

# Kol Nidrei: It Was Moroccans vs. Russians

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

*When a rabbi tried to prevent a murder on Rosh Hashanah...*

## The Dangerous Fight

It was the first day of Rosh Hashanah in 1972. Rabbi Yitzchak Dovid Grossman was engrossed in prayer in the main synagogue of Migdal Ha'emek when he felt a tap on his shoulder; it was Tzvi Eldorti, the all-powerful mayor of the city.

"Rabbi, I need to speak with you urgently!"

They moved to a side-room.

"Did you hear about the murder which occurred last night?" the mayor asked.

Rabbi Grossman hadn't heard a thing.

"Aren't you the chief rabbi? Why don't you know what's going on??"

In the 1970s, thousands of new immigrants from the Soviet Union arrived in Israel. Many were settled in Migdal Ha'emek.

To welcome them and help them acclimate, the government built new apartment blocks and granted each family a brand-new apartment. The immigrants were also absolved of the high taxes that were usually levied on electronics and cars that were brought in from abroad. As a result, many of the newly arrived families drove around in new cars.

This would all be good and fine if Migdal Ha'emek was built exclusively for Russian immigrants. The problem was that Migdal Ha'emek was also home to thousands of Moroccan Jews who had arrived in Israel in the 1950s.

In those years, the country was very poor and had nothing to offer immigrants. They were housed in tents and then in tiny apartments. Many of these families

were still suffering from dire poverty — when the ‘rich’ Russian Ashkenazim showed up and were given a hero’s welcome. In those days, personal cars were for the wealthy; the sight of new immigrants with new apartments and personal cars drew the ire of the Moroccans and created tensions between the two groups.

On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the city-council held a New Year’s celebration for the new immigrants. Hearing the noise, one young Moroccan decided that he wanted to join, but the Russian security guard posted at the entrance insisted that the party was exclusively for Russians. The young man was offended; he decided that nobody would stand in his way, and he forced his way past the security guard and into the hall.

Several immigrants surrounded him and tried to forcibly remove him, but he put up a fight. He was young — 19 years old — and already had a criminal record. He grabbed a glass bottle, broke it, and with one of the shards, stabbed an 18-year-old Russian named Mishka Garon in the neck. The injury was a bad one; he died a short time later from the wound. As the new immigrants stood there in shock, the young Moroccan managed to slip out and escape.

The entire Russian community was outraged. Nobody went to sleep that night; they stayed awake and planned their revenge. Everyone gathered in the center of town and brought whatever weapons they had. They were ready for war.

The mayor shared this entire story with Rabbi Grossman in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah morning.

“I tried to speak to the Russians,” he said, “but I speak Hebrew and they speak Russian and Yiddish. I couldn’t communicate with them. But one thing I understood: that if I didn’t leave the premises immediately, they would attack me as well.”

The mayor turned to Rabbi Grossman with a request: “You are the only one who could talk sense into them. If you don’t do something immediately, it could end in a massacre.”

The rabbi in his tallis immediately left the shul and headed to the city-center. When he arrived there, he found a large crowd of angry Russians, holding all sorts of weapons. At the center of the crowd stood Mishka’s mother, holding a picture of her son and reminding the crowd why they had gathered.

Rabbi Grossman didn't waste a moment. He climbed onto a low wall, and before they managed to identify him, began giving a speech.

"Yidden, Yidden," he said in Yiddish, "this was a terrible atrocity. How could such a terrible thing be carried out in our town? A young man was cut down in the prime of life! His blood is calling out to us from the earth for revenge! We must avenge his murder!"

Hearing the Yiddish-speaking rabbi take their side of the issue, they quieted down to hear what he had say.

"Come with me," Rabbi Grossman told them. "Let's continue the protest at the main synagogue of the town. We will make our protest heard on Rosh Hashanah, in middle of the prayers!"

He went over to Mishka's mother and asked her to join him. She agreed, and soon hundreds of people were walking towards the shul. The doors opened, and the worshippers were shocked to see hundreds of people file in — people who were clearly not dressed as if they had planned to join the services that day.

