



**THE
CHASAM
SOFER**

And the challenges of his day

By AKIVA AARONSON

Through Israel's long exile, each generation faced challenges and difficulties no less than our own. Yet led by the Gedolei Hador, our nation survived and surmounted. A valiant fighter in his time, the Chasam Sofer faced enemies, both internal and external, notably, the beginning of Reform Judaism and the march of Napoleon through Europe; the determination with which he fought these battles is an inspiration to us today.

The Chasam Sofer

The Chasam Sofer was born in 1762, in Frankfurt-am-Main, one of the oldest and most distinguished of the German Jewish *kehillos*. Named after his paternal grandfather, Moshe was the first child born to his parents after more than 10 years of marriage.

As a young boy, Moshe's father, Reb Shmuel, took him to the Sha'agas Aryeh,¹ then passing through Frankfurt, to receive his *brachah*. The Shaagas Aryeh was so astounded by the youth's Torah knowledge that he embraced him, declaring that he would grow into a *Gadol baTorah*, a glory to Israel.

The young Moshe continued to excel in his learning, mastering *Hilchos Brachos* (Laws of Blessings) at the age of 6. It was then that he realized there was a question regarding the correct *brachah* for sugar eaten on its own, a treat for children in those days. As a result, he would eat it only together with other food, a practice he continued for the rest of his life.

At the age of 12, Moshe began to learn under Harav Nosson Adler,² one of the most revered Torah scholars of his generation. He soon became one of the outstanding students in Harav Adler's yeshivah. At the age of 16, he completed the entire *Talmud*, confiding this in only one person: his *Rebbi*, Rav Nosson. Recognizing that Moshe was destined to become a leader in Israel, Harav Adler kept a watchful eye on him, and a lasting bond developed between them.

Also in Frankfurt, Moshe studied under one of the great scholars of the time, Harav Pinchas Halevi Horowitz,³ Rav of Frankfurt, and author of *Hafla'ah*,⁴ after which he is known. Rav Horowitz, too, would have a profound influence on the gifted *talmid*. Moshe regarded him as one of his primary *Rebbeim*.

Sometime later, Rav Adler was forced to leave Frankfurt

– the result of differences in accepted customs of *tefillah* in a *kehillah* grounded in tradition⁵. His *talmid* Moshe, aged 19, accompanied him. When Rav Adler eventually returned, however, he instructed his *talmid* to remain in Moravia; he would spend the rest of his life away from his native Frankfurt⁶. Despite the distance that separated them from then on, Rav Adler would continue to be a source of inspiration and guidance to Moshe in the years to come.

Rabbinic Positions

The Chasam Sofer's first Rabbinic position was in Dresnitz (Moravia), in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where he was appointed Rav in 1794 and where he remained for the next five years. Afterward, he became Rav of Mattersdorf, close to Vienna. There, in 1802, a devastating fire ripped through the Jewish neighborhood. As Rav, the Chasam Sofer immediately threw himself into the task of rebuilding. He raised funds from nearby *kehillos* and provided food, clothing and housing to those who had lost everything.

In 1806, he accepted the prestigious position of Rav of Pressburg,⁷ one of the most revered Jewish communities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Seeing teaching Torah as the principal duty of a Rav, the Chasam Sofer stipulated that the community agree to support his yeshivah.

Remaining in Pressburg for more than 30 years, until the end of his life, the Chasam Sofer's yeshivah drew outstanding *talmidim* from all over Europe. Many of them went on to

⁵ Such as prayer according to nusach of the Ari, z"l, and Birkas Kohanim every day

⁶ Nevertheless, the Chasam Sofer always remained proud of his origin, signing his name on documents, "Moshe Hakatan mi Frankfurt- Am -Main."

