

## ***Introduction to the 1934 Diary of Rabbi Oscar Z. Fasman, Journey to Europe and the Land of Israel***

**By: MOSHE SHERMAN**

During the summer of 1934, Rabbi Oscar Fasman embarked on a journey to Europe and the Land of Israel. It was an ambitious and arduous trip, with a fast-paced schedule. He met with numerous rabbis, *roshei yeshiva* and community leaders, while exploring the sites and spectacles of some of Europe's grand cities as well as places of interest in Eretz Yisrael and Egypt.<sup>1</sup> He traveled together with a close friend and colleague, Rabbi Uri Miller, or Harry, as he often called him. Miller and Fasman were classmates and friends at Chicago's Hebrew Theological College, and by the 1930s, were colleagues in the rabbinate and alumni leaders of their beloved yeshiva.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The diary reveals R. Fasman's meetings and discussion with numerous rabbis in Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna and Prague. He visited yeshivos at Telshe, Mir, Baranovich, and Slabodka, as well as other Torah institutions in Frankfurt, Berlin, Vilna, Warsaw, and Cracow. In Eastern Europe, he met with R. Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, R. Elchanan Wasserman, R. Yoseph Rosen (the Rogatchover Gaon), R. Zalman Bloch, and others. When he journeyed to the Land of Israel, he met with R. Avraham Isaac Kook, R. Yechezkel Sarna, and R. Isser Zalman Meltzer, and went to visit the Eitz Chaim Yeshiva, Mercaz HaRav, the Hebron Yeshiva in Jerusalem, and the Lomza Yeshiva in Petach Tikvah.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the diary, there are repeated references to "Harry," Rabbi Uri Miller, a close friend and colleague of Rabbi Fasman. Uri Miller was born on the Lower East Side of New York in 1905, and was one of the earliest graduates of Hebrew Theological College, Chicago. During the summer of 1934, Miller was serving as rabbi in Omaha, Nebraska, and completing a two-year term as president of the Hebrew Theological College Alumni Association. One year following his 1934 journey to Europe, he would become rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel, New Orleans, Louisiana, where he remained for eleven years. In 1945, Miller was appointed rabbi at Beth Jacob Congregation in Baltimore, Maryland. R. Miller went on to serve in several important leadership roles, including president of the Rabbinical Council of America (1946–48), and from 1963 to 1965 as president of the Synagogue Council of America. Rabbi

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Oscar Z. Fasman was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1908, one of four children of his European immigrant parents. Following high school, he attended the newly established Hebrew Theological College. The yeshiva had been founded in 1919, initially called Beis HaMidrash LeRabanim, but two years later, changed its name to Hebrew Theological College – Beis HaMidrash LaTorah. Two distinguished rabbinic scholars, R. Chaim Zvi Rubinstein and Rabbi Saul Silber, provided leadership for the school at that time and influenced the young Oscar Fasman. Rabbi Rubinstein (1872–1944), a graduate of the Volozhin Yeshiva, had come to America in 1917 and served as *rosh yeshiva*, while the administrative head of Hebrew Theological College was Rabbi Saul Silber (1876–1946), who functioned as president for twenty-five years, until his death in 1946.<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Fasman received *semichah* from Hebrew Theological College in 1929, and continued to learn Torah in the yeshiva *beis midrash*, while completing a B.A. degree at the University of Chicago, in 1930. At the time of the 1934 summer voyage, R. Fasman was serving as pulpit rabbi at Congregation B'nai Emunah in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he had been since 1931.<sup>4</sup>

In 1940, R. Fasman moved to Ottawa, Canada, to become communal rabbi of a consortium of synagogues. The financial challenge during the Great Depression of the 1930s made it difficult for individual Ottawa synagogues to retain their own rabbi. Four synagogues agreed to form a committee, called the Associated Synagogues of Ottawa, to hire one rabbi as spiritual leader for the entire Jewish community.<sup>5</sup>

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Uri Miller died in Baltimore in 1972. See the Rabbi Uri Miller Papers, Catalog 1995. 173.011, Jewish Museum of Maryland.

<sup>3</sup> For more on R. Chaim Zvi Rubinstein, R. Saul Silber, and the formation of Hebrew Theological College, see David Gleicher, “The Origins and Early Years of Chicago’s Hebrew Theological College,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 27:2 (Winter 1993), pp. 56–68.

