

# Pride in a Jail Sentence

Category: Bereishis, Mikeitz

*The power of a prison-stay.*

## Three Years is Showing Off

The Chassidic Jews in Soviet Russia had an interesting attitude towards prison. In a normal society, being imprisoned is a mark of shame, but for the Chassidic Jews of the Soviet Union, it was a badge of pride.

These fellows were involved in the running of a vast underground network of Jewish life, operating schools, shuls and mikvos. These were all severe crimes which entailed a jail sentence, so, over time, imprisonment became — unfortunately — the lot of many devoted Chassidim.

Naturally, prison became normalized and even became a mark of pride. A saying in Chabad of those days went as follows: “One year in prison is obligatory; two years is optional; but three — that’s already showing off.”

I would like to share a story about one such Chassid — who sat in jail not for three years but for twenty-one!

I don’t know of any others who survived such a long prison sentence. Some were *sentenced* to twenty years, but one of two things usually occurred: either the fellow was freed before serving the duration of his sentence, or he didn’t manage to make it and passed away in prison. To survive for twenty-one years in Soviet labor camps was truly extraordinary.

This specific Jew was named Mordechai Chanzin (brother of Reb Dovid Chanzin), known better as Mottel. In 1935, he attempted to escape across the border to immigrate to the Land of Israel, but he was caught and sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment. A short time after completing his sentence, he was arrested again on trumped-up charges and sentenced to five years. Upon his release, he was once more arrested and sentenced to six. Altogether, he was imprisoned from 1935 until 1956, for a total of 21 years (*David Avdi pg. 340*).

The following story took place on Chanukah sometime during World War II.

## How to Light Candles

As Chanukah approached, the question of lighting the menorah bothered Mottel deeply. He hoped to find a way to light a menorah despite the serious risk it entailed; he was determined to fulfill the mitzvah regardless of the danger. He shared his thoughts with a group of young Jews in the camp, and they were enthusiastic as well. One volunteered to prepare wicks from old clothing, a second volunteered to fashion a makeshift menorah, and a third arranged to obtain margarine which would stand in for oil.

On the first night, they arranged to meet at a location which wouldn't draw attention from the guards. At the appointed hour, they each slipped into the designated darkened barracks and got ready to light the menorah.

Mottel was honored to kindle the first flame.

Overcome with emotion, he recited the blessings and lit the menorah. The small group sat around the candle and warmed themselves in its glow. Their thoughts carried them far away, to their homes and to the wonderful Chanukah celebrations of past years.

Suddenly, there was a noise at the door. Yelling and screaming, guards rushed inside, grabbed all the participants, handcuffed them and hauled them off to a prison cell.

For their severe crime, a 'trial' was held in the camp. Needless to say, evidence and due justice was not a necessary component in these show trials. On the appointed day, they were brought into a room in front of a severe looking judge. Being the oldest of the group and the initiator of the Chanukah celebration, Mottel was being held responsible for the entire event.

They were obviously expecting a severe punishment, but even they were surprised to hear the accusation: "These youngsters lit candles to signal to the enemy," the prosecutor claimed. "They deserve the death penalty."

The judge turned to Mottel; "Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

Mottel asked the judge, "Is this accusation being made against me or against all my friends?"

"You are all counterrevolutionaries; you will all bear the consequences together," he responded coldly.

Mottel couldn't contain himself. He was willing to undergo any punishment, but he couldn't bear the thought that these young boys would be put to death because of him. He burst into tears and began to weep. Tears began flowing down his cheeks; it was as if many years of suffering finally burst out.

The judge watched him quietly. After several minutes, he called Mottel over and asked him a second time, "Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

Mottel gathered courage and told him the truth.

"We are Jews, and we simply wanted to fulfill our religious obligation to light the menorah on Chanukah!"

The severe face of the judge seemed to change a bit; he got out of his seat and began pacing the room. Suddenly, he asked the guards to leave.

Alone in the room with the young Jewish men, he turned to Mottel and said, "Chanukah candles you said? Chanukah candles?" He sounded strangely emotional. "Do you know how to light Chanukah candles? Here, I'll show you how to light them."

As the prisoners watched unbelievably, the judge took the pages of the accusations and, one by one, slipped them into the glass lamp on the table. Within a few minutes, they were nothing but ashes.

Not believing their eyes, the Jewish prisoners stood there open mouthed. Moments later, the judge called the soldiers back inside, his face now once again carrying a severe look. "Spread these prisoners throughout the camp so they will no longer be able to meet. These traitors are not even worth the punishment they deserve."

As the room emptied out, the judge got up to leave and passed by Mottel. He bent towards him and said in a choked voice, "I am a Jew! I ask of you one thing: tell the future generations how to light Chanukah candles..." (*Sichat Hashavua* 1248)

# Was There A Better Way?

In this week's Torah portion, the saga of Joseph continues. Last week, we read how he was thrown into prison for no fault of his own, remaining there for 12 years, and this week, he becomes, overnight, the second-to-the-king.

Now, we know why Joseph needed to go to Egypt. He explained it himself to his brothers when they finally met; "G-d sent me here before you to provide sustenance..." (Vayigash 45:5). He was sent for the purpose of saving his entire family from starvation. Furthermore: the Talmud says that Jacob could have been dragged to Egypt in chains, but his great merit allowed him to be brought there in an honorable fashion. Joseph's descent to Egypt was an integral part of this plan.

But why jail? Couldn't G-d come up with a better way to make Joseph second to the king?

## The Previous Rebbe

The previous Chabad Rebbe was also named Joseph. He assumed leadership of the Chabad movement during the Bolshevik revolution, at a time when most Jewish leaders saw no Jewish future in Russia and decided to escape. He nonetheless made the courageous decision to remain in the country and not leave millions of Jews rudderless.

He immediately set to work to build a broad underground chasidic network fighting to preserve Jewish life in Russia. Whenever a Jewish school was closed, he sent people to open a new one underground. If a mohel was arrested, he immediately sent a replacement. If a mikvah was shuttered, he would arrange for a new, secret mikvah to be built in someone's private home.

Needless to say, the communist government did not appreciate his activities, and in 1927 he was arrested and sentenced to capital punishment. After international pressure, especially from the United States, Germany and Latvia, he was released after a month and soon banished from the country.

On one of the occasions that the Rebbe spoke about his father in law's experiences, he commented that if G-d is the ultimate goodness, why was it necessary for Him to place the previous Rebbe in prison? There must have been a

purpose that it served.

The Rebbe went on to explain that the previous Rebbe's imprisonment and subsequent release was the greatest possible inspiration to all those involved in spreading Judaism. They personally witnessed how their 'General', their inspiration, was imprisoned by the Soviets for his activities — and then later very publicly released by those same individuals.

The Soviets knew, the Rebbe added, what type of impact the previous Rebbe's release would have; they knew how much it would invigorate the Chassidim, but nevertheless, they had no choice but to release him — and the story continued to inspire generations of young people following in his footsteps. (Shelach 5738, Sichos Kodesh vol. 2 pg. 549).

We can apply the same idea to Joseph.

When we see that Joseph spent 12 years in the most miserable state in prison only to become the second-to-the-king overnight, it gives us the courage to endure any obstacles that stand in our way.