



## SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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**PARSHAS VAYEITZEI**

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***The Secret of Jewish survival***

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**Vayeitzei**  
*The Secret of Jewish Survival*

Good Shabbos!

In 2016, an Israeli Jew by the name of Moshe Shuv passed away. But his story begins much earlier.

In 1959, a wealthy Canadian Jew decided to send several young men from Israel to the U.S.S.R. before the High Holidays of 1960.

Now at that period in history, of course, the Jewish situation in the Soviet Union was frightful. Communism was at its height of power. There were no synagogues and no kosher food, no tefillin and no mezuzos, no Shabbos and no holidays. Anyone trying to live like a Jew was arrested and exiled. Generations of youths grew up without even the minimum knowledge of Judaism. The Communists strangled Judaism in Russia. And it was specifically for that reason that this Canadian Jew wanted to send several young men to Russia—so as to inject life into the Jewish community of the Soviet Union and so that the Jews there would know that they hadn't forgotten about them.

But who was ready to go to a place where you know you can enter, but you're not sure that you'll be able to leave? So most of the young people that our rich man approached refused. So the gentleman finally found this same Moshe Shuv, who himself had been born in Russia and whose father was connected to Chabad Chassidim in Russia.

At the time, Mr. Shuv was a young married man and father of two little kids who had just finished elementary school. But still, Moshe Shuv not only agreed to go, but also convinced two of his friends to go, too. So together, the three of them started preparing for their secret trip to the Soviet Union.

Let's remember that until 1967, Israel had diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R., meaning that anyone bearing an Israeli passport could travel to visit the Soviet Union.

So one fine day, a Jew named Pinchos "Pinye" Althaus came to visit him. Reb Pinye was one of the leaders of Israel's Chabad community. He lived in Tel Aviv. (Moshe Shuv's father had secretly told Rabbi Althaus that his son was going to be traveling to Russia.) So Reb Pinye now told Moshe Shuv that he's giving him a very important mission. He told him that in Moscow there were three volumes of the Zohar that had belonged to the Rebbe's father, and that he needed to find a way to get them out of Russia.

So let's digress and talk about the Rebbe's father for a bit. Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Schneersohn was the chief rabbi of Yekaterinoslav, a large city in Ukraine. He was a great scholar and a known Kabbalist.

In 1939, under the Communist regime, Rabbi Schneersohn organized a large-scale matzah baking before Pesach not only for all the Jews of his city but for the entire U.S.S.R. Rabbi Schneersohn sent matzos all across the Soviet Union.

Now, even though he had actually gotten official permission from the government to do so, he was still a thorn in their side for having actually compelled the atheist authorities to take part in religious needs. And so before that very Pesach, the KGB stopped him. He was arrested and sentenced to five years of exile for the “sin” of promulgating Judaism. He was sent into exile in the city of Cheli in faraway Kazakhstan. Rabbi Schneersohn arrived there a lonely prisoner, with no relatives and no one who knew him.

This was during WWII, when there was an awful famine in Russia and only a little bit of bread was distributed every day. As such, Rabbi Schneersohn himself would need to stand on line with everyone else for long hours just to collect a meager portion of bread.

After some time went by, his wife, Rebbetzin Chana, joined him in exile so as to ease his loneliness. Rebbetzin Chana brought with her his most precious books: the Zohar. The Zohar is the “Bible” of Kabbalah, and Rabbi Schneersohn would sit and study from it for hours. Not only that, but when he would come up with an original thought, he would want to share it with someone—but there was not a single other living Jewish soul in the entire region, and certainly not a Torah scholar who would understand the subject matter.

And so Rabi Schneersohn was left with nothing to do but write—to share his original Torah thoughts with paper.

But in those days in Kazakhstan, blank writing paper was nowhere to be had. So Rabbi Schneersohn decided to pen his Torah thoughts on the margins of his books. Every printed book has blank margins around the edges, and that’s where Rabbi Schneersohn would write his contributions.

But there was still another problem. Not only were there no pens, there was no ink, either.

So Rebbetzin Chana actually went out and taught herself how to make ink out of wild reeds and grass. She would go out to the field, pick various blades and stems and boil them or whatever to make ink. (I don’t know how you actually make ink from plants, but whatever.) And with that ink (and a feather quill), her husband the great Torah scholar was able to continue writing his Torah thoughts on the margins of his copy of the Zohar.

But since this ink was made from various different plants, it was not always the same color. Sometimes it was blue, sometimes green, and sometimes even red.

