



Most *yeshivah* *bochurim* today would stare blankly at the name Rav Zvi Hirsch Grodzinsky, but Torah leaders of the early 20th century spoke of this *rav* from Nebraska with the reverence due a towering *gadol*. Now an IT professional originally from Omaha and a powerhouse attorney from Monsey have teamed up to reclaim this forgotten legacy of the Midwest

BY Eytan Kobre
PHOTOS Family Archives, Adina Markowitz,
Eli Greengart, Nebraska Jewish Historical Society

OMAHA'S *forgotten* Sage



To many people, “Sage of Omaha” is the business world’s moniker for a plainspoken white-haired Midwesterner named Warren Buffet, who has parlayed brilliant market forecasting skills into a financial empire valued in the tens of billions of dollars. But it wasn’t even 70 years ago that a man who was a true sage in the age-old Jewish sense graced Nebraska’s largest city.

His name was Rav Zvi Hirsch Grodzinsky, and if a book were to be written called *Great but Unknown Gedolim*, his name would surely be toward the front of that volume. How else to describe someone whose name draws blank expressions from today’s average *kollel yungerman*, yet was considered the *gadol hador* by no less than Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin? But, eventually, redemption comes. And so it has slowly begun to arrive for the rich Torah legacy, forgotten for nearly a century now, of Omaha’s venerable chief rabbi. Its redeemers make for an interesting duo in their own right. One, Rabbi Myron Wakschlag, is a native son of Omaha on a mission to spread the Torah of his hometown’s little-known *gaon*, while the other, Shalom Jacob, is a busy big-firm attorney whose true love is *seforim* and the people who write them. Neither lives anywhere near the Cornhusker State, but to visit the Wakschlags in Silver Spring, Maryland and the Jacobs in Monsey, New York is to find Rav Grodzinsky very much alive. Mindful of Chazal’s



Attorney Shalom Jacob (top) and Rabbi Myron Wakschlag have become the redeemers of Rav Grodzinsky’s legacy



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dictum that the lips of a deceased *talmid chacham* continue to move as his teachings are repeated in this world, the two are working steadily to bring this towering Torah personality ever more to life with the publication of each additional piece of his written legacy. Rav Zvi Hirsch was one of a number of *litvish rabbanim* who made their way from the Old Country — where Jewish life thrived but grinding poverty was the norm — to the shores of the USA, where the promise of a more comfortable material situation often came at a steep spiritual cost. Of this cadre, Rav Zvi Hirsch was surely among the most prominent of its members, in both his familial and personal standing. **Away from the Crowds** Born in the Lithuanian city of Novardok in 1857, he was a second cousin of Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky, who was five years his junior. As a teenager, Zvi Hirsch came to Ivye, where Rav Chaim Ozer’s father, Rav

Dovid Shlomo, served as *rav*. He lived in the Grodzinsky home and learned together with young Chaim Ozer, later moving on to learn in Vilna and Kovno and in the renowned Volozhin yeshivah as well. In 1880, Rav Zvi Hirsch married Bayla, of the well-to-do Levitan family of Tavrig, and the family’s support enabled him to continue learning for ten years following his marriage. By 1891, the couple had been blessed with five children; another two would follow after their emigration to America. The 33-year-old Rav Zvi Hirsch had by then established himself as a *talmid chacham* of stature; indeed, the Brisker Rav is reported to have said that had Rav Zvi Hirsch remained in Europe, he would have grown to be greater in Torah than his younger cousin and erstwhile *chavrusa*. But the New World beckoned. Only four years earlier, Rav Yaakov Yosef, the famed Maggid of Vilna and a leading disciple of Rav Yisrael Salanter, had accepted the invitation of a coalition of New York City shuls to become the chief rabbi of that metropolis. That experiment ended in failure just a few years later when Rav Yosef passed away, heartbroken over the implacable opposition and communal strife he faced from the moment he had arrived. But his presence in the United States paved the way for many young *litvish rabbanim* to venture overseas to the spiritually forbidding terrain of the *treifene medinah*. Between 1889 and 1892 alone, graduates of Lita’s leading yeshivos took positions as *rabbanim* in New York, St. Louis, Boston, Philadelphia, Rochester, and Des Moines. And so, when a written invitation arrived for Rav Grodzinsky to serve as chief rabbi in Omaha, Nebraska, with the city’s two major shuls each contributing toward a monthly salary of

\$50, he accepted the offer. His wife and children remained behind in Tavrig, joining him in Omaha two years later, in 1893. Although many of the rabbinic émigrés to American shores took up residence in the heavily Jewish urban areas along the East Coast, Rav Zvi Hirsch appears to have preferred the relative solitude of the Midwestern plains, far from the contentiousness that prevailed in some of the larger *kehillos*.

