

# The Shochet

A Memoir of Jewish Life in  
Ukraine and Crimea in the 1800s

Written by Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn  
Translated by Michael Rotenfeld  
Reviewed by Rische Deitsch

**T**his is one of those rare books that once you start, it is very difficult to put down. You know you should put it down and go to sleep or go to work or make supper... but you can't! And once you finish it, you want everyone you know and love to read it too.

I'm referring to the remarkable autobiography of a simple *shochet* named Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn (1848-1930), called Pinye-Ber, who was a *chossid* of the Tzemach Tzedek, the Rebbe Maharash, and the Rebbe Rashab. His Yiddish autobiography has been expertly translated into English in two volumes by Michael Rotenfeld under the title *The Shochet: A Memoir of Jewish Life in Ukraine and Crimea*, published by Touro University Press.

As Lubavitchers, we have all heard and read stories of the trials and tribulations of Jewish life in Tsarist Russia and the tremendous *mesiras nefesh* that Lubavitchers had in that nightmare called the Soviet Union. Yet *The Shochet* is making waves in the Jewish world, particularly among Lubavitchers, because of Pinye-Ber's rich and authentic descriptions of his experiences down to their minutest details: his daily struggles to survive amidst grinding poverty, disease (including a cholera pandemic), war, duplicitous strangers (and sometimes even relatives) and a Tsarist regime that delighted in tormenting Jews. His vivid writing makes the people in his life story come alive, each with his or her own personality. His tribulations are described in an honest and compelling manner, while at the same time his tremendous *bitachon*—aided by a good sense of humor—shines through.

Pinye-Ber wrote his autobiography for those of his children who had strayed from Yiddishkeit. He hoped and prayed that by reading all the instances of *hashgachah pratis* in his life, they would see the Divine orchestration of these events and be moved to do *teshuvah*.





# Pinye-Ber was born in 1848 in the Ukrainian town of Tiraspol.

He was the youngest of eight children born to a *chassidische* (non-Chabad) family. By the age of seven he had been orphaned of both his parents, and to spare him from the family's abject poverty, he was shuffled among various relatives, moving from town to town, from family to family.

The following episode occurred when he was ten:

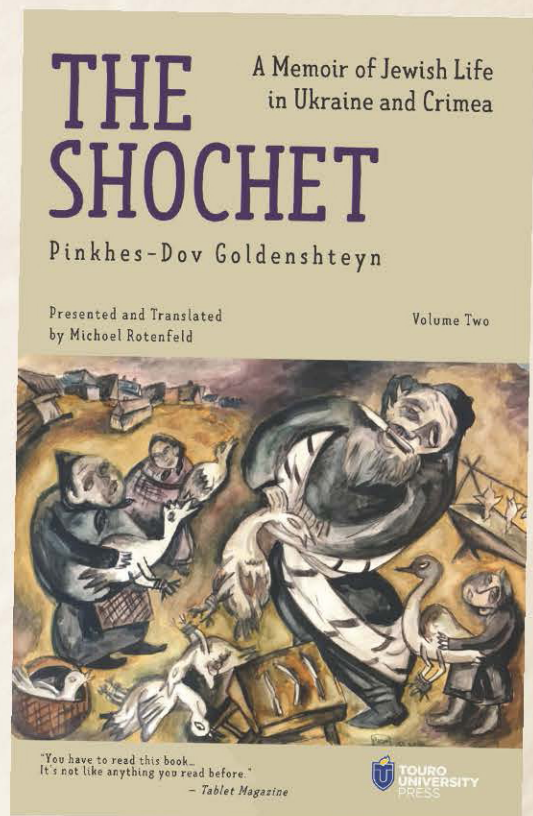
Very soon would be Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and you needed to recall your transgressions. But no matter how hard I tried, I could not find any. Missing *davenen*—no. Missing *Asher Yatzar*—no. Missing *Birkas Hamazon*—no... I searched and searched and could not find anything. Perhaps I had thrown a stone at a boy's head? That was no sin; the kid should not have been where he was not wanted! But, still, I did manage to find one sin. If you search hard enough, you will find something.

