Kol Nidrei: Coming Back Home

When Elie Wiesel foresaw a Jewish story.

The Lost Jewish Child

Good Yom Tov! And an easy fast.

It was in 1965 that Elie Wiesel traveled to then-Soviet Russia, to visit the Jews there and see what was really happening with Russian Jewry. Upon visiting, Elie Wiesel discovered that the Soviet Union was putting on a great act for the entire world: Officially, Jews were allowed to live as Jews in Russia, but actually, the Soviets had imposed so many difficulties and obstacles that there was no possibility for a Jew to raise a Jewish family there.

The Russians declared that Soviet Russia permitted all citizens to educate their children according to their faith—but with that "permission" came a "mandatory education law" that required every child to attend school on Saturdays and holiday, including Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. And with that, how exactly was the Russian Jew to educate his children to be Jews?

Worst of all was the fact that in official Soviet Union schools, they drilled it into kids that there is no G-d and no Creator—more than anything else, they tried to raise atheists.

Towards that end, the Soviet regime shut down all mikvaos for purposes of "hygiene," such that if a Jewish woman wanted to keep

the laws of family purity, she would need to immerse in wintertime in a frozen river. Likewise, bris milah (circumcision) and kosher slaughter were considered “counter-revolutionary activity.”

In the capital city of Moscow, home at the time to over a half-million Jews, there was one active synagogue to which all foreign diplomats and guests were brought. There, they were shown that only senior citizens attended synagogue, as a “proof” to the world that “young people are not interested in religion.” The truth, however, was that young Russian Jews at the time didn’t dare show up at that synagogue because anyone seen in synagogue would shortly be dismissed from their job or expelled from university.

Every Jewish event was considered by the government to be “unlawful assembly,” and so the Soviet regime imposed endless burdens on its Jewish citizens.

Well, into this grim world came Elie Wiesel. He visited Soviet Russia during the High Holiday period—on Yom Kippur, actually. They put him on the dais at the front of the synagogue next to Israeli diplomats; even the official Chief Rabbi of Moscow of the time, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Levin, was seated on the dais.

Mr. Wiesel didn’t exchange a single word with Rabbi Levin because he knew that if he spoke to him today, the good rabbi would be ruthlessly interrogated by the KGB tomorrow over exactly what he said to the foreign guest, how he knows him, etc.

But still, throughout the entire prayer service, Elie Wiesel couldn’t take his eyes off Rabbi Levin.

He would later say that in Rabbi Levin’s eyes, he beheld the suffering of all of Russian Jewry—how the Soviet regime was “strangling” the Jewish spirit.

A year after his first visit, Elie Wiesel traveled to Soviet Russia again. Again, he found himself sitting in the great synagogue of Moscow on the night of Kol Nidrei. But this time, when Rabbi Levin shook his hand, he smiled at him—as if to say, “I’m happy that you have not forgotten us.”

And this time as well, as Elie Wiesel sat and looked at the rabbi, he suddenly felt a strong impulse to tell the rabbi the following: “Get up! Stop the services! Let loose with an outcry that makes the whole world shake! Tell all the diplomats sitting in the synagogue here that the regime is acting as if it permits Judaism in the Soviet Union—but in truth, the Communist government is doing everything it can to make the young generation forget that it is Jewish.”

But obviously, he said nothing of the sort to the rabbi. Still, he was very dejected that the rabbi didn’t take the rare opportunity to stand up and speak out before of the world when he had the chance to do so. In his heart, he found himself practically berating Rabbi Levin: “What are you afraid of?! Get up and scream! Become a hero of the Jewish People!” But in reality, nothing happened.

So, Elie Wiesel returned to the United States and summarily tried to arouse the conscience of the community with regards to Russian Jewry; it was he who coined the phrase, “the Weeping Jews.”

Elie Wiesel wrote about it in the papers and tried in every possible way to wake up American Jewry to raise a hue and cry across Western countries to save Russian Jewry.

Well, a few years later he met a friend who was a movie producer. He asked his friend, “What else can we do?” His friend suggested a theatrical response: why not write a movie script? Elie Wiesel readily agreed to pen a script based on what he had personally and actually witnessed in Russia. In the script, the central protagonist would be the Chief Rabbi of Moscow, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Levin; he decided that in

the script, the Chief Rabbi character would do what the rabbi had not actually done.

Elie Wiesel's script added a synagogue aide character to the rabbi. This fictional character's name was Zalman; he was half-crazy, and in the plot he pushed the rabbi to snap on Yom Kippur night and expose the entire truth to all the diplomats gathered in the Moscow synagogue so that the entire world would rise up and do something.

Later, he wanted to add a woman to the script (remember, this was supposed to be a movie). So he invented a rabbi's daughter character: Nina, a woman of 30 or 40 years old. Nina, of course, would need a husband, and so the script also included Alexi, Nina's husband—and a proud Communist who was embarrassed that he was Jewish. In the plot, Alexi would function as the rabbi's chief antagonist.

But that's not all: Alexi and Nina had a 12-year-old son named Misha. And when the boy finally came with his mother to visit his grandfather on Yom Kippur eve without the knowledge of his communist father, his grandfather asked him if he's getting ready for his Bar Mitzvah—and Misha was to answer: "What's a Bar Mitzvah?"

