

The Yahrzeit of a Giant

Category: Devarim, Ekev

Every Chabad family has a Levi. What's up with that?

All The Famous Names

“Mendy and Mushky.” As I’m sure you all know, these are household names in every Chabad home.

There’s also another name that you’ve certainly heard before — Levi Yitzchak. It was the name of the Rebbe’s father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, of blessed memory, whose 80th yahrzeit we mark this Shabbat, on the 20th of Av.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was an extraordinary Torah scholar and a Kabbalist. In 1908, at just 31 years old, he was appointed as the rabbi of Yekaterinoslav, the fourth-largest city in Ukraine, which had a vibrant Jewish community made up of people from all backgrounds, religious, Zionist, Bundists—people of all stripes.

When the Bolshevik Revolution took place in 1920, the communists declared war on religion in general, and on Judaism in particular. Being a rabbi in Soviet Russia became increasingly difficult, but Rabbi Levi Yitzchak didn’t back down. Instead, he did everything he could to keep Judaism alive and thriving, both in his city and throughout the country.

Now, as we stand forty days before Rosh Hashanah, I want to share a story with you about the challenges that Jews in the Soviet Union faced during those times.

The Early Morning Minyan

By 1935, only two synagogues remained in Yekaterinoslav—the communists had shut down the rest. The only reason the main synagogue was allowed to stay open was that it served the working class, and workers were glorified under the Communist ideology. The gabbai was a tailor, the treasurer a shoemaker, and most of the congregants were tradespeople.

That year, during the High Holidays, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak led the services at the

synagogue. As we know, even those who don't usually attend synagogue feel a pull to join in the prayers during the High Holidays. But in Russia, the law required everyone to work every work day. Under communist rule, if you weren't productive, you were labeled a "parasite"—unworthy of even a piece of bread. Missing work could cost you your job, and if it was found out that you attended synagogue for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, the consequences could be even worse.

For these Jews, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak organized an early morning minyan on Rosh Hashanah that finished by 8:00 AM, so people could go straight from synagogue to work. He did the same for Yom Kippur. But on Yom Kippur, after work, instead of going home, everyone returned to the synagogue for the Neilah service. By then, the synagogue was packed, and even the streets outside were filled with people.

The Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Chana wrote in her memoirs that everyone was utterly exhausted—physically from the hardships and long walks, and emotionally from the pain of having to work on such a holy day. The heartbreak felt during those prayers was indescribable.

When Rabbi Levi Yitzchak talked about this, he would often break down in tears. But even through his sadness, he would smile and say, "This is the true essence of a Jew."

(From the memoirs of Rebbetzin Chana, booklet 26)

Certifying the Flour

Back in those days, the city of Yekaterinoslav was a major wheat supplier for large parts of Russia. As Passover approached, Jews from all over the Soviet Union would come to buy wheat for matzah. Since it was for Passover, people wanted the rabbi's certification that the wheat was kosher for Pesach.

The government officials in charge of the wheat approached Rabbi Levi Yitzchak and asked him to certify it. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak gladly agreed—but with one condition: that it actually be kosher. He insisted on appointing his own supervisors to ensure that the wheat never came into contact with water and that no water was used in the milling process. Although milling without water

produced less and made the process more complicated and expensive, it was necessary to meet the strict requirements for Passover.

As expected, the authorities were annoyed. They wanted him to simply give his stamp of approval, yet here he was making demands! In short order, they accused him of sabotaging the Russian economy. They claimed that he was intentionally causing financial losses for the government and forcing them to spend thousands of rubles on kosher certification.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was not impressed. He replied that according to Russian law and his own conscience, he was obligated to ensure the wheat was truly kosher. He was very firm that no one would force him to falsely certify something that wasn't correct.

Seeing that he wouldn't budge, they suggested that he travel to Moscow to meet with President Kalinin, the head of the Soviet Union at that time, to explain the situation directly. If he would give permission for the kosher supervision and the extra expense entailed, he wouldn't have any problem with it.

