

# Yizkor: The Soul's Secret Superpower

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

*What has the past year taught us about the nature of the Jewish people?*

## The Famous Chossid

I want to share with you a story about a devoted Chabad chassid who lived in Russia during the Communist era, one of the most renowned Chabad chassidim of the last generation — Reb Mendel Futerfas.

After World War II, the Russian government allowed for the repatriation of the Polish citizens who had escaped the Nazis by fleeing into Russia. Many Chabad chassidim saw this as their chance to get out of the Soviet Union, the “world’s largest prison,” by posing as Polish citizens.

A group of chassidim started forging Polish passports for their families, helping them sneak across the border. It was incredibly dangerous—they all knew that if they got caught, it meant years of hard labor in Siberia.

Rabbi Mendel Futerfas was one of those chassidim who was determined to help others escape so they could live openly Jewish lives. When it was his family’s turn to leave, he couldn’t bring himself to abandon the other chassidim still trapped in Russia. So, he sent his family ahead while he stayed behind to help the others.

He knew he was taking a huge risk. The moment the government caught wind of what was happening, the doors would be closed and he would probably be stuck in Russia forever. Still, he felt it was the right thing to do.

Rabbi Mendel sent his family ahead, and after a lot of challenges, they finally made it to England and settled in London. Meanwhile, he stayed behind in Russia. When the forgery project began to wind down, he decided it was time to reunite with them. He got on a train to Poland with a few other chassidim, with their own forged documents that claimed they were Polish citizens.

But just before they could cross the border, soldiers with rifles stormed the train and arrested him and the others.

Rabbi Mendel spent nine years in Siberian prisons. In 1953, after Stalin died, political prisoners were released, and he was freed. But his struggles weren't over yet—it wasn't until 1964 that he finally got permission to leave Russia and reunite with his family. Later, the Rebbe sent him to be a spiritual mentor (*mashpia*) at the Tomchei Temimim yeshiva in Kfar Chabad. Rabbi Mendel became a living legend.

## Yom Kippur in the Gulag

One time, Rabbi Mendel shared what Yom Kippur was like for him in Siberia:

“When we were arrested and sent to the camps, of course, they didn't let us keep prayer books or *machzorim*. On regular days, we usually remembered most of the prayers by heart, but when the High Holidays came around, it got much harder. There are so many prayers and liturgical poems, and we didn't know them all from memory.

“We were all alone in the labor camp for the High Holidays—no tallit, no *machzor*, no minyan, no shofar. We tried to recall as much as we could from memory, and we managed to piece together parts of the prayers.

“Naturally, in a situation like that, you think much more deeply about the meaning behind the prayers. If you remember something, you try to dig deeper into the meaning of each word.

“So, I reached the poem ‘*V'chol Ma'aminim*’—one of the prayers we recite on Yom Kippur. It talks about how the whole world believes in G-d's power. I kept repeating the words I remembered, using the special tune of the High Holidays, focusing intensely on each word and its meaning.

“As I was singing the poem to that special Yom Kippur tune, a thought hit me: Really? Is it true that ‘*V'chol Ma'aminim*’—‘everyone believes’? All those Bolsheviks, the Yevsektsiya, the communists, atheists, and all the others I see and hear around me (and suffer from constantly...), the ones who proudly trample everything sacred to the Jewish people, who mock anything that even hints at

faith, claiming religion is just ‘the opiate of the masses’—can we really say that all of them believe? Really, *‘V’chol Ma’aminim’*?

“After thinking about it for a while, I came to a conclusion: if it’s written in the prayer book, then it must be true—yes, *‘V’chol Ma’aminim’*, everyone believes!”

“A few days after Yom Kippur, I was lying in my bunk in the barracks. The ‘beds’ were just three tiers of wooden planks sticking out from the walls, and I was on one of the lower ones. It was late at night when I suddenly noticed a man staring at me intensely.

“This man was huge, the kind of person who looked like he could crush someone like me with just two fingers. His face looked like that of a robber or a killer. I started to get scared—when you’re in a place like that, you’ve got every reason to be. Life there wasn’t worth much, and it wasn’t unusual for prisoners to murder each other.

“He climbed down from his bunk and started walking straight towards me. I thought, ‘G-d forbid, this is it.’ Then, to my shock, he asked, ‘Are you Jewish?’ I hesitantly said yes, and then, in this rough voice, he said, ‘I’m Jewish too.’

“After a moment, he added, with emotion, ‘You know, I fasted on Yom Kippur!’

“‘Of course, I didn’t know when Yom Kippur was, and I hadn’t even thought about it,’ he explained. ‘But while I was working in my assigned group, I saw some Jewish prisoners who were allowed to “walk” in the yard for about an hour under heavy guard, their heads down and their hands clasped behind their backs. Despite the risk, I overheard one of them whisper to his friend, “Tomorrow is Yom Kippur!”’ (Morgen is Yom Kippur)

“‘When I heard that and realized it was Yom Kippur, I decided that right there, in the gulag, I was going to fast. I pretended to be sick and didn’t go to work (nobody suspected me because I didn’t look Jewish at all), and I spent the whole day lying on my bunk.’”

