

Rabbi Shlomo Feinzilber of Keidan

“Rabbi Shlomo Feinzilber – Keidan” by Rabbi Ephraim Oshry in אלה אזכרה: אוסף תולדות קדושי ת"ש-תש"ה (“*These I will Remember! Biographies of leaders of religious Jewry in Europe, who perished during the years 1939-1945*”). Volume II. pp. 232-235. New York: Research Institute of Religious Jewry, Inc., 1957. [Article translated from the Hebrew and annotated by Allen Dryer.]

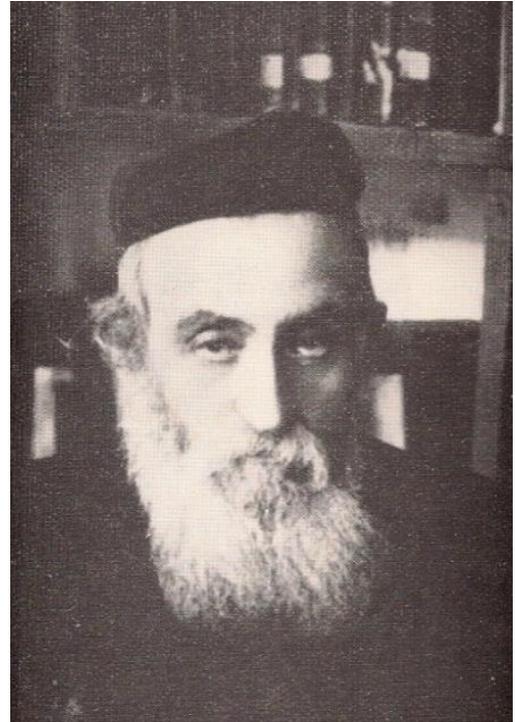
Biography

Rabbi Shlomo Halevy Feinzilber was born in the year 5631 (1871) in Bereza Kartuska [now Byaroza in Belarus] in the Grodno gubernia. His father was Rabbi Aaron Yosef [Feinzilber], author of the book “*Avodat Aharon*” (The Service of Aaron), and who was later the rabbi of Yaluvka [now Jałówka in modern Poland]. His grandfather was Rabbi Arye of Volkovisk [now Vawkavysk in Belarus], author of the book “*Pnei Aryeh*” (Face of the Lion).

Even as a young child, Shlomo Feinzilber began to write *chidushim* (novel interpretations) on the Torah. By the time he was fourteen years old, he was already having discussions with the great Torah scholars of his generation. He was an amazing *matmid* (person who constantly learns Torah) and there was none as diligent as he in Torah learning, a quality that remained with him his entire life. He used to say: “A *matmid* is not one who learns for ten hours (at a time) but one who learns for ten minutes” that is to say, a person who does not waste even one moment of his time. He had a phenomenal memory. Everything that he read or learned, he knew and could recite thoroughly. He remembered [what he had learned in] the Talmud to the page and even to the line.

At the age of eighteen, he married Sarah Tovah, the daughter of Rabbi Chaim Shor. When he was twenty-one, he was ordained by the gaonim Rabbi Yitzchak Elhanan Spektor and Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik.

His first rabbinical post was in the town of Turik (Tauragė), in the Vilna gubernia. In 5656 (1896), he was appointed as the rabbi in Porozova [now in Belarus], in the Grodno gubernia. While he was in Porozova, his reputation began to spread as a Torah scholar, community guide, and a talented and energetic rabbinic leader.



Rabbi Shlomo Feinzilber, Keidan, undated

The town of Vekshne (Viekšniai) in the Kovno district appointed him to their rabbinate in 5664 (1904). That same year, his dear and good wife passed away. In 5665 (1905), he married a second time, to [Sore] Hinda [Klevansky]. He remained in Vekshne until the outbreak of the First World War, where he had founded a yeshiva with two other great rabbinical teachers to spread Torah learning.

