‘only with love, with tenderness, with a smile’. She ‘demanded and protested, raged against those activists and leaders who were so indifferent to the burning question of girls’ education’. Her commitment and fervour, Deutschländer continued, put her in a difficult position:

How many times, when arguing with Torah-true men, with hasidic fathers, with strict administrators, did she have to point to a *midrash* or cite a passage of Talmud in order to substantiate her principles, to build her school on healthy foundations? . . . More than once, in defence of the purity of her movement, was she compelled to resort to manly stratagems in order to properly respond to indifferent fathers or short-sighted adminis-

trators. That was certainly enough to make her feel her proper self-worth, to arouse her to fight the so-called degradation of woman, her second-class status. For certainly, like other women, she felt the full force of her relegation to the women's section of the synagogue, to the outer quarters of the tent, the segregation between men and women, the honour granted to the man in the Jewish home.

How strong must have been her desire to visit a Jewish *heder*, to spend time in a yeshiva, sit at a hasidic rebbe's table, participate in an important men's gathering. For those were certainly for her the brightest places, the most cherished ideals. . . . With how much light, how much spirit, how much enthusiasm would she have passed these experiences on to her students! After all, were these men strangers or secular Jews? They were her own Jewish brothers, fervent Torah Jews. So why should she be kept from hearing them, seeing them, participating in their life for the good of her ideals? Why should she, the historical personality, the famous figure, be kept within such strict limits, so undervalued? Why should that be?<sup>63</sup>

Deuschländer's poignant question marks the end of a section, leaving the reader suspended, for a moment, in this remarkable state—a man imagining how an Orthodox woman might feel about her exclusion from the spiritual treasures she covets. The next brief sentence provides the only possible answer to this painful conundrum: 'This is what Judaism requires.' Deuschländer continues by describing the reasons for strict segregation between the sexes, acknowledging the special honour Jewish tradition bestows upon men, 'which is impossible for Europeans to understand'. He acknowledges that 'the Jewish male is obligated in more commandments, and so deserves more respect [but] this does not take one hair away from the importance of women. For what difference does it make who lays *tefilin*, who wears *tsitsit*, who sits in a sukkah, who learns Talmud? All Jews are one, truly one.' Returning to Sarah Schenirer, he concludes that this situation could not arouse protest 'in such a meritorious woman':

No, absolutely not! Not a shred of dissatisfaction, not a hint of anger, not a trace of frustration. But was it possible to detect in her a kind of resignation, a sort of submission? Oh well! What was there to be done about it? She was what she was, and there was no changing that. But no! Not a hint of resignation, no sign of complaint, not the faintest clue that she was dissatisfied with her lot. At peace with herself, happy to confront every setback, every restraint that was put on her, every limitation she faced. This, too, is Torah; this too is the will of God. 'Blessed [is the One] who made me according to his will.'<sup>64</sup>

Deuschländer's long-standing and close collaboration with Sarah Schenirer, and

the heightened emotion caused by the occasion, elicit a rather different set of reflections on the role of women in traditional Jewish life than most of those that appear in the *Bais Yaakov Journal* on the topic. The question here is not whether a Jewish wife might live in harmony with her husband, but rather how the relationship between Orthodox men and women might be experienced by a woman like Sarah Schenirer, who worked alongside men for the accomplishment of shared goals while nevertheless being excluded from taking part in some of their greatest spiritual pleasures. The (imagined) secular onlooker looking in with such disdain that is sometimes described in articles dealing with Orthodoxy and women in the *Bais Yaakov Journal* might be dismissed as foolish ('Answer the fool according to his folly', Rabbi Gutentag wrote), but the (also projected) feelings of a woman who treasured Jewish life and had done so much to save it, who knew her way around the Talmud and longed to taste the religious delights reserved for men, posed a more painful dilemma. But Deuschländer makes it clear (as Grunfeld-Rosenbaum does in her own reflections on the cornerstone-laying ceremony) that this protest does not derive from Sarah Schenirer's own complaints, or even her sense of 'resignation'.

After the Second World War, the bourgeois discourse developed in the interwar years along the lines laid out by Hirsch and his followers, which spoke of women's 'special gifts' and saw Bais Yaakov as a preparatory school for future wives and mothers, gained ascendancy, while the alternative discourse I have traced here receded to the margins. Nevertheless, the memory of Sarah Schenirer's life and the early years of Bais Yaakov hinted at it and supplied another model of Orthodox womanhood. In these stories, girls and women could be remembered and championed in a range of roles—as hikers as well as wives, Torah scholars as well as mothers, pilgrims as well as parents, and writers as well as readers.

