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From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles <editor@ascentofsafed.com>

The Red Army Officer Roommate

While I (Betzael Schiff) was still a young boy in second grade, my father passed away. My mother also died at a young age as a result of a tragic incident. This happened a week before my wedding.

Those days were permeated with persecution and much suffering. The fear in keeping *mitzvot* (commandments) was tremendous. Any action taken on behalf of Torah and Judaism involved risk of harsh prison sentences. Since I no longer had parents and I lived alone, I took on various missions on behalf of my fellow Jews, including many which were fraught with danger.

One of my jobs was to procure the *arba minim* (lulav, etrog, hadasim, arovot) for Jews in Samarkand. I traveled to Georgia in order to pick them from their respective trees for the Sukkot holiday. I left right after Rosh HaShana so that I could return in time for **Yom Kippur**.

One year I arrived in Tbilisi (the capital city) in Georgia where the usual policeman awaited me. He knew me, and he brought me to the place where palm trees grew in an area alongside the sea. Since I paid him handsomely, the policeman waited respectfully and even made sure I had a ladder and a saw. I cut down ten *lulavim* (palm branches), which was enough for all the members of the congregation. Then I went on to Kutaisi where I cut down *hadasim* (myrtle), which grew plentifully in the courtyard of the shul. That is what I did each year.

One year, when I finished my job and wanted to return home to Samarkand before Yom Kippur, I discovered that no tickets were available. I offered large amounts of money, triple the usual price, but not a single ticket was available.

I knew a Jew who had a pharmacy. I figured he might be able to help me. I begged him. "If there is no ticket to Samarkand, then at least get me to Moscow where my brother is." I hoped that I would be able to spend Yom Kippur there with him.

The man tried his best but he too failed. In the end he arranged accommodations for me at a special motel near the airport, hoping that perhaps the next morning, Yom Kippur eve, I would be able to get on a flight to Samarkand or at least to Moscow.

When I entered the room I saw a young man asleep on his bed. I got into the other bed and slept for a few hours. The next morning I rose early and ran over

to the airport to see whether there were any flights. I saw that I had time until the flights would be leaving, so I returned to the hotel.

Back in the room, I wanted to take out my *tefilin* and pray, but the other man had awoken and was sitting up in bed. and his presence bothered me. I asked him whether he was leaving soon or would be staying on in the room.

"I'm in no rush and I will be staying here," he said with a shrug. "Why, do you need something?" he asked.

"Yes, you're disturbing me," I said honestly and bravely. "Tonight we have a great holiday and now I want to pray."

"So pray," he said, "I'm not doing anything to bother you."

I had no choice. I turned to the wall, put on my *tefilin* and began praying. Afterwards I turned around and saw that in the meantime the young man had gotten dressed. He was wearing the uniform of an officer in the Red Army. When I saw his medals and high rank I realized I was in deep trouble. I thought to myself, "Well, that's that. I put myself in danger and now I'm in for it."

I didn't know what to do for I had been caught red-handed putting on *tefilin*. I was still in shock and wondering what to say when he quietly said to me, "What holiday do we have today?"

For a moment I didn't realize what he had meant, I responded simply, "Tonight is *Yom Kippur*."

I looked up to see his reaction and saw that he was again sitting on the bed. His head was down and he was deep in thought. Then I heard him sigh and say to himself, "Ah, Moshe Moshe, what's with you? Even things like this you don't remember?" and he burst into tears.

After he calmed down he turned to me and said, "What do you want to do now?"

"I want to return home before the holiday," I said.

"Where do you want to go?"

"To Tashkent," I answered.

"So come with me," he said abruptly, and he got up and left the room.

We went outside where I saw a military vehicle and driver. He told the driver to take us to the airport. When we arrived there he inquired as to where the

planes to Tashkent were (which is near Samarkand). We went out to the runway and nobody dared to stop him or say a word. His rank aroused the respect of all. When he found the plane to Tashkent he said to the pilot, "Where are you going?"

"To Tashkent."

"Take him," he ordered.

The pilot didn't have much of a choice in the matter. I boarded the plane and managed to reach home before Yom Kippur.

Before we parted the officer asked me, "If I want to find you in Tashkent, how will I do that?" I told him to come to the shul and ask for Betzalel. A few months later he actually came to Tashkent and looked me up.

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*Source:* Adapted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the "*Beis Moshiach Magazine*" translation, as posted on //LChaimWeekly.org (#736) 25 years ago, of the original Hebrew article by Menachem Ziegelboim.

*Connection:* Seasonal – **Yom Kippur**

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Betzalel Schiff** was born in the former Soviet Union, where he was a major activist in the Lubavitch underground Jewish education network. He also received a law degree from the university in Tashkent. In the winter of 5732 (1972) he managed to emigrate to Israel, where he took up residence in Jerusalem. When in the following year "*Agudat Shamir*" was founded for observant Russian Jewish academics, who would reach out to 'not-yet' observant Russian Jewish academics, the Lubavitcher Rebbe appointed Prof. Herman Branover as president of the organization and Schiff as the chairman.