“I wanted to pray, but I didn’t know any prayers, not a single one. I tried to think of anything I could remember, and suddenly, one prayer came to mind—the one my grandmother had taught me to say every morning when I woke up: *‘Modeh Ani lefanecha, Melech chai v’kayam, shehechezarta bi nishmati b’chemlah,*

*rabbah emunatecha*—‘I thank You, living and eternal King, for returning my soul to me with compassion, great is Your faithfulness.’ So I just lay there all day, repeating it over and over, dozens, hundreds, maybe even thousands of times: ‘*Modeh Ani lefanecha Melech chai v’kayam shehechezarta bi nishmati b’chemlah rabbah emunatecha.*’

Rabbi Mendel concluded, “After hearing his story, all of my doubts disappeared. If even this man—who looked so far removed from Judaism—if even he believes, then without a doubt, *V’chol Ma’aminim* is true. Everyone believes” (Reb Mendel, pg. 151).

So, what happened to that Jew? Where did this sudden awakening come from?

## The Five Levels

In Judaism, we pray three times every day — Morning, Afternoon, Evening: *Shacharit*, *Mincha*, and *Maariv*. On Shabbat, we add an extra prayer called *Musaf*. But once a year, on Yom Kippur, we pray five times in a single day. Along with the usual three daily prayers and the *Musaf* for Shabbat and holidays, we also add *Ne’ilah*, which closes the holy and special day.

Why five prayers on Yom Kippur? According to Kabbalah, the Jewish soul has five names: *Nefesh*, *Ruach*, *Neshamah*, *Chayah*, and *Yechidah*. In other words, it is divided into these five levels. The lowest is *Nefesh*, followed by *Ruach* and then *Neshamah*. These names are mentioned in the Torah itself—sometimes referring to life as *Nefesh* and other times using the other terms. Kabbalah introduces us to the two highest levels of the soul, called *Chayah* and *Yechidah*.

The Rebbe explains (Torat Menachem, Vol. 16, p. 212) that each prayer on Yom Kippur corresponds to one of the soul’s levels. The first prayer, on Yom Kippur night, purifies the *Nefesh*, the lowest part of the soul, which even animals have. During *Shacharit*, we elevate the *Ruach* level of the soul. The *Mincha* prayer corresponds to the *Neshamah* level.

During *Musaf*, we connect with the *Chayah* level of the soul. And in *Ne’ilah*, the final prayer, we reveal the essence of the soul, the *Yechidah*. That’s why we end *Ne’ilah* by saying, “*Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad*”—at that moment, G-d’s oneness and the Jew’s *Yechidah* merge and strengthen each other.

When Jews say *Shema Yisrael* during *Ne'ilah*, they reach their highest and most spiritual state of the whole year.

Yom Kippur reveals the deep connection between the Jewish people and their Father in Heaven—the “divine spark” hidden in every Jewish soul. That’s why even Jews who may not be involved with Judaism throughout the year still come to pray on Yom Kippur.

And as the Rebbe points out, we see this clearly at the Yizkor service. The Yizkor service is recited 4 times a year, during each major holiday. Yet, the Yom Kippur Yizkor service is by far the best attended one. The awakening of the Divine Spark within every Jew pulls him to Shul on Yom Kippur.

## **This Past Year**

This past year, the *Yechidah*, the deepest part of the soul, was revealed not on Yom Kippur, but on Simchat Torah. On October 7th, the incredible strength that lies within every Jew came to light. Suddenly, there was a sense of Jewish solidarity that we hadn’t seen since the Yom Kippur War. Usually, when war breaks out in any country, people do everything they could to flee. But in Israel, the opposite happened—300,000 Israelis did whatever it took to return home as fast as possible. Some even sat on the floors of planes, using any means they could to reach Israel.

Jews from around the world stepped up to help. It’s said that the Jewish people donated a billion dollars to Israel over the past year.

But the most amazing thing was the younger generation—the ones everyone thought were glued to their smartphones and not interested in anything else. “They’re spoiled,” the older generation said. “They’ve been given everything on a silver platter; they won’t be able to handle the demands of war.” But to everyone’s surprise, it was this younger generation that risked their lives to protect the people and the land, fighting with incredible dedication for an entire year—dedication that maybe even the older generation couldn’t have matched.

The *Yechidah*, the soul’s innermost strength, the power of self-sacrifice that exists in every Jew, has been revealed, shining brighter than ever. The parents of these young people can, and should, be proud of the children they’ve raised. Today, we

come before G-d and say: For an entire year, this nation has stood at a spiritual level that Jews usually only reach during *Ne'ilah* on Yom Kippur. Please have mercy on us and grant us a year of blessing and joy. And most importantly, give us a year without wars, suffering, or pain—speedily, in our days, Amen.