



Taking On Another Mitzvah

The amazing story of the Jewish hijackers in the Soviet Union.

The Spiritual Awakening

Good Shabbos!

In 1967, after the Six-Day War, a Jewish spiritual awakening spread across the Soviet Union. Both a spike in anti-Semitism on the one hand and a spike in Jewish pride over Israel's victory on the other hand caused a mighty Jewish awakening. The result was a spike in young Jews all across the Soviet Union getting together to learn Hebrew and otherwise to discover their Jewishness.

One of them was a young man in Riga, Latvia named Yosef Mendelevitch. He had grown up in an assimilated Jewish home. One fine day, he heard his friends in class announce that they would not be coming to class tomorrow because they'd be celebrating the New Year. Yosef Mendelevitch had never heard of a New Year in September. So they told him that it was a new year—Rosh Hashanah for the Jews.

So Yosef Mendelevitch found himself joining his friends in attending the only synagogue in Riga. They stood together outside with all the other young men and women, and it was an exciting scene.

Yosef Mendelevitch especially loved the way his fellow Jews were marking the New Year, and so he asked when the next Jewish holiday would be occurring. So they told him that the next holiday, Yom

Kippur, was coming up in another seven days.

Yosef Mendelevitch found himself being drawn ever closer to Judaism—even setting up a regular group that met to study. In the meantime, he discovered that there were Jews gathering secretly in cities throughout the Soviet Union, and he forged connections with several of them.

Operation Wedding

During that era, there was a young Jew in Leningrad who claimed he needed to make Aliyah—and if they didn't let him, he "needed to take himself." This Jewish man had been a pilot in the Soviet air force, and his idea was to commandeer an aircraft and fly across the border to Finland, where he would land and convene a press conference at which he would tell the world how much the Jews were suffering in Russia.

The code he gave to his plot was "Operation Wedding," because their cover story was that they were flying to a wedding.

The group learned that there was a regular commercial flight from Leningrad to a resort location in the middle of a forest not far from the Finnish border. The flight used small 12-seater aircraft, which was perfect for their mission.

At first, the entire group supported the idea. They agreed to contribute from their pooled funds towards the operation. But the closer the flight date got, the more differences of opinion appeared within the group.

One view held that the whole thing was dangerous and that in the end, it would hurt efforts to open the gates of the Iron Curtain so that more Jews would be able to leave.

Another view, one that was very much for the operation, decided to approach the Israeli government and ask them to decide for them

whether they should do it. They happened to find a Jewish tourist from Norway; they told him their entire dilemma and asked him to pass the question on to the right parties.

Well, the question got to the desk of none other than Golda Meir, the Prime Minister of Israel herself. Prime Minister Meir was very opposed to the idea. The group got a coded response that said, “The professor, who is a very high medical authority, is unable to recommend using such a medication.”

Still, the Riga group decided that they were going ahead with their plans.

On the morning of the 11th of Sivan, 5730, early in the morning, they arrived at Smolni Airport in Leningrad—but noticed immediately that they were being followed. Still, they decided that they were sticking with the mission to the end. They figured that even if they got arrested, it would create an international uproar and put pressure on the Soviet government to let Jews leave Russia.

As they approached the tarmac, several steps before the mobile staircase leading up to the plane, dozens of soldiers and KGB personnel swarmed them out of nowhere, arresting them all. And, as expected, the story hit the international media—“Jews Try to Hijack Plane to Flee Soviet Union.”

The Soviet government said that they were terrorists, and on Chanukah of 5731, the “Leningrad Trial” was held. The pilot and one other plot member was sentenced to death for “treason against country of birth.” For his role, Yosef Mendeleitch got 15 years in prison. At the end of the trial, the Jews sentenced to death stood up in court, sang “Am Yisrael Chai!” and recited the “Shma.”

From Exile To Redemption

The death sentence was reported throughout the world, bringing

condemnation and protest from every Western country. Ultimately, they “sweetened” the verdict from death to life in prison.

Yosef Mendelevitch himself ended up sitting in prison for 11 years, from 5730 through 5741. Throughout all those years, with great self-sacrifice, he made sure that he only ate kosher while in prison—as well as keep Shabbos, pray, etc. And then one day, he was suddenly transported from his labor camp in the Ural Mountains of Siberia to Moscow, where he was informed by a KGB agent that he was “sorry” to be stripping him of his Soviet citizenship and expelling him from the country. Before he knew it, he was on a plane on a one-way flight to Austria.

What Yosef Mendelevitch didn’t know was that the sudden turn of events was a result of tremendous international pressure on Russia. All he knew was that when he landed in Vienna, a full delegation representing the entire Jewish world was waiting for him; they were there to meet the legendary “Prisoner of Zion,” Yosef Mendelevitch.

Well, when he got off the plane, the Israeli ambassador to Austria stepped forward, shook his hand and said, “Whatever request you have of us, I assure you that I will fulfill it!”

And what do you think he asked for?

Here we have a young man who sat in prison for 11 years, who gets off the plane to freedom starving and broken from the Siberian cold. What do you think he was supposed to ask for?

Yosef Mendelevitch glanced up at the sky and noticed that it was still light outside. He asked for a pair of tefillin.