Rabbi Schneersohn spent five years in exile, but ultimately fell ill and passed away there.

After Rabbi Schneersohn passed away, Rebbetzin Chana moved to Moscow and took those books with her. And in 1946, along with a large group of Chabad Chassidim, Rebbetzin Chana got across the border of Russia with counterfeit documents.

However, Rebbetzin Chana did not take her late husband's beloved books with her on that journey. She was afraid that her bags would be searched at the border and they'd find the books and confiscate them. She knew how valuable the books were, and so she decided that she would leave them in Moscow.

So those three books, with all of Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Schneersohn's handwritten commentary on their margins, remained in Soviet Russia until 1959. And now, Rabbi Pinye Althaus was asking Moshe Shuv to help him get them back.

But Rabbi Althaus didn't ask him to personally smuggle them out of Russia. He only asked that the books be brought to the Israeli embassy in Moscow, where they would be sent as diplomatic mail directly to Israel. And Rabbi Althaus added: "If you do this, you will give the Rebbe tremendous pleasure. To him, these books are the most valuable of all!"

Reb Pinye then told him that to get the books, he'd first need to go to the historic Marina Roscha Synagogue in Moscow, which at the time (and to this day) was the center of Chabad life in the city. There he was to meet one Reb Binyomin, who would provide him with the books.

So Moshe Shuv assured Rabbi Althaus that he would do everything in his power to help.

Upon arriving in Moscow, he noticed that from the moment he landed, he was being followed and watched everywhere he went. On their first day, he and his friends went to pray at the Great Synagogue of Moscow. The Jewish senior citizens there were shocked to see young Jews with yarmulkes on their heads putting on tefillin. At first they were suspicious of them, but they slowly drew closer and began talking to them. But as soon as they heard that they were from Israel, they immediately distanced themselves from them. They were worried that they would be accused of supporting Israel—that's how great the fear was then.

The next morning, Moshe Shuv and friends went to visit the Marina Roscha shul. Moshe Shuv asked if Binyomin was there. His luck, Binyomin was not there that day—so they came back the next day, and an older Jew came over and said in Yiddish, "Ich bin Binyomin." I'm Binyomin.

Moshe then told him that he had come to get Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Schneersohn's Zohar books. But Binyomin didn't ask him for his name or for any document proving that he was the one authorized to collect the books. It seemed that Binyomin had already

gotten a message somehow that a young with such-and-such an appearance would be showing up to collect the books.

So Binyomin said that at 10:00 a.m. the next day, they would be meeting outside the public restrooms next to the Israeli Embassy. Binyomin would enter first and leave a package inside, and Moshe was to immediately follow to collect the package and physically carry it into the Israeli Embassy in Moscow.

The next day, Moshe and friends showed up outside those facilities. Binyomin was already there. He identified Moshe out of the corner of his eye, entered the restroom and quickly exited. Moshe Shuv went right in after him, found the package there and took it with him. When he stepped out, Binyomin was already gone.

Moshe Shuv now started walking in the direction of the Israeli Embassy, noticing that he was being followed (as usual). He walked faster and within minutes, he was already inside the embassy. There, Professor Harel, the Ambassador, was waiting for him. Moshe gave him the package. The Ambassador asked no questions. He was already in on the whole thing. He only said these words: "We'll send this to Israel."

Mr. Shuv continued his stay in the Soviet Union by visiting several other cities in Russia. Everywhere he went, they looked for where they could possibly find young Jewish people

In Kharkov, for example, they went to the city's largest mall. They stopped at the mall's music store and asked for any Jewish music. The clerk offered them a record with the famous song "Mine Shteteleh Belz" on it. So they asked the clerk if they could listen to it.

But once it was playing, they asked the clerk if he could play it a bit louder because they "didn't hear very well." But in the meantime, hundreds of Jews who happened to be walking by and heard the song gathered at the store—and Mr. Shuv and friends used the opportunity to distribute Jewish items like calendars and the like.

Well, the books ultimately made it to the Rebbe, who was very happy and who thanked Moshe Shuv in a long and emotional letter.

So in 1962, Moshe Shuv visited the United States, and he had a private audience with the Rebbe. The Rebbe began blessing him, when Mr. Shuv suddenly noticed that on the Rebbe's desk were the three Zohar books that had belonged to the Rebbe's father. So he told the Rebbe that these are the very books that he had the merit of getting out of Russia. The Rebbe reacted somewhat thunderstruck and said: "How did you not tell me?" But the Rebbe then went on to engage him in a conversation that lasted over two hours—the Rebbe wanted to know every detail of his visit to Russia, and thanked him warmly for rescuing the books. (The Rebbe and the Mossad, pg. 91.)

