

The Worst Three Hours

Category: Bereishis, Vayeshev

The Alter Rebbe's three hours & Yosef's three hours.

Today's Special Date

Today is a Chabad holiday; its Yud Tes Kislev, the day that marks the Alter Rebbe's release from Tsarist imprisonment. It's called the Rosh Hashanah of Chassidism.

However, not everyone knows that we actually celebrate this holiday for two days—on both the 19th and 20th of Kislev.

Why isn't one day enough? If we are celebrating the release of the Alter Rebbe, let's just look at the calendar and determine whether he was freed on the 19th or the 20th! Why two days?

The Alter Rebbe's Imprisonment

The Chassidic movement began about 300 years ago with Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov. His revolutionary message was simple yet profound: every Jew, no matter their background, is as precious to G-d as an only child born to elderly parents.

At that time, the scholars and Rabbis in the Jewish world were considered elite and they treated the average Jew as second class citizen. They didn't appreciate this message that simple Jews were equal to them in G-d's eyes. As the Chassidic movement spread among thousands of Jews across Eastern Europe, so did the opposition.

The Alter Rebbe, a leader of the third generation of Chassidism, had incredible success spreading Chassidism in Vilna, the very heart of the opposition. He attracted many young Torah scholars to the Chassidic path, which naturally didn't sit well with the *Misnagdim* (*opponents*). They were determined to put an end to his influence—at any cost.

Their opposition reached a tipping point when they falsely accused the Alter Rebbe of rebellion against the Russian monarchy. The Alter Rebbe used to collect money in Russia and send it to support the impoverished Jewish community in Israel which was then under Ottoman control.

They took that information and reported to the Tsar that the Rebbe was sending funds to the Ottoman Empire, which was at that time Russia's arch enemy. The Tsar, already consumed by paranoia about rebellions, treated the accusations as a serious threat. Soldiers were dispatched to arrest the Rebbe and take him to St. Petersburg for interrogation.

After the High Holidays of 1798, the Alter Rebbe was taken into custody and brought to the capital.

Once there, the authorities launched a thorough investigation. Some of the questioning was done in person, while other inquiries were submitted in writing. To the written questions, the Rebbe responded in writing, producing five fascinating pages in Hebrew that remain preserved in the archives to this day.

Meanwhile, the Chassidim had no idea where the Rebbe was being held. His location only came to light through the following story—thanks to his unwavering commitment to kosher food.

From the moment he arrived in prison, the Alter Rebbe refused to eat. The authorities didn't realize that this was a matter of religious observance. Instead, they assumed it was a hunger strike born of fear. They tried everything to persuade him to eat, and when that didn't work, they even attempted to force-feed him. Still, the Alter Rebbe wouldn't budge.

Eventually, a minister who had taken a liking to the Alter Rebbe during his imprisonment asked why he was so steadfast in refusing food. The Alter Rebbe explained simply: the food was not kosher.

The minister asked, "If I bring you kosher food, will you eat it?" The Alter Rebbe agreed, adding that after so many days without eating, his stomach could only handle something light, like porridge.

Well, there was a wealthy chossid named Reb Mordechai of Liepli living in St. Petersburg. The minister reached out to Reb Mordechai, asking him to prepare a kosher meal. The Chassidim, suspecting the food was meant for the Rebbe, placed

a note under the dish asking who the meal was for.

When the food reached the Rebbe, he discovered the note. He wrote back with his name and location and tucked the message beneath the remaining food. Thanks to this, the Chassidim finally learned where the Rebbe was being held.

The Mistake

After 53 days in the fortress, the investigators reached their conclusion. They determined that the Alter Rebbe was no threat to the state. He was a spiritual leader devoted to guiding Jews closer to G-d, loyal to the Tsar, and committed to the Torah's command to seek the peace of the kingdom.

So, on the 19th of Kislev, in the early afternoon, the Rebbe was informed that he had been acquitted and was free to go. When asked where he wanted to be taken, he requested to go to the home of Reb Mordechai—the Chassid who had provided him with kosher food.

Reb Mordechai lived on the upper floor of a building, but the ground floor was home to one of the leading *Misnagdim* and informers. When the authorities brought the Alter Rebbe to what they thought was the correct address, they mistakenly sent him to the *Misnaged's* apartment instead.

When the Alter Rebbe walked in, the *Misnaged* was stunned to see him free. Overcome with fear, he nervously offered the Alter Rebbe a seat and went to prepare him a cup of tea. But once he regained his composure, the *Misnaged* began to argue with the Alter Rebbe, launching into an aggressive, disrespectful tirade against Chassidism.

