



HIGH HOLIDAYS

Shabbat Shuva

A Jew's Kiddush In The Soviet Union Will Change Your Shabbat

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A JEW'S KIDDUSH IN THE SOVIET UNION WILL CHANGE YOUR SHABBAT

ABSTRACT

What is the personal meaning and relevance of Shabbat Shuva?

Jews today are blessed with unprecedented freedom. We can be as Jewish as we wish – we can send our children to Jewish schools, keep Shabbat, kosher and all the mitzvot without any fear of persecution or punishment. Keeping Shabbat, having a Brit, or studying Torah, does not have to be a clandestine, underground experience. Doing a Mitzvah does not come along with worrying for our lives.

This wasn't always so. Just a few short years ago Jews in the former Soviet Union had to make everyday choices between observing Mitzvot and staying alive. A Jew could be imprisoned or killed for keeping Shabbat or donning Tefillin. And countless were.

In 1984, just 35 years ago, Jews sat in underground synagogues, hidden by false fronts and trapdoors, praying the same prayers and listening to the same Torah. Only, no one banged on the Bimah, lest it be mistaken for a bang on the door by the KGB. No one shouted Shema Yisrael, lest someone on the street hear it.

One soul-wrenching story, sure to flood our hearts and well up our eyes with tears, of a Russian Jew writing a letter to the Lubavitcher Rebbe about his struggles with Shabbat, will change your entire perspective on Shabbat, Judaism, and being Jewish today.

And it will remind you of what Shabbat Shuva is all about.

1. Do Religious Jews Have Anything To Eat?

A Jewish friend of mine who grew up in a home that served shrimp, bacon, ham, lobster, and cheeseburgers recently asked me: Isn't it difficult being an observant Jew? Isn't it hard keeping Kosher? There are so many rules, so many things you can't eat! What do you eat?

I thought about and smiled to myself, picturing my recent walk down 13th Avenue in Borough Park, Brooklyn.

I turned to my friend and said: "Tell me, Gabe, have you ever seen an emaciated Chassid? Have you ever seen a religious Jew that was starving? You'd probably be hard pressed to find a religious Jew that wasn't struggling with his weight!

And I went on to describe to him my last visit to 13th Avenue. Every other store is an eatery. Even the hardware stores sell food. Some stores specialize in takeout; others are sit-down. Some are meat, others dairy, others pareve. You have stores specializing in Hungarian goulash, Israeli falafel, Mexican tacos, Moroccan ke-

babs, French bistros, Japanese sushi, Yemenite soups, Farsi rice, Turkish teas, Iraqi sabich, Tunisian shakshuka, Spanish tapas, German pretzels, Russian borscht, Polish pastries, Italian pastas, Greek yogurts, Brazilian BBQ, South African biltong, Australian meat pies, and American hot dogs.

And that's all on one block!

Go one block over and you have supermarkets bigger than some Israeli towns! With deli counters, heimishe bakeries, and butcher sections more diverse than the United Nations and with more offerings than Amazon!

So, is keeping Kosher today a challenge? Yes! It's a massive challenge choosing what to eat, and an even greater challenge trying to stay skinny.

Today, thank heaven, it is so easy to be a Jew. As anyone who as ever sat at a Shabbat table, especially my wife's, can attest, keeping Mitzvot is not a burden, but a pleasure. And not just a pleasure for the soul, but also for the body: the physical experience of food, drink, beauty, majesty, people, community is more powerful and precious than anything else on planet earth.

2. It Once Was Difficult

Jews today are blessed with unprecedented freedom. We can be as Jewish as we wish – we can send our children to Jewish schools, keep Shabbat, kosher and all the mitzvot without any fear of persecution or punishment.

Today it isn't illegal, punishable by death, to perform a Mitzvah. Keeping Shabbat, having a Brit, or studying Torah, does not have to be a clandestine, underground experience. In 2019, doing a Mitzvah does not come along with worrying for our lives.

But it wasn't always so.

Just a few short years ago, Jews in the former Soviet Union had to make everyday choices between observing Mitzvot and staying alive. A Jew could be imprisoned or killed for keeping Shabbat or donning Tefillin. And countless were.

If a Jew chose to keep Kosher, he could starve to death. And many holy souls did. Not anonymous souls. Relatives of ours, our grandparents, our families chose to starve rather than eat *treif*, chose to live Jewishly even if it meant dying.

Just imagine: here we sit in synagogue, praying freely, coming and going as we please. Today, in 2019, our biggest worry is how boring and long the rabbi's speech is, or what's for Kiddush.

