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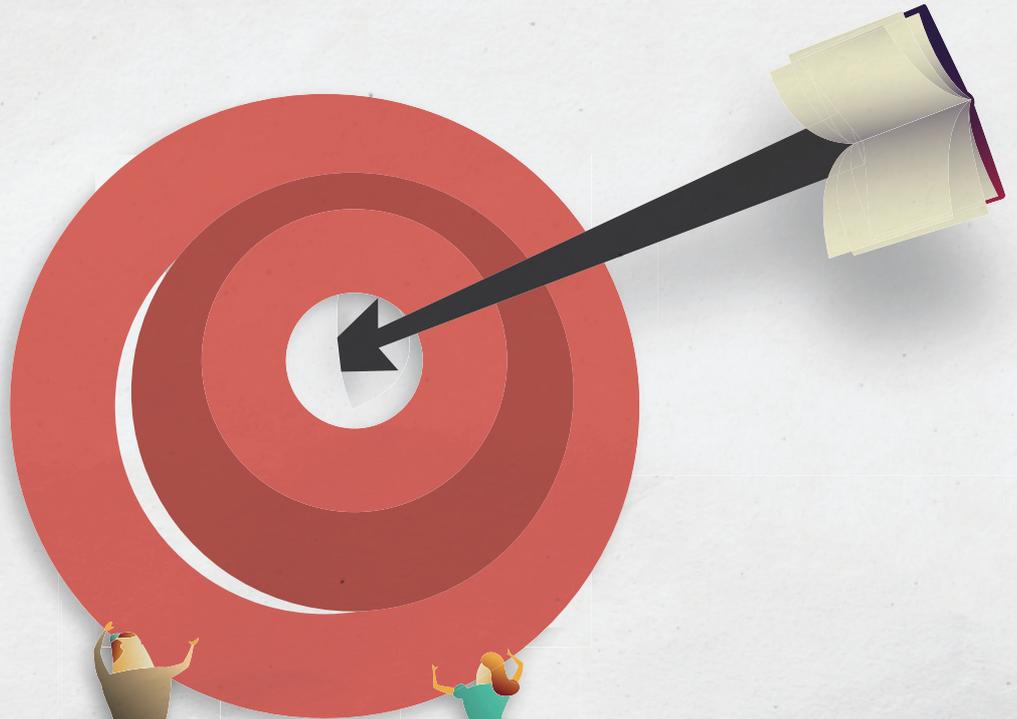
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# JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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## DEFINING THE GOALS OF DAY SCHOOL EDUCATION



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# ELIAS LEVI: THE RANGOON RABBI

LEVI COOPER



*“... Come you back ... come you back to Mandalay! ... But that’s all shove be’ind me—  
long ago an’ fur away ...”*

*- Rudyard Kipling, “Mandalay,” The Scots Observer, June 21, 1890, 124*

## From Baghdad to Burma

The Burmese Jewish community is not renowned for producing Jewish scholars. Yet the tale of a fascinating Baghdadi Jew from Rangoon and his quest to become a rabbi, reminds us of the presence of heroes even in far flung Jewish communities.

Elias Levi was born on November 4, 1910 in Baghdad. In 1913, his parents Suleiman and Ruhama Halevi left Baghdad with their nine children. Together with other Jewish Iraqi expatriates, the family moved to the British Indian Empire and settled in Rangoon. Despite the displacement, the Burmese-Baghdadi Jewish community maintained its links with the Iraqi Jewish community. Questions of Jewish law from Rangoon and other places in the British Raj were often addressed to Iraqi rabbis.

Young Elias displayed leadership capabilities and potential. He was a prolific writer, publishing articles in the Anglo-Jewish press, such as the Shanghai paper *Israel’s Messenger*, and in Burma’s leading daily *Rangoon Gazette*. Levi was an active Zionist, serving as founder and honorary secretary of the Young Judean League, which was later renamed the Rangoon Zionist Society. The League opened a new facility in early 1933, and at the event Levi was one of the speakers. The Bombay newspaper, *The Jewish Advocate*, reported Levi’s stirring words:

*Mr. Elias Levi ... delivered a dedication sermon, which was much appreciated by those present, unused as they were to hearing a discourse on a religious theme*

