

Good Yom Tov Everyone. In 1939, the German military began to attack Poland. When all of Poland fell to the Germans, the Jews knew it was time to take steps to escape from the destruction. Russia was no lover of the Jews, but many instinctively felt that anything was preferable to the Germans. So, along with many others, Harav Yisroel Rabinowitz packed his belongings and began to plan his escape to Russia.

Reb Yisroel and his group cautiously approached the border, following in the footsteps of their barely visible guide. And then suddenly-disaster! Shouts and gunfire rang through the night as the border guards tried to stop the illegal refugees. Reb Yisroel ran desperately, zigzagging back and forth to avoid the bullets that were flying through the air. And then he tripped and fell, and the Russian guards were on top of him. Based on trumped-up charges, the evil Russians sentenced Reb Yisroel to 5 years of hard labor in Siberia.

Despite the difficulties, Reb Yisroel was determined not to give an inch in his observance of Torah and mitzvos. He avoided treif food at all costs. He refused to work on Shabbos, despite many beatings and punishments. In time, the guards realized that he was adamant in refusing to violate his religious principles, and they left him alone.

Other Jews in the area were greatly heartened by the presence of Reb Yisroel. The word quickly got around. For the many Jews imprisoned in the wasteland of Siberia, he became the source of *halachic* (Jewish legal) advice and much needed encouragement.

Pesach was several weeks away, and Reb Yisroel began making plans for a chometz-free Pesach. He never touched the non-kosher soup, so he lived only on his bread ration. What could replace it for Pesach? Then he made contact with a woman living near the camp, who was willing to trade bread for other kinds of food. Now Reb Yisroel had to find a way to get to the woman to make the exchange. An idea began to form in his mind. He would eat only half his bread ration during the next few weeks, saving the other half to trade in return for potatoes. Then, shortly before Pesach, he would fake illness, thereby gaining access to the prison hospital, where security was lax. In the middle of the night, he would leave the hospital to make the trade.

The first difficulty was in saving half of the meager bread ration. The entire ration itself was hardly enough to live on, and on the reduced ration, he started to feel weak from hunger. Still, the thought of the upcoming Yom Tov strengthened him and made it all worthwhile.

Shortly before Pesach, Reb Yisroel managed to procure a grass that causes stomach illness. He was immediately admitted to the hospital, where they confiscated his fur coat; after all, they reasoned, bedridden patients had no use for fur coats. This certainly complicated his plan; going out in the Siberian night without a coat was not very advisable. But he had come this far, and he was determined to go ahead with his plan.

Long after the other patients were asleep, Reb Yisroel slipped out of bed and climbed out of the nearest window. The freezing wind instantly knifed through his thin nightclothes, and he started shivering uncontrollably. Moving quickly to keep warm, he dashed to the hiding place where he kept his extra bread, grabbed the food, and raced to meet the woman.

Upon reaching his destination, Reb Yisroel realized that he had to be back at the hospital before the nurses came around and discovered him missing. So he made the exchange quickly, thanked the woman politely, and dashed out toward the hospital. The way back somehow seemed to take much longer. Every step was an effort as the frigid wind snatched away his breath and froze his body. He slipped in the window and back into bed, with nobody realizing his absence. When Pesach arrived, the satisfaction of being able to observe the Yom Tov in accordance with *halacha* (Jewish law) made the outing at night well worthwhile.

After Pesach, spring finally came to Siberia. As spring turned to summer, Reb Yisroel began thinking about Tisha b-Av. Should he fast in his weakened state? Reb Yisroel decided to fast and share in the sorrow of his Creator over the destruction of the Holy Temple. His friends heard about his plans, and they tried to convince him not to fast. Still, Reb Yisroel remained firm. So they decided to help him out as much as they could.

One of the women cooked him a soup to eat after the fast. As soon as he ate the soup, Reb Yisroel suffered from unbearable stomach pains, and he was taken to the hospital. As he was dozing off, he suddenly realized that this was the second time he had been in the hospital for stomach pains; the first time, of course, he caused the stomach pains himself, to be able to observe Pesach.

Shouts and cheers awakened Reb Yisroel the following morning. "*We are free! We are free!*" The other patients were dancing wildly around the room, laughing and crying simultaneously. "*What is all this about?*" Reb Yisroel asked in surprise. "*Yisroel, we are free!*" they cried with excitement. "*Stalin made a pact with the Polish government in exile, allowing all the political prisoners of Polish nationalities who are in the hospitals to be set free. And that means that we are free to go!*"

Reb Yisroel immediately offered a heartfelt prayer to Hashem. Clearly, his being in the hospital at this opportune moment was a result of his *mesiras nefesh* (self-sacrifice) in observing the laws of Pesach. The hand of Hashem in his life was so evident, it was amazing! Reb Yisroel was sent to Tashkent, where he soon began teaching children. After the war, he came to America and became a rav in the Bronx, where he continued his vision in life: teaching Torah to all.

As we celebrate the Yom Tov of Pesach, we remember the incredible story of Reb Yisroel Rabinowitz, how he made the service of Hashem a top priority. We can be inspired by the example of Reb Yisroel. Whenever we may be tempted to complain about the effort involved in doing a mitzvah, we should remember the words of the Sages, "*Calculate the cost of a mitzvah against its reward.*" (Avos 2:1) Although the effort to perform mitzvahs may be big, especially on Pesach, the reward for mitzvahs is incredibly great. Through mitzvahs we grow closer to Hashem in a state of happiness. Therefore, one should always be happy to put effort into performing mitzvahs. **Good Yom Tov Everyone.**