Rav Grodzinsky was thankful for the opportunity the *shtetler* in Omaha gave him to sit and learn undisturbed and produce his remarkably prodigious output of Torah writings. In his early years in America he took an active role in rabbinic circles, traveling often to the East Coast when the need arose, such as to participate in the founding meeting of the Agudas Harabonim and to deliver a eulogy at Rav Yaakov Yosef’s *levayah*. But he also spoke out strongly for the important role played by rabbis in the so-called American boondocks. Reacting to one particular edict that New York *rabbanim* had promulgated, he wrote in his sefer *Mikraei Kodesh* that “the rule is not as the rabbis of New York think, that the rest of the country of America is secondary to New York, for indeed it is the opposite.”

Thousands of Folios Omaha of the late 19th century and the beginning decades of the 20th was actually not quite the Jewish backwater some may assume it was. The first Jews arrived in Nebraska in 1855, although it wasn’t until a full quarter-century later that the first shul, Congregation B’nai Israel, known popularly as the “Litvishe shul,” was founded.

The ensuing decades saw an influx of Jews to Omaha, and perhaps inevitably, for some of the newcomers the Litvishe shul became the “shul they didn’t attend.” They founded the rival Chevra B’nai Israel Adas Russia, or the “Russishe shul,” and in 1889, it became the first Orthodox congregation in Omaha to dedicate its own building. From a nucleus of about 2,000 when Rav Zvi Hirsch arrived in 1891, the community’s numbers grew to 5,000 in 1907 and reached a high-water mark of 12,000 in 1912, with yet more shuls forming to serve the needs of the burgeoning Jewish populace, a majority of whom were *shomrei Shabbos*.

Rav Tzvi Hirsch was spiritual guide to them all, tending with great dedication to the needs of every individual. Despite towering over his flock in his Torah scholarship, Rav Tzvi Hirsch delivered a daily *shiur* in Mishnayos as well as weekly *derashos* in Yiddish, a departure from the European custom in which the *rav* spoke only twice each year. The Grodzinsky home on Davenport Street became the destination for visitors at all hours seeking to discuss a wide variety of halachic and personal issues with the Rav.

And through it all, Rav Zvi Hirsch wrote, and wrote, and never stopped writing. He filled thousands of pages in scores of notebooks with Torah novella on the broadest spectrum of

Before printing a *sefer*, he would rewrite the manuscript three times over, writing the entire *sefer* out in bound notebooks in the exact format in which it was to be printed



Rav Grodzinsky published seven *seforim* in his lifetime, but until just a few years ago, the bulk of his manuscripts lay neglected in a library in Jerusalem.

topics imaginable, all in a flowing, crystal-clear Hebrew script, with nary a cross-out in sight. Before printing a *sefer*, he had an unusual editing process: he would rewrite the manuscript three times over, writing the entire *sefer* out in bound notebooks in the exact format in which it was to be printed, and refining the *sefer* with each successive version. During his lifetime, Rav Zvi Hirsch published seven *seforim*, a large output for a *rav* in those times. His first published *sefer* was a halachic work on the laws of *mikvaos* entitled *Mikveh Yisrael*, which he hoped would serve as a practical guide for

rabbanim in how to construct a *mikveh* and help address a dire need for kosher *mikvaos* in American communities.

That was followed by two volumes of *Mili d’Brachos*, a commentary on *maseches Berachos*; a three-volume work entitled *Mikraei Kodesh*, which comprehensively addresses the laws of Krias HaTorah and *safrus*; and *Likutei Zvi*, the first part of a multi-volume index for the *Shulchan Aruch* that cites relevant sources throughout Torah literature relating to each halachah in *Shulchan Aruch*.