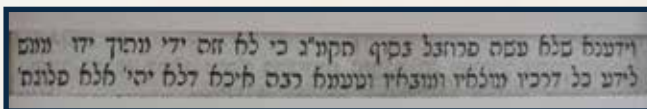
⁷ Today Bratislava, capital of Slovakia

¹ Rabbi Aryeh Leib Gunzberg 1695-1785

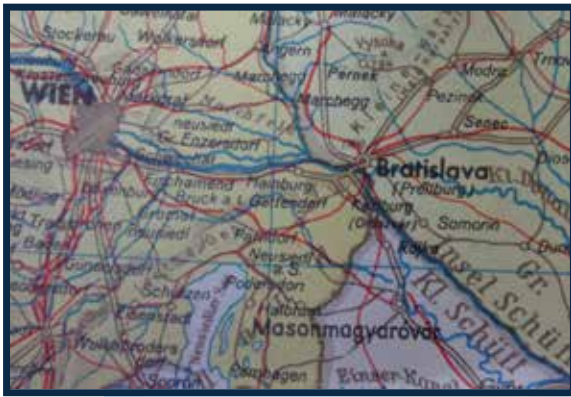
² 1741-1800

³ d.1805

⁴ Chiddushim on Tractate Kesuvos



She'eilos u'Teshuvos Chasam Sofer, Choshen Mishpat 50, the Chasam Sofer testifying to his closeness to Harav Adler: "כי לא זזה – My hand did not leave his [Harav Adler's], to know all his ways, his comings and his goings."



Map of Central Europe, showing Pressburg (today Bratislava) and Wien (Vienna), forty miles to the west.

occupy leading positions in European Jewish communities, Pressburg becoming the model of hundreds of others established in the empire. Thus, Torah was maintained as the predominant factor determining Jewish life in Hungary, a stronghold against Reform Judaism, which was beginning to make inroads in the region.

She'eilos U'Teshuvos

It was not long before the fame of Rav Sofer's scholarship spread far and wide, and he was besieged with hundreds of halachic questions from all over Europe. Each day he would receive the incoming post, read the *she'eilah* and without hesitation lift his pen and write the *teshuvah*. His sons affirmed that they were almost all written on the day that the *she'eilos* were received. In his humility, the Chasam Sofer resisted pressure to print his *teshuvos* during his lifetime. Instead, covering all parts of *Shulchan Aruch*, they were brought to print volume by volume only after his passing⁸.

Most Rabbanim also looked to the Chasam Sofer for guidance. The bulk of his *teshuvos* – numbering an estimated 1,377 in total – were written not to individuals but to community leaders themselves, indicating the extent of his leadership of European Jewry. Many *she'eilos* were received from his own *talmidim*, naturally regarding him as the one to whom to turn.

One of his principal *talmidim*, the Maharam Shick,⁹ wrote of him, "I see no difference between the responsa he wrote in his youth in Dresnitz and those he wrote in Pressburg, *Toras Emes* in his youth as in old age¹⁰." The Chasam Sofer was a prolific writer: His legacy includes *novellai* on many tractates of the *Talmud*; insights on the Torah, especially *Toras Moshe*; and his *derashos*, *Derashas Chasam Sofer*, in two volumes.¹¹ Like his responsa, all these were prepared for printing by his sons and *talmidim* only after his passing.

⁸ First edition *Yoreh De'ah*, Pressburg, 1841; First Edition *Orach Chaim*, Pressburg, 1855; First Edition *Even HaEzer I*, Pressburg, 1858; First Edition *Even HaEzer II*, Pressburg, 1859; *Choshen Mishpat*, Vienna, 1862; Volume Six (miscellaneous responsa), Vienna, 1864

⁹ Rabbi Moshe Shick, *Av Beis Din Yaargen and Chust*

¹⁰ *Beginning of Chiddushei Chasam Sofer, Pesachim*

¹¹ He himself wanted all his work to be collectively known as *Chiddushei Toras Moshe*, from which his name derives – *חדושי תורת משה סופר*.

Maintaining Minhagim in Israel

Additionally, the Chasam Sofer fought hard to maintain the customs of Israel, seeing them as drawn from "deep waters," protecting the Torah itself. He clearly stated the blessing that comes from doing so. Conversely, with regard to changing *minhagim*, he wrote, "No individual, even if he is as mighty as an oak tree, and as high as a cedar, and his words are well founded, is permitted to undo even a minor *minhag* in Israel¹²." He went as far as to say that anyone who tampered with *minhagim* should be investigated.

Battle Against the Haskalah

Although the Chasam Sofer was warmly accepted by some in Pressburg, his time there was not peaceful, since an appreciable minority of *maskilim* ("Enlightened Ones") already existed in the city; they had unsuccessfully opposed his appointment. Wanting a more liberal interpretation of Judaism in line with the "spirit of the times," they were never completely silenced. The Chasam Sofer waged total war against them, with no concessions. Although he did so vigorously, it gave him no pleasure to engage in conflict, as he would say, "There are no quarrels without wounds."

