

Good Yom Tov Everyone. Tonight begins Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Year. The Torah tells us that as long as we do teshuva - repentance, the day Yom Kippur itself has a power to wash away most sins. We that live in free societies are blessed with the ability to daven in shuls with our family and friends. The shuls are generally well-lit, and air conditioned or heated as is necessary. We have machzorim and prayer books, Boruch Hashem. Jews have not always had it so easy though. The following account, told by the son of the person in the story, illustrates how some Jews overcame tremendous obstacles to be able to daven properly on Yom Kippur.

"On Yom Kippur of 1951, my father, Rabbi Moshe Greenberg, faithfully prayed all the Yom Kippur prayers. All, that is, except one that is often regarded as the most solemn of the holy day's prayers, the Kol Nidrei. He was twenty years old and a prisoner in a Soviet labor camp in Siberia. His crime was trying to escape from Russia. He dreamed of leaving the country and reaching the land of Israel. But he was caught and sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor. He was separated from his parents and two sisters. His brother was already a prisoner in another camp for a similar "crime."

There were about 1,000 men in my father's camp, all laboring on the construction of an electrical power station. About twenty of the prisoners were Jews. As the summer drew to a close, the Jewish prisoners yearned to observe the upcoming High Holidays. They knew they would lack a shofar (ram's horn), Torah scroll and talesim (prayer shawls), but they hoped they could find a machzor, a High Holiday prayer book.

My father spotted a man from the "outside," an non-prisoner engineer who worked for the camp on certain projects. He believed the engineer might be a Jew. So he waited for an opportunity to approach the engineer. "קענסטו מיר אפער העלפן?" "Kenstu meer efsher helfen?" he whispered to the man in Yiddish ("Perhaps you can help me?").

At that time, most Russian Jews were still fluent in Yiddish. He saw the flicker of comprehension in the engineer's eyes. "Can you bring a machzor for me, for the Jews here?" my father asked.

The engineer hesitated. Such a transaction would endanger both of their lives. Even so, the engineer agreed to try.

A few days passed. "Any developments?" my father asked. "Good news and bad news," the engineer replied. He had located a machzor with difficulty, but it was the only machzor belonging to his girlfriend's father, and the man was furious when his daughter asked him to give it up. Maybe she told him why she wanted it, maybe not.

My father would not relent, however. Perhaps, he suggested, the man would lend him the book and he could copy it and return it in time for Rosh Hashanah.

The engineer duly smuggled the machzor into the camp and passed it to my father. To copy it, my father built a large wooden box and crawled into it for a few hours each day.

There, hidden from view, he copied the prayer book, line by line, into a notebook. After a month, he had copied the entire machzor. But there was one page missing -- the one containing Kol Nidrei, the very first prayer recited on Yom Kippur. My father returned the book, and autumn arrived.

The Jewish prisoners learned the dates of the impending holidays from letters from home and, on the holiday, they bribed the guards, probably with cigarettes, to allow them to gather in the barrack for services. With his handwritten prayer book, my father served as hazzan (cantor) and recited each prayer, repeated by others in low solemn voices.

Seven days later, they met for Kol Nidrei services. But despite their efforts, none of the worshippers could recall all of the words of that prayer from memory. After nearly seven years in jail, my father, along with all political prisoners, were released, owing to the death of Joseph Stalin. The only item my father took with him was his machzor.

He was reunited with his family near Moscow and later married. I was an infant when, in 1967, fifteen years after his release from prison, my family was allowed to immigrate to Israel. The machzor came with us.

My father, who still lives in Bnei Brak, Eretz Yisroel, doesn't like to recall those painful years in Siberia. But on the rare occasions that I hear him tell a story from those times, he tearfully states that he had never participated in services as meaningful as those in prison.

In 1973, he visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe in New York and presented the machzor to him as a gift. A few months ago, I visited the Rebbe's library and saw father's machzor. I looked at the worn book with its fragile pages and Hebrew letters written in haste and with such respect and determination.

I copied it -- on a copying machine. This Yom Kippur, as I lead the services at the Chabad Jewish Center of Solon, Ohio, I will have with me the copy of my father's machzor, with the Kol Nidrei prayer still missing. My father couldn't recite Kol Nidrei during his years in prison. This year I will ask my congregation, and all of us, to say it for him and anyone else who may not have the opportunity to do so." Let us all take advantage of the privilege we have to be able to daven and do teshuvah with the least amount of interferences! Through davening with all of our heart and returning to Hashem, we will all merit a good and sweet new year! **Good Yom Tov Everyone.**