But the far larger part of Rav Grodzinsky’s

rich written legacy remained unpublished during his lifetime. Until just a few short years ago, the manuscripts lay neglected in a library in Jerusalem.

Enter Myron Wakschlag. A resident of Silver Spring, Maryland, he’s a *musmach* of Rav Ahron Soloveichik and an IT professional. Born and raised in Omaha, it was at the tender age of six that he first came across a *sefer* containing Rav Zvi Hirsch Grodzinsky’s name, followed by his title — HaRav d’Kehilla Kadi-sha Omaha. “I was amazed,” he recalls, “that anyone from Omaha could have written a *sefer*, and I set out on what has become a lifelong mission: introducing the Jewish world to the grandeur of Omaha’s very own Torah sage and disseminating the Torah writings into which Rav Zvi Hirsch poured heart and soul.

“As a teenager, I wanted to visit his *kever*, but no one seemed to know where it was. Finally, I asked my mother to accompany me to Omaha’s oldest Jewish cemetery, and after a very long search, I came upon the Rav’s burial place amid those of other Grodzinsky family members. The Rav’s *kever* is marked with a small headstone that bears a succinct, but powerfully descriptive inscription: HaRav haGaon Sar haTorah R’ Tzvi Hirsch ben R’ Meir.”

Meis Mitzvah Rabbi Wakschlag left Omaha for parts east in 1981, but has returned every year since to visit *kever avos*. Over the years, he has interviewed everyone he can find who might have known the Omaha Rav, and believes that by now he has acquired almost everything that has Rav Grodzinsky’s name printed in it. Rabbi Wakschlag’s resolve to give Rav Grodzinsky the posthumous honor due him got a powerful boost from an encounter he had on Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

He had traveled there to visit the offices of the Agudas Harabonim on East Broadway after learning that Rav Grodzinsky had helped found the organization. The offices were closed for the summer, he remembers, “but just then, I met a man emerging from the offices of Ezras Torah, located in the same building. It was Rabbi Moshe Margolin, who worked for decades alongside Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin

in that venerable *tzedakah* organization. When I told him why I had come, he exclaimed, ‘You’re interested in Rav Grodzinsky? My name is Rav Margolin and I was *meshamesh* Rav Henkin for many years, and I must tell you that Rav Henkin considered Rav Grodzinsky the *gadol hador*.’”