Among the changes proposed by the Haskalah was a new school system, in which the *Talmud* would be taught but as just another subject in the curriculum. The Chasam Sofer straightaway understood the implications of this, that Torah would quickly become secondary, and informed its proponents that no such place would open. Though they couched their plans in cleverly chosen words – "*Divrei Shalom v'Emes*" (Words of Peace and Truth) – he saw through their disguise.

The *maskilim* also began to produce books that reflected their ideology but included just enough words of Torah to give them the appearance of *sefarim*. In this way they hoped to make changes subtly, but the Chasam Sofer saw through this deception as well. In 1833, near the end of the Chasam Sofer's life, the Jews of Pressburg were excitedly following deliberations at the *Riechstag*, the seat of parliament, where the status of Jewish citizens was being discussed. Emancipation – full civil rights for Jews – seemed imminent, and the Jewish population was ecstatic. The Chasam Sofer dissociated himself from this desire; among other concerns, this was due to the worry that Emancipation would make Jews feel too much at home in exile and forget about *Eretz Yisrael*.

Battle Against Reform Judaism

In the latter half of the 18th century, new ideas began developing in society, challenging previous ways of thinking and old forms of society, such as the French Revolution of 1789 with its slogan, "Liberty, Equality,

¹² *Responsa Chasam Sofer, Orach Chaim 154*

ידענא פאר דוס זוכ'ה טלא ילעג עוד על זונתגי ישרא סגעלס טעווס
 זוננו כי זונקור גוים חיים הם רוצעי' ורגילי אזי לוונו כל האופסקק
 על קעמק' וזנחננו לרדך בדקוקה אסריו כי זיי שזורכו לזונתו וידאח' ס'

She'eilos u'Teshuvos Chasam Sofer, Orach Chaim 51:
 “Anyone who tampers with the way we do things and our *minhagim*, you need to investigate after him.”

Fraternity,” acting as a catalyst to taking them farther.

In Germany followed by other locales in Europe, ghetto walls began to crumble. Those who ventured outside, attracted by the seeming opportunity there, returned with new names and a new way of life, together with contempt for their former co-religionists – if they returned at all.

The outcome of these changes came with the opening of the first Reform temple in Hamburg in 1818. Considering themselves “Germans of Jewish extraction,” the Reformists reformulated Judaism, removing any reference to Eretz Yisrael and the Return to Zion from their prayers, along with any mention of belief in Moshiach and the Final Redemption. They also said their prayers in German, together with a mixed choir and an organ, clearly imitating non-Jewish places of worship.

In response, from all over Germany and farther afield, Rabbanim of the time came together, publicizing their utter rejection of these changes. They specified in particular that it was forbidden to change the order of *tefillah*, to *daven* in any language except *Lashon Hakodesh* or to use musical instruments in shul on Shabbos and Yom Tov.

A leading figure in the battle against Reform, uncompromising and fearless, the Chasam Sofer regarded the slightest innovation as an insidious threat to authentic Judaism. Paraphrasing the section of the Torah dealing with *chadash*,¹³ he declared, “*Chadash assur min haTorah* (Anything new is forbidden by the Torah).” This became the banner of Torah Jewry against Reform, sharpening the division with them and creating an irreparable breach between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewry.

In his *drashos*, too, the Chasam Sofer fought against the Reformers, quashing their designs. Because their prayer books lacked any reference to the *Geulah* (Redemption) and the return to *Eretz Yisrael*, he spoke with even greater passion about these. In his annual *drashah* on *zayin Av*, he would actually count the exact number of years since the *Churban*, creating a tangible link between his listeners and the Beis Hamikdash. Arousing in them a longing for Yerushalayim, he made the dream of rebuilding the Holy City come alive.

Battle Against Napoleon

The Chasam Sofer’s life also coincided with Napoleon’s march through Europe in his attempt to dominate

¹³ Prohibition of consuming the new crop of grain until the second day of Pesach (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah, 293)



Sefer Eleh Divrei Habris, Altona, 1819, stating on the title page the ruling of the Hamburg Beis Din forbidding the changes instituted by the Reform:

- (a) Forbidden in any way to change the order of *tefillah* of Israel... and the more so not to subtract from it
- (b) Forbidden to daven in any language other than *Lashon Hakodesh*
- (c) Forbidden to use any musical instruments in shul on Shabbos or Yom Tov, even by a gentile

the continent¹⁴. In 1809, French armies laid siege to Pressburg, encamping on the far side of the Danube, only the mighty river impeding their onslaught. Then followed a devastating 42-day siege. Pounded by an uninterrupted rain of cannonballs and shells, the city turned into a scene of utter destruction.