Throughout all the years in prison, he was able to keep many mitzvos—but putting on tefillin, he was not able to do. He didn’t have any. But now, here he was, finally in freedom, and it was still

daytime—there was still time to do that one mitzvah he could never fulfill.

The distinguished delegation was dumbstruck. The young man asked for tefillin, of all things, but not one of them had thought to bring one. The diplomats and dignitaries stood there at a loss, not knowing what to do.

But suddenly, Mr. Israel Singer, the American representative of the World Jewish Congress, stepped forward from the back of the crowd to hand Mr. Mendelevitch a pair of tefillin... as a gift from the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Mr. Singer told the astonished crowd that before he had traveled to Vienna, he had called the Rebbe's office to notify the Rebbe that he was going to meet Yosef Mendelevitch—and that the Rebbe had asked him to take a pair of new tefillin with him so as to give them to Mr. Mendelevitch as a gift!

Why Talk About Slavery

This leads us right to this week's Torah portion.

This week's Parshah is Mishpatim. The Parshah begins with the laws of the eved ivri, the Jewish manservant. The commentators all wonder why G-d chose to open the Torah's civil laws specifically with the laws of the eved ivri. Last week, we read how the Jewish Nation stood at Mt. Sinai and got the Torah from G-d Himself—and here suddenly, we are talking about servants! Couldn't the Torah have started its legal section with something more positive?

Let's digress to remind ourselves here for a moment just why the Jewish Nation went into exile in Egypt in the first place. What caused them to go down to Egypt?

Well, it all started with the fact that Yosef's brothers sold him as a

slave in Egypt—ultimately triggering the Egyptian exile in which the Jews themselves were slaves in Egypt. And thus, as soon as they left Egypt, G-d exhorted them about the laws of manservants—because it was servitude that had caused the entire Egyptian exile.

But now we can ask the Big Question: If G-d does not want there to be servants among the Jewish Nation (“They are My servants and not servants of servants”—Rashi, Shmos 21:6), why did He not forbid the entire concept of servants among the Jewish Nation?

In our Parshah, the Torah allows a Jewish person to purchase a servant, although under strict conditions. The Torah tells us that the servant can only serve for six years and then must go free, and that during those six years, the master must treat his servant by the same standards with which he treats himself. What’s more, if the servant wants to remain in his master’s employ, the servant is punished by having his ear pierced—as a deterrent against anyone else ever wanting to become a servant. So again, why does the Torah not just outlaw the entire concept of servants in the first place?

A Law They Can Handle

Let’s take a historical digression to explain this a bit.

Back in the 1920s, the United States had a Constitutional amendment that we all know of as Prohibition. This “dry period” ran from 1920 through 1933, during which the production and sale of alcohol was prohibited throughout the entire United States.

As it turned out, Prohibition did not cause people to stop needing alcohol—anyone who wanted some could easily still buy wine. And not only did Prohibition not reduce or end alcohol consumption, on the contrary—a booming black market outside the law created a huge industry of smuggling alcohol into the United States from Canada and Mexico.

As we all know, Prohibition was ultimately repealed. And today, it is only through public health information campaigns, not laws, that there is any success in convincing people to refrain from alcohol.

The fact that laws do not always have the power to successfully sway people is nothing new—as a matter of fact, that goes back as far as Mt. Sinai itself, where G-d Himself declared, “You shall have no other gods before me...”—and 40 days later, the Jewish Nation built the Golden Calf.

And so, when it comes to the subject of servants, the first mitzvah G-d gave the Jewish Nation after the Sin of the Golden Calf, the Torah chose to allow the purchase of servants—but with very strict conditions on how to treat them, etc. And that sent a message to the Jewish Nation that in truth, G-d didn’t want there to be servants among the Jewish Nation in the first place—but still, He left it to our choice. G-d wanted us to arrive at that conclusion on our own—and then, G-d’s true preference would enjoy greater endurance and permanence. And indeed, generations went by and ultimately, the lesson was internalized and servitude disappeared from the Jewish Nation—and indeed, from most of the world as a whole.

We see the same concept with regards to polygamy. The Torah doesn’t prohibit a man from marrying more than one woman—but from all the stories the Torah tells us, we learn that it’s not a good idea, and that when it does occur, it emerges from “extenuating circumstances,” not “initial preferences.” Even though it’s not prohibited, the Jewish Nation understood that the Torah doesn’t really look favorably upon such marital situations. And in the sweep of time, the Jewish Nation paved its own way towards monogamy—towards marriage consisting of one man and one woman.

The Communist Mistake

And that, my friends, was the fundamental flaw of Communism. The

Communists tried to force millions to not believe in G-d, but they didn't understand that opinions and views are not changed by force. While you could indeed compel someone to do something by sheer brute force, you'll never succeed in forcing him to think and believe as you do. And so, despite 70 years of Communist repression, the Soviet Union failed in eradicating Jewish faith. On the contrary...

And this, my friends, is true for our daily lives today.

From time to time, we may try to influence members of our families to take on one more mitzvah or another—but with coercion, it will never work! The only way that has worked, since the Giving of the Torah to this day, is to simply suggest, or to show the way.

Ultimately, in taking on that new mitzvah, everyone needs to arrive at his or her own pace.

Good Shabbos!