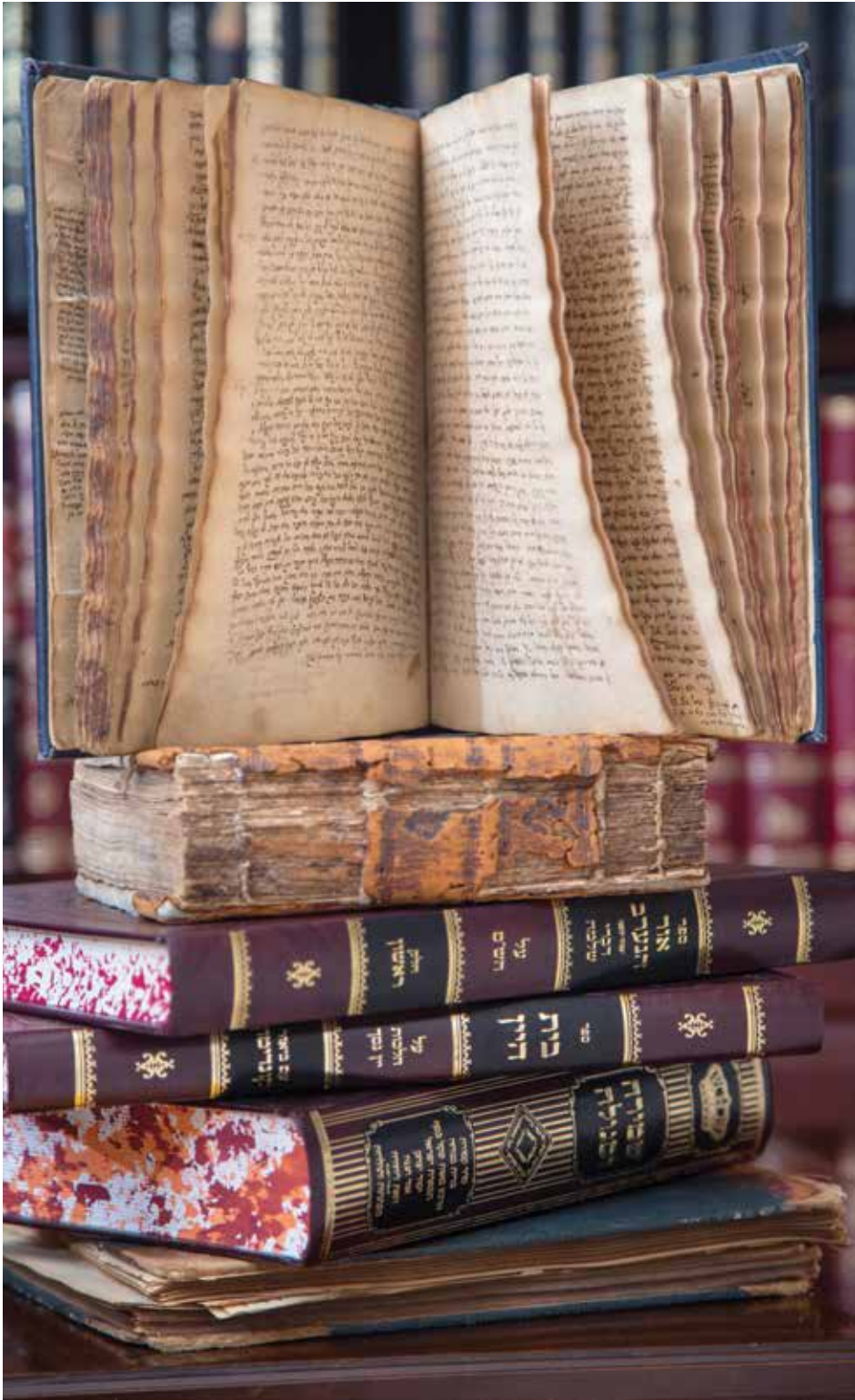
Indeed, in a *teshuvah* addressing an issue on which Rav Grodzinsky expressed a position contrary to the view of other *rabbanim*, Rav Henkin opined that “Rav Grodzinsky was ‘*rav guvrei*’ in *hora’ah*, more than those who disagreed with him, even though they were *gedolei Torah*.’”

In 1991, Rabbi Wakschlag arranged for all seven existing volumes of Rav Tzvi Hirsch’s *seforim* to be republished. They flew off the shelves, he says, “like hotcakes, disappearing almost overnight from Boro Park’s Biegeleisen *seforim* store and wherever else they were sold. Many people told me they were struck by his remarkable clarity of thought, his vast *bekiyus*, and his deep insights.”

But what was the fate of the rest of his voluminous writings? The person best qualified to answer that question is Shalom Jacob, the other half of the dynamic duo involved in rescuing Rav Tzvi Hirsch Grodzinsky’s legacy from obscurity. A partner practicing bankruptcy law in the New York office of Locke Lord LLP — an international law firm with approxamitely 1,000 lawyers, Shalom Jacob is, to put it mildly, a very busy man. Somehow, however, he has managed to use his free time to turn a passion for learning and spreading Torah into a second vocation: bringing to the light of day the until-now unpublished writings of the Torah greats of the past.

Ever since his grandmother’s passing 15 years ago, Shalom has published a *sefer* each year to mark her *yahrtzeit*. He focuses on lesser-known works because, he says, “nobody needs me to put out a *ksav yad* from Rav Akiva Eiger. I try to focus on *seforim* that are a *meis mitzvah*, which, if I don’t print them, no else will.”

Not a Collector It helps that Shalom himself has an extensive collection of contemporary and antique *seforim*. Although he’s rapidly running out of space, he’s not



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worried because, as he sees it, “love of *seforim* is *ruchniyus* and space is *gashmiyus* and one has nothing to do with the other.”

He also lends out his *seforim* to those writing *seforim* or giving *shiurim*. “There’s very little that can’t be replaced. Sure, if it’s a ‘*shin*’ [1540] from Krakow or Lublin, you may not see it again, but a *sefer* that’s 200 years old is no problem. I’ve never had a person lose one of my *seforim*.”

