



The Testimony of the Torah

What happened when a Russian Jew made it back to Russia?

The Soviet Visit

Good Yom Tov!

In 1965, a Chabad Chasid named Zalman Gurevitch, who lived in Canada, traveled to the Soviet Union.

Today, it seems like a simple thing. But back then, it was an exercise in complication. Soviet Russia generally didn't lend itself to tourism. They rationed tourist visas. Jews, and religious Jews in particular, were afraid of visiting Russia. The atheistic Russian government fought against everything Jewish. The atmosphere was antireligious and the antisemitism could be felt everywhere. But this Chasid, because he did business with Russia, succeeded in getting a visa to visit Russia.

In those years, those who had already succeeded in visiting Russia were English-speaking Jews who had not really succeeded in connecting with the Russian-speaking Jews of Russia. But because Mr. Gurevitch spoke fluent Russian, he was able to get his finger on the Russian Jewish pulse and really feel what was happening with Russian Jewry.

But that wasn't just because he spoke the language. It was also because he had the same mentality. Russian Jews were generally not the kind of people who would tell you about their problems, both because of fear of the KGB but more so, because they are not emotional people and also because with Russians, everything is a secret.

In Russia (at least back then), as in most countries, there is a law that makes childhood education mandatory. Every kid must go to school. The only day of rest that they had in those years was Sunday—meaning, that every student had to go to school every Shabbos throughout the year, and when the Jewish holidays came

around, he would have to show up in school, even on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

When a Jewish kid would be born in Soviet Russia, it was impossible to do a bris on him because it was considered an illegal action. A mohel caught doing a bris would be sent to prison and the baby's father would lose his job and be left with no source of income.

In such an environment, Jews would put on tefillin under their blankets so that their own kids would not tell their teachers in school what their fathers were doing at home, and then start spying on their own parents. If your son was going to turn 13 and you wanted to buy him tefillin, it was impossible to get them, at any price. They simply weren't available. A lulav and esrog set? Maybe you'd find one in the entire city, and even then, only in the big cities. In short, for a Jew to live Jewishly in the Soviet Union was hell.

Mr. Gurevitch witnessed all that, returned to the United States, and reported to the Rebbe all that he had seen. This is not to say that the Rebbe didn't know what was going on in Russia—the Rebbe was constantly in contact with Soviet Jewry. They were the apple of his eye. Still, to hear it again from someone who had just now gotten back from “there,” and who personally spoke Russian and understood what was being said between the lines, was very important to the Rebbe.

So this Chasid stayed in New York for Shabbos. That Shabbos, the Rebbe had a farbrengen. In the middle of the farbrengen, between the Rebbe's talks, Mr. Gurevitch looked at the Rebbe and said “L'chaim!” And then, without any warning, he burst out crying. The bad situation of Russian Jewry was so close to his heart that the moment he approached the Rebbe, all his emotions came to the fore and he burst out in intense sobbing.

Right after that, the Rebbe started talking about Soviet Jewry, “our brothers in constraint and captivity,” who want to be Jewish but who cannot—they are not able to get esrogim for Sukkos and they are ready to pay any price for an esrog, but it doesn't help because it's simply impossible to obtain one there. The Rebbe cried a lot and said, “They have neither day nor night,” and so they are not capable of studying Torah or davening. There are no shuls. The Rebbe spoke at length and concluded that the one thing certain for Soviet Jewry is that “those who are in constraint and captivity will be the first to merit going out of exile with the coming of Moshiach” (Toras Menachem Vol. 44, pg. 285 et al).

Testimony

The Midrash (Sefer HaToda'ah, pg. 394), tells us that at the time of the Destruction of the First Temple, the Prophet Yirmiyahu went to the Meoras Hamachpeilah in Chevron, so as to arouse the "Sleepers of Chevron," the Patriarchs of the world, to rise up in Heaven and ask for divine mercy for the Jewish Nation which had gone into exile.