In 1914, the community of Vekshne was expelled, along with the rabbi, to Russia. Large numbers of the rabbi's writings were lost, as his notebooks were left behind in Vekshne – the townspeople had expected that they were being exiled only for a short while, as the Russian authorities had proclaimed when they had issued the expulsion orders, and thus books and writings had been left behind. However, when the German-Russian front overtook the town, the houses were completely burnt, including the rabbi's house, which had stood at the edge of the town next to the synagogue. Everything in it was destroyed.

While in Russia, Rabbi Feinzilber was appointed rabbi of the Great Synagogue in Minsk, the capital city of White Russia (Belorussia). There he established a large yeshiva, where he transmitted Torah learning to many young men. Many of his students, who learned Torah from him directly, are leading rabbis in Israel and in the Diaspora today. The *shiurim* (lectures on Jewish religious subjects) that he delivered were also written down.

In 1920, Rabbi Feinzilber returned to Vekshne. However, due to the difficult wanderings under the Soviet regime before he returned, his works were again lost. He began again to record his *chidushim* on the Torah, having the fortitude to write down his ideas under difficult circumstances and conditions. Even when he or his children were ill, or they had nothing to eat, even when they were under fire or bombardment, he would record his *chidushim* in his notebooks.

After remaining in Vekshne for about four years, he moved to the town of Keidan (Kédainiai), which was renowned all over the [Jewish] world for its great rabbis. In this town, Rabbi Feinzilber again established a yeshiva, and appointed the rabbinical leader, Rabbi Shimon Dubiansky (HY"D)¹ as the Rosh Yeshiva (Dean of the Yeshiva). For many years, Rabbi Feinzilber was the president of the *Agudas HaRabonim B'Lita* (Association of Rabbis in Lithuania).

His Books

Rabbi Feinzilber published three books during his lifetime, as follows:

"*Nishmat Hayim*" is a book about the laws of Brit Milah, religious circumcision, and its practice. The book approached the topic of circumcision both from the standpoint of examining the issues for the sake of Torah learning in and of itself (*I'hagdil Torah u'lha'adira*) and from the point of view of practical application, including investigation and integration of medical practice. The book was published in 5668 (1908), after Rabbi Feinzilber was appointed the rabbi of Vekshne.



Title page of the book "*Nishmat Hayim*" by Rabbi Shlomo Feinzilber, published in Jerusalem in 1908

It is interesting to note that this book was printed in Jerusalem and published by Rabbi Shmuel Salant,² then the rabbi and head of the Bet-Din (rabbinical court) in the Holy City. In addition, the old rabbi studied the book in depth, and even added his own comments and footnotes to it. Apparently, Rabbi Salant appreciated the book and its author very much, so much so that he did not see it as beneath his dignity as a world renowned, great rabbi of the generation, who held a seat in the most prestigious rabbinate in the world, to write notes for the book of a young rabbi in a small and neglected town in faraway Zamut.³ The book was published by the "Etz Hayim" yeshiva in Jerusalem, under the auspices of Rabbi Salant.

It has been asked how the rabbi of Vekshne connected with the Rabbi of Jerusalem. It has been said that there were family connections – albeit very distant – between the second wife of the rabbi (Feinzilber), Sore Hinde Klevansky, who was born in the shtetl of Salant (Salantai) in Zamut and Rabbi

Salant, who, as his names also indicates, originated from this town; both the rabbanit (rabbi's wife) Feinzilber, nee Klevansky, and Rabbi Salant were descendants of the righteous gaon, Rabbi Israel Salanter ZT" L⁴, founder of the Musar movement famous throughout the Orthodox Jewish world.

The book *Nishmat Hayim* was very popular among rabbis and *mohelim* (ritual circumcisers), as a guide and a determiner of the religious law about circumcision, especially regarding questions such as infants who were ill or had some physical defect.

"*Hashlamot Hamidot*" (Perfection of Qualities) was published in 5685 (1925), right after Rabbi Feinzilber had moved from Vekshne to serve as the rabbi of Keidan, and it was published and printed by the publishing house of Movshovitz & Cohen in Keidan, one of the few publishers of Jewish religious books in Lithuania; they even had typeface for Rashi lettering, which was not available from any of the other publishers [of Hebrew books in Lithuania].



