

Avi Weiss

OPEN UP THE
ЖЕЛЕЗНЫЙ ЗАНАВЕС
IRON DOOR

MEMOIRS OF A SOVIET JEWRY ACTIVIST

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Part I

The Early Years

Regret

May 1, 1964

On May 1, 1964, under the auspices of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), more than a thousand students filled East Sixty-Seventh Street in Manhattan to protest the Soviet Union's treatment of its Jews. Gathered across from the Soviet Mission to the United Nations, Jewish university students from all over the city marched for hours in orderly circles. They walked in utter silence, a silence meant to evoke the silencing of Soviet Jewry – three million people trapped behind the Iron Curtain – forbidden to live as Jews, yet forbidden to leave. Immediately after that first demonstration, leaders of the SSSJ realized they had made a mistake. Although the May 1 protest had historical significance, conducting it in silence, they stated, “was precisely counter to our strategy. We resolved never to be silent again.”¹

The demonstration was nearly spontaneous. A handful of students and activists organized it in just four days. But that first day in May – coincidentally, a national Soviet holiday called International Workers' Day – would mark the beginning of a massive worldwide outcry and decades-long struggle that would ultimately play a key role

1. Glenn Richter, letter to the author on the formation of the SSSJ, December 15, 2013.

in the liberation of nearly two million Jews from the Soviet Union's oppressive grasp.²

ABSENT

I was not in front of the Soviet Mission that May morning nor at any of the follow-up meetings and protests.³ As an undergraduate and then rabbinical student at Yeshiva University (YU) through June 1968, I had not yet begun to take part in demonstrations. But in my roles as bar mitzva teacher at the Jewish Community Center of Paramus, New Jersey, and then as student rabbi at a congregation in Richmond Hill, New York, I took the opportunity to raise consciousness by teaching about Soviet Jewry whenever I could. As student rabbi, I also directed plays that highlighted the plight of Soviet Jewry.

The most memorable play we produced was *The Phonograph*, an adaptation of Isaac Babel's short story "Gedali," which we performed for congregations and youth seminars.⁴ In this story, the village cobbler, Gedali, a forlorn Russian Jew, is forbidden by Communist decree from attending synagogue services on Shabbat (the Sabbath). Soon after that,

2. Although the SSSJ was the first group engaged in sustained public protest for Soviet Jews, sporadic actions had been initiated beforehand. In April 1962, students Bernard Kabak and Benjamin Silverberg organized a one-time demonstration at the Soviet UN Mission. A year later, the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism, spearheaded by NASA scientist Dr. Louis Rosenblum and Dr. Herb Caron; and the American League for Russian Jews, headed by revisionist Zionists, in particular businessman Morris Brafman, were created. By 1964, the time was ripe for the SSSJ's emergence. On April 27, Jacob Birnbaum convened a meeting at Columbia University to discuss what could be done to assist Soviet Jews. Over 150 students attended the gathering, among them Glenn Richter, Arthur Green, who today heads the non-denominational Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, and Jimmy Torczyner, who became a professor of sociology. It was resolved that on May Day the Soviet UN Mission would be picketed.
3. Among the countless rallies organized by the SSSJ were the Jericho March from the Soviet UN Mission (April 4, 1965); the Passover *Geula* March of thousands of students from the mission (April 6, 1966); the fast-in at the mission (August 15, 1967); the Freedom Boat Ride to a mass rally at the Statue of Liberty (September 29, 1968); and the Let Them Out Rally at the mission at which then Congressman Ed Koch spoke (November 23, 1969).
4. See Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry and Other Stories*, ed. Efraim Sicher (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006).

another sacrifice for the revolution is pressed upon him: his grandson is conscripted into the Red Army. Only when his beloved phonograph, his prized possession, is taken from him and given to a visiting commissar, does he realize that his first compromise opened the door to subsequent demands. In the play's most poignant moment, Gedali says:

You know when it all began? ... When they told me to stop praying on the Sabbath – and I agreed to it. When a man starts going against the things he believes in, when he turns his back on the God he believes in – that's the beginning of the end. After that he is going to lose everything very quick – phonographs, grandsons, nothing is left to a man after that.⁵

The play ends with Gedali dramatically deciding to risk everything he had left by attending Friday night Shabbat services.

