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50 Children

Behaalos'cha

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In January of 1939, a Jew named Louis Levin walked into the office of Gilbert Kraus, a prominent lawyer in Philadelphia. Mr. Levin told him that the situation in Germany was getting worse and worse—that the Nazi government was persecuting the Jews in a terrible way and that they needed to save as many Jews as possible from there.

The problem was that in those days, the United States had greatly stiffened its immigration laws, not admitting Jews from Europe in any way. So Louis Levin came along with the suggestion that they try to save Jewish kids. He argued that it would be easier to push a campaign of saving children, because that's something that's hard for people and government to oppose.

Gil Kraus caught fire with the idea. He forged a connection with an assistant to the U.S. Secretary of State at the time, George Messerschmidt, who had been the U.S. Consul General to Berlin at the time of Hitler's rise to power. He had also been one of the few Americans to publicly oppose Hitler's government.

So Mr. Kraus met with Mr. Messerschmidt and told him that he wanted to save 50 children from Germany. The aide to the Secretary of State told him that it was a good idea, but that the quota for entry visas from Germany to the United States was already full for the next five years, and there's no chance for the government to expand the quota.

Mr. Kraus began investigating the matter, and then discovered that the number of visas that allowed German citizens to immigrate to the United States, and the number of Germans who had actually done so, didn't match. A lot fewer than the quota allowed to had actually immigrated. So Mr. Kraus came to the conclusion that there were people who had received the visas but for whatever reason had not actually used them, because they had immigrated to other countries, or because they no longer had the money to immigrate, etc.

So Kraus went back to the State Department and asked that the United States give these unused visas to Jewish children from Europe. And indeed, Mr. Kraus got their approval to bring over 50 kids.

Now he just needed to find families who wanted to take in these children, meaning, to sign affidavits for them. His wife, Eleanor Kraus, took that campaign upon herself. She went around her friends and neighbors and asked them to sign the affidavits, stating that they agreed to take responsibility for one child. She went from one family to the next, and most of them answered her request. And so after great efforts, she put together 54 affidavits for children from Germany.

When the campaign started to make the news, a lot of people tried to dissuade Mr. Kraus of the idea. They said that it had no chance because the Nazis would never allow the kids to leave.

Now one day, three of Philadelphia's most important Jewish community leaders visited him at his office and pressured him to drop the whole idea. They argued that it would trigger anti-Semitism in the United States, and they warned him that they would do everything in their power to hinder the campaign. But as much they tried to keep him back, he insisted more and more.

The aide to the Secretary of State, who was also the Ambassador to Austria, told Kraus that it seemed to him that it would be very hard to pull off in Berlin, and that he should try to do it in Vienna. He decided to travel to Vienna, which at that time was already under Nazi rule; it was also after the events of Kristallnacht.

The State Department told him that they were only prepared to admit healthy children, and so they would need a doctor to examine the children. He turned to his non-Jewish pediatrician, a young widower busy with three little children of his own, who didn't hesitate for a second and immediately agreed to travel along.

They got to Vienna in April of 1939, where they publicized that they had come to choose 50 children to take to the United States. Hundreds of families gathered at the Jewish community center and asked that their children be the ones chosen for the journey. After a few weeks of reviews, etc. a list of 50 children was drawn up.

Now the Krauses turned to the American Ambassador in Vienna and asked for visas for the kids—but were told that they had never received instruction from the United States to allow the visas for 50 kids. They added that anyway, visas were not approved by the embassy until July. Additionally, they claimed that the affidavits had been improperly prepared!

The one solution remaining was to travel to Berlin and meet with the United States Ambassador to Germany.

So Mr. and Mrs. Kraus immediately traveled there and met with the American Ambassador, who said that he'd try to provide the visas. He also certified that the affidavits had been properly prepared and that they had nothing to worry about.

Now they needed the Nazi government of Austria to provide Nazi-German passports for the kids, because without those, they would not be able to leave Austria. So the Krauses went to meet with the same Gestapo officer responsible under the Nazi regime for the office of Jewish emigration.

This Gestapo officer actually had a Jewish assistant named Friedmann. Friedmann took the Krauses to his Nazi boss, and served as interpreter. He told them that this was a couple from the United States that had come to take out 50 children and bring them to the United States. The Nazi asked them if they were Jewish, and Friedmann had to tell the truth. But after several more questions, the officer said that he'd approve the 50 passports.

