

"... EVEN IF IT MEANS GOING BY FOOT"

Recent reports about Soviet Jewry are of the utmost historical importance. What has happened these past several months, or year, marks a watershed in the story of this community. Not everything can be discussed publicly. But even what has been reported in the press is a testimony to the irrepressible Jewishness that has survived more than half a century of Communism and has now suddenly come to life in a spirit and courageousness which we did not dare dream of only a few years ago.

Last year, Yaakov Kazakov, a Russian Jew, wrote a letter to the Supreme Soviet in which he declared forthrightly: "I am a citizen of Israel."

Three months ago, a Moscow Jew, D. S. Drabkin, similarly declared publicly: "I consider myself a citizen of the Jewish State of Israel."

And now, most dramatic of all, as reported some four weeks ago in the Christian Science Monitor, and this past week in the New York Times, a young Jewish radio engineer, age thirty, Boris Kochubiyevsky of Kiev, smuggled out to the Western world a letter which he wrote Brezhnev, and for which he has now been sentenced to three years of imprisonment. It is a document that will live in Jewish history as a tribute to Jewish determination and responsibility, to Jewish hope and obstinacy, to Jewish heroism

and courage. The relevant passages, which it is an honor to recite from this pulpit, read as follows:

I am a Jew. I want to live in a Jewish State...

I want to live in Israel.

This is my dream. This is the goal not only of my life, but also of the lives of hundreds of generations preceding me that were expelled from the land of their ancestors.

I want my children to study in a school in Yiddish. I want to read Yiddish newspapers, I want to attend the Yiddish theatre. What is wrong with that? What is my crime? Most of my relatives were shot by the Fascists. My father perished, and his parents were killed. If they were alive, they would be standing next to me: Let me go! ...

As long as I live, as long as I am capable of feeling, I will do all I can to be able to leave for Israel. And if you find it possible to sentence me for it, then all the same, if I live till my release, I will be prepared to go to the homeland of my ancestors, even if it means going by foot.

In a generation in which determination is measured by the criterion of those who would "walk a mile for a Camel," a Russian Jew -- alienated, Jewishly unlettered, intermarried, Communist-educated -- rediscovers his people and his land and is willing to walk from Kiev to Jerusalem: "even if it means going by foot."

It makes us feel inadequate in the face of such moral courage and personal heroism. How pale our own loyalties appear in comparison!

He is willing to go, even if it means going by foot.

And we are reluctant to consider going -- even by El Al.

He rediscovers the dreams of hundreds of generations of ancestors -- and many American Jews, who no longer dream Jewish dreams, have begun to forget that our ancestors lived lives of dreams.

Our Sidra tells us of a number of people who were

טמא דתשמיש, impure because of contact with a dead body, and

were therefore unable to participate in the Passover sacrifice.

(Tradition tells us that they were impure because they were carrying the remains of Joseph from Egypt, and they are therefore praised for their devotion.) They demanded of Moses an additional

opportunity to celebrate the Passover. Moses brought their

request before the Lord and in answer he received the law of Pesah

Sheni, the Second Passover: one month after the First Passover

there was to be celebrated another Passover sacrifice in which

those who had been impure during the first Passover could partici-

pate.

However, God in His answer includes one other category

of those who, exempted from the First Passover, were permitted to

participate in the Second: אלו בארץ זרה, those who were

impure or those who were "on a far journey," far away. The Torah

holds out the promise of Pesah Sheni, of a second festival of

freedom, even if one was אלו בארץ זרה, far away, in answer

intentional

to those who yearn for it, whose absence is not intended, who are so possessed of Jewish determination that they are willing to come "even if it means going by foot."

Soviet Jewry is far away -- *רחוקים מאד*. But their hearts are in Israel. And some day their souls will follow.

They ~~will~~ cry out, as did the petitioners in the days of Moses: *למה נעדר*, why should we be excluded from participating in the Passover *ביום ילולתנו*, amongst all the other Children of Israel?