<sup>4</sup> Congregation B'nai Emunah was founded in 1915, and one year later, built a synagogue building. Unlike most Eastern European immigrants who struggled with little financial means, several families who supported Cong. B'nai Emunah had become wealthy from the Oklahoma oil business. Indeed, most of the officers and board members of the congregation were in the oil industry. Originally built as an Orthodox congregation with a women’s gallery separate from the men’s seating, B'nai Emunah would later become affiliated with the movement of Conservative Judaism. For a brief history, see <<https://www.tulsagogue.com>>.

<sup>5</sup> See online searchable documents, Associated Synagogues of Ottawa, Ottawa Jewish Archives. <<https://jewishottawa.com/ottawa-jewish-archives>>.

Rabbi Fasman remained in Ottawa until 1946, when he was chosen to succeed Rabbi Saul Silber as president of Hebrew Theological College. His tenure as the second president of Hebrew Theological College would be marked with considerable distinction. The school moved from its initial West Side Chicago location to its current campus in Skokie; a yeshiva high school was established; and several outstanding *talmidei chachamim*, including Rav Chaim Kreiswirth, and influential thinkers, such as Dr. Eliezer Berkovits, joined the teaching staff as faculty.

When Rabbi Fasman retired as president of Hebrew Theological College in 1964, he helped establish and became pulpit rabbi of Congregation Yehuda Moshe, in Lincolnwood, Illinois. He remained rabbi of this increasingly vibrant Chicago-area synagogue for thirty-four years, before retiring in 1998, at the age of ninety. Moving to Los Angeles to be close to his children, Rabbi Fasman died in Los Angeles, in November 2003, at the age of ninety-five. He left a noteworthy legacy of distinguished leadership and communal activity, and several generations of descendants.

Rabbi Fasman maintained a diary of his 1934 summer journey to Europe, of which the original copy, written in longhand, was held for many years by Millicent Drebin, Rabbi Fasman's daughter. She prepared a typed copy of the diary, which is now in the possession of her son, Shmuel Drebin.<sup>6</sup>

R. Fasman's summer itinerary was designed to spend three weeks in Europe before traveling to the Land of Israel for an additional three weeks. After departing Eretz Yisrael, R. Fasman was scheduled to travel through Cairo and Alexandria, and return from the port of Alexandria to Italy. He would then travel to Venice, to Paris, by boat to London, and on to the port of Southampton, from where he would return to the United States.

The first segment of his journey was not intended as a vacation to visit the art, architecture, and culture of Europe's notable places of interest. It was a pre-planned, fast-paced itinerary with the objective of meeting with leading rabbis, viewing Jewish educational institutions, and experiencing places of Jewish interest. The second portion of the trip to British Mandate Palestine was arranged for R. Fasman to see the cities and towns, the historical and religious sites, the growth and develop-

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<sup>6</sup> See the edited and annotated version of Rabbi Fasman's 1934 diary at <https://hakirah.org/Vol30FasmanDiaryEditedbySherman.pdf>. For the unedited version of the diary, see <https://hakirah.org/Vol30FasmanDiaryUnedited.pdf>.

ment of the Land of Israel. Nonetheless, he seized any opportunity to meet with eminent rabbis, the leadership of Mizrachi and Agudath Israel, and other notable individuals associated with the progress of the Yishuv.

A curious and inquisitive person, R. Fasman was attentive to the formative issues facing the Jewish people at that time. The diary presents illuminating discussion with leading European *rabbanim*, *roshei yeshiva*, and communal leaders. Always probing, and eager to learn from those with different perspectives, R. Fasman met with both Rabbi Josef Jona Horowitz, of the *Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft* (IRG), and Rabbi Yaakov Yehuda Hoffmann, Chief Rabbi of Frankfurt's *Israelitische Gemeinde* (IG), where he heard their concerns about the lack of rabbinic independence, and varied opinions about the need for one united, rather than two Frankfurt communal organizations. In Vilna, he encountered a situation slightly akin to Frankfurt, when he met Rabbi Yitzchak Rubinstein, who co-shared the position of Chief Rabbi of Vilna, together with R. Chaim Ozer Grodzenski.<sup>7</sup>

At Dvinsk, Latvia, R. Fasman spoke with the renowned Rogatchover *Ilui*, R. Yoseph Rosen, for more than two hours. The diary paraphrases some of his halachic opinions, and shares the Rogatchover's comment regarding his opposition to the integration of secular knowledge in Jewish schools, preferring that every father assume the responsibility to teach his child not only a livelihood, but general knowledge as well.