During the summer, I once went to *cheder* and had two little apples, bought for a *groshen*. One looked delicious and I really wanted to eat it, but what was I to do since it was before morning prayers? But my evil inclination

was working doubly hard so I just took one bite. A good little apple—actually very good. And I ate it all up. Suddenly, I felt an ache in my heart. What have I done? Before prayers—eating?! Now I would surely die. I was certain that my days were numbered. Fear gripped me—I very much did not want to die so young. I felt the transgression burning inside me and leaving me no rest. Rosh Hashanah arrived, and I beseeched G-d and sobbed before Him to forgive me for my misdoing and that I should sin no more. And suddenly, a commotion broke out in shul; a mortal fright overcame the entire congregation.

The uproar was the arrival of a band of *chappers* (snatchers) who set out to kidnap Jewish children to serve as Cantonist soldiers. Pinye-Ber was saved by his clever older sister who hid him under her skirt as she slowly walked out of synagogue, though he later suffered some more close calls with *chappers*.

Disappointed in the local *chassidim*, he decided to travel almost 700 miles to the Tzemach Tzedek in Lubavitch because he had been favorably impressed by the few Lubavitchers he had met. After traveling much of the way on foot, he arrived in Lubavitch in Elul 5625 (August 1865). Pinye-Ber asked the Tzemach Tzedek for a *brachah* for a long life, since his parents and many of his older siblings had died young, and for advice on where to learn. The Tzemach Tzedek





Pinye-Ber Goldenshteyn's first wife, Freyde (1851-1896), and their daughter Rochel.

responded that for him to live a long life he should not marry until age 19 (everyone was surprised that the Rebbe had him wait so long) and that he should study in a yeshivah in nearby Shklov. Pinye-Ber spent Shabbos in Lubavitch and heard the Tzemach Tzedek say a *ma'amar*, and he vividly describes all the the goings-on before, during, and afterwards. Before leaving Lubavitch, Pinye-Ber wanted to make sure that the Tzemach Tzedek was as holy as he seemed. As he writes:

I hid myself in the *beis medrash*. After *Shacharis*, the *shames* did not see me hiding and locked up the *beis medrash*. I wanted to see what the Rebbe was doing while alone in his room. At 11:00 a.m., I peeked in through the keyhole of the door.

What follows is Pinye-Ber's illuminating account of the Tzemach Tzedek's constant learning and purity of conduct which greatly impressed and inspired Pinye-Ber.

Afterwards, Pinye-Ber went to Shklov where he excelled in his studies, but he was forced to return home after six months because of problems with his documents. He worked as a *melamed* and then married, after which he tried a number of different occupations, including being a grain merchant and a tavern keeper, until he decided to become a *shochet*. He studied and trained in great poverty. When he finally became certified as a *shochet*, he ran to Lubavitch to get a *brachah* from the Rebbe Maharash. But things didn't go exactly as he had envisioned:

[The Rebbe] glanced at me and said, "I would advise you to travel home right away. Don't delay and leave immediately... And G-d will most likely prepare for you a place to practice *shechitah*." I stood there paralyzed. I stared but could not say a word out of fear. "Why are you standing there so terrified? I'm asking you to go home—nothing more." "What does this mean, Rebbe? How can I go home? I endured so much to get here. I made it here in freezing cold weather and without a *kopek*, and now you're telling me to return immediately. The chill from my trip here still lies in my bones. I'd like to rest a bit and obtain some money for the trip back." I said all of this with tears in my eyes. The Rebbe replied, "Eh, no matter! Hashem will help you. You'll make the trip home unharmed. But make sure you leave soon. And here's a ruble as a contribution towards your expenses. Now give me your hand and bid me farewell."

Stunned, Pinye-Ber allowed himself to be convinced by a well-meaning Lubavitcher *shochet* that the Rebbe certainly meant that he could stay three more days, until after Shabbos. After Shabbos, he rushed home to Tiraspol, where he learned from his wife that, exactly three days earlier, men had been looking for him to hire him as their *shochet*—but the position had since been filled.