Title page of the book "*Hashlamat Hamidot*" by Rabbi Feinzilber, published in Keidan in 1925

This book, as its name indicates, deals with the improvement and elevation of personal qualities and relationships between people, that is, not *mitzvot* (commandments) between people and God (*beyn adam l'makom*), but *mitzvot* concerning interpersonal relationships (*beyn adam l'chavero*).

The book was widely distributed in yeshiva circles where time was set aside to study *Mussar* (ethics), and just as in those yeshivot time was allocated every day to learn the book "*Mesillat Yesharim*" (Pathway of the Upright) of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto,⁵ so too they learned the book "*Hashlamot Hamidot*" of Rabbi Feinzilber. This book was designated for study in the great yeshivot of Slobodka and Telz, from which thousands of students and hundreds of rabbis came and spread Torah learning throughout the world.

"*Yeriot Shlomo*" (The [Temple] curtains of Solomon) is a commentary on Rambam's *Sefer Kedoshim* (Book of Holiness).⁶ The book was printed in Keidan in 5694 (1933) and is the crown jewel of his [Rabbi Feinzilber's] Torah scholarship. His life's goal was to write a complete exposition on all the Jewish legal writings of the Rambam. It was intended to be a work of huge proportions, comprising ten volumes. The book "*Yeriot Shlomo*" was the first volume of this multi-volume composition and is an elucidation of the laws of the Temple Service and the Sacrifices in "*Yad Ha'Chazaka*".⁷

He saw in this overall effort a great opportunity for practical application regarding the renewal of Jewish national life in the Land of Israel. As the rebuilding in the land increased, he resolved to contribute towards this, and if it were not possible for him to assist in the building of the land in a material sense, he decided to add his contribution to the spiritual rebuilding of the Land of Israel.

These are his words in the introduction to this book: "In these times, as our holy Land is being rebuilt, it should grow and flourish, and the eyes of the people of Israel are lifted up towards her, because they see and feel that only there is their home; may it be His will that the building up of our holy Land will be on the foundations of our holy Torah. We [thus] need to

prepare ourselves with the knowledge of these halakhot (laws), and as Haggai the Prophet asked from the kohanim when the Second Temple was being built, if they were familiar with the laws pertaining to the Temple and its holiness, and he took care to complete their knowledge, as it says in Pesachim 17 “the priests erred”.⁸



Title page of the book “Yeriot Shlomo” by Rabbi Feinzilber, published in Keidan in 1933

This book was received with great enthusiasm especially by the rabbis and scholars who had devoted time to learning *Seder Kodashim*.⁹

Public Activities

Rabbi Feinzilber endeavored to unify the parties working on behalf of [the Jewish presence in] the Land of Israel. In the early twenties, he published an article titled “*Mashmiya Shalom*” (Heralding Peace) in which he championed the idea of a unified party. The article made a strong impression in all the communities of the Jewish Diaspora and the rabbi received many letters of thanks from throughout the Jewish world.

Huge changes, far-reaching in his lifetime, began as he took over the rabbinate in Keidan. Vekshne had been a small provincial town, with several tens of families, far from the political center of the capital Kovno [Kaunas], while Keidan was a mid-size regional city of several thousand inhabitants close to the political center of the capital city – Kovno.¹⁰

However, while in little Vekshne, Rabbi Feinzilber had been the unopposed leader of his flock whom no-one dared to contradict, in Keidan there were well-established factions and interests, who were not so willing to accommodate the notion of the unchallenged supremacy of the rabbi’s leadership. [For example] He and the Zionists had a difference of opinion as they wanted a Zionist rabbi in the political sense.¹¹ The struggles and the divisions between the factions continued for several years, during which the rabbi was not paid his salary and he and his family lived in poverty and want, and often literally did not have bread in the house.

In [December] 1926, the fascists seized power through a coup d’état, disbanded the Seimas – the Lithuanian parliament¹² – and abolished the provisions for Jewish autonomy. The only Jewish institution that was recognized by the Lithuanian government was the *Merkaz Agudas HaRabbonim*, the Central Association of Rabbis, which was headed by Rabbi Feinzilber for more than twelve years.

