

Good Yom Tov Everyone. Tonight begins Pesach, a beautiful yom tov during which we celebrate our freedom from physical and spiritual imprisonment in Mitzraim. One of the ways we observe Pesach is by abstaining from bread and other foods with leavening. For some, this is a very difficult nisayon - test of faith. The following story will inspire us all to abstain from Chometz in the coming days.

Eliezer Nanas was serving a ten year sentence for the crime of "harmful acts against the State." This, however, was a libel. The truth was that he was a religious Jew who had committed the "crime" of keeping his Yiddishkeit in every possible way he could, and encouraging other Jews to practice Yiddishkeit. When this was discovered, he was sent to a "Correctional Labor Camp" in Siberia for ten years, to be reeducated in the company of political offenders. On some other occasion it would be most interesting to learn about his experiences in this camp.

Now, however, we shall tell you about a certain Pesach he spent there. This was in the year 1943, the seventh year of his sentence. This is how he began his moving narrative: "A few weeks before Pesach, I received a letter from my home, telling me they were sending a package with matzos and other Pesach products as in previous years. This letter had first been addressed to the previous camp where I had been working, and then it was readdressed to my new camp. I wrote home at once to inform them of my new address, and hoped that the package would reach me in time. I gave my letter to David, a friend of mine, who was the manager of the Food Department in the camp. He, in turn, passed it on to someone outside the camp who was going to Moscow. I eagerly awaited this package of matzos and Pesach products which would enable me to observe Pesach properly, as well as strengthen me, for I had become rather weak and suffered from stomach trouble.

One day, the woman who was the head of the "political division" of the labor camp came to see me. She was also the censor of letters and packages addressed to the prisoners. She was new to the job and came to ask me if I was still keeping to my religious beliefs and practices. Was I still abstaining from working on Sabbaths and holidays and not eating the meals served from the Camp kitchen? Incidentally, she also asked me: "What is matza?"

I explained it all to her, then she asked: "When is Pesach?" I replied: "In ten days' time." "What will you do if your expected package of matzos does not come in time?" she asked. "I would just eat potatoes," I answered. "And if you don't get potatoes?" "Then I would have no choice but to go hungry."

"For eight days?" she asked, wonderingly. "The Almighty will not forsake me," I replied. The conversation ended there, and she left. The first Seder night arrived. No package. No matzos. No Pesach provisions. I had invited David and a Jew named Berkovitch to the "seder."

We had covered the table with a clean sheet of paper to serve as a tablecloth. We had boiled a kettle of water. I poured out glasses of tea, which were to serve us in place of the four cups of wine we should have had. Then, to their unbelieving eyes, I produced three whole matzos! Thus, we observed the first seder. I recited as much of the haggadah as I could remember. The following night there were no matzos. We again had tea in place of wine, and three pieces of sugar completed our seder. I again recited the haggadah from memory. I then told my guests the secret of how I had the matzos for the previous seder.

"Since I'm in the labor camps I always saved a few matzos from one Pesach to the next, in case I'd have difficulty getting matzos for the following Pesach. This year, luckily, these matzos were a blessing, and I was thankful that I'd had such forethought." David was very angry with me for not telling them that this year I had not received any matzos for Pesach. "We would certainly not have eaten your last piece of matza last night had we known," he declared. "That is the very reason I did not tell you," I answered. "Every Jew is obligated to eat a piece of matzo at least the size of an olive on the seder nights. During the rest of Pesach we must only refrain from eating chametz (leaven). One can manage with eating potatoes, fruits, vegetables, etc." I said.

"You can forget about fruits, and it's not so easy to obtain potatoes either," retorted David. "How do you expect to survive a whole Pesach?" he demanded, heatedly. "I was given a blessing by my father that I will return home in peace, and, with G-d's help, I will manage," I replied calmly.

