

Don't Submit to Circumstance

Category: Metzora, Tazria, Vayikra

The new Chabad center in Hanover is a symbol of Jewish strength. What can we learn from it?

The New Center

This week, a new Chabad center was inaugurated in Hanover, Germany, named for the city's beloved Shliach, Rabbi Binyamin Wolff, who passed away one year ago. The former president of Germany participated in the celebrations; he has the same last name, (Christian) Wulff.

Before the event, Rabbi Yehudah Teichtel of Chabad in Berlin invited the former president who is himself a Hanover resident, and he immediately agreed to participate. Thanks to his presence, the grand opening was covered in all the major newspapers of Germany. Over eighty million people were exposed to the new Chabad center.

Exactly one year ago, on 1 Iyar 5780, Rabbi Wolff passed away, leaving a wife and eight children, the youngest of whom was just four years old. The common assumption was that the Wolff family—both parents being Israeli—would leave Hanover and return to Israel to build a new life closer to family support.

But Mrs. Sterni Wolff made the immediate decision that her husband would be buried in Hanover, and that she and her children would remain in the city to continue the mission she and her husband had set out to do.

Rabbi Wolff passed away on a Friday night. As Mrs. Wolff walked home from the hospital that night to share the tragic news with her children, the street was dark, and it was even darker in her heart. But one thing was clear as day: she would remain in Hanover to carry out her husband's dream - to establish a permanent building for Chabad of Hanover. She thought to herself; her husband would work from above and she would carry on from below.

Her decision made waves in Chabad communities throughout the world, and her courageous choice inspired thousands of people to help her fulfill the dream—by

moving the thriving Chabad center from a rented space into a large and beautiful, permanent home.

Help poured in from all over the world. People who never met her and will never meet her enthusiastically donated large sums of money. Dozens of people worked day and night to bring in donations, and this week, as we marked the first Yahrzeit, the dream became a reality.

In his remarks, Mr. Christian Wulff said that Mrs. Wolff was an inspiration to thousands of people throughout the world, being a living example of perseverance.

Where does the strength come from? How does a person, going through such hardship, draw the strength to continue and even grow the activities?

True Heroism

This week, a new book was released in Hebrew called “Shanim Rishonot,” documenting the early years of the Rebbe’s life, from his birth until his marriage. It is an expanded version of an English book, *Early Years*, which was released in 2017.

Naturally, a significant portion of the book focuses on the home of his parents, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak and Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson. The Rebbe’s father was the rabbi of Yekatrinoslav, now known as Dnipro, in Ukraine.

During the Rebbe’s teenage years, the First World War broke out, and the Russian Czar issued a decree banning all Jews, an “untrustworthy minority,” from the entire border region. This included the heavily Jewish regions of Poland and Lithuania, among others. They were given 24 hours to abandon their homes and possessions and move deeper into the Russian territory.

It was a terrible decree. Imagine being established in a city with a home, family, and business, and suddenly being told to abandon everything and move to a new, distant location within 24 hours. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were exiled, and many of them arrived in Ukraine. Hundreds of families reached Yekatrinoslav.

One young refugee, Aaron Friedenthal, later became a journalist and wrote about his experiences. The Russians announced that anyone caught cooperating with

the enemy would be sentenced to death. Unsurprisingly, many Jews were immediately accused of being spies and were thrown into prison. Furthermore, the authorities in every city arrested two Jewish “guarantors,” and threatened to shoot them if any Jew was caught spying for the enemy. These poor fellows remained under arrest with their lives hanging in the balance, dreading the possibility that someone would come and report that a Jew had been spying for the enemy.

Aaron Friedenthal’s father was detained as one such guarantor, and Aaron accompanied his mother to the home of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak to ask for his assistance. He related that the rabbi’s home looked like a beehive,. People were constantly entering and exiting; some were looking for a place to sleep, others were trying to obtain medicine, and they had come to ask for legal assistance to obtain their innocent father’s release. He writes that Rabbi and Mrs. Schneerson worked day and night for the sake of the refugees, establishing special committees, one for food, and one for shelter and so on.

When the rabbi heard that their father had been arrested and that his life was in peril, there were tears in his eyes. He immediately reached out to all of his contacts, and as it turned out, he discovered that 40 Jews were languishing in prison.

He first worked to get permission to visit the prisoners. During his visits, he would smuggle letters to and from their families; an act that was punishable by death. Then, he worked to give them access to kosher food. But that was only the beginning. He worked tirelessly, reaching out to all the necessary people until the Jews were given permission to go under house arrest. At the end, on the first night of Selichot 5676-1916, the prisoners were set free.

“The Selichot of the first night were recited together with the rabbi, their liberator,” writes Aaron Friedenthal. “When the prayer reached the words ‘לחיים טובים ממך נשאר, may we remain with the good life that comes from You,’ the people pointed at the rabbi and repeated the passage again and again, with tears of joy.”

Friedenthal comments that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak demonstrated true heroic strength and quoted the Rabbi who said that Chabad derives its spirit from the Asarah Harugei Malchus, the ten famous Jewish martyrs we read about on Yom

Kippur. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak said that they were responsible to continue saving those Jews even to the point of self-sacrifice. (Shanim Rishonot 121).

Modern Day Self-Sacrifice

The most famous of the Ten Martyrs was Rabbi Akiva. The Roman rulers over the Land of Israel two thousand years ago persecuted the local Jewish population, and, among other decrees, prohibited the public study of Torah with the penalty of death. Rabbi Akiva wasn't moved, and continued teaching Torah publicly. In the end, he paid with his life, and other righteous Jews followed in his footsteps. This is what Rabbi Levi Yitzchok, of righteous memory was referring to.

Every Jew has an inherent power of self-sacrifice. In this week's Torah portion, we read about the commandment to circumcise our children. "When a woman gives birth to a male child, he should be circumcised on the eighth day." We circumcise him when he is still an infant; instead of asking for his permission when he is an adult, we do it when he is a mere newborn. That is the definition of a covenant; we are committing ourselves to G-d in a way that transcends understanding.

Self-sacrifice does not necessarily entail dying in sanctification of G-d's name. To the contrary, Judaism believes in life. Self-sacrifice means that we don't allow our circumstances to dictate the course of our life, instead, we dictate the circumstances to conform to G-d's will. Conventional wisdom would suggest that if a husband dies, the wife and children could submit to their new reality and move to a place where they have family support. But a Jew, with the power of self-sacrifice, does not allow those circumstances to shape the course of his life.

We each deal with a host of circumstances on a regular basis. Sometimes we plan to do a mitzvah but then the circumstances get in the way; all sorts of unexpected issues arise. Very often, we tell ourselves, "I wanted to help my friend," "I wanted to call my mother, but it just didn't work out."

But a Jew doesn't give up and doesn't submit to the circumstances. A bris is held on the eighth day because the number 7 represents nature—G-d created the world in seven days. The number 8 controls nature - that we set the reality. And with the power of our self-sacrifice, we will merit to usher in the redemption, when we will sing to G-d on a "harp of eight strings."