Shalom eschews the term “collector,” because he “doesn’t just buy. I only buy something that I want to use and I think I’m going to use. I won’t tell you I’ve learned all my *seforim* cover to cover, I don’t have the time. But I use them. And when someone references other *seforim*, I like to be able to actually look up and review the actual source.”

He also takes a dim view of those for whom *seforim* is a business. He says he’s “never sold a *sefer*. Even if I have three, I’ll give it as a gift, but I won’t do business with *seforim*.” He relates with a touch of pride a certain *seforim* dealer’s comment to him that “everyone buys for a reason, but you’re the only one who does it because you love *seforim*.”

It’s a love that came through osmosis. Both father Marvin — a *talmid* of Rav Aharon Kotler and now-retired partner at the powerhouse firm of Weil Gotshal — and Marvin’s brother Heshy, a mainstay of both the Lower East Side *frum* community and the Kopycznitzer *chasidus*, are connoisseurs of *seforim*. Similarly, Shalom’s father-in-law, Rabbi Ehud Hubner, has thousands of *seforim* and, Shalom says, really knows what’s in them.

There were other early influences, too, on Shalom’s knowledge of and emotional attachment to *sifrei kodesh*. One was Rav Chaim

Yitzchok Poupko, a leading *talmid* of Radin who tended to the Chofetz Chaim during his last years. His shul was next door to the Jacob home in Flatbush and he drew young Shalom close. “Rav Poupko had a few thousand *seforim*,” Shalom recalls, “including many that were way beyond what most *rabbanim* would be interested in. And he used to take me through them and show me many interesting things.”

Another influence was Rav Tuvia Goldstein, *rosh yeshivah* of Emek Halacha, with whom Shalom merited to learn privately and who had “an amazing love of *seforim* of all sorts.”

As we sit in the dining room of his Monsey, New York home, the table piled high with *seforim* and printers’ galleys, Shalom offhandedly mentions that he’s in the thick of preparing a number of different *seforim* for publication: several by Rav Grodzinsky, including a work on *hilchos niddah*; responsa on *Yoreh Dei’ah* and two volumes on the Moadim; Be’er Avrohom on Mishnayos by a *talmid* of the Rebbe Rav Heschel, and an 18th century commentary on *hilchos Pesach*.

How does one juggle professional, familial, and communal responsibilities and still be this deeply involved in Torah study and dissemination? “Everyone has free time, but the question is what you do with it. I work hard and it takes up a tremendous amount of my time and energy. I like my work, and I’m very appreciative to my firm. But there needs to be more to life.” Shalom is also quick to credit his wife Sarah, who, he says, is “a genuine *bas talmid chacham*,” enabling him to maximize his time.

Shalom explains that Rav Grodzinsky had received a letter of understanding from a certain Torah publications institute in Jerusalem

promising that upon the Rav’s passing, his library would be donated to the institute and they would undertake to publish his manuscripts. In the winter of 1947, Rav Grodzinsky passed on unexpectedly at the age of 90, alert, active, and engrossed in learning to his last days. And indeed, during the *shloshim*, people arrived to crate and ship to Jerusalem his entire personal library, including boxes of his cherished manuscripts and some 1,500 volumes — many of those with Rav Tzvi Hirsch’s copious notations in the margins.

Collaborators Fast forward to 2007, exactly 60 years since the *petirah* of the Omaha Rav: The letter of understanding had still remained unfulfilled — virtually none of his works had been published. But worse yet, his writings were in a state of disarray and neglect, with some individuals having permanently “borrowed” pages or whole notebooks.

Shalom received an offer to purchase Rav Grodzinsky’s writings and, he recalls, “I realized that if I didn’t take the collection, it would either end up in a *sheimos* pile or someone would make a business out of it. Since then, I’ve been on my own search to find the missing notebooks and some of the many *teshuvos* he sent, almost all of which are gone and by now and may have changed hands several times. Some may not even have Rav Grodzinsky’s name written anywhere. One example is a large record book with a number 5 written on it containing *chiddushim* on *Yoreh Dei’ah* and the second half of Rav Grodzinsky’s *sefer* on *hilchos niddah*. Whoever has this volume probably doesn’t even know what it is.”

