

Mikietz 5771 Imprisoned

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Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukkah!

One of the most powerful memories of my teenage years was participating in the struggle to free Soviet Jews. It is hard to believe that just over two decades ago, millions of Jews were, for all intents and purposes, imprisoned in the former Soviet Union, prevented from immigrating to Israel and practicing Judaism.

This is a critical story that our young people need to hear and learn. I have been surprised to find out that most of our college students, teens, and *b'nei mitzvah* students are unfamiliar with this recent history. In the 1970s and 1980s, the American Jewish community mobilized to rescue this vital part of the Jewish people. Many of these Jews were disconnected from Judaism, having been assimilated or prevented from practicing Judaism for generations. Many were living in the shadow of the Holocaust, having had parts of their families wiped out; they were afraid to be Jewish, given the history and the fear of what could happen. Many of them lived with continuing anti-Semitism.

Responding to their plight, the American Jewish community mobilized and began an incredibly powerful effort to rescue Soviet Jews. Rabbis and Jewish leaders would visit Russia, sneaking in siddurim and sets of tefillin or boxes of *matzah*. They were often followed by the KGB, Russia's secret police; they would try to arrange meetings with the Jewish

leaders in the Soviet Union. Sometimes these Jews would be arrested, and they were known as Refuseniks – Russian Jews denied the permission to leave the country.

Most famous among these was Natan Sharansky, who was imprisoned in the Gulag, a system of forced labor camps; his crime: being Jewish and wanting to make *aliyah* to Israel. Some of our own Emunah families were Refuseniks, including Lilia Veksler.

Growing up, I watched and participated in the movement to free Soviet Jews. In my high school, Ramaz, a modern Orthodox Yeshiva and prep school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, we were immersed in the effort to free Soviet Jews. Each year during winter vacation, a group of students were given the honor of travelling to the Soviet Union, filling their suitcases with Jewish books and sets of tefillin, arranging clandestine meetings with Jewish leaders, teaching them how to daven, how to pray, teaching them how to *leyn* – to chant Torah, bringing them back under the wings of the *Shekhinah*, of the Divine Presence, back into a relationship with Torah.

In tenth grade, my classmates and I raised funds to purchase these supplies, and the group headed off on this most remarkable journey. They were taking risks. They could be arrested. Who knew what the KGB would do to them? But our tradition teaches us that this was a required risk, a necessary *mitzvah*.

The mitzvah is called *pidyon sh'vuyim*, redeeming the captives, and it is a vital act). Throughout Jewish history, Jews have taken herculean efforts in order to free our brothers and sisters whenever they were in need.

As students in Manhattan, we attended rallies: rallies at the United Nations, in front of the Russian Consulate, at the Russian mission to the UN, rallies anywhere we could gather and mobilize support.

The largest rally took place in 1987. We boarded buses in New York, as did Jews all around the country. Over a quarter million of us gathered in Washington DC to cry out against this injustice and demand that the Soviet Jews be freed.

That's a day I will never forget. I must have been a junior. Hopping on the bus early in the morning, we *davened Shaharit*, the morning service, with a minyan on the bus itself. Eating breakfast on the bus, arriving and trying to find the other buses and groups, joining together with our placards and signs and our chants, hearing the speeches – it felt like the entire Jewish people were coming together. In many ways, it was like Sinai, with hundreds of thousands of us gathering and affirming as our ancestors declared “*Naaseh V'nishmah* – we will listen and we will do!”

While Sinai was receiving the core of God's message, here we acted on the message, crying out for justice, standing up for what was right and also protecting our family: the Jewish people.

That's a day that is seared into my memory, into my very soul. Throughout the years, I have attended other rallies in support of Israel and many other issues, but that day really became part of my core identity. It continues to impact who I am as a Jew in the world and how I experience the world.

As I think about Soviet Jews, their experience is like a modern Hanukkah. In the Hanukkah story, the Jewish people were denied their freedom to worship as they wanted, to fulfill God's command.

Scholars teach us that the story is more nuanced; there were actually assimilating Jews who invited the Syrian Greeks and their philosophy into Israel, and there were Jews who opposed them who did not want to assimilate to the same extent. So, while there was an external force, the Syrian Greeks, there was also an internal civil war taking place among Jews.

Nonetheless, Jews who wanted to worship traditionally and who wanted to remain faithful to their understanding of the Torah were denied that right. Some 2200 years later, the Jewish people in the Soviet Union had a similar experience. We were the Maccabees of this modern story.