Now they just needed to bring the kids from Vienna to Berlin to get the visas—and only then would they be able to sail to the United States.

The group of children left Vienna on the 22nd of May, 1939. The separation from their parents in Vienna was, obviously, the hardest thing.

All the families and their children came to the train station, which was crawling with Nazi soldiers of all types. They were told that they could not wave goodbye to their children, since it was a movement similar to the salute for which the Nazis, and Jews were not allowed to make that salute.

The kids got to Berlin, where they were temporarily housed in a Jewish community building that was also under Nazi control. The next day, each child was interviewed at the American consulate, where their visas were approved.

Only then did they set sail for the United States.

Now there was a five-year-old boy who was supposed to be in the group, but who fell ill a few days before the voyage. They needed to replace him with another child, and the original child perished in the Holocaust three years later.

As it turned out, those 50 kids had won the greatest lottery of all—tickets to life. And Mr. and Mrs. Kraus merited to save them.

This amazing true story is documented in a book and movie called, *50 Children*.

Every morning, we start the synagogue prayer services with the prayer “Hodu.” Anyone not too busy Saturday morning who makes it to shul early just when prayers are getting started can catch this prayer, too.

But in this prayer, you’ll find an interesting verse: “Don’t touch My “Meshichoy” - Anointed Ones.”

With this verse, G-d is warning us not to bother or harass His anointed ones. But it sounds strange, seemingly. We know of one *Moshiach*, one anointed one, for which everyone prays and looks forward to his coming—and suddenly, we learn that there are several anointed ones! What’s going on here?

True, the noun “Moshiach” can also refer to a king, who is anointed with oil, or to a Kohen who is anointed to lead the Jewish Nation in war. But the verse still needs explanation.

The Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 119b) tells us that the meaning it refers to school children studying Torah. And why are they dubbed “anointed ones”? Rashi says, “The norm with kid was to anoint them with oil.” Apparently, in those days they had the custom of actually pouring oil on the kids. (I guess it was some sort of shampoo or conditioner that they would put on the head.) And so they were called “My anointed ones.”

The Rebbe asks (Sichas Parshas Bamidbar 5739, Sichos Kodesh Vol. II, pg. 694): True, they anointed children with oil—but it’s hard to say that because they had the custom of anointing kids with oil that the Torah itself calls them “My anointed,” a title that denotes someone head and shoulders above the people—especially since it’s the name reserved for Moshiach ben Dovid.

Instead, the Rebbe explains, Jewish children have a “Moshiach effect,” something messianic about them. What will happen when the Moshiach comes? It is written that then, “*mazikim* will

be banished from the world” (Toras Kohanim Bechukosai 26:6). This means that there will be no more demons—and kids can also bring about something to that effect.

Kind David says in the Book of Psalms, “From the mouths of babies and sucklings did Your form strength... to banish the enemy and the avenger” (Psalms 8:3). This means that children, by means of their Torah study and prayer, have it in their power “to banish the enemy and the avenger”—meaning, to banish mazikim, which is normally something that only Moshiach will do.

And so, Jewish children are also referred to as “My anointed ones.”

Additionally, the Rebbe says that the truth is that every Jewish child has the potential to be Moshiach himself. That means that every Jew has a spark of the Moshiach inside, and if he is to reveal that spark, he could be Moshiach. As a grown adult, we see in actuality whether or not he used this inner potential, and that brings us to the conclusion that he won’t be Moshiach. But with little kids, each one of them has the potential to be the Moshiach.

And so, when we talk about Jewish children, we say, “Don’t touch My anointed ones.”

And so, the Jewish Nation invests all of its strengths and energies in educating little children: “My anointed ones.”

And that brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

In this week’s Parshah of Behaalos’cha, the Torah begins with the command to Aharon to light the candles of the Menorah.

Spiritually speaking, every Jewish child is a candle of G-d, and it is incumbent upon us to kindle these lights in such a way “that the flame rise of its own accord” (Rashi), meaning that these children grow into flames that don’t need to be reignited again and again but rather, became “neiros l’ha’ir”—“candles to illuminate.”

And then, we are assured that “these candles will never go out” (Ramban, start of Parshas Behaalos’cha).

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