Perhaps they thought Rabbi Levi Yitzchak would be afraid to take on their offer, but he wasn't. He made the trip to Moscow and managed to meet with President Kalinin. He presented his case, and the president issued an order that wherever Rabbi Schneerson sent his supervisors, they were to be supported and their instructions followed—even if it meant extra costs. That year, across Ukraine, the communist government provided kosher flour for Passover to any Jew who wanted it. (Sicha 8 Nissan 5743 (1983), video about Rabbi Levi Yitzchak by JEM, (Disc 104, Program 413) and Toldos Levi Yitzchak, Vol. 1, p. 181.)

This was an incredible achievement. This was during a time when people were rationed to just 30 grams of black bread per day, yet the government made sure that white flour was available for matzah. This success, ensuring thousands of Jews had kosher matzah for Pesach, brought Rabbi Levi Yitzchak “true spiritual joy.”

The Arrest

However, his joy did not last long. Just five days before Passover, on 9 Nissan 5699 (1939), KGB agents showed up at Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's home and arrested

him. Thankfully, they allowed him to take two kilograms of matzah with him, and that's how he made it through Passover in prison.

During one of the interrogations, the investigator grilled him, asking how he managed to pull off such a large-scale project during a year of severe shortages—especially for something religious. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, quick on his feet, cleverly replied that he bribed President Kalinin... The topic never came up again.

Another incident that led to his arrest took place just before Passover that same year. The government was conducting a census, and one of the questions was, 'Do you believe in G-d?' Many Jews were terrified to answer truthfully, worried that admitting their faith could cost them their jobs. On Shabbat, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak stood up in the packed synagogue and boldly declared that answering 'no' to this question was like denying your very Judaism—no Jew should ever do such a thing.

His words struck a chord. One man, who worked in a government job he desperately needed, had let his wife fill out the census for him, and she had written that he didn't believe in G-d. After hearing Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, he marched down to the census office and demanded they change his answer, insisting that the previous response was a mistake—he did believe in G-d.

In one of the interrogations, they asked Rabbi Levi Yitzchak if it was true that he encouraged people to openly declare their faith. He responded that, since the Soviet government was so committed to honesty, he felt it was his duty to ensure that no Jew lied on the census out of fear. He wanted to make sure that no one denied their belief just to stay out of trouble.

(From the memoirs of Rebbetzin Chana, booklets 1 and 2)

The heel

This week's Torah portion is called Eikev. In its simplest meaning, "eikev" translates to "because." Moses tells the Jewish people that because they keep the commandments, G-d will bless them with children, abundant livelihood, and more.

But "eikev" has another meaning—"heel," as in the heel of the foot. Chassidism explains that the heel, unlike the head or the heart, represents serving G-d

through accepting His will, rather than through intellectual understanding or emotional connection. (Likutei Sichot Vol. 34, p. 254)

Some people fulfill the commandments they logically comprehend, like honoring one's parents—something everyone agrees makes sense. Others might feel a strong emotional connection to certain mitzvot, like eating matzah on Passover, which resonates with many Jews.

But when it comes to a mitzvah that doesn't make much sense, or one that they don't feel emotionally attached to, it becomes much harder to observe. Think about fasting on Yom Kippur in 1936, in the Soviet Union. The government was battling anything Jewish, and forced everyone to show up to work on Yom Kippur. Yet, there were Jews who woke up early, prayed before work, walked several kilometers on an empty stomach to their jobs, and then returned to the synagogue for the Neilah service. This was a mitzvah fulfilled with the "heel"—a pure act of accepting G-d's will.

A soldier follows orders, whether he understands or not. When a Jew performs a mitzvah—and doesn't even have the satisfaction of observing it properly, because he would lose his job if he didn't show up —that's when he becomes a true soldier in G-d's army.