

bs"D From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles

Story # 1267 (5782-29) 18 Adar Beit 5782 (March 21, 2022) FREE [email subscription](#)
Discover! the "TillesTells Saturday Night Stories" [WhatsApp group](#)

Coronated by Media in Siberia

In a night that most often showcases the profound growth and success of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, the 5782 (Oct. 27-31. 2021) International Kinus Hashluchim (albeit less populated than usual, owing to COVID) paused to draw strength from the many difficulties emissaries meet and overcome in the course of their work. At times, the hardships begin even before a young couple has landed in the community they will call home.

In 1998, Rabbi Schneor-Zalman Zaklos was 24 years old, newly married to his wife, Miriam. They both dreamed of becoming Chabad emissaries anywhere in the world, with one exception. "When I was dating my wife she told me: 'I am ready to go ... with you anywhere, except Russia.'"

Nevertheless, when friends suggested strongly that they meet with Rabbi Berel Lazar, chief rabbi and head Chabad emissary of Russia, they did so. "I told him there's actually a big city, Novosibirsk, the capital of Siberia [and 3rd largest city in the FSU]," Lazar recalled, "and his first reaction was, it's not for him, it's absolutely not for his wife."

"Siberia? Why would anyone want to go to Siberia?" Israel-born Zaklos added, envisioning a frozen wasteland dotted with ice huts.

Lazar urged them to at least visit the city, before declining the offer. They agreed to do so, and flew there to spend *Purim* with its local Jewish community. Novosibirsk was everything they feared – the thermometer read way below zero. The synagogue was a broken shell, with bathroom facilities consisting of a frozen bucket in the courtyard. They arranged a Purim program to the best of their ability and prepared to leave.

The two-week visit reinforced the young couple's reluctance. "There's no real synagogue, no congregation, no Jewish community than a handful of older Jews," they told each other. "It's not for us."

Two days before their planned return to Israel, Zalman went to the city's tiny shul to return a prayer book. The Rabbi was horrified when he opened the door. Vandals had destroyed it, trashing the furniture, tearing up the Torah scrolls, littering the floor with ripped holy books and *tallitot* (prayer shawls), and spraying anti-semitic graffiti on the walls threatening more.

Furious, Zaklos called Lazar in Moscow for advice. "I'm calling the media," the Chief Rabbi replied. "We have to call attention to it. It shouldn't happen again."

Television and radio crews swiftly arrived at the scene. Before long Zaklos found himself facing TV cameras and microphones. “The first question I was asked was if I am the rabbi of Novosibirsk,” he recalled. "I said, 'Yes.' What choice did I have?"

When he was asked how long he had lived in Novosibirsk and what brought him there, he responded, “I’ve only been here a short time, in order to be the rabbi for the Jews here in Novosibirsk.”

He then addressed the municipality directly: “You must truly do everything in your power that something shameful like this should never happen again. And the only way to ensure this is by finally having a place where it will be possible to build a large synagogue.”

That evening, the Rabbi's face and his new title were splashed on TV screens across the former Soviet Union. "I guess we're staying," he told his wife.

Even as the story went viral in Russia, the couple returned to Israel – and to a barrage of congratulations from friends and family on their new position as Chabad emissaries and leaders of the Jewish community of Novosibirsk.

“Zaklos realized that when he said, ‘I’m here in order to be the rabbi’, this wasn’t just ... by chance,” added Lazar. “This is what the Rebbe was telling him, that this is your place.”

The obstacles were many: Siberian isolation, anti-semitic sentiment, and most of all, their own fear. Yet it was precisely these setbacks that propelled the Zakloses to set about kindling Jewish life in the frozen city.

Only a year after they moved to Siberia, they succeeded to open a fully accredited school for students in grades K-11. This was their first major project, because Zalman reasoned that parents who might not want Jewish education themselves would wish it for their children. He hoped to gradually draw the parents' interest to Jewish thought and traditions.

"People thought we were crazy," Zalman says. "They told us we'd get one, maybe two students." Instead, the school opened with 126 students. Tuition is free, thanks to funding from the Ohr Avner Fund and its Israeli philanthropist, Lev Leviev.

In addition to high quality education, students get free meals, transportation and medical care. Nearly half the students come from single parent, impoverished homes, and many suffer from chronic illness, so the support services are critical.

On Sept. 1, 2000, a brand new secondary school opened on land donated by the city, along with new facilities for the grammar school. The joyous occasion was marred by a bomb threat. After the chief of the bomb squad checked out the building, he told the rabbi, "This is a beautiful school. I never told this to

anyone else, but my wife and I are both Jewish, and we want to enroll our kids here."

In addition to his rabbinic duties, Zalman supervises the operation of the synagogue, the schools, a summer camp, medical services, food distribution to the needy, community-wide celebrations of Jewish holidays that draw up to 1,000, a soup kitchen, and an emergency fund. He must also raise significant funds from the local community to support these activities.

Within five years after the Zakloses moved to Novosibirsk, a significant Jewish community was in place. Starting from the handful of Jews who asked him to come to the city, he had attracted some 2,000 families who had been told they were Jewish, but never understood what it meant. Zalman estimates there are probably 25,000 Jews in the area.

In 2013, 25 years after they first arrived, the construction of a gleaming 35,000 square meter Jewish center was completed, including a new \$2.5 million synagogue, a far cry from the dilapidated structure they had been met with.

Despite their pride in what they have accomplished, the Zakloses admit they are still overcoming the challenges of living in Siberia. Neither knew a word of Russian when they arrived, and it took many years till they acquired an adequate fluency. On the other hand, they had little trouble keeping kosher because Zalman is a *shochet* [ritual slaughterer] who can kill his own chickens, and fish and produce are abundant in Siberia.

Miriam, of course, still looked forward to when there would be a kosher bakery where she could buy cakes and bread. Finally, in 2015, they opened the "Jerusalem Café," the first and only kosher restaurant in this area of central Russia.



The Zakloses' story is not unique. The Rebbe taught that God does not place an obstacle before someone if they cannot overcome it; the difficulty is itself a sign to dig deeper, persevere and transform the circumstances into a positive.

~~~~~

Source: Compiled by Yerachmiel Tilles from // [anash.org](http://anash.org) (2021) and from an article, "Roots in Siberia" by **Ellen Harris**, in the *Cleveland Jewish News* (2004 – as posted on // [lchaimweekly.org](http://lchaimweekly.org), #827). Photo: // [fjc-fsu.org](http://fjc-fsu.org)

*Connections:* The main event took place in the week after *Purim*. Also, the rabbi was also a *shochet*, and a major section in this week's Torah reading is about which animals and birds are eligible for kosher slaughter.