From the early 1900s, the issue of including secular subjects within a yeshiva curriculum had become a matter of dispute among rabbis and Jewish communal leaders. The subject was therefore an ongoing topic of discussion as R. Fasman traveled to other destinations. When he met with R. Elchanan Wasserman, *rosh yeshiva* at Baranovich, Belarus, R. Wasserman repeated two comments of the Chofetz Chaim regarding his opposition to include secular studies in the curriculum of yeshivos. The Chofetz Chaim felt that studying Torah and secular knowledge together is "like two wives; one must be a *'tzarah'* to the other. If Torah is the only wife, even when you get a bit discouraged with it, you don't go away, but if you have a second wife, the claim of Torah on you is weakened." R. Elchanan Wasserman also repeated another statement of the Chofetz Chaim, which reflected specifically on Yeshivas Rabbeinu

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<sup>7</sup> For further background of these rabbis and the organizations mentioned above, see my edited and annotated version of R. Fasman's diary on the *Hakirah* website, fn. 6, *ibid*.

Yitzchak Elchanan in New York. By 1934, under the leadership of Telshe-educated Rabbi Dov Revel, the R. Yitzchak Elchanan Yeshiva had established Yeshiva College, and included secular education at the yeshiva. The comment pertained to Nathan Lamport, a generous benefactor of the R. Yitzchak Elchanan Yeshiva. The Chofetz Chaim reputedly stated about Nathan Lamport, “*Min bat eim eingeret az dos iz a yeshiva un er güt gelt.*” [English translation: “they persuaded him that it’s a yeshiva and he gives money.”] The quote of the Chofetz Chaim had an undertone of sarcasm, if not derision, as if to suggest that “they talked him into assuming that it was a yeshiva, and he sent money.”<sup>8</sup>

R. Fasman was particularly keen to visit Europe’s many yeshivos and educational institutions and meet with their administrative heads or *roshei yeshiva*. In Frankfurt, he visited the yeshiva, known as the Torah Lehranstalt, established by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, whose grandson, Rabbi Joseph Breuer, presided as *rosh yeshiva*. He also saw Khal Adath Jeshurun’s elementary school and gymnasium high school, directed by Dr. Markus Elias. When visiting Telshe, Lithuania, R. Fasman spent a Shabbos weekend near the yeshiva, attending the wedding of R. Chaim Telzer’s daughter.<sup>9</sup> R. Fasman was particularly impressed with the friendliness of the Telshe Yeshiva students. While in Vilna, he visited

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<sup>8</sup> R. Elchanan Bunem Wasserman (1874–1941), prominent *rav* and *rosh yeshiva*, was one of R. Yisrael Meir HaCohen’s closest students. The reference to “Lamport” is no doubt Abraham Nechemia Lamport, born in Nowogrodek, Russian Poland, in 1854. Lamport came to the United States at the age of 23, in 1877, and became a successful merchant and real-estate owner. (In the U.S. he called himself Nathan Lamport.) An outstanding philanthropist who supported numerous charities, his primary interest was support for Yeshiva Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan, New York, where he served as president of the Board of Directors for many years. On Nathan Lamport, see the revised edition of Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel: Builder of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (2013). See the *Hakirab* website full edition of the diary, for R. Elchanan Wasserman’s Yiddish remarks in the name of the Chofetz Chaim.

<sup>9</sup> R. Chaim Shalom Tuvia Rabinowitz (1856–1931), *maggid shiur* at the Telshe Yeshiva, and commonly referred to as R. Chaim Telzer, had died three years earlier. Following his death in 1931, his son, Rabbi Azriel Rabinowitz (1905–1941), took his father’s position as *maggid shiur*.

R. Zalman Bloch, son of R. Yoseph Leib Bloch (1860–1930), who succeeded his father-in-law, R. Eliezer Gordon, *rosh yeshiva* at the Telshe Yeshiva, was *mashgiach ruchani* at the yeshiva. Tragically, R. Azriel Rabinowitz, R. Zalman Bloch, and much of their family were killed by the Nazis in Telshe, in 1941. See Samuel K. Mirsky, ed., *Mosdot Torah be-Eropah be-vinyanam u’ve-hurbanam* (New York, 1956); Shaul Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012).

the Tachkemoni Talmud Torah, part of a larger network of religious Zionist Mizrachi-sponsored schools. In Kovno, R. Fasman was informed by one individual that Zionism generally moved young people away from traditional observance. But it's not clear that R. Fasman accepted that assertion. Throughout the summer trip, he repeatedly visited schools promoting religious Zionism. While in Kovno, he went to its Yavneh school, operated by the religious Zionist Mizrachi, which advanced traditional observance and Torah study while encouraging immigration to and development of Eretz Yisrael.