*in English. Choosing as his text “Loh becoah veloh be moah, kee im beruah,” [Not by might nor by mind, but by spirit - LC] the speaker showed, by numerous instances from Jewish History, that the spirit behind any undertaking was more important for its success than the strength or skill of those engaged in its undertaking. Although, he said, the Zionists of Rangoon might be few in number, and the society small and weak to cope with the great tasks that faced it, it could not fail, provided their Zionist home, the club, was filled with the spirit to conquer.<sup>2</sup>*

It is unclear at what stage Levi decided he wanted to become a rabbi, but once he made the decision it was clear that he would have to leave Burma for his rabbinical training. As a Zionist, Palestine was the natural destination. The British influence in India also meant that London may have been a consideration. However, Levi’s association with Rabbi David Miller (ca. 1869 – 1939) of Oakland, California changed this course.

## Reaching out to Jews in British India

Rabbi David Miller hailed from a poor family in Lithuania.<sup>3</sup> He studied in Ruzhany and later at the Slabodka Yeshiva. Miller arrived in America towards the end of the nineteenth century and served in the rabbinate in New York and in Providence,

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Rhode Island. With time, he became disillusioned with the rabbinate and moved to the west where he was successful in real estate and construction.

Miller's passion was encouraging the observance of Jewish law, and particularly Family Purity and Shabbat. His first printed work was a thirty page booklet in Yiddish entitled *Miqveh Yisra'el*. Miller would later claim that "[t]his work has spread over the Jewish world" and that he had "received letters and congratulations; also, many requests to translate it into English." Miller considered those requests but ultimately decided against translating the Yiddish booklet, explaining that it "would not be practicable, as the arguments used for the Yiddish-reading people, most of whom are familiar with the subject, would not appeal to the younger classes of Jews."<sup>4</sup> Instead, Miller set about writing an English version aimed at a different audience. In 1930, Miller published a lengthy English work entitled *The Secret of the Jew: His Life – His Family*. This book was printed in an astounding twenty editions! Thanks to Miller's financial situation and his principled decision not to profit from rabbinic activity, *The Secret of the Jew* was distributed free of charge.

In January 1932, Miller wrote to the President of Yeshiva College in New York, Rabbi Bernard Revel (1885-1940), with a report about the success and popularity of his work: "It has reached the far, remote corners of the earth such as South Africa, Australia, China, Persian, India, etc." About India, he had special words to say: "The India Jewry are a new discovery to me. Judging from the correspondence there are a great number of intelligent, pious Jews in India." In another letter penned later that year, Miller mentioned that the Welfare Fund of the Jewish community of Karachi – then in India and today in Pakistan – was funding the translation of his book into Marathi, the language widely spoken by the Bene Israel community. It was sometime during this period that Miller became aware of Elias Levi and began corresponding with him.

Miller managed to convince Levi to come to Yeshiva College for rabbinic training, rather than traveling to Palestine or Europe. On May 16, 1932, Revel wrote to J. E. Joshua, the president of the Young Judean League in Rangoon, and to Levi informing them of Levi's acceptance to Yeshiva College. In previous correspondence with Revel, Joshua had written that in order to facilitate a Burmese student's attendance at Yeshiva College it would be necessary to grant him free tuition and free board and lodgings. Revel acquiesced. The momentous decision to accept a Burmese student and subsidize his study was not lost on Revel, who wrote to Joshua:

*In spite of the gloomy picture you give, I have great hopes for the strengthening of our faith. The very ex-*

*istence of the Young Indean [Judean - LC] League, and the spirit that breathes in your letter and that of Mr. Elias Levi, is sign that the fervor of our ancient prophets and seers, which has sustained Israel through the ages, still burns in the breasts of our scattered brethren.*

Joshua responded to Revel perceiving the impact of the venture as being even greater: "We feel assured that you have done a great service not only to Burma but to Eastern Jewry in general in the revival and strengthening [sic.] of our faith."

Revel assumed that Elias Levi would join the College for the 1932 fall semester. But the twenty-two year old still had to make the journey from South Asia to America, an arduous undertaking with stumbling blocks in the American consulate in Rangoon.

### Coming to America

In September 1932, Elias Levi wrote to Revel and informed him that he would not be able to begin his studies in the fall of that year: "As much as I would like to, I am unable to do so, owing to the long delay that the authorities out here take to issue a passport. My departure will be therefore postponed for a few months yet." Revel wrote Joshua asking for assistance in expediting Levi's departure. Joshua replied that all was being done for that very purpose.

