

Good Shabbos Everyone. ...More this week from the amazing spiritual survival story of Reb Yitzchok Zilber, of blessed memory.

When Rabbi Zilber was in the Siberian labor camp, Rosh HaShanah prayers were conducted quietly and secretly with a few Jews. One year, towards the end of the services, a fire broke out in the camp, and in order to prevent the prisoners from escaping they were all pushed into a smoke-filled room and the door was locked.

The words of Unesaneh Tokef, which had been said just a short while earlier, suddenly became very real: "Who will live, and who will die ... who by water and who by fire..." The fire continued raging around them. Huts collapsed and people died as Rabbi Zilber and the Jews who were with him miraculously survived the blaze. Yom Kippur he also secretly convened a minyan for a short, half-hour service. They really made it count in that half an hour!

In that way, Rabbi Zilber succeeded in organizing tefillah, even in a Siberian labor camp! Rabbi Zilber's job at the labor camp was to bring the water, an exhausting job that he had actually chosen in order to refrain from Shabbos desecration. It also allowed him to find a few spare minutes to pray learn secretly. "If I was davening when the supervisor appeared I would stop and resume carrying water later." Rabbi Zilber would say.

Rabbi Zilber tells how he was once summoned to the camp commander while he was in the middle of Shemoneh Esrei (silent prayer). He didn't respond. They came again to call him, shouting this time, but he continued standing. One of the soldiers then commented: 'If he can stand like that (while davening), then even if they kill him they won't be able to move him.' Having no choice, the soldiers waited until he finished davening!

After being released from the labor camp and running away to Tashkent, Rabbi Zilber was very afraid of the authorities and thus preferred to daven with a private minyan that didn't include informers. Only after some time did he begin attending the unofficial shul, which was less safe. One day the official shul in the Chimgan neighborhood contacted him and asked him to come to read the Torah for them because they had no one else to do it.

The shul was teeming with informers, and Rabbi Zilber's acquaintances warned him not to go, but he was made of stronger stuff. He didn't heed their warnings and pitied the good Jews who would be left without anyone to read the Torah for them. On Shabbos he came to read the Torah, but when he began, he heard talking in the background. He stopped reading and only continued when quiet reigned.

Within a few weeks he succeeded in conveying the importance of the matter to the congregants, and no one dared speak during the Torah reading anymore. After some time, he began saying a dvar Torah after davening, and wonder of wonders — no one informed on him!

Whenever he could, Rabbi Zilber tried to convene a minyan to daven. But in Tashkent, which was full of dogs, his hurried-running worked against him because the dogs would often chase him. One day he was missing a tenth man for Shacharis, and Rabbi Zilber decided to go to call a friend. He ran to his friend's house and knocked on the door, but no one answered. He decided to enter through the porch, but was attacked by two dogs, one of which bit him viciously.

The friend, who heard the commotion, rushed out in alarm to see what was going on, and Rabbi Zilber explained what he was doing and urged him to come along to complete the minyan. Rabbi Zilber was bitten several other times while running to do mitzvos and needed shots to treat the dog bites. Rabbi Zilber hurried to always do another mitzvah, to accumulate another zchus-merit, but he didn't always spend a long time actually davening. In truth, it is almost a miracle that Rabbi Zilber left a written testimony of his unbelievable life story. This humble man would never have written down memoirs of his miraculous life, but Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, ztz"l, who was amazed by what he heard, instructed him: "Tell!"

Hashem tells us this week in Parshas Re'eh, "For you are a holy people to Hashem, your G-d and Hashem has chosen you for Himself to be a treasured people, from among all the peoples on the face of the earth." (Devorim 14:2) One of the definitions of the word "holy" is "separate, set apart." We are truly a nation which enjoys a supernatural existence, with an extra special supervision from above. By acting according to the Torah, we demonstrate our membership in the Chosen Nation. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**