Rabbi Feinzilber was very active in his public work and not one week passed that he did not visit Kovno,¹³ whether for conferences with rabbis, meetings of the Association, or conversations with the leaders of the Lithuanian government, personal efforts, and so on.

After the conquest of Poland by the Germans and the Russians [in 1939], young men from several yeshivot in Poland that had been destroyed arrived in Keidan. Rabbi Feinzilber gathered them and established a yeshiva, concerning himself both with their material well-being and teaching them Torah. Eventually also, the Yeshiva of Mir found itself a home in Keidan and Rabbi Feinzilber made immense efforts to ease their difficult material situation.

Sons-in-law

Rabbi Feinzilber had three sons-in-law, all learned in Torah and meticulous in religious observance:

Rabbi Zalman Permut, HY"D, served in the prestigious and important post as the principal of the Kovno Kollel¹⁴, in which many young men, filled with Torah and Fear of Heaven, learned. Rabbi Ephraim Sholem Kravitsky, HY"D, served in the rabbinate in the city of Loknik (Luokê). Rabbi Aaron Galin, HY"D, was a righteous teacher in Keidan.

The Destruction of Keidan

The days of agony of the Jewish community of Keidan began on 15 August 1941. The inhuman torture and

suffering lasted for thirteen days. On Thursday, 5 Elul 5701 (28 August 1941), the entire Jewish community of Keidan was destroyed by the Germans and their Lithuanian accomplices, leaving no survivors. The old Rabbi Feinzilber buoyed the spirits of his community until the end. His son-in-law and aide, Rabbi Aaron Galin, husband of his younger daughter Chaya, and one of the outstanding students of the Slobodka Yeshiva declared when reaching the site of the mass grave that "the pure, spilled blood will not be silent and will not rest!" In a moment, the murderous rain of bullets and grenades began, and ended with the complete annihilation of the entire community, from who remained just a few individuals who had managed to save their lives.¹⁵

End Notes

¹ HYD is the abbreviation of the Hebrew expression *Hashem Yikom Damo* – May God avenge his blood – typically appended after the name of someone who was murdered in anti-Semitic violence. During World War Two, Rabbi Shimon Dubiansky and his family were in the Kovno ghetto. When the ghetto was liquidated, Rabbi Dubiansky and his son were sent to Dachau concentration camp, where Rabbi Dubiansky died on 23 December 1944.

² Rabbi Shmuel Salant (1816 – 1909) served as the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem for almost 70 years. He was a renowned Torah and Talmud scholar.

³ The region of western Lithuania known as Žemaitija (Samogitia)

⁴ ZTL is the Hebrew abbreviation for *zaycher tzaddik livracha* – may the remembrance of the righteous be for a blessing.

⁵ Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707–1746), also known by the Hebrew acronym Ramchal, was a prominent Italian Jewish rabbi, kabbalist, and philosopher.

⁶ Rambam is the Hebrew acronym of the renowned 13th century Jewish legal scholar and philosopher, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides).

⁷ *Yad Ha'Chazaka* is Maimonides comprehensive code of Jewish law also known as *Mishne Torah*.

⁸ The Talmud, tractate *Pesachim*, 17a, describes several cases where the prophet Haggai questions the priests and discusses whether their answers are correct or not.

⁹ *Seder Kodashim* is the fifth Order of the Mishna, dealing largely with the rituals of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

¹⁰ The “temporary capital of Lithuania” was the official designation of the city of Kaunas during the interwar period; the declared capital in Vilnius was part of Poland from 1920 until 1939.

¹¹ Meaning, supportive of working towards a sovereign Jewish political entity in the Land of Israel.

¹² The democratically elected government was replaced with the authoritarian rule of Antanas Smetona and the Seimas was dissolved in March 1927; new elections were not held again until 1936.

¹³ Kaunas (Kovno) is about 33 miles (55 kilometers) from Keidan.

¹⁴ A Kollel is an institute for full-time, advanced study of the Talmud and rabbinic literature, comprised mostly of married men who earn a regular monthly stipend for their studies.

¹⁵ Among the few survivors were Chaim Ronder, born in Kedainiai, and Shmuel Smulasky, a refugee from Poland, who managed to escape the massacre.