Receiving a visa was complicated. A letter of guarantee from Yeshiva University, sent in July 1932, did not suffice. The American Consul was concerned about who would cover Levi's "petty expenses." Levi also had to produce a medical certificate, as well as an affidavit from his father stating that he would send his son small sums to defray petty expenses. When the Consul still refused to issue the visa, Joshua wrote to Revel asking him to approach the immigration authorities, such that they would send instructions to the American Consul to issue the visa. Finally the stalemate was broken when letters of guarantee were provided by Miller and by New York Attorney Benjamin Koenigsberg, undertaking to cover the sundry expenses that the American Consul was so concerned about.

In July 1934 – some years years after Miller began corresponding with Levi – the visa came through and Levi hastily wrote a handwritten letter to Revel with the good news.

The journey from Rangoon to New York was taxing. Levi travelled by ship to Shanghai, landing there on September 29, 1934. In Shanghai he was met by Nissim Ezra Binyamin Ezra, the editor of *Israel's Messenger*. From Shanghai, he boarded the *S.S. President Pierce* that set sail for San Francisco, arriving there on October 16. Miller, who had just recuperated from a serious operation, met Levi in San Francisco. Upon arrival, Levi was subject to medical

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It is unclear at what stage Levi decided he wanted to become a rabbi, but once he made the decision it was clear that he would have to leave Burma for his rabbinical training.

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examination on the ship, after which Miller took him to his home in Oakland. Levi remained in Miller's home for a couple of weeks, where he recuperated from the journey. At that time, Miller also outfitted Levi with clothing to suit the climate. Miller then helped Levi board a bus to New York where he was met Koenigsberg.

### Who gets credit?

One sign of a successful initiative is the number of people who are willing to take credit. In December 1934, *Israel's Messenger* published a letter from I. A. Isaac, a leader of the Bene Israel community in Calcutta: "My voice was the first to propose to send our young men of a religious bend of mind to the West for Rabbinical diplomas and I am glad my suggesting has taken a practical shape."<sup>5</sup>

According to Miller, he convinced Levi to study at Yeshiva College. Indeed, according to the press it was thanks to Miller that Levi was accepted.<sup>6</sup> The correspondence held in the Yeshiva University archives indicates that any accolades that Miller deserves, should be shared with Koenigsberg who also invested time, effort, and funds in bringing Levi to America.

As Levi departed, N. E. B. Ezra expressed the community's appreciation:

*We wish to express our gratitude to Rabbi David Miller for the interest he has taken in making all the necessary arrangements for Mr. Levi to enter the Yeshiba College, free of charge, including board and lodging. We thank the Yeshiba College for its generous offer to give free tuition and free board and lodging. We thank Mr. Benjamin Koenigsberg, a leading Jew and a leading attorney-at-law in New York, for the timely help he has given to make Mr. Levi's entrance to American possible. Needless to say, we shall watch Mr. Levi's progress with great interest, and hope he will make good.*<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the role of local support – in particular J. E. Joshua and the Young Judean League, as well Ezra – should not be ignored. Ezra was well aware of his role, writing in 1934: "Due to combined efforts of Rabbi David Miller and the Editor of *Israel's Messenger*, provision has been made for a young student, Mr. Elias Levi, to study for the Rabbinate in the Yeshiba College."<sup>8</sup> Upon Levi's graduation Ezra wrote that "it is with no little pride that we recollect that it was through the instrumentality of this journal [*Israel's Messenger*] that he was afforded his great chance in life."<sup>9</sup>

Yet, in 1937 Levi described the situation differently:

*A few years ago while in India, I was a member of a group of young men and women who were making some endeavour for the intellectual and spiritual uplift of the community. We heard of the Yeshiva through reading the American Jewish journals and I was the first to conceive the notion to come to this great and worthy institution.*

Levi's description comes from a handwritten document held in the Yeshiva University archives in a folder marked "Yeshiva College - Jubilee, 1936-1937." In April 1937, Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and Yeshiva College celebrated its fiftieth

anniversary. According to a *New York Times* report, students gathered for the occasion and donated a copy of the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. Each volume was to be "presented by a young student representing a different religious school, and each will be accepted for the Yeshiva by a student from a different State or nation." As the report noted, "among the representatives of different nations will be ... Elias Levi of India ...."<sup>10</sup>

There can be no denying that Levi became enamoured with Yeshiva College; a few years earlier Levi had written to *Israel's Messenger*: "Yeshiva College is a great institution and the biggest seminary in western countries and the standard of Rabbinic education is very high."<sup>11</sup> The handwritten document may have been a transcript of remarks delivered by Levi on the occasion of the jubilee, and if so – should be read in that light.