So impactful was this play on the teens, they decided to write their own dramas as well. Together we studied the plight of Soviet Jews, sang songs of solidarity, offered prayers, and resolved to keep Soviet Jewry constantly in our hearts and minds.

As much as I enjoyed those teaching experiences, and our collective learning and study, I can't help but think back to those years with regret. Today, activism – in particular participating in demonstrations – has become my *first* nature, and I wish I had gotten to this place sooner. I have spent much time contemplating why it took me so long to stand up, to raise a voice of moral conscience, and to be counted. I am but one of many activists who, in their own way, and at their own pace, chose to dedicate themselves to the Soviet Jewry struggle. In what follows, I offer my own tale of how I got to here from there.

PERSONAL EVOLUTION

Although I was raised in a religious Zionist home, I attended a *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) elementary school. At my high school, which leaned to the religious right, many of the rabbis were Shoah (Holocaust) survivors. And yet, never once did any of my teachers bring up the Shoah.

5. James Yaffe, *The Phonograph*, adapted from "Gedali."

In hindsight, I recognize that I was receiving a mixed message: while my parents implicitly taught me the importance of standing up for other Jews, at school I was being taught that to remain silent in the face of threats, to keep one's head down, was one's best means of survival.

After graduating from high school in June 1961, I devoted a year to study at Yeshivat Kerem BeYavneh in Israel, where my fellow Israeli students, aside from their studies, also served part-time in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Never will I forget the morning my *havruta* (study partner), Menachem Weininger, bid me farewell and took off for his military duties. I felt in awe of his commitment, his readiness to put his life on the line, even though I regarded it as his responsibility, not mine. Later on, during the winter of 1961–1962, under the threat of a possible attack by Syria, virtually all the Israelis were ordered to join their military units. Only the American students stayed behind.

After completing my year of study, I returned to New York to begin college. In the spring of 1967, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser vowed to throw Israelis into the sea. Wearing my *kippa* (skullcap) with great pride, I attended a large rally in New York shortly before the outbreak of the war. Little Israel, beset on all sides, stood its ground, emerging victorious in what was later named the Six-Day War. So I participated in an even larger rally, in Washington, DC, to celebrate Israel's stunning victory. Ecstatic with Israel's success, I was keenly aware of how its citizens' resolve, courage, and fight had won the day. But, though I felt tremendous pride in Israel's accomplishment, I did not translate that pride into a sense of responsibility to *physically* stand up for Israel myself.

The tide of my conviction started to change when nine Jews, alleged spies for Israel, were hanged in the center of Baghdad in January 1969. The Iraqi government declared the day a national holiday. Thousands of Iraqis cheered the execution and bayed for Jewish blood. I was by then serving in my first pulpit, in St. Louis, Missouri. The photo on the front page of the newspapers is still seared in my memory: Jews left hanging on the gallows, the word "Jew" scrawled on their bodies.

I was outraged. These defenseless Diaspora Jews did not live in Israel, where the IDF could have come to their aid. My pent-up feelings

for my people were intensifying, and I began to feel an urgency to transform Jewish pride into active assumption of responsibility. With fervor, I urged my St. Louis congregants to raise a voice of protest, right there in our sanctuary. Though our protest was rather placid, it was to be the first of hundreds more that I would lead in streets around the world.

Leningrad Trial

December 1970

In June 1970, a group of fourteen Jews and two gentiles resolved to take an unprecedented action: they would hijack a Soviet plane and re-route it to Sweden. From Sweden they planned to make their way to Israel. Though they knew they could not reach Israel directly, their act would symbolize their desperation to escape, highlighting for the whole world the intolerable suffering of Soviet Jewry.

Among this daring group were Yosef Mendelevich, a newly observant Jew from Riga; Sylva Zalmanson, a young factory worker who had already gained a reputation for the brazenness with which she defied government authority; and Sylva's new husband, Eduard Kuznetsov, a veteran of the Soviet penal system who had served years for his dissident activities. The group was led by Mark Dymshits, a former Soviet pilot whose career had been stalled because of his Jewish identity. (Though Dymshits was the leader of the group, Mendelevich was the "soul" of the action.)