In 1984, just 35 years ago, Jews sat in underground synagogues, hidden by false fronts and trapdoors, praying the same prayers and listening to the same Torah. Only, no one banged on the Bimah, lest it be mistaken for

a bang on the door by the KGB. No one shouted Shema Yisrael, lest someone on the street hear it. No one worried about how many types of herring were at the Kiddush; they worried about staying alive!

One soul-wrenching story, sure to flood our hearts and well our eyes with tears, of a Russian Jew writing a letter to the Lubavitcher Rebbe about his struggles with Shabbat, will change your entire perspective on Shabbat, Judaism, and being Jewish today.

And it will remind you of what Shabbat Shuva is all about.

3. 1983: A Yechidus

1984 is the codeword for socialism. Named after the book *1984* by George Orwell, this year has come to be the shorthand for all the propaganda, insanity, and cold-blooded mind control of the Soviet Union.

But the end of 1983 may be even more apt a time to describe the Soviet Union. On 14 Tevet 5744, December 20, 1983, 11 days prior to 1984, a relatively unknown yet transformative *yechidus*, private audience, took place between the Lubavitcher Rebbe and the Sadigerer Rebbe in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.¹

The subject is Russian Jewry. The Lubavitcher Rebbe and the Sadigerer are talking about their plight, and how it reflects the plight of the Jews enslaved in Egypt. And, in many ways, is even more challenging.

Then, at about a half hour into the *yechidus*, the Rebbe shares a letter that a Russian Jew had smuggled out of Russia, against pain of death, to ask a *halachic* question of the Rebbe.

And this is a paraphrasing of the letter that the Rebbe received and shared in the *yechidus*. This letter made me cry and put into perspective my entire Judaism. I believe it will do the same for you.

4. A Letter That Will Make You Cry

Every healthy adult in the Soviet Union has to work. Not working was not an option. And you have to work on Shabbat. The government dictates the work and no one has the option of taking Saturdays off.

Indeed, the authorities would get highly suspicious of someone who would suddenly attempt to get off on Saturday. Is this person trying to keep Shabbat?

This one man writing the letter, writes to the Rebbe that after much effort he was able to finagle a job where he would not have to outwardly break a single Shabbat prohibition. He could walk to work, he would not have to drive, he would not have to write, or do anything that desecrates the Shabbat.

¹ https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/553880/jewish/14-Teves-5744-Yechidus-Sadigerer-Rebbe.htm

To all outward appearances it would seem like he was working on Shabbat. But inwardly and in reality he would keep Shabbat completely.

So he turns to the Rebbe, writing this letter, with a Halachic question.

According to Jewish law wine is a holy, sacramental libation, as attested by the fact that, unlike any other fruit juice, it has its own blessing, Hagafen. Wine therefore must be handled only by a Shabbat-observing Jew, and one who *looks* and *acts* like a Shabbat-observer for all to see. Otherwise it's the wine is referred to as *yayin nesech* and cannot be used for Kiddush (or service in the Temple when the Temple stood).

Asks the Russian Jew of the Rebbe:

After working in the Russian factory all Friday and Friday night, everybody thinks and assumes that he's breaking Shabbat. It appears to others that he's a non-Shabbat-observing Jew, even though he actually did not break a single law or perform any of the 39 *melachot*. So, after he comes home late Friday night from work, here is his Halachic dilemma:

How should he make Kiddush? Should he make Kiddush on wine, which would be deemed *yayin nesach*, because though he didn't break any Shabbat laws everyone *thinks* and *perceives* that he did, or should he make Kiddush on Challah?

And he could not simply tell his fellow Jewish brethren that he really is keeping Shabbos, and is just pretending to work, because if he does that, then the Soviet authorities will find out and they'll do who knows what.

6. Can You Imagine Such A Halachic Question? Asks the Rebbe

The Rebbe asked the Sadigerer if he ever heard of such a story and could he imagine such a phenomenon: A Jew sits in Soviet Russia, the threat of his life constant and the fear of surviving real, and yet all he could worry about, all he could write about is such a Halachic question! All this Jew wants to do is keep Shabbat in the right way!

Smuggling a letter out of Russia to a religious leader is a major offense. Yet, of all request he can make of the Rebbe, this man does not ask for a blessing to be free, he doesn't ask for an allowance to break Shabbat because its *pikuach nefesh* and ensure his life, he doesn't even tell the Rebbe the good news that he found a way to actually keep Shabbat: He smuggles out a letter to ask a Halachic question: Should he make Kiddush on wine that is considered *yayin nesach* because others *think* he broke Shabbat!...