These individual heroic Russian Jews whom I mentioned are not alone. They are not exceptions. They are representative of a whole new spirit of three million Jews who have reawakened and discovered their Jewishness, their link with the Jewish people and with the State of Israel. God only knows what will be the consequences of this renaissance!

What we must do is to prepare for that great day, that Pesah Sheni for the Jews of the Soviet Union who, unable to join world Jewry in conjunction with Israel in the great Pesah Rishon days of 1948 and 1956 and 1967, will come when the doors are opened from that *רחוקים מאד*. And come they will, for it is a divine promise that Pesah Sheni is available to those who are so determined that they are willing to come "even if it means going by foot."

But this hope and this confidence that they will return holds true not only for the Russian Jews returning to Israel, but also for all Jews behind the Iron Curtains of ignorance and alienation and assimilation returning to the Promised Land of Torah and the Jewish tradition.

I spoke last week of my confidence in the new quest for the Supernatural which is making itself felt in various guises in Western civilization generally. I am hopeful as well that there will take place a return to Torah by those Jews who are אֲשֶׁר יָשָׁבוּ. I know that it is easier to return to Israeli national identity and to Jewish culture than to a life of Torah and mitzvot. But it has already happened in small but significant numbers, and it is therefore a sign that the desire and the yearning can find fulfillment in a general movement of teshuvah.

In Yeshiva University there is a whole school which caters primarily to young men who have come from backgrounds of little or no Jewish observance. There are probably several thousand such whose lives have been profoundly transformed after a "return" to a way of life they never knew. They were far away, and they have come to us. And many others can follow -- and will, if we are wise. And here too the goal will be reached only if those who are אֲשֶׁר יָשָׁבוּ will be so determined that they will be willing to return "even if it means going by foot."

Permit me to give you an illustration of extraordinary and heroic persistence by a young man whom I influenced to attend Yeshiva University. He comes from a community where the circle of observant Orthodox Jews is quite narrow. His own home was typically American Jewish -- Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and an identification with the Temple only for social purposes. The young man today is a fine, observant, upright, and proud Jew about to enter a scientific profession. Several years ago he called me with a שאלה . He wanted to know if it is permissible for him to lay the tefillin for Minhah instead of for Shaharit. I informed him of the halakhic answer, but asked him to explain the necessity for the question. He told me that he was going to go home for mid-Winter vacation, and that if his father would see that he lays the tefillin in the morning, he would be furious with him and force him to stop his studies at Yeshiva University! The young man wanted to avoid a head-on collision with his father by laying the tefillin for Minhah, when his father would be away from home. This is an example of Jewish determination, of a young man coming back to Judaism -- "even if it means going by foot."

In the past there has been a tendency by the Orthodox community in this country to concentrate only on its own local problems and to ignore all others -- even other Orthodox communities and their problems.

More recently, there has been a felicitous outward reach -- to Israel, to Europe, to the Orient, in order to contact and cooperate with observant Jewish communities even if they are

רחוקים גוֹרָם, far away. American Orthodoxy, especially through the Orthodox Union, has begun to break out of its geographic isolation. That is all to the good. But it is not good enough.

Permit me to explain. In the text of the Torah itself, which contains no vowelizations or punctuation marks, there is a strange dot that appears over the last letter, the ן, of the word רָחֹק (in the expression רָחֹק גוֹרָם). What is the reason for this unusual orthographic sign? The Jerusalem Talmud (Pes.9:2) tells us that the dot acts as a line drawn through the letter as if it were crossed out, thus reading רָחֹק rather than רָחֹקִי, the masculine rather than the feminine form. This is so, says the Jerusalem Talmud, to tell us that the word refers not to גוֹרָם "way," a feminine word, but to the man: רָחֹק אִישׁ. The Second Passover was meant not only for those people who are close to us in spirit but find themselves geographically distant, on a faraway road, but also for people who are close to us geographically but who are themselves far away, who are in the category of רָחֹק אִישׁ. At times the distance in space is narrow, but the distance in commitment and in background and in ideology and in education is very great -- רָחֹק אִישׁ -- and nonetheless, deep within such people there burns an ember which

cries out: *למה נעדרתם... הלא אנחנו בני ישראל*, why should we be excluded from participating in the life of our people amongst the Children of Israel!

