

Showing Respect to Everyone

Horav Meir Simcha HaKohen, zl, Rav of Dvinsk and author of the Ohr Sameach and Meshech Chochmah, was certainly well-known for his encyclopedic knowledge of Torah. He was also recognized for another unique quality - his relationship with -- and the respect he received from -- the non-Jews of Dvinsk. When World War I broke out, Grand Duke Nikolai ordered the expulsion of all Jews from the Russo-German front. Dvinsk became dangerous for the Jews, and many fled, leaving their homes and belongings. Even the Rogatchover Gaon, zl, the other rav in Dvinsk, was prevailed upon by his congregants to leave. Rav Meir Simcha refused to budge. He said, "As long as there are nine Jews and I am the tenth, I will be there for the Minyan." When he was reminded of the constant danger, his response was simply, "Every bullet has a designated address, and none will reach where there is no Heavenly decree that it do so." Yet, despite the obvious dangers of doing so, thousands of Jews and gentiles signed petitions attesting to the nobility of the Rav's character and his vital importance to the well-being of all of the members of the community. He was allowed to remain unharmed. His reputation was so widespread that even non-Jews sought his counsel. Indeed, some say his universal acceptability began with a decision he had rendered in a dispute between a Jew and a gypsy. These two had been business partners until a major conflict of interest developed between them. The gypsy suggested that they both go to the Rav for a decision. Rav Meir Simcha listened to both sides and, after his own careful independent investigation, decided in favor of the gypsy. From that day on, word of Rav Meir Simcha's integrity and sense of justice spread throughout all of Dvinsk and even Latvia.