OPERATION WEDDING

Dubbed *Mivtza Hatuna* (Operation Wedding), this was not to be a hijacking in the strict sense of the word. The group had purchased all the seats on a small Soviet commercial airliner so that no other people

would be affected. The plane was scheduled to fly out of Smolny, a small airport near Leningrad, to a fictitious wedding. During a scheduled stop at a remote area called Priozersk, they would overpower the pilots, leave them there, and with Dymshits in the cockpit fly to freedom.

This was the refined plan. According to the original plan, over a hundred people were to have boarded the plane. But the organizers realized that with so many people involved, it would inevitably be leaked to the KGB, so the mission was narrowed to include far fewer people, including the above-named four. By then, however, it was too late – someone had leaked the plan to the KGB, which thereafter monitored the group's every step.

On June 15, 1970, the planned day, Mendelevich and his colleagues realized they were being watched by Soviet authorities. Courageously, they decided to go ahead anyway. Their arrest, they reasoned, would draw worldwide attention to the plight of Soviet Jewry. As they walked toward the plane, they were brutally pounced upon and arrested.¹

Many years later, I asked Mendelevich, “Even if you had succeeded in taking over the plane, wouldn't the Soviets have sent fighter jets to stop you, and, if necessary, shot you out of the sky?” Yosef responded that the group had considered this possibility, but were ready to die for the cause. This brought to mind a teaching of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: If in life you are not ready to die for something, you're really not living.²

The verdict handed down by the court six months later was unduly harsh, even by Soviet standards. Dymshits and Kuznetsov were sentenced to death; Mendelevich and Zalmanson received fifteen and ten years, respectively. The verdicts shook me deeply. These Diaspora Jews, ready to risk their lives for freedom like the Baghdad Nine before them, did not enjoy the protection of the IDF. Yet unlike the Baghdad Nine, they had not yet been put to death. So here was a chance not only to feel pride, to raise a voice within the confines of my synagogue, but also to join thousands of others and loudly declare that Jews will never again remain silent. Among the crowd, as I shouted and demanded that the death sentences

1. Yosef Mendelevich, *Unbroken Spirit: A Heroic Story of Faith, Courage, and Survival* (Jerusalem and Springfield, NJ: Gefen, 2012).

2. Dr. King's exact quote was, “I submit to you that if a man hasn't discovered something he will die for, he isn't fit to live.” Speech in Detroit, June 23, 1963.

be commuted and that all Soviet Jews be freed, I felt an enormous sense of camaraderie with the whole of *Am Yisrael*. While I had participated in demonstrations ever since returning to New York in September 1969, only after the Leningrad Trial verdicts did I join others in actually leading protests, with passion and vigor.

My sense is that the Leningrad Trial, even more than the Six-Day War, forged American Jews into a community that stood up for our brethren wherever they might be suffering. Whereas the Six-Day War inspired pride, the Leningrad Trial inspired action. The Six-Day War laid the groundwork for Jews everywhere to feel a sense of Jewish commitment and identity; the Leningrad Trial translated that commitment into a reality. My sense, too, was that Israelis were more immediately and urgently preoccupied by the imperative of defending the Jewish state than with championing the cause of Soviet Jews. So Soviet Jewry became primarily a Diaspora issue, inspiring American Jews to take the lead.

Regarding that lead, various groups from the established Jewish community formed an umbrella organization, the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry (AJCSJ), to coordinate their efforts for the cause, at least in name. In actuality, the AJCSJ wasn't given sufficient human or financial resources to effect much change in the name of Soviet Jewry. As such, they were incapable of mobilizing protest on a grand scale, though they did arrange a meeting with President Richard Nixon, asking him to intervene. In contrast, American Jewish activists, having developed a solid infrastructure since 1964, were prepared to immediately mobilize in response to the Leningrad sentencing – organizing rallies and protests in America and throughout the world. These protests were buttressed by the efforts of the more militant Jewish Defense League (JDL) of Rabbi Meir Kahane.

GETTING THERE FIRST

It should come as no surprise that activists got there first. Activism is a form of leadership. Leadership is identifying a need, and responding to that need. In short, the very core of leadership is to demand change. And change is difficult for the establishment, which is mired in bureaucracy, encumbered by red tape. Activists, operating outside the mainstream,

can move forward without having to answer to a board or executive committee. The establishment hesitates; activists move with alacrity.

