

Hostages in Starodub

Category: Shemos, Shemos

The topic of redeeming hostages is actually a very ancient one. It's even the story of Passover, which we are reading this week.

The Hostages

The topic everyone is talking about these days is “the hostages.” Every Jew feels their pain, and we all pray for their safety and their return. Unfortunately, this isn't new in Jewish history. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of stories of Jews being kidnapped or held captive. It's a reality that began with Joseph and his brothers...

Today, I want to share a story from about 140 years ago in Russia. It's a story of incredible self-sacrifice that left a deep impression on the entire Jewish community in that country.

Rabbi Neimark of Starodub

At that time, military service in Russia was mandatory. Within the Jewish community, this was received with fear for obvious reasons. Everyone knew what military service in Russia entailed, both physically and spiritually. They were well aware of the severe consequences for Jews who were conscripted. As a result, everyone sought ways to avoid the draft, despite the risks, and the Russian officials, known for their corruption, made it pretty easy. This was true in the town of Starodub as well.

The leader of the Jewish community in Starodub was Rabbi Zalman Neimark. He was a very revered figure, but one wealthy and brazen individual in the community—close to the authorities—resented him. At a meeting in the rabbi's home, the chassidim—who knew he was up to no good—offended him, so he decided to take revenge by informing the authorities about Rabbi Neimark.

To make his accusation severe, the man claimed that Rabbi Neimark was the head of a Chabad group operating throughout the country with a mission to help Jews

evade military service. He alleged that the group was based in the town of Lubavitch but had representatives in every city, with Starodub being the center of their activities.

As a result of these accusations, Rabbi Neimark and his son were arrested. They were treated as high-level political prisoners and held in harsh conditions with no contact with the outside world. A military investigation was launched in Starodub, and it was discovered that 300 men had evaded army conscription in Starodub. The order went out to arrest them and approximately 80 individuals were caught. Some managed to escape, while the rest were detained under orders to track down everyone involved and stop their activities. The investigation was assigned to a zealous officer named Gantzov, who later became the Minister of Justice.

Rabbi Neimark remained imprisoned for two years until his trial. Due to the severity of the accusations, his bail was denied. However, over time, the prison guards became deeply impressed by Rabbi Neimark. They eventually softened, transferring him and his son to a cleaner and more comfortable room and allowing him to receive kosher food and holy books from home.

The room where Rabbi Neimark was held became a small synagogue, where he and his son spent their days and nights learning Torah. Rabbi Neimark even wrote halachic responses from prison. Messages and updates from the outside world were secretly smuggled in a coffee pot that had a double bottom, including notes of encouragement from the Rebbe Maharash. One message urged him not to fear, promising him G-d's blessings for the entire year.

During Sukkos, the guards' respect for Rabbi Neimark reached such a level that they allowed him to build a sukkah in the prison yard. He would later speak about the profound spiritual experience of those days for the rest of his life, cherishing them deeply.

One incredible incident occurred during his imprisonment. In one of the prison cells, Rabbi Neimark encountered a hardened criminal, a notorious murderer and thief. The man had once, while shackled in chains, begged soldiers to allow him to kill a Jew. Yet, when this man heard Rabbi Neimark praying, he was moved to tears by the rabbi's heartfelt devotion. Even the cruelest individuals could not remain unmoved by his sincerity.

In the end, Rabbi Neimark was acquitted. While the efforts of skilled lawyers

played a role, the judges noted that it was the sincerity and holiness of Rabbi Neimark—with his broken Russian—that left a far greater impact than the carefully crafted legal arguments. His very presence seemed to influence the courtroom.

At the time, this story was deliberately silenced in Jewish newspapers, despite being widely known, for obvious reasons—Jews did not want to draw attention to the widespread avoidance of the draft. Publicizing the story might lead to severe consequences for anyone who assisted Jews in evading conscription.

Even the Rebbe Maharash himself was under threat. During the investigation, Chassidim were interrogated about their connection to the Rebbe and the town of Lubavitch, but they firmly denied any involvement in the draft evasions.

The Chassidim explained to the investigators that their frequent visits to Lubavitch were solely to pray at the resting place of the Tzemach Tzedek, who had passed away about 15 years earlier. They categorically denied any connection to the Rebbe Maharash, and despite the lack of evidence against him, Rabbi Neimark bore the brunt of the accusations. He paid a high price, risking his life and enduring great suffering.

Despite the tremendous danger he faced, Rabbi Neimark never uttered a word of complaint and took full responsibility. Miraculously, the case ended with no harm coming to the Chassidim or their efforts. The self-sacrifice of Rabbi Neimark became a legendary story among Chassidim (from *A Chassidisher Derher*, Kislev 5785).

The Message

This week's Torah portion begins with the book of Shemos, telling the story of the Jewish people's exile and the beginning of the redemption. Like the story of Rabbi Neimark, it's a story about hostages. The entire Jewish people were being held hostage in the greatest prison in the world—Egypt, where it was famously impossible for slaves to escape.

Yet, Moshe was sent by G-d with the mission to free the Jewish people from their bondage. At the burning bush, G-d told him to go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the Jewish people so they could serve Him. This marked the beginning

of the journey toward redemption, which culminated at Mount Sinai with the giving of the Torah, where G-d introduced Himself as—the one who liberated them from Egypt.

The question is famously asked: Why indeed is that how G-d introduces himself? Why didn't He say, "I am G-d who created the heavens and the earth?"

One answer is that it's because G-d wanted to teach the world—and especially the Jewish people—the immense value of redeeming captives. G-d Himself takes pride in this mitzvah—that's even how He introduces Himself.

But there is something important to remember:

The ultimate purpose of the Exodus—of our redemption—was to serve G-d at Mount Sinai and receive the Torah. Moses told Pharaoh, ““Let My people go—so they may serve Me.” Any Jew who has been saved from danger or captivity has an obligation to remember G-d's kindness and strengthen their commitment to Torah and mitzvos.

This message is particularly relevant today. Over the past year and a half, the people of Israel have all been “held hostage” by Gaza. We've been living the story—feeling the pain and experiencing the joy. Without entering into debates about the current deal, we are all experiencing the story of the Jewish people as captives and their journey to freedom. Let us remember that the true goal is, “Let My people go—so they may serve Me,” and strengthen our connection to G-d.