On occasion, R. Fasman met with outstanding rabbinic scholars but failed to report anything meaningful. In Berlin, he spoke with R. Yechiel Weinberg; at Slabodka, he met R. Yitzchak Sher, and in Vilna, he visited R. Chaim Ozer Grodzenski. Regrettably, he had little to report about his conversations, except noting that R. Chaim Ozer had a "lovable personality" and that he engaged in a "little discussion in Halachah; mostly general conversation."

R. Fasman was acutely attentive to the different approaches of the Agudath Israel and Mizrachi movement. Throughout his trip, he often called upon representatives of both organizations. In Warsaw, he visited the Mizrachi office, where he met with R. Yitzchak Nisenbaum, and called on the local Agudath Israel headquarters, where he encountered Alexander Zusia Friedman and R. Isaac Meir Levin, Agudah leader, member of the Polish Sejm, and son-in-law of the Gerrer Rebbe. Among several thoughts expressed by R. Isaac M. Levin, it is noteworthy to emphasize his advocacy that the "Agudas Yisroel must get into the active work of pioneering, colonizing, developing Palestine." R. Fasman was impressed with the activities of the Agudath Israel organization in Poland, where several branch offices thrived, and the Beth Jacob schools for girls supported more than 50,000 students. The Agudath Israel also maintained a teacher's seminary to train women as qualified instructors.<sup>10</sup>

When R. Fasman later traveled to British Mandate Palestine, he met with representatives of both Mizrachi and the Agudath Israel. He made the following comment regarding supporters of Agudath Israel, who separate themselves from the broad community of Jews in Israel.

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<sup>10</sup> See my comments on R. Alexander Zusia Friedman and R. Isaac Meir Levin, in the annotated version of the diary found on the *Hakirah* website. R. Isaac M. Levin had just returned from Eretz Yisrael several months earlier, and had prepared a Yiddish booklet cited by R. Fasman called *וואס איך האב געזען אין ארץ ישראל* (Warsaw, 1933), Yiddish.

“Trouble is,” he says, “Agudah, instead of making separatism a means to an end—in which case compromise might come—made it an end in itself.”

R. Fasman’s arrival in Trieste, from where he would depart to British Mandate Palestine, could not have been better timed. The great Hebrew poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik, had unexpectedly died a week earlier, in Vienna, and his body had been brought to Trieste for transport to Israel. On the day before their departure, R. Fasman went to pay his respects to Bialik, whose casket was on display. Later, on board the ship that was carrying Bialik’s coffin, he attended a memorial service, the first of what would be several ceremonies held in Bialik’s memory. When the ship landed in Cyprus, David Ben-Gurion and other dignitaries who had come from Eretz Yisrael arrived on board to honor Bialik. Another memorial service was conducted by representatives of the Yishuv. Remarkably, R. Fasman met and chatted with Ben-Gurion, who complimented those American Jews who chose to make Israel their home. Upon arrival at the port of Jaffa, R. Fasman went to Tel Aviv, where he attended the afternoon procession and funeral ceremony for Chaim Nachman Bialik.

Whereas in Europe, R. Fasman’s attention was primarily focused on meeting with rabbis, *roshei yeshiva* and educators, in the Land of Israel he spent much of his time visiting its growing cities, towns, and emerging institutions. Yet, along with considerable sightseeing, he met with numerous *rabbanim* and religious Zionist leaders during his three-week visit. At the Tel Aviv offices of Mizrachi, he met with Rabbi Meir Berlin, R. Zev Gold, Yaakov Berman, and other leaders of the religious Zionist movement. While in Haifa, he met with R. Avraham Isaac Kook, Chief Ashkenaz Rabbi of British Mandate Palestine, who informed R. Fasman that he occasionally receives *kashrus* questions from various Hadassah medical facilities. For more than twenty years, Hadassah had been developing infirmaries, clinics, and health services in cities and towns throughout the Yishuv. It was in 1934, the summer R. Fasman was in Jerusalem, that a cornerstone was laid at Mount Scopus for what would be the Hadassah Medical Center. Rav Kook impressed on R. Fasman one additional matter worth noting. “Always,” he said, “speak good of Eretz Yisrael.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> On the history of Hadassah medical services, from the early 1900s through the years following the rise of the State of Israel, see Marlin Levin, *Balm in Gilead: The Story of Hadassah* (1973). An abridged version of this book later appeared under the title *It Takes a Dream: The Story of Hadassah* (2002).