The Rebbe elaborates: This Jew did everything in his power to maneuver a job that would allow him to keep Shabbat. He kept the entire Shabbat according to the letter of the law, down to every detail -- this Jew kept Shabbat in the Soviet Union at the threat of death, or at least imprisonment, and all he's worried about is... that his wine, the wine of a Tzaddik, is *yayin nesach*!

Can you imagine?! Without any airs, without any second thoughts, he innocently wants to know whether he can make kiddush on wine!!

It's a wonder! It's humbling! Is this not the essence of a Jew? Is this not the essence of Shabbat?

6. Comfort Zones

Here we are, in America, happy and completely free and carefree, and many of us feel that Shabbat is a struggle. How could I turn off my cell phone? How could I not check my text messages and emails? How could I not go shopping, online or off? How could I not cook? How could I not drive? How could I not go golfing? How could I not watch college football?

Surrounded by abundance and countless possibilities, by luxury and freedom, by opportunities and the right to be as Jewish as we wish – with no fear of reprisal – we can easily take our gifts and blessings for granted.

Comfort zones create apathy. We can forget the importance and the beauty of Shabbat. We can forget the prices our grandparents paid to keep the holy Shabbat; the sacrifices they made to never forsake our eternal heritage. For them this was not an option; Shabbat and all of Judaism was their lives, their oxygen. No matter how difficult it was they kept the Shabbat because it is the holy Jew's *natural* state, while the mundane workweek is our superimposed reality.

7. Shabbat Shuva, Returning to Shabbat

And that's why Shabbat Shuva exists. That's why this time of year, the High Holidays, exist. Shuva, Teshuva means to return – to return us to who we truly are. To return us to our very essence – to that which the Soviet Jew knew in his gut.

His sacrifice and his simplicity – not even recognizing the enormity of his commitment – serves as a remarkable lesson to us all.

Named after the opening of our Haftarah,² Shabbat Shuva is the Shabbat of Return, of returning to our natural state as Jews.

This is also the general theme of this time of year. The ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur are called the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, the 10 Days of Return. Teshuvah, what is often translated as “repentance,” literally translates as “return.” Repentance and forgiveness is all about returning to our souls, to our Jewish-

² Hosea 14:2.

ness, to our core purpose in life of making this world a home for G-d through our mitzvot, good deeds and actions.

Poetically, we may also read Shabbat Shuva as “Returning to Shabbat.” In addition to the “Shabbat of Return,” Shabbat Shuva returns us to the heart and soul of what Shabbat is for the Jew, as exemplified by the Jew in Russia who, though he may have been in exile, was as one with his *yiddishkeit*, as one with his *neschama*, as one with his Shabbat as any Jew who has ever lived.

And each one of us has a piece of this inside of us. We each have this type of connection to Shabbat, where the only thing that worries us is (not the Soviets, not perception, not difficulty, not the threat of getting caught writing a letter to a Rebbe, nothing but) doing Shabbat the right way.

But, as we sit in America, sometimes we can forget this. With freedom comes challenges. When surrounded by a plethora of options and possibilities, sometimes it's hard to remember our core essence – Shabbat.

Comes Shabbat Shuva and returns us to Shabbat, reminds us of the power and wonder of Shabbat.

And, the blessing and luxury of being free to celebrate it in comfort, peace, and luxury. Our only worry, today, being: which type of wine to make Kiddush on!

8. Conclusion: Being Jewish Is The Easiest Thing In The World!

In past generations, it was difficult to be a Jew. It took great sacrifice to be committed.

Not today. Today keeping a Mitzvah, observing a divine prescription, is not just easy -- it's more pleasurable and profound than not doing so!

In addition to being spiritually delicious, Kosher is physically delicious. And diverse. And plentiful. (Hopefully, not too fattening). And healthy too!

In addition to being spiritually elevating, Shabbat is physically elevating. And peaceful. And therapeutic. No digital. No Social Media. No email. No distraction from who you are, what's important, and what's eternal. A gift from above to spend quality time with children and family.

The Jew in Soviet Russia reminds us of the essence of Shabbat. Only today we can access it without the trials and tribulations that he had to go through.

So how can we not? How can we not make Kiddush and celebrate Shabbat -- on Kosher, delicious wine -- for ourselves, for our families, for our children, for our grandchildren, for all generations, and for that Jew in Russia!

That Jew and so many others throughout history inspires us to appreciate our freedoms and opportunities, and use them to educate our children with Torah and our eternal tradition, to become more passionate Jews, to illuminate our homes, communities and environments with virtue and kindness – with divine light.

Shabbat Shuva returns the essence of Shabbat to us, and returns us to the essence of Shabbat!

Shabbat Shalom, a Good Shabbos, a gmar chatima tova, and a gut gebentht yor!

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