So the Midrash says that Avraham Avinu rose before G-d in Heaven, so to speak, and said, "Master of the Universe! For what reason did You exile my sons and hand them over to the nations... and destroy the Beis Hamikdash? G-d said to Avraham, 'Your sons sinned and violated the entire Torah and the 22 letters in it.' And Avraham replied to G-d: 'Master of the Universe! Who is it that testifies against Israel that they have violated Your Torah?' To which G-d replied, 'The Torah shall come and testify against Israel.' "

So the Torah immediately arrived to testify against the Jewish Nation. And the Midrash continues: "Avraham said to the Torah, 'My daughter! You have arrived to testify against Israel, that they have violated your commandments, and you have no shame before me?! Remember the day that G-d brought you about to every nation and tongue and they did not want to accept you, until my sons came to Mt. Sinai where they accepted you and honored you! And now you come to testify against them on the day of their anguish?!' When the Torah heard this, she stood to one side and did not testify against them."

The Midrash continues: "G-d said to Avraham, 'Let the twenty-two letters come and testify against Israel!' And the 22 letters immediately arrived. The Aleph stepped forward to testify against Israel that they had violated the Torah. Avraham said to her: 'Aleph, you are the head of all the letters—yet you come to testify against Israel on the day of their anguish?! Remember

the day that G-d revealed Himself Mt. Sinai and opened with you, "Anochi Hashem Elokecha," and no nation or tongue but my sons accepted you—yet you come to testify against my sons?!' And the Aleph immediately stood to one side and did not testify against them."

"Then came the Beis to testify against Israel. Avraham said to her, 'My daughter, you have come to testify against my sons who are fluent in the five books of the Torah which you head?! [Bereishis starts with a Beis.] So the Beis immediately stood off to one side and did not testify at all."

“And since all the other letters saw that Avraham had silenced them, they were ashamed and stood by themselves and did not testify against Israel.”

Moshe’s Testimony

Now, this concept of the Torah “testifying” regarding the Jewish Nation was already mentioned in the Torah itself, in the Book of Devarim.

Towards the end of the Torah portion of Vayeilech, Moshe Rabbeinu says, “And it will be, when they will encounter many evils and troubles, this song will bear witness against them, for it will not be forgotten from the mouth of their offspring” (Devarim 31:21). There, Moshe Rabbeinu says that the Torah will testify regarding the Jewish Nation.

However, Moshe Rabbeinu raised the concept of testifying up a level—as a matter of fact, he flipped it around. He summoned the Torah to testify *for* the Jewish Nation, not against it. Moshe was a great believer in the Jewish Nation; he argued that, on the contrary, it is the Torah herself that needs to come forward and testify before G-d about the Jewish Nation’s sacrifice towards seeing to it that the Torah “is not forgotten from the mouths of his progeny.”

So the Torah testifies about how many Jews risked their lives in Russia to perform brisim, and how much blood, sweat and tears it cost them to observe Yom Kippur [there was one synagogue officially opened in Moscow during the Soviet Era, in which Jews were officially allowed to pray on Yom Kippur. However, at the end of the Neilah prayer, when they blow the shofar, you’ll hear the people declare, “Next year in Jerusalem!” at every synagogue anywhere else in the world. But in Soviet Russia, if they were to say such a thing, they were likely to be suspected of Zionism, with “they,” the Israelis, being opposed to Communism and thus part of the “imperialist” West. And so those precious Jews in Russia would have to say, “L’shana haba’ah b’Yerushalayim!” quietly, so that the spies who were everywhere would not hear it.]

So Moshe Rabbeinu turns the tables in the trial of the Jewish Nation. He subpoenas the Torah to come and testify for the Jewish Nation every day—and especially on Simchas Torah.

And so tonight, my friends, when we come to dance with the Torah scrolls, we are really joyfully “summoning the witnesses”—we are calling upon the Torah to come and testify for us that for over 3,300 years, Jews have seen to it that the Torah is “not forgotten from the

mouths of his progeny.” And we thus guarantee that we continue the chain of the generations—that even in generations to come, the Torah will come and testify for us, and be happy and proud that her sons are dancing with her.

Good Yom Tov!