In Jerusalem the following day, R. Fasman visited both the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva, established by Rav Kook, and the Hebron Yeshiva, where he met R. Yechezkel Sarna. Founded in 1924 by Rav Kook, Yeshiva Merkaz HaRav was a small and rather insignificant yeshiva during his lifetime, and remained so even following his death in 1935, when the yeshiva was led by Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlap. R. Fasman notes that there were no more than thirty-five students at the yeshiva during the summer of 1934. It was only following the creation of the State of Israel, and the rising prominence of R. Zvi Yehudah Kook, Rav Avraham Kook's son, that the Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva emerged as a large and influential yeshiva.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, the Hebron Yeshiva had its origins in Slabodka, a suburb of Kaunus (Kovno), Lithuania. When the Bolshevik regime wanted to draft young yeshiva students into the army, the yeshiva leadership, notably R. Nosson Zvi Finkel, the pre-eminent Alter of Slabodka, directed R. Yechezkel Sarna, son-in-law of the rosh yeshiva, R. Moshe Mordechai Epstein, to leave for Eretz Yisrael and search for a suitable location to relocate the Knesset Yisrael Yeshiva. In 1924, the same year that Rav Kook established the Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva, more than one hundred young men arrived from the Slabodka Yeshiva to Hebron to form what would become the first Lithuanian yeshiva established in Eretz Yisrael. Despite the terrible massacre of twenty-nine yeshiva students in 1929, and the school's subsequent relocation to Jerusalem, the Hebron Yeshiva by 1934 continued to be a vibrant institution.<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Epstein, longstanding *rosh yeshiva*, had died about eight months before R. Fasman arrived in Jerusalem that summer. He met with the new *rosh yeshiva*, R. Yechezkel Sarna, who related an observation of R. Meir Simchah of Dvinsk about the brilliance of the Rogatchover Gaon, which underscored R. Yoseph Rosen's prodigious and constant study more than his exceptional memory. R. Sarna, in the

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<sup>12</sup> On R. Avraham I. Kook and the Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva, see my notes on the 1934 diary, found on the *Hakirah* website.

<sup>13</sup> For a broad account of the Hebron massacre, including the murder of the yeshiva students, see Maurice Samuel, *What Happened in Palestine: The Events of August, 1929, Their Background and Their Significance* (Boston, 1929). Maurice Samuel was in Mandate Palestine during the time of the Hebron massacre. See the recent work of Jerold S. Auerbach, *Hebron Jews: Memory and Conflict in the Land of Israel* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009). On the history and personalities of the Slabodka Yeshiva in Hebron, later Jerusalem, see Nathan Kamenetsky, *Making of a Godol: A Study of Episodes in the Lives of Great Torah Personalities*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 2002); Shaul Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2012).

name of R. Meir Simchah, said of the Rogatchover, “People say he has a wonderful memory, but it’s an error; he remembers things because he has just finished studying them.” Later that same evening, R. Fasman met with R. Isser Zalman Meltzer, *rosh yeshiva* at Jerusalem’s Etz Chaim Yeshiva, whom he describes as a “magnetic personality.”<sup>14</sup>

The 1934 daily journal of R. Fasman provides a personal and vivid glimpse of some of the illustrious rabbinic figures of Europe and Eretz Yisrael. The tone of the diary emanates with fervor, as R. Fasman writes about the rabbis he met, the discussions he had, and the sites he saw at each location. Five years before Jewish life in Europe would be embroiled in an epic struggle for survival, one gains no indication that European Jews felt excessively threatened for their lives or institutions. When he continued his journey through Eretz Yisrael, his daily accounts offer a fascinating window into the development of the Land of Israel, during the inter-war period of British-controlled Palestine. I am confident that this 1934 travel journal will be of keen interest to students of modern Jewish History. 

See the edited and annotated version of Rabbi Fasman’s 1934 diary, at (<https://hakirah.org/Vol30FasmanDiaryEditedbySherman.pdf>). For the unedited version of the diary, see (<https://hakirah.org/Vol30FasmanDiaryUnedited.pdf>).

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<sup>14</sup> R. Isser Zalman Meltzer came to Eretz Yisrael in 1925, where he served for many years as *rosh yeshiva* at the Etz Chaim Yeshiva, in Jerusalem. R. Meltzer died in 1953, at the age of eighty-three. See my note in the Fasman diary found on the *Hakirah* website.