In the words of the *haftarah* that Jonathan chanted a few minutes ago, we didn't do it with power or might; we didn't go to war, but we did it with our God-given spirit, *kee im b'ruhi*. In the words of Zekhariah the prophet, it was our divinely inspired spirit that overcame this oppression and stemmed the tide. Jews were allowed to emigrate, and in the former Soviet Union, the floodgates were opened, and millions of Jews came to Israel and

to America. Our next mission, then, was to raise the funds to resettle them and to bring them into a deeper contact with Judaism. As Jonathan described in his dvar Torah, they became immigrants in a new land.

It's an incredibly powerful and moving story and one that happened just twenty years ago. We need to hear the stories of those in our own community who came from the former Soviet Union and those stories must be taught to us and to our children.

But let me remind us that there are still causes that cry out to us as strongly as the Soviet Jews. Just as Joseph at the beginning of the parashah is imprisoned and alone, there is one particular Jew who is imprisoned and alone for doing nothing wrong except being an Israeli Jew. His name is Gilad Shalit; he's an Israeli soldier captured by the Hamas terrorist organization, an organization that, among other vile acts, in 1996 murdered two of my best friends, Matt Eisenfeld and Sara Duker, may their memories only go higher, an organization that has taken over the Gaza Strip, creating a terrorist state that attacks Israel regularly by launching mortars and rockets into civilian areas.

Gilad has been imprisoned now for four and a half years, and I swore the day that he was taken captive that we would not forget him. Thus with each and every minyan, morning and evening, we recite a simple traditional prayer on his behalf, a prayer the Jews have recited for generations, for thousands of years, thinking of their captives.

“May the Holy One be merciful to our fellow Jews who wander over sea and land, who suffer oppression and imprisonment. May God soon bring them relief from distress and deliver them from darkness to light, from subjugation to redemption. And let us say: Amen.”

Some of us have complex feelings about Israel. Some of us are disappointed that Israel is not compromising more for peace, and some of us are uncomfortable that Israel is doing as much as it is doing to compromise for peace. I am well aware that we have a broad range of political perspectives in our community, and some of us have ambivalence toward Israel given its religious positions.

Over the last few months I have been asked: How can you, Rabbi, spend so much time supporting Israel when you are not even recognized as a Conservative rabbi, and you cannot perform a wedding in Israel without a Orthodox rabbi to co-officiate, a country where women are arrested at the kotel for wearing a *tallit* or carrying a *sefer* Torah, where women are beaten up because they wore tefillin and the strap marks are still showing on their arm, standing at a bus stop?

I am left with some ambivalence. I love Israel. It is a place where I feel spiritually at home. Walking the streets, I feel proud to be a Jew. I can enjoy Israeli music; the combination of Hebrew and modern music is exciting and exhilarating. I can walk into restaurants and eat the food since most of it is kosher. The whole rhythm of living in Israel responds to the Jewish calendar. It's a place where the Jewish people are acting out our dream of being a free people in our own land.

Is it riddled with problems? Sure.

It has many areas that need improvement.

Is it an unabashed success? It certainly is.

Resettling 700,000 Jews kicked out of Arab lands from 1948 to 1952, creating a modern, thriving economy – one of the most successful in the world.

It is miraculous and glorious.

So how can we do both? Can we support Israel in her time of need and push her to change?

My friends, we must walk that fine line. We are sophisticated Jews who understand that we can be both supportive of Israel on some levels and deeply critical on others. We can speak out and make sure that Israel is protected and sustained in a world that wants to eliminate Israel off the map— with enemies like Iran, who are dedicated and devoted to the destruction of the state of Israel physically, and other countries and people who are trying to destroy it through divestment, boycotts, and sanctions, the campaign of de-legitimatization.

We must all stand firm against that. We must double and triple our efforts to protect Israel. Much of my family lives in Israel. My friends live in Israel. They are counting on us.

At the same time, we must cry out for religious freedom, so that Jews who converted here in America will have equal rights with Jews in Israel.

There must be huge reforms in Israel's political system and its religious system, which is filled with corruption, and an Orthodox monopoly that is destroying Judaism in a way that we have not seen for thousands of years since the time of the destruction of the Second Temple.

But in order to fight these battles, we must also be engaged, and finally we must be fighting for Gilad Shalit. He's counting on each one of us.

Joseph, alone, imprisoned at the beginning of this parashah was blessed with a gift of being able to interpret dreams, which gave him an opportunity. Gilad has no such chance. We will have to be his dreamers. We will have to petition Pharaoh to free him. We will have to effect change. My friends, while our position on Israel is nuanced, it must be strong. Take home the insert in your Shofar bulletin and petition the Red Cross to demand that he simply get a visit.

We must all go to Israel, visit Israel, connect to Israel deeply, even as we seek its improvement and its change. We must cry out and redeem our captive, Gilad Shalit.

I look forward to working with all of you on these projects.

Not with power and with might, but with our spirit.

May it be God's will speedily and swiftly. And let us say, Amen.

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