While others would have walked away from the overwhelming challenges he sometimes faced, Pinye-Ber would not allow anyone to "spit in his *kasha*" and would not consider backing down from a fight. In his position as a *shochet* in the *shtetl* of Buzinove in the Ukraine, he was once walking down a road in the winter when he saw a nobleman's carriage approaching from behind:

Suddenly, I heard the nobleman shout to the coachman in Russian, "Stop!" He then grabbed the whip from the coachman's hands, jumped off the carriage, and headed right toward me, saying in Russian, "You *Zhid*. You aren't taking off your hat? You see that a nobleman is driving by, and you aren't removing your hat out of respect?!" I actually had with me a good walking stick, which I raised before him and said, "If you strike me with that whip, I'll pound you over the head with this stick." He did not back down and lashed me with it and raised his hand to whip me again. I took my stick in both of my hands and, while holding on to each end, flung it over his head and squeezed him against me, holding the stick against the entire breadth of his shoulders. I had him fettered where he could not move a limb. Whenever he wished to move, the stick would squeeze his back. He could not move his

She reciprocated my love and appreciated me greatly, never ignoring anything I said. That is why our life together evolved with pure love from day to day because we always, even in our greatest poverty, considered ourselves happier than the happiest couple in the world.

arms because I had them firmly locked within my own. He was quite fat and beefy, but I was also no lightweight. Whenever he tried to tear himself away from me, I would give him a jab in his back with the stick and knee him right in his stomach so that he danced back and forth as if he was reciting *Boi ve'sholom...*

The nobleman promised that he would stop assaulting Pinye-Ber, so he let him go. But the nobleman went back on his word and attacked Pinye-Ber again.

I cannot remember now how I was able to get out from under his hands nor do I know how I had the strength to make it home. I was confused from the blows I had received to my head. Upon entering my house, I laid myself down and cried over my bad luck. I felt I had

personally wrestled with Eisav—and not with his angel as Yaakov Avinu did.

Now Pinye-Ber Goldenshteyn could certainly have been arrested for assaulting a nobleman and sent to a prison camp in Siberia for the rest of his life, but he believed in standing up for what was right no matter what and he planned to file a complaint against the nobleman. But the next day, he was told that the nobleman, who turned out to be the owner of the entire town, had shot himself dead out of embarrassment for having been bested by a Jew. The local non-Jews were all thrilled because that nobleman had beaten so many of them over the years, yet they had all been too afraid to stand up to him. They said, “That nobleman hit that Jew, and G-d immediately struck him down—probably because that Jew is pious.” I am not doing justice to Pinye-Ber’s full account of the incident, and *The*



**Pinye-Ber Goldenshteyn's second wife, Fayge, is sitting next to her stepmother, Udl. Standing is Feyge's daughter-in-law Klara. This photo was taken in Feodosiya, Crimea, in the early 1910s.**

*Shochet* includes many such gripping events.

In 1879, Pinye-Ber and his wife and children moved from Ukraine to the Crimean town of Bakhchisaray, where he served as *shochet* for 34 years. He always served in small Jewish communities which were too small to support both a *shochet* and a rabbi, thus making him the local authority for all religious matters. As a settlement for Jews, the Crimea was like the Wild West, and Pinye-Ber describes the trials of leading a Jewish life in this frontier.

Pinye-Ber married three times and was widowed twice. His first wife Freyde gave him 13 children, seven of whom lived to adulthood (the oldest two remained *shomer Shabbos*). He writes about Freyde in very endearing terms, which (Michoel Rotenfeld, the expert and well-read translator of this book,

tells me) was quite unusual for those times, and details all the many ways she helped him:

She reciprocated my love and appreciated me greatly, never ignoring anything I said. That is why our life together evolved with pure love from day to day because we always, even in our greatest poverty, considered ourselves happier than the happiest couple in the world. I always thanked and praised G-d for preordaining for me such a true partner who sweetened the bitter times that I lived through.

He also writes tenderly about his second wife and her great efforts to help him pay all of his many debts after his first wife died and his two oldest children were married off:

Such a precious Feyge, being so religious and such a kosher soul, appears very rarely on this earth.

Regarding his third wife, Bashe, he writes:

G-d had compassion on me, accepted my prayers, and predestined for me a good partner, who is a prominent and respectable elderly woman in Petach-Tikvah. She has no children and is a good-hearted woman. She loves to do *mitzvos* and is involved in performing them as much as her strength permits. Since there is goodwill between us, I am devoted to her.

