

The Shofar of the Cracked Bell

Chaya Halberstam-Evers

It was the end of a Siberian summer, in 1940. My grandfather, **Rabbi Meir Halberstam**, a young boy of 13 years old at the time, was imprisoned in a work camp together with his grandfather, **the Rebbe of Zhemigrod, Rabbi Sinai Halberstam**.

Young Meir had moved with his family to Palestine to settle in the holy city of Jerusalem in 1936, before the war had broken out. In honor of his upcoming Bar Mitzvah, his father sent him on a boat back to Poland where he would be able to celebrate this auspicious day in the chasidic court of his holy grandfather. Upon his arrival in Poland, the rumble of war was approaching. Disciples, family, and community members were all scrambling to save their lives. With the Nazis at their heels, young Meir escaped with his Grandfather and immediate family to Russia. At last they were safe from the Nazi enemies, or so they thought.

Due to the large amount of Polish refugees in Russia, the Russian government seized the opportunity to use them as slaves. Charging them as enemies of the state since they had Polish passports, young Meir and his Grandfather's whole entourage were sentenced to heavy slave labor in the cold Siberian plains.

Rosh Hashana was approaching, and the mild Siberian summer had ended, ushering in the tundra-like winds and cold. Young Meir noticed that with each passing day, his Grandfather, the Rebbe of Zmigrad was becoming more and more depressed. "How will we blow the *shofar*?" he cried. Although he had the holy shofar that had been passed down from his ancestors, the thought of being caught blowing it by the evil Russian guards, brought dread to his very being.

It was two nights before Rosh Hashana, and young Meir devised a daring plan. He awoke in the middle of the night, and wrapped cloth around his hands and feet in order to muffle any noise he would make. From his window, he watched the wild guards drinking and dancing late into the night. He waited until they were all stooped over in a drunken sleep and quietly trudged through the wind and cold to the front of the work camp, where the giant camp bell stood. He looked to all sides to make sure he was unobserved, then climbed up a very high post until he reached the top of the bell. With all his might he unraveled the rope holding the bell and watched the entire bell come crashing to the ground, where it shattered into many small bits and pieces. He then descended the post and quietly returned to his barrack.

The next morning there was an uproar in the camp. Upon awakening, the guards saw the broken bell and realized that they would have a problem waking all the prisoners in time. It would take weeks until they would be able to get a new bell.

Young Meir then shared with his grandfather the brave mission he had done the previous night and whispered his plan.

By the time all the prisoners were up, the guards were quite angry and looking for someone to blame. Instead, young Meir's uncle came forward and related to the head commander that he had an old shepherd's horn that his father would gladly blow each morning to wake the prisoners until they received a new bell. Upon hearing this, the commander ordered him to bring the horn at once.

The Rebbe arrived, shofar in hand, and began to blow long notes. "Let me blow it," yelled the commander, grabbing it out of the Rebbe's hands.

The commander took the shofar in his hands and brought it to his mouth, but no matter how hard he blew, no sound came out. It was at this moment of frustration that young Meir's uncle advised the commander to let his Father blow it, since he was a 'professional' horn blower. The commander then appointed the Rebbe as the official waker, who would be responsible to wake the prisoners each morning until a new bell was mounted.

Word spread quite quickly throughout the camp. All the Jewish prisoners knew that the Rebbe of Zmigrad, would blow his holy shofar the next morning, on Rosh Hashana. As the frosty morning beckoned, each prisoner was up early awaiting the sound of the shofar. The Rebbe wept as he blew the horn, the prisoners cried and prayed, and young Meir stood proudly as he watched the notes of the shofar break the darkness on that crisp Siberian morning. It was a shofar blowing that he never would forget.

My grandfather went through many more trials and hardships until he made it back to the shores of Israel (then Palestine) where he was welcomed and celebrated for the great miracles that happened to him.

Although I am a grandchild of Reb Meir Halberstam, I have only recently heard this story and it made a deep impression on me. Rosh Hashana is a very special time for our family. For me, it has always been a holiday of hope, and positivity, as we surely believe that the Al-mighty will embrace us and hold us, as he ushers us into a beautiful and sweet new year.

I try to think about the shofar that *Zaidy* (my grandfather) heard all those years ago on that cold Siberian morning, and the strength that it gave him and all the Jews who heard it. Perhaps this year, if I close my eyes and listen with my soul, I can internalize the sounds of the shofar and I will hear the sounds of faith, courage, and hope that it gave my grandfather.

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*Source:* Adapted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from an article on //chabad.org. [**Chaya Halberstam-Evers**, is an educator and writer who lives with her husband and four children in Amsterdam.]

*Connection:* ROSH HASHANA

*Biographical note:* **Rabbi Sinai Halberstam**, the first Rebbe of Zhmigrod (1869-1941), was a son of Rabbi Boruch of Gorlitz, the 4<sup>th</sup> son of the Divrei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Halberstam, founder of the Sanz dynasty. He died in the Omsk forest in Siberia, shortly after the events of the above story. Many of his male descendants became rebbes, including five grandsons who currently are Zhmigrod rebbes, in USA, Israel and Belgium.