The Second Passover was meant not only for people who spiritually locate themselves in the camp of Israel and Torah but are prevented from joining it because of external obstacles -

*אין להם*; but also for those who experience inner alienation, and who do not yet realize -- that they are really part of us!

We Orthodox Jews must plan for that day, that Second Passover, when the Jew who is *אין להם* will come to Torah because inwardly, very deep within him, as yet unconsciously, he is willing to come -- "even if it means going by foot."

We have made efforts in that direction, but they are not nearly sufficient. We still in large measure suffer from a "fortress psychology," which causes us to man the ramparts against the outside world and blinds us to the very real opportunities which exist amongst those who are at present *אין להם*.

It will not be easy. To attract such people will require tremendous boldness. It will demand of us unusual daring. But it must be done.

Consider, for instance, the case of Boris Kochubiyevsky himself. When he comes back -- and he will come, because he is willing to come even if it means going by foot -- he will return with his non-Jewish wife. Now, my position on intermarriage in the



United States is known to this congregation. It is a position which is unyielding and unaccepting and forceful. I have from this pulpit preached a "hard line" against those who stray, in an attempt to make clear our displeasure at intermarriage. Yet we cannot and dare not condemn the Boris Kochubiyevsky's who were brought up under Communism and who married out of the Jewish people, and who then have rediscovered their Jewishness and were willing to sacrifice not only imprisonment but life itself for their people. The Israeli Rabbinate is making proselytization much easier in such cases. But we will need psychological reorientation even as halakhic relief is forthcoming.

But such openness to those who are *בני תשובה* or are in the category of *בני אמונה* is not only a matter of organizations or scholars or publicists. It is equally as much a matter for each individual Jew.

There are people who, possessed of this powerful Jewish determination have returned -- they are the baalei teshuvah, those who have returned to the fold. For many of them, their spiritual journey proved no less arduous than the trip from Kiev to Jerusalem by foot. Yet, with all the depth of their commitment and the authenticity of their search, they sometimes feel rebuffed and disappointed and cruelly heartbroken if and when they meet Jews, ostensibly Orthodox, whose conduct in their personal life is not only not Jewish, but not even human, who violate the precepts which we are

taught by Torah, whose example is a rejection of everything we stand for as a people. Such people make a mockery of Torah which we hold to be *אשר באנו אל*, to purify character, and such people in effect declare the journey of the baalei teshuvah as a joke. They tell him that he traversed the *בין ים וים* for no good reason.

Of course that is not true. Those who have made the journey are worthy of the highest praise. We stand in awe of them. But it is up to each of us to help by exemplifying what a Torah personality is and should be.

A holy obstinacy, a sacred sense of determination -- the willingness to return "even if it means going by foot" -- is what characterized our people since that first Passover in the days of Moses. It is that same quality which will bring about the great Second Passover, when the dispersed of Israel, those who are *בין ים וים* will return to the Land and the People and the Torah of Israel.

Not all of it depends upon us. There are political conditions and diplomatic decisions and cultural contexts and spiritual movements which are beyond our control.

But a great deal does depend upon us. It depends upon those who are far away, and requires of them to be so determined that they are willing to come "even if it means going by foot." And it depends upon those of us who are already *בין ים וים*

squarely within the Jewish camp, to be ready to receive them: to strengthen the State of Israel; to keep up the steady public pressure against Russian anti-Semitism; to fortify the institutions of Torah both in the Diaspora and in Israel; to exemplify personally the life and ideals of Torah.

Perhaps it depends upon us more than we realize, more than we are willing to admit.

Last week Yigal Allon, the Vice Premier of Israel, told a story which is worthy of retelling, and with which we conclude our remarks. As a child in his native village near Mt. Tabor, he heard the famous Jewish legend about the Messiah sitting in the gates of Rome as a poor leper and waiting. He was disturbed by the story, and asked an old man the question that was bothering him: "What is the Messiah waiting for?"

His answer is something that each of us must consider very carefully and soberly.

"He is waiting -- for you."