

A Russian Conspiracy

Category: Devarim, Ki Savo

Enemy of the Soviet Government

This week, I discovered that my father, Rabbi Moshe Greenberg, was considered an enemy of the state in the Soviet Union at the young age of just 18 years old, considered so dangerous that a memo about him was disseminated among the highest echelons of power, even those closest to Stalin.

This memo was only recently discovered:

In June 1950, a deputy minister of the Ukrainian branch of the Soviet secret police drafted an 11-page memo regarding an investigation into the case of the “Chassidim,” and sent it to Viktor Abakumov, minister of state security (MGB) of the Soviet Union—one of the closest people to Stalin.

Marked with a hand-written “Top Secret,” he reported about “the Schneerson anti-Soviet organization” headed by the “tzaddik Schneerson” which had been set up in New York by American intelligence under the guise of a yeshivah, along with an European branch established in France, and all of it connected to an extensive anti-Soviet network within the Soviet Union.

They were convinced that the FBI was working with the Rebbe in New York, and that 770 was essentially an anti Soviet center. What bothered them most was that there were Chasidim in Russia who continued to receive instructions from the Rebbe.

They reported that during the Second World War, many Chassidim escaped to Uzbekistan, where they contacted the Rebbe via the border with Iran, and upon his instruction, established illegal “Schneerson schools” where they were educated in a “religious and nationalist spirit” and provided with room and board. The true story, obviously, was that Jewish children were being taught Torah.

After the war, the memo continues, they received instructions to escape from Russia to the West—a terrible crime of its own.

The memo reports that after the Soviet Union agreed to allow Polish citizens to return home following World War Two, many Chassidim used the opportunity to forge Polish passports and escape the country. Indeed, according to Chabad historians, some 1200 people escaped over the border to Lvov, in Poland, before the Russian government stepped in and convicted the organizers to many years in prison.

But this was all an introduction. The main focus of the memo was the second attempt of Chassidim to cross the border. This attempt took place in Romania. A group of Chassidim traveled to Chernovitz, which was then on the Romanian border, because they had heard about a smuggler who claimed that he could lead them over the border to safety.

It wasn't clear whether he was a reliable smuggler or an agent of the KGB, and many were hesitant to take the risk, but three yeshivah students and their teacher decided to go ahead. On a winter night in December of 1948, the smuggler led them over the border—and brought them straight to the Romanian police, who arrested them and handed them back to the Soviet border patrols.

The memo describes the entire endeavor and mentions the four names of those involved. One of them was my father. The memo says that they were put through an intense investigation. That's not an exaggeration; my father told us, on occasion, about the terrible tortures he underwent during that period.

It turns out that the Soviet secret police knew everything. Despite the greatest efforts of the Chassidim to conceal their work, both in Jewish education and in crossing the border, it didn't help. Russian intelligence, without telephones or sophisticated technology, knew everything that was going on.

For example, the memo reports that a person named Zusha Portugal—the Skulener Rebbe, at the time still living in Romania—sent two individuals to bribe the Romanian police to let them go, but his agents arrived too late. I knew this story well, from “our side of the family,” but the Russians clearly knew it as well. They also knew to report that my father and his friend Meir Junik had been students in the secret Chabad Yeshivah in Tashkent.

What's most amazing about this memo is how it reveals that the world's greatest superpower, which controlled 300 million people under Stalin's iron grip, was occupied with the activities of three 18-year-olds, and the minister of state

security needed to receive a detailed report to ensure that their activities were stopped.

My father and his colleagues were sentenced to 25 years of hard labor in Siberia. With G-d's help, Stalin died in 1953, and their cases were reviewed. Their charges were changed from treason to illegal border crossing and they were released under "time served."

Almost all of the people mentioned in the document had a good fortune to ultimately leave the Soviet Union and raise wonderful Chasidic families, and their descendants continue to spread Judaism—just this time not in secret (Chabad.org/5619816).

Choosing G-d

In this week's Torah portion, Ki Savo, Moses tells the Jewish people that they are making a covenant with G-d to observe the commandments of the Torah. This would be in addition to the covenant that was sealed at Mount Sinai.

Then Moses says: "You have designated G-d today to be your G-d, and G-d has designated you today, to be his chosen nation" (Tavo 26:17). This was the contract between us—we choose G-d and G-d chooses us.

Regarding this verse, the Talmud tells a story about two students who came to visit Rabbi Yehoshua in the town of Peki'in.

When they arrived at his home, Rabbi Yehoshua asked them, "What novel ideas were presented in the study hall?"

"We are your students," they responded, "and we came to drink from your waters." They had come to hear from him, not to teach.

But Rabbi Yehoshua insisted, "Nonetheless, it's impossible that nothing novel was presented in the study hall..."

"Whose Shabbat was it," he asked. During that period, two people served together as nasi—leader of the Jewish people: Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah. Rabban Gamliel was the elder of the two, and he usually was the one to speak on Shabbat, but once a month the honor was given to the young

rabbi, Rabbi Elazar. Therefore, Rabbi Yehoshua asked, “Whose Shabbat was it?”

“This week,” they replied, “Rabbi Elazar spoke.”

“What did he say?”

“He spoke about the commandment of Hakhel,” the students told him, and proceeded to repeat the content of his speech.

Seeing that Rabbi Yehoshua was enjoying their presentation, they mentioned that Rabbi Elazar had presented another teaching as well. He had spoken about the verse that we mentioned earlier, “You have designated G-d today to be your G-d, and G-d has designated you today...”

Rabbi Elazar had said, “G-d said to the Jewish people: You have made Me a single entity in the world, [as you singled Me out as separate and unique]. And therefore I will make you a single entity in the world, [as you will be a treasured nation, chosen by G-d]. You have made Me a single entity in the world, as it is written: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is One.’ And therefore I will make you a single entity in the world, as it is stated: ‘And who is like Your people, Israel, one nation in the land?’ (I Chronicles 17:21).”

In other words, we make G-d special in the fact that we believe in Him and only in Him, and therefore, G-d makes us special as well and chooses us as his nation.

True Commitment

My friends, we all designate G-d as our single, special G-d when we recite the verse of Shema Yisrael. But there were those who made that same designation not by their words, but by their actions. By sacrificing their lives to live Jewishly in the most difficult circumstances—even in the miserable expanses of Siberia. They lived with the reality that there was only one G-d—even in a terrible Soviet labor camp.

We are now approaching holiday season. To our luck, all the holidays this year are in the middle of the week. Rosh Hashanah is on Monday and Tuesday, Yom Kippur is Tuesday night and Wednesday, and the holidays of Sukkot and Simchat Torah are both on Mondays and Tuesdays as well. Everybody’s worried—a full month of work will go to waste as we jump from Shabbat to holiday and from holiday to

Shabbat.

This is our opportunity to show that Shema Yisrael is a commitment not only in words, but also in action. We don't just say it; it's actually a way of life. Our 'sacrifice' will be to take these days off, keep the kids home from school, and celebrate the holidays together joyfully.

Let's demonstrate to ourselves and to our families that Judaism is the most important thing in our lives.