The importance on having Elias Levi and other non-Americans at Yeshiva College was not lost on others. In 1942, Hirschel Revel (1913-1961) noted that European leaders "could not be convinced that America possessed a welt-Yeshiva drawing students from all over the world including India, Africa, and Iraq until they visited the Yeshiva."<sup>12</sup>

But the fact that Yeshiva College was reaping the credit for Levi irked Miller. In 1938, Miller was embroiled in a dispute with Yeshiva College over funding for a lectureship and repeated requests for donations. Writing to Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman (1861-1945), Miller complained:

*Now, as you probably know, Mr Levi has been at the Yeshiva for several years. Within all the time the real facts, the truth, how he came there were obscured. The leaders of the Yeshiva found in him a valuable asset for propaganda, exhibiting him in public, emphasizing the greatness of the Yeshiva, that students from all over the world flock to their institution, while in truth it was my humble work, "The Secret of the Jew", which pioneered and penetrated to the remote distances of the world and made the Yeshiva known there. It was I who brought about his coming to the Yeshiva, and I am the one who gave impetus to the Yeshiva.*

### Yeshiva years

Even once he had arrived in America, Elias Levi still had further hurdles to overcome on his journey to the rabbinate. In his 1932 letter of acceptance, Revel had indicated that Levi had work to do: "Your Jewish knowledge, from your brief description, seems much less than we usually require for entrance, but I trust that earnest application, with individual instruction, will in time prepare you for the regular work." Ezra described Levi as having "a fair knowledge of Biblical and Talmudical lore," asserting that Levi's "contributions to the Jewish Press attest this."<sup>13</sup>

The 1938 Yeshiva College yearbook gives us a glimpse of Levi's years in New York. His picture in the yearbook notes his origins as Rangoon, India – apparently the editors were unaware that since Levi had arrived in New York, his home town was no longer in British India, but was now in the independent colony of Burma. The yearbook also includes an article penned by Elias Levi: "The Hebrew Sources of Milton." Reminiscing about their experiences

together, the graduating class noted that in 1936 “Rangoon, India is put on the cultural map as its itinerant prodigy, Elias Levi, becomes one of the highest ranking students of the class.”<sup>14</sup>

In 1937, Levi became engaged to Sylvia Iger of Paterson, New Jersey. Iger was a senior student at the New Jersey State Teachers College, and a descendant of the famous talmudist Rabbi Akiva Eiger (1761-1837). Elias and Sylvia were married on June 18, 1939 in New York, and moved to Paterson. Rabbi Leo Jung officiated at the ceremony.<sup>15</sup>

### Career goals and change of plans

Rabbi Elias Levi graduated in 1938 with his B.A. and ordination as a rabbi. News of his ordination and impending return to Burma reverberated around the world. In distant Australia, *The Canberra Times* reported: “The first Burma man to become a rabbi, Elias Levi, a young Rangoon Jew who is now in New York, returns to Burma shortly.”<sup>16</sup>

Levi’s career path was clear, as Miller put it in a letter to Revel in 1932: “I hope he shall succeed in his endeavour to acquire knowledge and becoming the messenger to carry the banner of our sacred Torah to his native country in the Far East.” A few months later, when Revel penned the letter of acceptance, and he too understood that Levi would return home after completing his studies: “Yeshiva College will be glad to welcome you as a student, in the hope that through your desire and devotion, and the service and influence an ordained rabbi can bring, there will be an increased recognition, in your congregation and the wider community, of the eternal values of Judaism.” In Levi’s response to Revel,

he also expressed his intention to return to the Orient for what he termed a “holy mission”: “After graduation, I desire to instill the spirit of Judaism in the hearts of our co-religionists, groping in darkness, imbue them with a love for their religion and literature, and shall reorganise the present antiquated method of religious instruction along modern systematic lines.”