*The Shochet* is also a book about *bitachon* and resilience. For example, by the time he was planning to leave Bakhchisaray in 1913, the *mikveh* was dilapidated, so Pinye-Ber took it upon himself to build a new one. He placed a down payment from his own limited funds to buy a house from a Karaite next to the local shul, and then looked for a donor who would sponsor the new *mikveh*. That brought him to a wealthy former *meshumad* named Kizilshteyn in Feodosiya, who had



Pinye-Ber Goldenshteyn with his third wife, Bashe, in 1928 in Petach-Tikvah.

not returned to Jewish communal life. Pinye-Ber approached him, but Kizilshiteyn had him thrown out of his house. Not to be deterred, Pinye-Ber thought:

It would not be easy to convince such a sinful person to return to righteousness and merit this great *mitzvah*. So I had to accept any difficulties in this matter with love, and I prayed to G-d that He should not allow Kizilshiteyn's sins to prevent him from performing the *mitzvah* in its entirety.

A few weeks later, Pinye-Ber approached him again and was able to be *mekarev* him. Under Pinye-Ber's influence, Kizilshiteyn fully returned to Yiddishkeit and purchased the house in Bakhchisaray next to the shul which he converted into a *mikveh*. Kizilshiteyn also left his entire fortune to the local Jewish community, and after his demise his large residence housed many Jewish communal institutions.

The story of how Pinye-Ber wrote his *Sefer Torah* displays this same kind of *bitachon* and determination. In trying to buy parchment after the outbreak of World War I (when there were shortages of many items), he writes:

Only through tremendous self-sacrifice did I obtain the parchment. I then understood that one who performs a *mitzvah* with self-sacrifice is helped by Hashem, and then Divine providence causes everything to be as he had hoped—and even better than he had hoped.

In 1913, at the age of 65, Pinye-Ber Goldenshteyn fulfilled a lifelong dream of moving to Eretz Yisroel, where he hoped to live out his years learning Torah in peace. He settled in Petach-Tikvah, but all too soon afterwards was one of roughly 1,500 Jews taken by the Ottoman Turks as human shields in their war against the British. He survived that, and then, while many younger people died during that time of typhus, cholera, and other diseases raging at that time, he remarkably survived this tumultuous period.

When Pinye-Ber was exiled from Petach-Tikvah by the Ottoman Turks to Kfar Saba, which was for some time the center of their war with the British forces, he continued writing his *Sefer Torah*:

I was so intent on writing the Torah scroll that I ignored the cannonballs flying over my head in all directions. I

sat in that hut writing the Torah scroll as if the bombings had absolutely no bearing on me. With a strong will, I continued writing. I was up to writing the Torah portion of *Bo*, which describes the plague of hail falling on the Egyptians, while here in Kfar Saba a hailstorm of cannonballs was thundering. Once, I walked out of the hut to eat and look for a bit of water to drink, and I left a sheet of freshly written parchment spread out on the table since the letters were still wet. Upon my return an hour later, I found that a bomb had fallen right through the roof, completely destroying it. I was barely able to find the sheet of parchment which was buried under a mound of dirt. I cleaned it off and saw that it was severely damaged. Thank G-d I was spared. I *bentsht goyim* for the miracle of having been out of the hut at the exact moment the cannonball exploded. G-d not only saved me then, but Divine providence saved me constantly.

The Tzemach Tzedek's *brachah* for a long life was fulfilled, and Pinye-Ber died in 1930 in Petach-Tikvah at the age of 81 after accomplishing many achievements include the writing of a *Sefer Torah*, serving as *shochet* and acting rabbi in several small communities for 40 years, getting the *mikveh* rebuilt in



In this 1922 photo, Pinye-Ber is standing in the foreground with the white beard. Standing on the first step is Rabbi Yisroel Abba Tsitron, Rav of Petach-Tikvah and son-in-law of the Rogatchover Gaon.



Pinye-Ber Goldenshteyn (1848-1930) in Petach-Tikvah in 1927.

Bakhchisaray, and publishing his autobiography in 1928-1929.

*The Shochet* is written, edited, and footnoted beautifully. I am in awe of Michoel Rotenfeld's translation, which is not only precise but also eloquent. It is rare for the *frum* world to be gifted with a book that is this well written as well as this meticulously researched. The footnotes alone are remarkably illuminating—each one clearly the result of hours of thoughtful study.

Pinye-Ber has not been a household name among Lubavitchers—but I think he will be now. I keep *The Shochet* on my desk just to remember the inspiration I gleaned from reading the life story of this remarkable “simple Jew.” ■