



Jewish Instinct

Why are Jews so willing to sacrifice their lives for Judaism?

Russian Headlines

This week, people around the world heard about Russia in the headlines; everyone is still trying to wrap their heads around what happened. In Chabad too, Russia is in the headlines; today is Yud Beis Tammuz, the date of the Previous Rebbe's release from Soviet prison in 1927.

In our family, Russia is in the headlines too, because this week was the tenth yahrzeit of my father, Rabbi Moshe Greenberg who joined Chabad as a teenager under the tutelage of the Previous Rebbe's Chassidim, and spent many years in Soviet prison for the crime of being an observant Jew.

Here are a few stories about him, which will give you a small taste of life in the Soviet Union.

For an observant Jew, and especially for a Chabad chassid, the Soviet Union held no future for him. Stalin ruled with an iron fist over all two-hundred-million citizens; religion was outlawed, and the government went to great lengths to stamp out any vestige of religious practice.

Judaism was particularly targeted. If a Torah teacher was caught, he might be sent to Siberia, and if a Mohel was discovered, he might be shot by a firing squad. People lived in perpetual fear; leaving was not an option either, because only a traitor would want to leave the utopian reality of Communism, so applying for an exit visa carried with it the risk of arrest and exile.

By the 1940s, almost every Chabad Chassid had served time in Soviet prison, whether for the crime of teaching Torah, establishing Jewish infrastructure, or even just for trying to feed his family through commerce on the black market. It almost became a mark of pride; it was so commonplace that they would joke, "One year in prison is

mandatory; two years is optional; but three years is showing off." On one occasion many years later, the Rebbe held a "competition" at his farbrengen to see who sat in Soviet prison the longest (the winner was 13 years).

The years of WWII gave a slight reprieve, because the government was occupied with the war, but as the war concluded, the persecutions began to come back, and Chassidim realized that their future in the Soviet Union was bleak, and began looking for ways out.

In 1948, my father and a few friends hired a smuggler that offered to take them over the border from Chernovitz into Romania for one thousand ruble per person. During one winter night, they carried out their plan, but after a few hours in Romania, they were caught by the Romanian border patrol and handed over to the Soviets. From there, it was a short trip into prison.

The Chasidim in Chernovitz, who had assisted them on the Russian side of the border, were unaware of what had happened. Had they successfully crossed the border, or were they apprehended?

A short while later, on Shabbos morning, as the Chasidim made their way to a clandestine prayer location, they were taken aback when they unexpectedly saw my father standing between two KGB agents. The agents hoped that my father's face would register reactions upon seeing his friends, leading more Chassidim to be identified and fall into their hands.

The attendees were engulfed in dread; they were convinced that everyone would be apprehended that night, just as had occurred in the past. Astonishingly, however, no one was arrested. My father remained stoic, betraying no one through his words or even his facial expressions.

My father shared with me that when he was arrested, he made a firm decision to never betray another Jew, no matter what. He said that they took him into a dark interrogation room, where a powerful spotlight was aimed at his face. The interrogator sat in the shadows, reading out a long list of names. Some names were made up, and the interrogators knew he didn't know them. But mixed among those names were the names of wanted Chasidim. They hoped that if he recognized a familiar name, his expression would change, allowing them to identify someone he knew and question him about their actions. However, my father would review passages from Tanya in his mind and the names wouldn't even register. He simply replied every time, "I don't know them."

Shabbos — No Matter What

After months of investigations and a trial, a verdict was given. They were charged with the most serious crime in the Soviet law—the betrayal of their homeland. While deserving the death penalty, the compassionate Stalin had declared the “abolition of the death penalty,” so the judges had no choice but to sentence him and his companions to 25 years of hard labor in the gulag.

They were sent to a labor camp in Omsk, Siberia, where they were assigned to build power stations and railway tracks. The bitter cold often reached temperatures below minus fifty degrees Celsius. Nevertheless, when my father arrived at the camp, he made a resolute decision: he would not work on Shabbos, no matter the consequences.

The first clash occurred on the very first Shabbos. In the camp, if you missed a workday, you were confined to a small concrete cell for five days, and that’s exactly where my father ended up for refusing to work. The cell was freezing, with an iron bed and crawling insects on the floor. As part of the punishment, his daily bread ration was cut in half to a mere 300 grams. He stayed in the cell until Thursday, then returned to work for two days before repeating the cycle the next Shabbos. This went on for almost two years.

He said that his body deteriorated to the point where he could witness food passing through his digestive organs. As a result, he became seriously ill and was transferred to the camp’s infirmary. There, a compassionate Jewish doctor took pity on him and went above and beyond to save his life. His family sent special injections to treat his shriveled leg, and after spending several months in the prison hospital, he was released back into the regular barracks.

This time, he decided to adopt a different strategy. He would show up for work on Shabbos but avoid doing any work. This time, the guards turned a blind eye because the prison gang leaders — who respected my father for living according to his truth — had made an arrangement with the administration to leave him be.

