

**Good Shabbos Everyone.** It was a cold Russian morning in early September, 1964 and the American Rav Braunstein was in Kiev once again. By 1964, Jewish communities in Russia barely resembled the vibrant Jewish life which had characterized Russia for so many centuries.

Communist Russia was a dangerous place where Jews were persecuted and killed and where Judaism was almost completely stifled. One sad example, thousands of miles of railroad tracks of the Russian railroad were literally laid down on the bodies of Jewish slave laborers who died in its construction.

Over the years, Rav Braunstein made several dangerous trips to Communist Russia, in order to perform bris milahs and to spread Yiddishkeit among the oppressed Russian Jews. Most of his work was done under fear of his life.

Several times the evil Russian police caught and beat Rav Braunstein. One time, after a particularly bad beating, when Rav Braunstein was near death, the Russians sent him to England on a special medical plane, in order that he not die in Russia. Thankfully, Rav Braunstein survived that beating and lived to return to Russia to continue his holy work.

One of the most memorable Rosh Hashanas that Rav Braunstein remembers is the Rosh Hashana he spent in Kiev, Russia in 1964. After the morning prayers on Erev Rosh Hashana, a Skverer Chassid approached Rav Braunstein and asked him if he would like to pray on Rosh Hashana with a special minyan of Jews in Kiev. (It is important to note that by this time after so many years of Russian persecution, Russian Jews for the most part lacked almost all external trappings of Judaism, although their hearts still beat strongly for Hashem.)

Rav Braunstein was intrigued by the offer of the Skverer Chassid and therefore he quickly agreed to join the minyan. Rav Braunstein was instructed to look for two men who would walk by his hotel the next morning at 7 a.m. The evil KGB was always lurking in the area, so the utmost care had to be taken to avoid detection. So, the Skverer Chassid instructed Rav Braunstein to carefully follow the two men, at such a pace so that nobody would notice that Rav Braunstein was following the men. It was only early September, but it was still very cold in Kiev, so Rav Braunstein was instructed to bundle up well.

Sure enough, the next morning at 7 a.m., as Rav Braunstein waited in the hotel lobby, two men walked by the entrance very quickly. As instructed, Rav Braunstein walked at a healthy distance behind the men.

The three, two ahead and one way behind, walked for what seemed like hours on that frigid winter morning. It was very cold and the walk was very long, yet Rav Braunstein walked with determination. Soon, Rav Braunstein and the others left the city and entered the fields surrounding Kiev.

Eventually, the group arrived to a small forest. At the entrance of the forest stood two righteous women. The Jewish women stood guard against unwanted visitors, such as the Russian police and the dreaded KGB.

As Rav Braunstein approached an opening in the trees, he noticed an amazing site. Several Jews milled around, some standing, some sitting on fallen trees which served as benches. This was the Rosh Hashana minyan, in the middle of a forest outside Kiev. This was a minyan made of up survivors, survivors of the evil Russian Empire. Rav Braunstein was amazed at what he saw...

We read about the power of prayer in our Torah portion this week Toldos. When our Yitzchok Avinu was near death, Yitzchok called his son Eisav to receive the blessing of the first born. Yitzchok told his son Eisav to go out and to hunt some game and then prepare a big feast for his father. When Eisav left the tent of his father Yitzchok to go hunting, Rivka, the mother of Eisav and Yakov hurried to tell her favorite son Yakov.

Although Yakov was the younger of the two brothers, Yakov was actually entitled to the blessings of his father Yitzchok; because, Yakov had purchased the birthright from Eisav. (Bereishis 25:31-34) Why would Yitzchok call Eisav to receive the blessing, if Yakov was now entitled to receive the blessing of the firstborn?

The Ohr HaChayim explains that Yitzchok was perhaps unaware that Eisav had sold the birthright to Yakov. And perhaps, there was too little time for Yakov to explain to his father Yitzchok that Eisav had actually sold the birthright to Yakov; because Eisav would soon return from the field with the meat for his father. Therefore, Yakov dressed in the hunting outfit of Eisav and approached his father Yitzchok to

**In memory of Shusha Malka bas R' Avrohom ה"י**

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receive the blessing.

The Torah tells us "So Yakov drew close to Yitzchok his father who felt him and said: The voice is the voice of Yakov, but the hands are the hands of Eisav." (27:22) The Midrash explains this powerful verse in an interesting way. The power of Yakov/Yisroel is in its voice with prayer and Torah study, while the power of Eisav and the nations is in its physical strength. (Artscroll Tanach Series, Bereishis, p.1133) As the Prophet tells us "Fear not, O' worm of Yakov." (R.Amonon Yitzchok, Shlita, citing Yeshiyahu 41:14)

Why is Yakov compared to a worm? The power of a worm is in its mouth. A tiny worm can bore through the strongest wood with its mouth. So too, the strength of the Jews is in their mouth with prayer. (Rashi and Metzudas Dovid on Yeshiyahu 41:14)

The nations may be bigger and stronger than we are, but we have the power of prayer, which is much stronger than their physical power. Against all odds, Yisroel will prevail over the nations with the help of fervent prayer to Hashem.

Thus, the Midrash explains, when the verse states "The voice is the voice of Yakov, but the hands are the hands of Eisav," the Torah is telling us that as long as the voice of Yakov is heard in prayer and Torah study, the hands of Eisav and the nations are powerless against the us. (Midrash Eicha Pesichta 2,1)

One of the biggest Eisavs in history was the Russian Empire. Interestingly enough, the Torah tells us that Eisav was red. (see Bereishis 25:25) The color red is also associated with the Communist Russians...

The congregants huddled around what few machzorim there were, back in the cold Russian forest. Soon after Rav Braunstein arrived, a chassid began to lead the prayers. The minyan was made up of Skverer, Lubavitcher, Chernobler, and Breslever chassidim.

It was a davening that Rav Braunstein remembers to this day. Sitting nearby was an 80 year-old man who was too tired to stand up at all during the prayers. Apparently, the man had spent all his strength taking the long walk to the secret forest.

The old man sat on a log, in a talis which was in tatters; for new talisim and the like were not available in Communist Russia.

The old man sat crying on the log from ma tovu - the beginning of the prayers to Aleinu. Rav Braunstein watched in awe as the old man soaked his raggedy talis in tears

Soon, it came time to blow the shofar. This was the most dangerous time for the secret minyan. The baal tokeah wanted to immerse himself in a mikveh before blowing the shofar, as is the common practice for many. Where would they find a mikveh deep in the Russian woods?

The baal tokeah went off to the side and undressed. He then proceeded to roll himself in the snow several times before getting dressed and rejoining the minyan.

The voice of the shofar had to reach up to the ears of the minyan and onwards to heaven without alerting the Russians of the holy congregation. So the baal tokeah sat on the forest floor while the minyan crowded around, squeezed together and hunched over him.

Because of the conditions, the baal tokeah had to blow the required 100 blasts one after the other, instead of the usual custom. As the voice of the shofar rose up to the ears of the members of the minyan huddled above, tears rained down on the baal tokeah. Fervent prayers sailed up to shomayim, asking Hashem for forgiveness and begging an end to the evil Russian Empire.

Having shed so many tears on that cold Russian day, Rav Braunstein left the minyan and trudged back to Kiev. It was a Rosh Hashana he would never forget.

Nearly 25 years later, the Iron Curtain and the Communists finally came down; at least partly on the power of that secret minyan in a forest outside of Kiev in 1964. (as told by Rav Yosef Chaim Greenwald) As long as the voice of Yakov is heard in prayer, Yakov - Yisroel will prevail. Good Shabbos Everyone.