Shalom was able to trace some of the notebooks with the help of his friend Myron Wakschlag and others. “A certain halachic encyclopedia of sorts quotes extensively from Rav Grodzinsky, and using a list of such citations that Myron prepared, I contacted the people who worked on those sections of the encyclopedia,” Shalom explains. “Lo and behold — sitting in these people’s houses, I found notebooks and loose pages.”



The Kapulier shul (top) was one of several Orthodox shuls in Omaha at the turn of the century, and Rav Zvi Hirsch was spiritual guide to them all. While tending his flock, he filled thousands of pages in scores of notebooks with Torah *chiddushim* and *piskei halachah*



Wakschlag and Jacob also have an unspoken collaboration with other individuals who, like them, are on a search to piece together the lost Torah legacies of *gedolei* America. They include Rabbi Doniel Kleinman, who is publishing the collected writings of Rav Henkin (featured in *Mishpacha* Issue 470) and Rabbi Bentzion Bergman, who is doing the same for the voluminous Torah oeuvre of Rav Michoel Forshlager, a brilliant *talmid* of the Avnei Nezer who spent decades in near-obscurity in Baltimore in the early 20th century. When in the course of their sleuthing, they come across a *teshuvah* of Rav Grodzinsky, Shalom Jacob is the man they call, and when given the opportunity, he returns the favor.

Thus far, Shalom has published one *sefer* from Rav Grodzinsky’s manuscript, *Bais Hayayin* on the laws of *yayin nesech*, with the other manuscripts mentioned earlier moving through the pipeline. And still, so much more remains. Shalom takes out notebook after notebook, each a veritable work of art, exquisitely organized and written flawlessly in the clearest handwriting imaginable. There are eight notebooks making up *Pischei Shas*, a *Sdei Chemed*-type work on topics in Shas; 12 notebooks on the *teshuvos haRosh*, called *Ateres Rosh*; many notebooks comprising *Likutei Zvi*, his index of sources on *Shulchan Aruch*; hundreds of loose pages of *teshuvos* and *chiddushim*; and many additional works on a vast array of topics in Shas and *poskim*.

Winds of Change There’s certainly a bittersweet quality to the odyssey on which Myron Wakschlag and Shalom Jacob are embarked. On the one hand, the nearly 60 years that Rav Zvi Hirsch spent in Omaha gave him the time and tranquility to swim endlessly in the Yam haTalmud. Those years enabled him to produce world-class *seforim* of the sort that led Rav Chaim Kanievsky, upon looking through the recently-published *Bais Hayayin*, to remark, “I didn’t know they had such *rabbanim* in America.” In addition to his *seforim*, Rav Zvi Hirsch

probably responded to more *sh’eilos* than any other American *rav* of his time. But at the same time, he was vastly underappreciated by the Jews of Omaha. Many of them purchased his newly published *seforim*, but were not in a position to fully value them; some even discarded them.

Rav Grodzinsky served Omaha’s Jewish community faithfully for decades, teaching, guiding, and counseling. All throughout, he was compensated so meagerly that he was forced to supplement his income by traveling each year to Sacramento, California to supervise the production of kosher-for-Pesach wine.

But eventually, the winds of religious change reached the Midwest. The nascent Conservative movement was on the rise throughout the country, putting pressure on Orthodox congregations to prove themselves to be still relevant. The old-time *rav*, who had always insisted on speaking only in Yiddish as part of a principled stand against the forces of change, would no longer do.

And so, in 1916, the Litvishe and Russishe shuls over which he presided for a quarter-century disassociated from him, hiring a more modern, English-speaking rabbi in his stead. The new young rabbi served on various boards in the wider Jewish community, created a Sunday school, and in the synagogues’ words, introduced something they “deemed essential to... attract our younger element... Friday evening eight o’clock services.” He also commanded an annual salary of \$2,000, and his successor \$3,500, where Rav Grodzinsky’s had been \$200 to \$400 per year. It was a blow from which Rav Zvi Hirsch would not quickly recover.

Rav Zvi Hirsch Grodzinsky passed away on 18 Teves 5708 (1948). He requested that no *hespedim* be delivered at his funeral, and none were. But if, as Chazal teach, the words of Torah scholars bring more honor to their memory than the grandest of monuments, perhaps then, the efforts of two Jews born long after the Omaha Rav passed on are helping, at long last, to pay the debt that his hometown — and all the rest of us — owe him. ●