Since biblical times, outsiders have characteristically been the first to raise a voice of moral conscience. Abraham, the first patriarch and father of the Jewish people, began on the fringe, a lone voice promulgating monotheism against all odds. Hence, he is called an *ivri* – a person from the other side. The whole world, say the rabbis, was on one side of the river, and Abraham stood alone on the other.³

Though they had persuaded the Jewish elders to join them in marching on Pharaoh's palace to demand he release the Jews, Moses and Aaron were the only ones to arrive at the palace. Where were the elders? The biblical commentator Rashi suggests that "one by one [the elders] dropped out until only Moses and Aaron drew close to the palace."⁴

We've seen this in our own day as well. Neither the US civil rights movement nor the anti-Vietnam War movement began in the mainstream. Similarly, the struggle to free Ethiopian Jewry was for years the lonely cause of the heroic Graenum Berger and a small number of activists. So, too, the Soviet Jewry movement was pioneered by visionaries who by and large stood alone.

This brings us to another challenge of leadership. By definition, change is resisted. It is not easy to leave behind the tranquility of the mainstream to enter into turbulent waters. But a true leader understands that a fundamental principle of spiritual activism is to do that which is right, even if it is not popular; to become involved in a cause even when uncertain of victory; to overcome the natural resistance to taking risks.

Activists cannot do it alone. To succeed, they must convince the mainstream to become involved. This, too, is one of the great challenges of leadership: navigating the inevitably choppy waters of a reluctant establishment, pushing and cajoling them to get on board.

Over time, Soviet Jewry activists did just that, succeeding in convincing – and sometimes embarrassing – the mainstream to join the effort. As will be seen in these pages, once the cause acquired a measure of respectability, the establishment "boldly" stepped in. But even then,

3. Genesis Rabba, 42:13.

4. Exodus 5:1.

establishment figures made sure to distance themselves from, and even discredit, those who first stirred the conscience of the community.⁵

I was not among the very first trailblazers; I, too, needed time to join the Soviet Jewry cause. That was a mistake I later resolved never to repeat. From then on, I have been driven to be among the first to do what is right, no matter how unpopular it may be at the time.

My conscience is eased a bit in knowing that even the sssj needed time. Recall that its first demonstration, on May 1, 1964, though large, was silent. While that silence was intentional, it might also be too much to have expected or wished for a loud, raucous protest right at the outset. And, as noted earlier, the sssj soon changed tactics, and by the time the death sentences were handed down in the Leningrad Trial, it was positioned to galvanize protests nationwide. As a result of those efforts, the Soviet Union, embarrassed by the flood of bad publicity, commuted the death sentences of Dymshits and Kuznetsov to fifteen years. We activists felt empowered. The Leningrad Trial had planted the seeds for a massive public awareness campaign. The American Soviet Jewry movement was fully born.

JUNIOR PARTNERS

It must always be remembered, however, that while American Jews played an indispensable role in the movement, the true heroes were the Soviet Jews themselves. Sometimes I think that it is the greatness of the challenge that determines the greatness of a leader. Lincoln responded to the challenge of slavery; King responded to segregation; Herzl responded to Jewish statelessness; Mendeleovich responded to Soviet anti-Semitism. Great people muster the inner spirit, the inner godliness, to rise to challenges. The simple fact is that the challenges faced by Soviet Jews themselves far exceeded those their American counterparts confronted. While American Jewry went into the streets to express solidarity with Soviet Jewry, Soviet Jews were risking life and limb for their freedom.

The great Zionist thinker Aḥad HaAm said, “More than the Jews have kept the Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept the Jews.” It could similarly

5. Avraham Weiss, *Spiritual Activism: A Jewish Guide to Leadership and Repairing the World* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), 52–54.

The Early Years

be said that more than American Jews impacted Soviet Jews, Soviet Jews impacted American Jews. Just twenty years after the Shoah, with American Jews struggling to find and forge their identity, Soviet Jews broadcast a message to their American counterparts: stand up and be counted as strong, proud Jews.

The destiny of two people as leaders of the movement coalesced on the day of the Leningrad Trial sentencing: in the east, the heroic Yosef Mendelevich; and in the west, his junior partner, Glenn Richter, the young student leader of the sssj who led protests on behalf of Yosef and his comrades.