Back home in Rangoon the expectation was even greater, as Joshua wrote to Revel in October 1932:

*In view of the peculiar circumstances in which Indian Jewry is situated especially the poor state of Jewish Education Mr. Elias Levy will devote his energies with an eye not for the betterment of any particular community but Indian Jewry as a whole. We have already various schemes before us for application to the peculiar needs of Indian Jewry and a few of them are the establishment of: (a) a Beth Din and (b) a Jewish Education Board. ... I am happy at my selection of Mr. Elias Levy and am confident that our expectations and hopes reposed on him will see their fulfillment when he takes up his holy duties in India.*

Two years later when Levi obtained his visa, his goals had not changed, as he wrote to Revel: “I shall certainly strive my level best

to prove an asset to your great Yeshiva and do justice to my desire to return to our Eastern co-religionists and help to intensify Jewish life out here.” A few years after that, Levi confirmed his goals in words penned in connection with Yeshiva College’s Jubilee in 1936-1937: “My purpose is to train myself here and be ordained, so that I go back and be a pioneer in the movement for Jewish revival in the East.” When Levi graduated, he was still slated to return to the South Asia to become what the press described as “the only rabbi of India.”<sup>17</sup> Dr Asher Isaacs, editor of the Pittsburgh newspaper *The American Jewish Outlook*, explained to the American Jewish public what awaited the newly ordained rabbi from Rangoon:

*Although India has somewhat over 24,000 Jews, it apparently has had no rabbi. So when a recent graduate of the Yeshiva in New York sets sail for Rangoon, it will be a momentous occasion for these co-religionists. Rabbi Elias Levi will find that there is one Jew in India for every 15,350 persons that he meets. And he will find that there are two types of Jews – about 14,000 “white” Jews and 10,000 “black” Jews. ... Rabbi Levi can expect to have some unparalleled experiences in the years to come.*<sup>18</sup>

## The momentous decision to accept a Burmese student and subsidize his study was not lost

Alas, the job search was not as easy as everyone had expected. In 1939, *Israel’s Messenger* reported that Levi “has informed us he is now open to receive a ‘call’ from any of the Jewish communities in the Orient which are in need of spiritual guidance.” The plan was clear: “Should Rabbi Levi be forthwith engaged as rabbi, he will marry and then set forth with his wife to fulfill

his mission.” Ezra was optimistic, identifying one particular community that he thought should hire the young rabbi: “The chance has presented itself to Calcutta Jewry to avail itself of Rabbi Levi’s offer to occupy what is perhaps the most influential pulpit in India, and we trust that the offer will not go unheeded.”<sup>19</sup>

Levi married in mid-1939, but he still did not have a rabbinic post. *Israel’s Messenger* once again drew attention to his candidacy:

*Rabbi Elias Levi, A.B., Graduate of Yeshiva College, New York, is open to receive a “call” from any of the Progressive Jewish Communities of India, Burmah or the Straits Settlement. He will be assisted in his task by Mrs. Elias Levi who is a Graduate of the New Jersey State Teacher’s College, Montclair. Together they offer their services as Spiritual Leader and Educator respectively to any Community which wishes to avail itself of this opportunity.*<sup>20</sup>

I have yet to find any record of an offer, but during this time Levi continued to write for *Israel’s Messenger*, presumably increasing his profile in the east.

A letter of recommendation written by Revel sometime between 1938 and 1940 reveals that Levi applied for the position of “Rabbi and spiritual leader of the Jewish community of Bombay.”

Revel reminded the Bombay addressees that Levi would be “the first and only ordained Rabbi in your country, and his influence is bound to be felt not only by the community in Bombay, but by the entire Jewish people in India.”

In the meantime, Burma had become a separate British colony in 1937. The Second Sino-Japanese War began in 1937, and with the outbreak of the Second World War, this war zone became another theatre of battle. In 1941, the Japanese Empire invaded and occupied Burma. Together with most of the Burmese Jewish community, the Levi family left Burma.

Levi did not return to South Asia; instead he served in the rabbinate in America. Levi’s last post was as rabbi of *Kahal Joseph* in Los Angeles, a congregation that continues to pride itself on being the only one to follow Baghdadi custom in Western United States. There he served for twenty-one years, from 1966.

Rabbi Elias Levi passed away in 1987.