Now, imagine this scene: the Alter Rebbe, physically drained after days of not eating and emotionally exhausted from intense interrogations, had just been released from the most notorious prison for political dissidents. He was finally free—but instead of finding peace, he found himself enduring three long hours of bitter accusations and hostility in the home of a *Misnaged*.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Reb Mordechai and the Chassidim were eagerly awaiting the Alter Rebbe's arrival. They knew he was supposed to be released that day, but as night fell and he still hadn't shown up, they began to worry.

When they passed by the ground-floor neighbor's door, they heard angry shouting about Chassidism. Suspecting what had happened, they knocked loudly. When the door opened, they saw the Alter Rebbe sitting with his head resting on his hands, silently enduring the *Misnaged's* tirade.

Reb Mordechai was furious and wanted to lash out at the *Misnaged*, but the Alter Rebbe stopped him immediately. Calmly, the Rebbe finished drinking the tea—which by then had grown cold—and quietly left to join the Chassidim upstairs.

That's when the real celebration began. While the Alter Rebbe had officially been freed on the 19th of Kislev, it wasn't until late that night—the 20th—that he finally reunited with the Chassidim. (*Sefer Hatoldos Admur Hazaken*, vol. 3).

The Alter Rebbe told Reb Mordechai something curious about that experience. He said that those three hours in the *Misnaged's* home were more difficult than all the days he had spent in prison.

At first glance, it's a very strange statement. How could the Alter Rebbe say that the three hours in the *misnaged's* home were worse than the 53 days he spent in Russian prison?

Joseph and His Brothers

A similar story is found in this week's Torah portion, Parshas Vayeshev, which recounts the tragic tale of the sale of Yosef—a story of sibling jealousy and hatred that ultimately led to Yosef's being sold into slavery and brought to Egypt.

It all began when their father, Yaakov, singled Yosef out from the rest of his brothers, giving him a “coat of many colors” to emphasize his unique status. This favoritism was further compounded by Yosef's dreams, which suggested he would rule over his brothers and they would bow to him. The jealousy and resentment only deepened.

One day, Yaakov sent Yosef to check on his brothers, who were grazing their flocks in Shechem. When the brothers saw him approaching from a distance, they conspired to kill him. Reuven, the eldest, intervened and convinced them not to shed blood but to throw Yosef into a pit instead. When Yosef arrived, that's

exactly what they did: “And they took him and cast him into the pit.”

How long was Yosef in the pit?

In *Toras Levi Yitzchak*, the Rebbe’s father explains that Yosef arrived during the time of Mincha, the afternoon prayer. This time is associated with intense judgment (*dinim*): “It was during the weekday Mincha time, a period of heightened judgment, that they cast him into the pit, sat to eat bread, and sold him” (*Toras Levi Yitzchak*, p. 5).

The Midrash (Tanchuma) sheds light on Yosef’s suffering during those hours in the pit, explaining that the fear and terror he endured took a physical toll: “He was sold for twenty pieces of silver. Could such a beautiful boy have been sold for so little? This happened because the terror of the snakes and scorpions in the pit drained his blood and turned his face pale and green.” Those few hours left Yosef so changed that his very appearance and even his value diminished.

Yosef’s time in the pit may have lasted only a few hours, but they were the most excruciating hours of his life.

Even more so, the Medrash Raba related, that almost forty years later, when Joseph went to Israel to bury his father, Jacob, he detoured to visit the site of the pit that he was thrown into. Obviously, even forty years later, the trauma was still very vivid.

The Answer

This answers the question about the Alter Rebbe’s stay in the home of the *misnaged*.

Sometimes, the pain caused by a brother cuts far deeper than anything an enemy could inflict. From outsiders, we don’t expect kindness, but from a brother, we hope for support and love. When that trust is betrayed, the hurt runs much deeper.

While people often focus on antisemitism, large protests, and external threats, these stories teach us that the real concern lies in how we, as Jews, treat one another.

The tale of Yosef's sale and the trials surrounding Yud-Tes Kislev highlight the critical importance of the bonds between brothers—the relationships within the Jewish people. It's our shared responsibility to ensure we never repeat the mistakes of the past.

Both the story of Yosef and the events of Yud-Tes Kislev should remind us daily to strengthen the ties of love, unity, and connection between one Jew and another. Through this commitment, we pave the way to merit the ultimate redemption.