The *Bais Yaakov Journal* already recognized the power of these stories even as they were unfolding. In 1923, in the inaugural issue, Friedenson expressed his desire to spread the word about Bais Yaakov and to provide 'the best reading material' for Orthodox girls and women. In the sixteen years of its existence, it achieved that and more: it created a laboratory for exploring the possibilities of Orthodox womanhood in the modern era, and a mirror for the participants in the Bais Yaakov movement to catch sight of themselves and the wonders they had wrought.

## On the Occasion of our World Congress [1929]

### The Eve of the Congress

And so the Orthodox woman has awakened from her long, lethargic sleep and has begun to organize. From day to day her work for society intensifies, with pride she carries the Torah banner of old, around which all the women of Israel will congregate.

This month all the delegates chosen by religious Jewish women will gather in Vienna to create a world organization of Orthodox Jewish women.<sup>12</sup> It has not been long since we first established the Bnos organization in Poland, and already from the dais of the World Congress the powerful voice of the religious Jewish woman rings out on the world stage. She is no longer isolated either in her thoughts or aspirations, the daughter of Israel who knows the Jewish sources. In every corner of the world she has close and intimate sisters in spirit.

I know full well that many of our pious Jews will view this with suspicion. We hold sacred the ideal of women's modesty: 'She is in the tent' [Gen. 18: 9], and 'all the glory of a princess is within' [Ps. 45: 14].<sup>13</sup> No doubt a portion of the com-

<sup>12</sup> The second World Congress of the A. S. T. ...

munity will regard our congress with suspicion and fear and see it as a deviation—God forbid—from Israel of old.

But these same pious Jews should know that this conference of Orthodox women is a necessary response to the dangers that prey on our sisters from various secularist directions. *Et la'asot lahashem*, 'It is time to act for the Lord'—from this perspective must our public efforts be understood.

We have recently been hearing about other women's congresses, which present themselves as if they were the sole representatives of the masses of Jewish women and put forth various resolutions that stand in absolute contradiction to the ideals and aspirations of religious women. Even though no one has appointed them to do so, they take upon themselves the right to proclaim various slogans against the spirit of our Torah and launch false accusations against our Torah sages.<sup>14</sup> Just recently we heard of a women's congress where certain things were said and written about the *agunah* question and about women's suffrage that we Orthodox women would never have dreamed of saying—although we know the meaning of 'women's rights' perfectly well, and no one feels more deeply than we do the plight of the unfortunate *agunah*.<sup>15</sup> But we also know that the Torah and Jewish law are supreme. And that is why we religious women, in just the same way as religious men, submit to the Torah and Jewish law, which always works for our benefit and happiness.

Our congress is necessary right now for just these reasons. *From our speakers' podium it must boldly be proclaimed that all those other women have no right to speak in the name of the religious Jewish woman.* The aims, approaches, and ideals of the great masses of religious Jewish women must be made clear before the whole world. The Jewish world must know that thousands and tens of thousands of Jewish women all over the globe cling to the Jewish religion and wish to continue to spin the golden thread of Jewish tradition.

But that does not mean that we do not have many problems requiring internal resolution. Family purity, luxury and fashion, the education of our children, and

so on.<sup>16</sup> The weightiest issue we are facing now is how to combat the Parisian way of raising children, which increasingly threatens the Jewish family.

Our task must also be to find ways and means to fight for the protection of the Jewish daughter and her moral improvement.<sup>17</sup>

It will be a great day when we come together to collectively consider how to improve Jewish family life and return the sanctity to Jacob's tent.

It will also be a great sanctification of God's name before the eyes of the world that our congress is taking place at the same time as the second World Congress of Agudath Israel. The honour and esteem of Orthodox Jews will be strengthened when, at the same moment as the sons of Israel declare in ringing tones their faithfulness to the God of Israel, the daughters of Israel proclaim to Orthodox Jewry: 'We are with you!'

During the great days of the month of Elul this year, we will fulfil 'We will go with our sons and our daughters, for we must observe the Lord's festival' [Exod. 10: 9], and this will be remembered for generations as the great holiday of the revival of the entire Jewish people.