In the script, that was supposed to be crazy Zalman's moment of victory: "You see?!" Zalman screams. "Your family is lost! Raise a ruckus, I tell you! This is your only chance—and mine, and your little grandson's, too! Your future and your people's future depend on you—and only you!"

In the script, the rabbi ultimately gets up and protests in the synagogue. But it doesn't help. The movie was named "Zalman."

After a lot of work and endless problems, the movie was finally completed. It was shown on the PBS public television network. Its first airing was on a Friday afternoon.

After watching his own movie, Elie Wiesel rushed to get home before Shabbos. But when he got home, he found a letter on his table from a woman. “My name is Rivkah,” the letter began, “and I am the daughter of the Chief Rabbi of Moscow. I would like to meet you.”

Needless to say, Elie Wiesel was astonished. He was “in the market”—but he had had no idea that Chief Rabbi Levin actually had a daughter in real life.

After Shabbos, Elie Wiesel and the rabbi’s daughter, who apparently lived in New York at the time, met. And the first question he asked her was: “Did you see my movie?”

“Movie?!” she said. “What movie? I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Elie Wiesel was completely confused. He said, “You didn’t know that I wrote a script about you, and that it’s now playing on television?!” She got angry and said to him, “This past Friday you didn’t know I existed! And now you’re telling me that you made a movie about me?!”

He asked her: “So then why did you want to meet me?”

She replied that she had read in his books on Soviet Jewry that he had known her father, Chief Rabbi Yehudah Leib Levin.

And then she related to him the following:

One day, when her father was old already and not well, he telephoned her from Moscow to Odessa, where she lived and worked as a dentist. Rabbi Levin asked his daughter to hurry back to Moscow.

She dropped everything, left her husband and kids and rushed to Moscow—where she found her elderly father pale and weak. He knew that he didn’t have much time left to live and he wanted to give her his final request.

“Rivkah, promise me that you’ll see to it that your kids grow up as Jews. I know that you can’t do that here in Russia. I want you to make Aliyah to Israel, or move to New York.”

She promised him, but her father insisted that she swear to him. But that wasn’t easy, because her husband, while readily admitting that he was Jewish, hated his own Jewishness.

Sitting there and listening to Rivkah say that, Elie Wiesel felt like blurting out, “Exactly like in the movie!” But he held himself back.

As it turned out, Rivkah’s husband was opposed to raising their kids as Jews—and whatever she tried didn’t help. He said that their kids were going to be Communists like him! Non-believers and atheists.

She argued, cried, reminded him that she had taken an oath for her father, but nothing helped. They fought day and night to the point that she decided to get divorced. He agreed and let her take their two daughters with her. (One ultimately got married in Israel and the other got married to a Chabad Chasid in Brooklyn.)

Elie then asked Rivkah, “What happened with your son?”

She lowered her voice and sadly replied, “He stayed with my ex-husband.”

When he had written the script, he had not known what to do with the young Misha character. Should Misha end up with his Communist father? He couldn’t allow the loss of a Jewish child (even in a movie). Should he end up with his Chief Rabbi grandfather and stay Jewish? That wouldn’t sound too realistic. He decided that it would stay murky—that the audience would be the one to decide what had happened with the Misha character.

But now, here in real life, Elie Wiesel heard from the rabbi’s daughter that the real Misha (which, incredibly, was his actual name, too) was

not growing up Jewish! He asked her, “How old is Misha?”

She said that he turned 13 a few months ago—adding that they had not made a Bar Mitzvah for him because his father was fiercely opposed to it. And that ended Elie Wiesel’s meeting with the real-life daughter of Moscow’s Chief Rabbi.

A few weeks later, he got another letter from Rivkah.

In it, she wrote that she had finally seen his film for the first time, and cried throughout, saying to herself all along, “Yes! That’s exactly how it was! It was like that exactly!”

Several months later, he met a businessman who also served as a rabbi in New York. The businessman knew that Elie Wiesel was involved with Russian Jewry, and so he informed him that he had just now returned from Israel where—among other things—he had visited Masada, where he stumbled upon a mass Bar Mitzvah event for 30 boys whose military fathers had died in the line of duty. They got called up to the Torah and the whole nine yards.

The businessman approached the presiding military chaplain standing there, telling him that he had not known that there were so many boys in Israel whose fathers had fallen in Israel’s wars. The rabbi sadly told him, yes, it’s true. But then the rabbi pointed at one boy and said, “Take a good look at that kid. He’s not an IDF orphan. He’s the grandson of the Chief Rabbi of Moscow!”

When Elie Wiesel heard that, he turned white. He was once again reminded that ultimately, a Jewish child does not get lost. (From “All Rivers Run to the Sea,” pg. 367 et al.)

Come Home

My friends: As we sit here this Yom Kippur eve in shul, prepared to begin Kol Nidrei, let us remember what the Rebbe taught us about

teshuvah (repentance).

The Rebbe said many times that “teshuvah” is not just “charatah” (regret) over things we did that weren’t good. Instead, teshuvah comes from the verb “shuv”—return or come back.

Yom Kippur, the day on which we are officially supposed to do teshuvah (repentance), is really the day on which we all discover (or rediscover) our Jewishness. And when we look around at the crowd here tonight, we not only know but feel that ultimately, every Jewish child comes home.

On Yom Kippur, my friends, we all “do teshuvah.” On Yom Kippur, we all come back home.

Good Yom Tov!