So when we hear such a story, we might ask: Where did the Jews of Soviet Russia draw the strength to hold strong as Jews over 70 years of Communist repression? How is it that they succeeded in remaining Jews and in raising Jewish children and grandchildren on the other side of the Iron Curtain?

And the answer can be found right in this week's Parshah.

In the Torah portion of Vayeitzei, we read about Yaakov Avinu. And when we contemplate the life of Yaakov Avinu, we realize that his life was one full of suffering.

As long as Yaakov lived in the Holy Land, in the earlier part of his life, everything was fine. But as soon as he got the blessings from this father Yitzchok, as we read in last week's Parshah, everything became one long chain of troubles. Yaakov had to flee his childhood home, his parents and his land and run alone to Charan, a place where he knew nobody. In Charan he had no friends who lived or thought like him.

And once in Charan, Yaakov met his uncle Lavan for the first time—a man who tricked him and used him again and again. He promised him his daughter Rochel as a wife, but after seven years of hard labor, Yaakov gets not Rochel but Leah—and he has to work another seven years to get Rochel. And then, after 20 years, when he wants to go back to the Holy Land, Lavan engages in all sorts of manipulation to not let him leave. It gets to the point that Yaakov waits for the moment that Lavan has to step away for some business trip, at which point he packs up his entire family and flees Charan. But when Lavan hears about it, he immediately rounds up a posse to chase Yaakov, and catches up to him. It was only thanks to G-d's direct intervention that Lavan didn't hurt him. And when Yaakov finally separates from Lavan and gets back to the Holy Land, he gets the news that his brother Eisav hasn't forgotten anything—Eisav is approaching not just with a posse but with a fully armed militia of 400 warriors to attack him!

So Eisav and Yaakov actually do ultimately meet and reconcile. But no sooner does that happen than the story with Dinah and Shechem happens—and to rescue their sister Dinah, Shimon and Levi have to kill all the villagers of Shechem.

Because of that, Yaakov and his entire clan have to move away—but in doing so, Yaakov's beloved wife Rachel dies on the way. It's a tragedy that Yaakov never gets over.

And after that, the troubles with Yosef fall upon him. His very own sons sell their very own brother into slavery in Egypt, and for the following 22 years, Yaakov believes that Yosef was torn apart and devoured by an animal. And in the end, when he's already gotten the news that "Yosef is still alive!", he is forced to move down to Egypt and spend the rest of his life as an expatriate.

So now we can ask the question, "Where did Yaakov get the strength to survive so much trouble? And not just to survive, but to build the House of Israel?" It was from Yaakov after all that the Jewish Nation began.

So perhaps we can find the answer to this question at the beginning of our Parshah.

When Yaakov is just beginning his long journey through his adult life, when he's first leaving the Holy Land and his father's home on the way to Charan, the sun suddenly sets and he finds himself alone in the middle of the wilderness, in a place of predatory animals.

But he lies down to sleep in the middle of nowhere—and it is then that he has the famous “Jacob’s Dream.” As the Torah tells us (Bereishis 28:16), “Yaakov woke up from his sleep and he said, ‘G-d is indeed in this place, and I did not know!’ ”

So it is when Yaakov finds himself alone, in the middle of nowhere, it is there that he finds G-d. And this is a surprise to Yaakov—“I did not know!” Yaakov discovers that G-d is found not just in the Holy Land of Israel but also in the most unpleasant places. And not only that, but one of Yaakov’s most spiritual experiences was that night that he found himself sleeping alone, far from home.

And this, my friends, is why the Jewish Nation is called by Yaakov’s name: the Children of Israel. Because throughout all its long years of exile, the Jewish Nation learned from Yaakov Avinu, our Patriarch Jacob, to find G-d wherever they find themselves.

And that is the secret of the Jewish Nation. We Jews have survived exile after exile because we have found that G-d still dwells among us. Even when we’ve lost everything we had, we have never lost our connection to G-d. Again and again, the Jew has found that “G-d is indeed in this place, and I did not know!”

From our Patriarch Avraham we received the strength to fight against idol worship. From Yitzchok we learned what self-sacrifice is. But Yaakov gave us the faith that wherever we go and wherever we are, we find that G-d is indeed in this place.

And that is the Jewish Nation’s secret—wherever we end up, whether exile in Russia or Kazakhstan or anywhere else in the world, every place we land in we discover again and again: “G-d is indeed in this place.”