Led by the Chasam Sofer, the Jewish community miraculously escaped virtually unharmed. Among other measures, he performed the rare *pidyon nefesh* (Redemption Ceremony)¹⁵. Additionally, he led the community in the intense saying of *Tehillim*¹⁶. He also gave instructions for Torah scholars to pray at the graves of *tzaddikim* and for more *tzedakah* to be distributed to the poor.

¹⁴ Born in 1769, twenty years before the French Revolution, Napoleon rapidly rose through the ranks of the French army and political system, at the age of 30 becoming first consul and ruler of France. His driving passion was to extend the rule and influence of France abroad, his career marked by remarkable conquests, until his ultimate defeat in Russia in 1812, and his death in 1821.

¹⁵ This entailed taking 541 coins from the community fund, therefore every member of the community having a share in it – being the numerical value of the hebrew letters of the word “Yisrael” – then donating it to charity in individual amounts: 10 coins for the letter yud, 300 coins for shin and so on, together with an ancient formula of *tefillah* and the verse, “Charity saves from death” (Mishlei 10:2).

¹⁶ Including *Tehillim* 119, verses representing the letters of the word “Pressburg” – *pei, reish, ayin* and so on, as written in a get.



She'eilos u'Teshuvos Chasam Sofer, Yoreh De'ah, Pressburg, 1841



She'eilos u'Teshuvos Chasam Sofer, Orach Chaim, Pressburg, 1855



She'eilos u'Teshuvos Chasam Sofer, Even HaEzer I, Pressburg, 1858



She'eilos u'Teshuvos Chasam Sofer, Choshen Mishpat, Vienna, 1862

After 42 days, a peace treaty was concluded between Austria-Hungary and the French Empire. Four weeks later the enemy withdrew. Then began the task of rebuilding the community, which was shattered physically and financially after weeks of preoccupation with nothing more than survival. This included dealing with the inevitable halachic questions that arose. Not the least of these was how to apportion the heavy tax put upon the Jewish community by the Austrian government, badly in need of funds after the war.

Illustrious Offspring

After his first wife passed away without bearing him children, the Chasam Sofer married the daughter of Harav Akiva Eiger,¹⁷ the two distinguished families thus united. From them came leaders of the following generations, who continued the tradition of their forebears, serving as bastions of Torah Jewry and stalwart opponents of Reform over the next century.

In accordance with his wishes, the Chasam Sofer was succeeded as Rav of Pressburg and leader of Hungarian Jewry by his oldest son, Harav Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer¹⁸. He was known as the Kesav Sofer, the title under which his responsa and Torah commentary were published.

The Kesav Sofer was in turn succeeded by his son, Harav Simcha Bunim Sofer,¹⁹ known as the Shevet Sofer, who continued to maintain the large Pressburg yeshivah. He was succeeded by his son Harav Akiva Sofer,²⁰ the Daas Sofer, who settled in Jerusalem in 1940 and established the Pressburg Yeshivah there.

17 1761-1837
18 1815-1871
19 1842-1906
20 1878-1959



Matzeivah of the Chasam Sofer.

Passing of the Chasam Sofer

The Chasam Sofer passed away in Pressburg in 1839, two years after his illustrious father-in-law, Harav Akiva Eiger. Today, more than 180 years later, his presence is still felt, standing firm among us, an eternal light for the generations.

In his *tzavaah*, his ethical will to his children, the Chasam Sofer instructed them not to adopt gentile names or dress in the style of non-Jews. To his community he enjoined that there be no change in the way Torah was taught, nor in the order of *tefillah*, or in the layout of the shul. He stated, "We have an old Father, blessed is His Name, Who never has changed, nor will He ever change." Finally,

he expressed his deepest desire, a summary of his life's work, "that the wellspring may never run dry, and the tree bearing the fruit of everlasting life never be cut down."



So Klal Yisrael continues, in time of war and peace, tumult and tranquility, rising to the challenges of the generation, coming out renewed and rejuvenated, until the arrival of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu, bimheirah b'yameinu. Amein.* ■

Akiva Aaronson is the author of PEOPLE OF THE BOOK, Five Hundred Years of the Hebrew Book from the Beginning of Printing until the Twentieth Century; Feldheim Publishers, 2014.

Photo Credit: Rabbi Meir Ba'al HaNes, Jerusalem.