David was not mollified, and left in a sulk. I saw him only a couple of times during the whole of Pesach. He then tried to persuade me to eat chametz or, at least, have something from the camp kitchen if I did not wish to die of hunger! When he failed to convince me, he avoided me; he could not bear to see me suffering hunger, it seemed. On the third day of Pesach I had an unexpected visitor: the woman

In memory of Shusha Malka bas R' Avrohom ob'm

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tensor. I was at work and she noticed that my hands were trembling. She realized that I was weak from lack of food. "I have brought you something to eat," she said, and brought out a freshly baked roll. The appetizing aroma made my head spin! I told her that we Jews are not allowed to eat that on Pesach. I thanked her and refused it. She left without saying anything more. The next day she visited me again, and I was really feeling much weaker. This time she brought me some cookies made from white flour (a luxury).

"I baked these myself," she said, "with sugar and oil. You must eat them, otherwise you will die of hunger!" I thanked her, but again refused. "You are probably wondering why I am so concerned about you," she said. "You probably have a wife and children who are waiting for the time when you will be free to return to them. I sympathize with them. I have no husband waiting for me. He was an officer in this camp and was sent to the battlefield. He fell in action, fighting against the Hitlerites. Now, do please take a cookie! It will do you good," she pleaded. "Thank you, no. I am sorry to hear about your loss, but please leave me alone."

She went out, obviously annoyed at her failure to persuade me to eat anything she had brought me. I felt so weak, I had to lie down on my bed, and I had no more strength to get up. Berkovitch came to see me a few times and brought me some warm, sweetened water to drink. He left me, each time, in sorrow at my sad plight. On the morning of the last day of Pesach he came and found me in a semi-conscious condition. I asked him to pour some water over my hands and give me my siddur. This, he did, but the words swam before my eyes and my head spun. I then passed out completely.

When I regained consciousness I found the head nurse of the hospital standing beside me. She had, apparently, given me an injection which made me feel very hot. "I don't know where this obstinate Jew gets such strength and resistance," I heard her say to David who was also present. She then left the room. David stayed with me until it got dark. "Pesach is now over," he said. I tried, but was too weak to recite the evening prayers. He brought me some white toast and some sugar. He dipped the dry toast into some sweet tea, and fed me like a child.

After my meal I fell asleep and did not awaken until the following morning. I was still so weak that David had to help me put on my tefillin. Two days after Pesach Berkovitch came to tell me the good news that he had been freed, and would soon be allowed to return home. At the same time he told me that, whilst he was at the post office, he heard that, some time before Pesach, a package had arrived for me from my home, but had been sent back by the tensor. Now it was clear to me why she had been so upset when I refused to eat her food on Pesach. She was afraid I would die of hunger, and my death would be on her conscience.

The freed Berkovitch remained in town for two more weeks before leaving for home. Each day he brought me milk, potatoes, bread, some sugar, and once, something special--scallions! I gradually regained my strength. Meanwhile I was called to the office of the superintendent of the camp. Berkovitch was present. Also the woman tensor. The superintendent told me he had learned that the woman tensor had sent back my package before Pesach and, she had, in fact, admitted doing so.

Further investigation revealed that she had also withheld and destroyed two letters from my home, so that I should not know about the package they had sent me. The superintendent asked me to sign a complaint against the tensor, saying: "I will personally make sure she is punished." The tensor burst into tears and pleaded with the superintendent. "Have pity on me and on my orphaned children," she begged. "Their father gave his life for the Motherland," she sobbed. "Don't ask me to have mercy on you. You must ask forgiveness from this man whom you have wronged so cruelly," he said.

I told the superintendent that the woman tensor obviously regretted her inhuman behavior and had tried, somehow, to correct her misdeeds. In addition considering that her husband had died fighting the Nazis and had left her with the responsibility of caring for the orphans, I was ready to forgive her. This, on condition that she would faithfully promise not to give any more trouble to the prisoners in the camp. The superintendent was visibly impressed with my declaration of pardon. He promised not to report the matter to the higher authorities. He did, however, have the tensor transferred to a position where she would have less authority. Thus ended the matter. But that "foodless Pesach" will remain in my mind all the days of my life. Thank Hashem I am alive to tell the story... **Good Yom Tov Everyone.**