The Secret of Survival

Category: Mishpatim

Nobody ever wanted the Jews. So how did we manage to survive?

The Alaska Plan

In recent weeks, the world has been focused on Trump's plan to relocate people from Gaza to other countries like Egypt and Jordan. Interestingly, a similar idea was proposed 87 years ago, in 1938—but this time, for the Jews. It was called the "Alaska Plan."

The idea was to settle Jews in Alaska at a time when Hitler was in power and the future of Jews in Europe was clearly in danger. Desperate to escape, they searched for any place that would take them in. But tragically, the world didn't want them—country after country refused to open its gates, leaving thousands of Jews trapped as the threat in Europe, and especially in Germany, grew darker by the day.

A Jewish man named Bruno Rosenthal, who lived in Neustadt, Germany, wrote letters to the U.S. government, saying he was

willing to come to Alaska with a group of Jews from his city to help settle the land.

At the time, U.S. immigration policy set strict quotas—only 2% of people from any given country were allowed to immigrate each year, and even that quota wasn't being fully used. There was little hope of convincing the U.S. government to make an exception for Jews.

But Alaska was different. At the time, it wasn't considered a full-fledged state like the rest of the U.S., but a U.S. territory, meaning different rules applied. It was an enormous, mostly uninhabited territory—larger than any other state in America. The U.S. had purchased it from Russia in 1867 for $7 million, hoping to tap into its vast natural resources. But to do that, they needed people willing to live there.

In reality, Alaska's freezing temperatures scared away most potential settlers. That's why the idea of bringing European Jews to settle there seemed like it could be a win-win—helping both the Jewish refugees and those looking to develop Alaska's economy.

Bruno Rosenthal from Germany latched onto this idea and sent letters to the U.S. State Department, hoping to push it forward. But in the end, no one even bothered to reply.

The Recurring Offer

This idea came up multiple times from different directions, rising and falling without ever taking hold:

There was a Jewish official named James Coughlin who held a

senior government position and submitted a memorandum to White House officials, proposing that Jews be brought to Alaska. According to his plan, various organizations would be responsible for settling them across the territory, but with one strict condition: they would be banned from entering the rest of the United States. If they came, they would have to live only in Alaska.

Another time was following the events of Kristallnacht, when the U.S. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes voiced his concern for the fate of Europe's Jews. He was eager to develop Alaska, and saw an opportunity: He instructed his deputy, Harry Slattery, to draft a report outlining ways to develop Alaska—including bringing in settlers from outside the United States.

Slattery suggested that the project be funded by private investors. To ease public concerns, he proposed that 50% of the new jobs created would go to unemployed Americans, while the other half would be reserved for immigrants. Furthermore, the immigrants would be required to stay in the same job for at least five years before they could even begin applying for U.S. citizenship.

But in the end, none of it mattered. The bill never even made it to a vote in the U.S. Senate due to strong public opposition.

In 1941, Samuel Dickstein, the chairman of the House Immigration Committee, also proposed resettling refugees in Alaska by using immigration quotas that had gone unfilled over the previous six years. These unused quotas represented hundreds of thousands of unclaimed visas. But like the other

proposals before it, this idea also failed.

Even within Alaska, there was strong opposition to bringing Jewish refugees from Europe. The three largest cities—Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau—firmly rejected the idea. Only a few small towns were open to the plan and even requested to take in refugees as settlers.

The sad reality was that no one wanted the Jews.

The Last Piece of the Story

And yet, despite everything, Jews found ways to survive in different places around the world. This raises the question: What is the Jewish secret? What enables a Jew to maintain their Jewish identity no matter where they are?

This week, we read *Parshas Mishpatim*, which primarily deals with *mishpatim*—laws that govern financial matters, personal injury, theft, property damage, and guardianship. It also includes commandments between man and G-d, such as caring for orphans and widows, prohibitions against mistreating converts, laws of Shemitah, and the observance of the three festivals. In short, *Mishpatim* is filled with mitzvos.

But then, near the end of the parsha, the Torah suddenly returns to the story of Har Sinai. Last week in *Parshas Yisro*, we read about the giving of the Ten Commandments, yet here we discover that part of the story was left untold.

Why was the main story of Matan Torah recorded in *Parshas Yisro*, while this part was pushed to the end of *Mishpatim*?

Our Commitment

The Rebbe explains that the Giving of the Torah had two components: (1) The giving of the Torah—Hashem teaching the Jewish people the Ten Commandments, along with other mitzvos given before and those detailed in *Parshas Mishpatim*. (2) The forging of an eternal covenant between Hashem and the Jewish people.

On the eve of the Giving of the Torah, a covenant ceremony was held at the foot of Har Sinai. Moshe built an altar, and young men offered sacrifices. And most significantly, it is in this very section of our parsha that the Jewish people proclaim their legendary words: *"Na'aseh v'nishma."*

The Jewish people's commitment—declaring that they would first *do* and only afterward seek to understand—defined their relationship with Hashem in a way that transcended logic.

The fact that Hashem descended onto Har Sinai and spoke to the Jewish people was an unparalleled event in history, a Divine revelation that would never happen again. As the Torah describes: *"Has any people heard the voice of G-d speaking from within the fire, as you have, and lived?"* (Devarim 4:33). It was a breathtaking experience, a flash of overwhelming Divine light.

But that was a revelation from above—brief and momentary. The true eternity of the Giving of the Torah lies in what came next: the Jewish people elevated themselves, accepted upon themselves to be Hashem's servants, and sealed this commitment with a covenant. Their declaration of *"Na'aseh*

v'nishma" wasn't just a response—it was a transformation, something they took upon themselves, making it real and everlasting. (Lekutei Sichos vol. 26 pg. 159)

This mindset is the secret to Jewish eternity. A Jew, without always knowing why, feels an innate desire to connect to Hashem. And the way to do that is through Torah and mitzvos. We see this truth playing out in real time, as stories emerge from those who were held hostage by Hamas.

Just this past week, a story came out about one of the released hostages, Keith Siegel. When his daughter asked him what he wanted for his first Shabbat dinner, she expected him to request a favorite dish or a special challah. Instead, he told her that the most important thing to him was that they wear a kippah and make Kiddush. He also shared that what gave him strength during captivity was the fact that he remembered he was a Jew—praying, reciting *Shema Yisrael*, and saying various blessings.

My friends, our commitment to G-d—that is the secret of the Jewish survival.