The chazzan leading the services was an American who had traveled to Migdal Ha'emek for the High Holidays at the behest of Rabbi Grossman. Seeing the commotion, he asked someone what was going on, and he received the following terse reply: "Last night, a Russian was killed by a Moroccan. The rabbi is trying to ensure that nobody kills anyone else." Hearing that, he fainted on the spot!

Now they had to deal with a new crisis — saving the chazzan. Once that problem was solved, Rabbi Grossman got onto the podium and addressed the crowd.

"My dear Jews," he said, "look to where we have fallen. How is it possible that on the day of Rosh Hashanah, a young man who had just arrived in Israel lost his life — at the hands of other Jews, no less."

Rabbi Grossman also spoke out against the scheduling of the celebration on the holy day of Rosh Hashanah. He spoke for some time, and then, with a dramatic turn, he opened the holy ark.

"Yidden!" he solemnly declared. "Let it be known: Whoever takes the law into his hands and tries to avenge the murder by harming another Jew — will not survive the coming year."

A murmur passed through the crowd.

He wasn't finished. He wanted the Russians to know that he understood their anger. "My dear friends, we won't ignore the murder of our brother. The perpetrator will be brought to justice and receive a life sentence. But nobody should raise a hand on another. It is not your job to seek justice; that is the role of the police and the courts. Please, I beg of you, don't begin a civil war. I am with you, and I will fight for you, but you need to ensure that no further life is lost."

As he finished speaking, the crowd heard the sound of a helicopter. Piling out of the shul, they saw that a police helicopter had just landed, bringing the national head of the police-force and several other important police figures — who had been informed that a civil war was about to break out in Migdal Ha'emek.

They were immediately mobbed by the Russians who began yelling their grievances, but the police chief shouted that he could not hear so many people at once. "Appoint a delegation and we will meet with them in a room in the synagogue," he said.

Soon, in a side room of the shul, a delegation sat on one side of the table and the police sat on the other. Rabbi Grossman sat in between as the interpreter.

After the Russians aired their complaints, the police-chief began to explain in Hebrew, "You see, the Moroccans feel underfunded and insulted that you received more..."

Rabbi Grossman realized that this wasn't exactly what the Russians needed to hear at the moment. He translated accordingly.

"We understand why you are upset, and we promise to hunt down the murderer and ensure that he receives a life-sentence or even capital punishment; this will never again occur and the government will implement serious changes in this city..."

The delegation was delighted by what they heard via Rabbi Grossman's "translation." Over the two days of Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Grossman ran between the two camps, the Moroccans and the Russians, to calm everyone's nerves and ensure that no one committed any acts of violence. It was a Rosh Hashanah he will never forget. (Living Legend pg. 115).

# Measure for Measure

My friends, right after the prayer of Kol Nidrei, we recite several verses from the Torah.

The first one is *venislach*, “And it shall be forgiven to the entire congregation of Israel and the stranger amongst them; for the entire people sinned unintentionally.” This verse, from Bamidbar, is the verse we recite right as Yom Kippur enters with sundown. With that statement, we declare that Yom Kippur is a day of atonement for every Jew — no matter his spiritual state.

The Chazzan then continues with the verse Moshe Rabeinu said when praying for the Jewish people: *Slach na*, “Forgive, I pray You, the sin of this people in the greatness of Your lovingkindness.”

Then, the crowd says the following verse three times: *Vayomer Hashem* “And G-d said: I have forgiven, as you stated.” As the Rebbe explained once in a Sicha, G-d forgives the Jewish people with a full heart. (Toras Menachem 5750 pg. 93).

The Rebbe often explained that the forgiveness is “measure-for-measure.” When we ask G-d to forgive us with a full heart, we need to forgive others with a full heart as well. We could have disagreements; we are allowed to disagree on politics, on vaccines, on whatever. But we need to remember that we are one people — whether Russians or Moroccans, we are all Jews.

We don’t need to agree with the Israeli government, but those are our brothers and sisters. We don’t have another nation. When we gather in synagogue on Yom Kippur, it’s because we understand that we have nobody else but our own nation, our own family.

Yom Kippur is the day that awakens this profound connection between all Jews. When we strengthen that connection, we strengthen our connection with G-d as well. And when we forgive others with a full heart, G-d forgives us with a full heart, and gives us a happy and sweet new year.