



The Speech that Echoed Throughout the World

When the Alter Rebbe was released from prison, it ushered in an unprecedented level of growth for the Chassidic movement. The Jewish people seem to be on the cusp of a similar moment right now.

Shema Yisroel

On November 8, a month after the outbreak of the war, a special session took place in the European Parliament. Yoni Asher, whose wife and two daughters were abducted by Hamas terrorists into Gaza, appeared and delivered a heartfelt speech. At the end of his very emotional delivery, he rose, placed one hand on his head and the other on his eyes, and declared, "Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad." His speech reverberated around the world.

On November 24th, Yoni's wife, Doron, and their two daughters, Aviv and Raz, returned from captivity in the group of hostages released from Gaza and were reunited.

His "Shema Yisrael" reminded me of a similar story that happened during this same time of year, 225 years ago, when the Alter Rebbe was imprisoned in Petropavlovsk in S. Petersburg due to false accusations stemming from the war against the Chassidic movement.

While in prison, he was visited by a minister who was very well-educated and well-versed in the Torah. The minister asked the Rebbe if he could pose a question. He recounted the biblical story of Adam and Eve and the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, where G-d revealed Himself to Adam and asked him, "Where are you?" The minister asked, "Did G-d not know where Adam was?"

The Alter Rebbe first gave the common explanation—that it was a question meant by G-d to initiate a conversation, much like how

people open a dialogue before getting to the main point. The minister knew this explanation, but he wanted more. "What is the Rebbe's own explanation?" he asked.

"Do you believe," asked the Rebbe, "that the Torah is eternal and relevant at all times and in all places, for every generation and every individual?"

"I do," replied the minister.

"The meaning of the verse," the Alter Rebbe then said, "is that G-d—at every moment in time—calls out to a person and asks, 'Where are you?' Every person has a predetermined amount of years and days. What have you done with them? How many years have passed, and what have you accomplished? For example, you," the Rebbe turned to the minister, "have lived such and such years," pinpointing the minister's exact age. "What have you accomplished? How have you contributed?"

The minister was deeply moved by the Rebbe's knowledge of his age and quickly became an enthusiastic supporter. Eventually, he approached the Rebbe and offered his services.

The Rebbe said, "I want to inform my family that I am alive."

The minister asked how he was supposed to identify the chassidim from the misnagdim, and the Rebbe said, "When I was arrested, I told my brother-in-law, Yisroel Kozik, to travel to S. Petersburg immediately. He was wearing a housecoat at the time, and I'm sure that he immediately set out for Petersburg. Therefore, if you see a Jew dressed peculiarly, know that it's Yisrael Kozik."

The minister spent some time wandering the streets until he identified Yisrael Kozik. Surreptitiously, he motioned to Kozik to follow him, and brought him until his home. Standing outside the house, Kozik suddenly noticed a large melon fall from the window. Realizing it was meant for him, Kozik grabbed the melon and rushed to his fellow Chassidim. They cut it open and discovered a small note inside with the Rebbe's handwriting, bearing the words "Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad." With this verse, the Rebbe conveyed that he was alive, but also—and more importantly—he gave hope and strength to the Chassidim, helping them persevere until his release.

The Message of Chassidism

Why was the Alter Rebbe incarcerated?

The Chassidic movement was founded 300 years ago by the Baal Shem Tov. During that time, Jews living in Eastern Europe suffered from abject poverty. Parents couldn't afford to pay for their children's education, leading to a situation where most Jewish children couldn't read or write, neither in Hebrew nor in the local language.

As time passed, an elite group of educated Jews emerged—those who could afford to study Torah and teach their children. The rest of the community, though wonderful people, were simple and uneducated.

The elite Jewish group sought to distance itself from the masses and they dominated the Jewish establishment. They were the high-riding rabbis and community leaders, while the rest of the people felt downtrodden and hopeless.

Then came the Baal Shem Tov, who proclaimed that G-d is a merciful Father. Just as a loving father cares for all his children, regardless of their intelligence or learning, so too does our Heavenly Father love every Jew, even the simplest among them.

This message breathed new life and hope into thousands of Jews across Poland, Ukraine, and beyond. After years of being scorned and told that G-d would punish them for not being good enough, they were now told that when they do an act of kindness for another Jew, they cause great joy in heaven. They were told that G-d loves them, regardless of their level of education. It was like awakening someone from a deep slumber.

Of course, the “elite” didn't like hearing this; they wanted to maintain their hierarchical control over the Jewish establishment. This led them to wage war against the Chassidic movement, a conflict that escalated from generation to generation. When it reached the third generation of Chassidic leaders, with the Alter Rebbe spreading Chassidism in the region of Vilna—the epicenter of the opposition—the opposition couldn't tolerate it. They resorted to slander, and told the Russian authorities that the Rebbe intended to rebel against the Czar.

The Czar, who was always paranoid that people wanted to rebel against him, heard accusations that the Chassidic Rebbe was behaving like a king and planning a rebellion, so he immediately ordered the Rebbe's arrest and brought him to Petersburg, accusing him of insurrection against the regime.

So, 225 years ago, on the day after Simchat Torah, Russian soldiers appeared with the dreaded black carriage that was used to arrest those who rebelled against the monarchy.

The Rebbe was imprisoned in Petersburg for 53 days and released today, the 19 Kislev. The story is told that during his imprisonment, he received a visit from the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement, and his successor, the Maggid of Mezeritch. The Alter Rebbe asked them, “Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this?” He wanted to understand why this had suddenly befallen him as he endeavored to spread the message of Chassidism.

His teachers replied that a heavenly indictment was issued against him because of the way he was spreading the deepest secrets of the Torah to the masses.

“So when I leave here, I should stop?”

They answered, “Now that you’ve started, don’t stop. On the contrary, spread Chassidism even further.” Indeed, after his release, he spread Chassidus to an ever greater extent, and actually far far more than before.

The Two Eras

In the Chabad world, there are two eras, the “pre-Petersburg era” and the “post-Petersburg era.” After the Alter Rebbe’s imprisonment, the Chassidic movement flourished on an entirely different scale, and continues to grow until this very day throughout the world.

G-d willing, this will happen in the current times as well.

With the war that began on Simchat Torah, and with the release of so many captives just before 19 Kislev, a new era has begun for the Jewish people. The conflicts and divisions that existed before the war belong to the past. Today, Jewish people worldwide and especially in Israel are living in an entirely different atmosphere—there is an incredible spiritual awakening and a feeling of unity that hasn’t existed in many decades.

And, just as the Alter Rebbe’s release brought about an incredible growth for the Chassidic movement, this war will—G-d willing—bring tremendous growth for the Jewish people, both on a material level, and, even more so, on a spiritual level.