**Postscript: Continuing the YU – Myanmar connection**

Moses Samuels (whose Burmese name is Than Lwin) is currently the trustee and caretaker of Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue in Rangoon; a position he has held since 1978. Moses’ son, Sammy Samuels (whose Burmese name is Aung Soe Lwin) studied in Yeshiva University where he graduated with a degree in Information Systems and International Business. In 2006, Sammy was hailed as the first Jewish student from Myanmar in the history of Yeshiva University. In an interview after his commencement exercises, Sammy explained how he got to Yeshiva University: “If it wasn’t for tourists, I wouldn’t be here. It was a visitor to the synagogue who told me about Yeshiva University and offered to carry my application back to New York and deliver it personally. That’s how I got here.” Sammy has remained in New York, running Myanmar Shalom Travels & Tours.<sup>21</sup>

Anyone with further information about Rabbi Elias Levi or the Jewish community of Rangoon is encouraged to contact the author.

**Endnotes**

1 This article is a work-in-progress, supported in part by the I-CORE Program of the Planning and Budgeting Committee and The Israel Science Foundation (grant No 1798/12). The information presented herein is largely based on newspaper reports and on documents held in the Yeshiva University Archives. The relevant collections that I have consulted are: Bernard Revel Papers, 5/3-27, General Correspondence, L, 1933-1940; 5/3-36, Box 9, 38-E-2, General Correspondence, M-1, 1929-1940; 5/3-37, Box 9, 38-E-2, General Correspondence, M-2, 1927-1935; Box 7, India, 1932-1934; 5/3-42, re R. David Miller Lectureship 1937-1939. Jacob Hartstein papers, box 13, 8/2-63, Yeshiva College - Jubilee, 1936-1937. I am indebted to Shulamith Z. Berger, Curator of Special Collections, Yeshiva University Archives, for her gracious assistance. I am also grateful to Victoria Raun for invaluable research assistance.

For earlier writing on Elias Levi, see Margot Lurie, “The Boy From Rangoon: How my grandfather landed at Yeshiva University,” *Tablet Magazine*, October 27, 2009, <http://tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/19238/the-boy-from-rangoon>.

2 “Zionist Society Formed in Rangoon; New Premises Opened; Great Task Before New Committee,” *The Jewish Advocate* (Bombay), February 24, 1933, 10.

3 On Miller, see Levi Cooper, “D.I.Y. *Mivkeh*: The Challenge of Encouraging Commitment,” *Jewish Educational Leadership* 9, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 58-63. Biographical information is scattered in Miller’s three books: David Miller, *Mivkeh Yisra’el* (Oakland: D. Miller, 1920?); David Miller, *The Secret of the Jew: His Life – His Family* (Oakland: D. Miller, third edition, 1930; eleventh revised edition, 1938); David Miller, *The Secret of Happiness: How to Enjoy Life* (Oakland: D. Miller, 1937?).

4 Miller, *Secret of the Jew* 3, 289.

5 I. A. Isaac, “Judaism in the East,” *Israel’s Messenger*, November 2, 1934, 15. Isaac is not mentioned in the correspondence held in the Yeshiva University Archives.

6 *Israel’s Messenger*, August 3, 1934, 11; “Rangoon Zionists to Send to Study for Rabbinate Youth to N.Y. Seminary,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, August 8, 1934.

7 *Israel’s Messenger*, October 5, 1934, 5.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Israel’s Messenger*, August 12, 1938, 14.

10 “Elchanan Seminary to Mark 50th Year,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 1937, 34.

11 *Israel’s Messenger*, April 5, 1935, 29.

12 Hirschel Revel, “Rabbi Dr Bernard Revel,” in *Eidenu: In Memory of Rabbi Dr. Bernard Revel*, ed. Bernard Aaron Poupko (New York: Shulsinger Bros., 1942), 17.

13 *Israel’s Messenger*, October 5, 1934, 5.

14 *Masmid*: 1938, 28, 34, 47-50.

15 *Israel’s Messenger*, October 25, 1937, 11; August 16, 1939, 17, 19.

16 “Ordained in U.S.A.,” *The Canberra Times*, July 27, 1939, 4.

17 “Yeshiva College Graduates 46; India to Get First Rabbi,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, June 16, 1938.

18 Dr. Asher Isaacs, “Currents Comments,” *The American Jewish Outlook*, July 1, 1938, 1.

19 “A Full Fledged Rabbi,” *Israel’s Messenger*, April 3, 1939, 1.

20 “Rabbinical Position Wanted,” *Israel’s Messenger*, August 16, 1939, 19.

21 [www.myanmarshalom.com](http://www.myanmarshalom.com); Charles W. Bell, “Yeshiva student in class by himself,” *Daily News*, May 27, 2006, [www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/yeshiva-student-class-article-1.648259](http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/yeshiva-student-class-article-1.648259).

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