My father told me that he would walk quickly from one end to another in the massive labor camp so that no one would notice he wasn’t doing anything. He would repeatedly whisper to himself one word, “Shabbos, Shabbos,” to constantly remind himself to avoid doing something that was forbidden.

This is just one example of what he endured; for many years, he lived

a life of absolute self-sacrifice, a value he had learned from his parents, and especially from the Previous Rebbe's Chassidim who had educated him during his years in the Soviet Union.

Why Was It Necessary?

But here comes the question: In Jewish law, there is no obligation for a person to sacrifice their life in order to avoid desecrating Shabbos. On the contrary, there are many opinions that prohibit causing one's death due to Shabbos desecration. This same question applies to most Jewish observances; my father also observed kosher in prison, and during Pesach, he did not eat any chametz. One year, by the eighth day of Pesach, he almost died. But according to many opinions in Jewish law, he was allowed to eat chametz! Why did he go to such lengths to observe Judaism.

The same question could be asked about the story in the Torah which became the model of Jewish self-sacrifice:

After the destruction of the First Temple, when the Jewish people were exiled to Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar tried everything to force the Jews to abandon their religion and assimilate. Chapter 3 of the Book of Daniel tells how Nebuchadnezzar issued a royal decree for all the residents to attend the king's holiday, and at a certain moment, everyone was to bow down to the statue of the king. In other words, Nebuchadnezzar had built a massive idol, and everyone was commanded to bow down to it.

He declared that anyone who would not bow down to the idol would be thrown into a fiery furnace. Three young Jewish men, who had become advisers to the king, decided that they would go to the gathering place in the Valley of Dura and refuse to bow down, despite the punishment awaiting them.

On the appointed day, Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah stood there among the people, and when everyone bowed down, they remained standing upright. As expected, they were seized and thrown into the fiery furnace, and then a tremendous miracle occurred. The fire did not impact them at all; they walked around inside the fiery furnace as if they were in a park, until the king finally called them out; needless to say, he had a new respect for the G-d of the Jews.

Where did Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah get the inspiration to demonstrate such self-sacrifice? They could have escaped the city or hidden, as the prophet Ezekiel suggested to them. However, they insisted on participating and sanctifying the name of G-d in public, in

front of all the people and even among many Jews. Why did they do so? And why was it necessary?

The Talmud asks this exact question, and answers that they drew inspiration from the plague of frogs in Egypt. When Moses struck the Egyptians with the plague of frogs, the frogs crept into every location possible; they entered the houses, beds, and even the ovens, dying in “self sacrifice.” Chananya, Mishael, and Azariah learned a *kal vachomer* (a *fortiori*) argument: if frogs were willing to be burned for the sanctification of G-d’s name, how much more so should they be willing to do so.

At first glance, this comparison is strange. What can we learn from frogs? Do frogs have free will to think and make decisions? Did they know they would be burned and still go willingly?

The answer is that animals don’t make logical decisions; they follow their instinct—and that is exactly the point. The decision to sacrifice oneself for Judaism goes beyond rational contemplation or legalistic Halachic debate. It taps into a primal Jewish instinct that emanates from the very core of their being. When pressured to act against G-d’s will, a Jew instinctively rebels, even without a complete understanding of why. His essence rejects an act that is against G-d’s commands—it’s a force he simply cannot defy.

Jewish history has proven that the willingness to sacrifice one’s life for the preservation of Torah and mitzvot is deeply ingrained in the Jewish soul. The lesson from the frogs is that our connection to Judaism is instinctive; that is the secret of Jewish survival.

Hitting the Rock

This brings us to the weekly Torah portion. Parshat Chukat tells the story of “Mei Merivah”; the Jewish people complain about the lack of water, and G-d commanded Moses to speak to the rock. Instead of speaking, he hits the rock, and an abundance of water flowed out.

G-d is not pleased with his decision: “Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, you shall not bring this congregation into the land.” Because Moses did not sanctify the name of G-d by following His exact instructions, he was not destined to enter the land of Israel.

How exactly was this a desecration of G-d’s name? After all, a rock in the desert was giving water—an unbelievable miracle!

Rashi explains that if Moses would have spoken to the rock, the people would have learned a lesson: “If this inanimate rock, which doesn’t speak or hear and doesn’t require sustenance, follows G-d’s instructions, how much more so we... (Chukas 20:12)”

At first glance, it sounds strange. What is the meaning of learning from the rock? After all, Rashi himself says that the rock neither hears nor sees, so it has no choice. What can a person, who has free will, learn from an inanimate stone?

But that is precisely the message. Just as the rock acts without thinking about its own gain and benefits, a Jew’s instincts are so connected to the Creator that they do G-d’s will without calculations.

On Yud Beis Tammuz, the Previous Rebbe paved the way for self-sacrifice. When it comes to doing something Jewish, we do it even if it totally contradicts our senses. We do it not out of logical conclusion, but because we cannot do otherwise; as Chassidim would say, “*Azoy un nit anderish*—This and not any other way.