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

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A Chanuka Blaze

Reb Mordechai Chanzin frequently found himself behind bars, repeatedly arrested for his “counter-revolutionary” activities to preserve the flickering flame of Judaism in the Soviet Union. His first sentence amounted to 10 years in a forced-labor camp. After his release, Reb Mordechai was again found guilty and punished with five more years. His third and final sentence resulted in six years. Overall, between the years 1935 and 1956, he spent 21 years in Soviet prisons and camps.

In his short stints of freedom, he selflessly devoted himself to preserving Judaism behind the Iron Curtain. Among his many experiences, there was one story that he would tell again and again.

One bitter Siberian winter, as Chanukah approached, a group of young Jewish men, all prisoners of the Gulag, convened for a short meeting. The topic: how to obtain and light a secret menorah. One promised to supply margarine to be used as fuel. Some frayed threads from standard-issue camp garb would suffice as wicks. Even small cups to hold the margarine were procured from somewhere. Of course, all this was against camp regulations, and they all understood the implication of their actions should they be caught.

Reb Mordechai was the eldest of the group of 18 men, and was therefore honored to usher in the holiday by lighting the first candle. In the dead of night, in a small garden shed, the hardy crew crowded around their makeshift menorah and listened to Reb Mordechai’s emotional voice as he recited the first blessings, tears trickling down his cheeks. Reb Mordechai and his comrades gazed silently at the small yellow light, each one recalling Chanukah in his parents’ home.

The loud crash of the door opening shattered the men’s reverie. Camp guards rushed through the doorway and flooded the cramped space. The Jewish inmates were grabbed by brutish hands and shoved through the camp. When they reached a small dank cell, they were ordered to pile inside.

The first to be brought to trial was the ringleader, Reb Mordechai. Inside the small courtroom, which consisted of the judge's desk and a bench for the defendant, the proceedings were all but *pro forma*. Reb Mordechai had already predicted his indictment, and solemnly awaited the verdict.

"This is an act of treason," said the prosecutor. "By lighting the candles, you intended to signal to enemy forces. The penalty for this is death."

The judge regarded the young man standing in front of him. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Reb Mordechai's heart pounded in his chest as he approached the judge. "Is it just me, or is it the rest of the group too?"

"All of you," enunciated the judge dryly.

Reb Mordechai was devastated.

The courtroom began to spin around him. Whatever indifference he was able to afford until then vanished in the terror-stricken realization that his fellow brothers also would be led to their deaths. He blamed himself.

Reb Mordechai burst into bitter tears, and for a few minutes he stood in front of the judge, sobbing uncontrollably. Years of crushing pain and pent-up emotions overwhelmed him and couldn't be stopped.

"Come close," said the judge.

Reb Mordechai took a step towards the judge's desk. Softly, the judge asked about his relatives, their means of livelihood and other personal details. Reb Mordechai answered the judge's inquiries.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" the judge pressed on.

Mustering courage he did not feel, Reb Mordechai addressed the judge, "We are Jews, and we lit the candles that night to observe the holiday of Chanukah."

"You lit Chanukah candles? You lit Chanukah candles?" the judge repeated to himself, clearly unsettled. "You don't say! ...Hmm, Chanukah candles...."

Composing himself, the judge called to the two guards present in the courtroom and asked them to stand outside. When the door clicked closed, the judge turned his attention back to Reb Mordechai.

“Since you lit Chanukah candles, let me demonstrate the right way to light them.”

Reb Mordechai watched the judge light a small lamp. Picking up the incriminating documents gingerly, with trembling hands, the judge slid the first one off and held it to the flame. The paper caught fire and disappeared quickly in an orange blaze and a few wisps of smoke. As if he were afraid to delay lest he change his mind, the judge worked quickly through the pile.

“You see?” he remarked, half smiling, half trembling; “this is how you light Chanukah candles.” And soon there was nothing remaining of the pile.

The judge scooped up the scattered ashes, strode over to the window and tossed them into the Siberian wind. Sitting down, the judge reached for the buzzer on his table and summoned the guards.

“Take this group of 18 men,” the judge barked, “and separate them. Make sure that it will be impossible for them to see one another. There’s no point in killing them; they are not worth even one bullet.”

The guards marched out, and Reb Mordechai was again left alone with the judge. The latter faced Reb Mordechai and said in a trembling voice, “I too am a Jew, and I beg you to **make sure that the future generations of our people will know to light the Chanukah candles.**”

Postscript:

In 1956, a few years following Stalin’s death, hundreds of thousands of prisoners were pardoned and their names cleared. Among them was Reb Mordechai Chanzin, who was finally given permission to leave the camps that had robbed him of decades of life.

Soon thereafter, Chanzin moved to Moscow, where he became secretary to Chief Rabbi Yehudah Leib Levin. A decade later, through the efforts of the Rebbe, he was allowed to immigrate to Israel, where he was reunited with his brother Dovid, the rabbi of Petach Tikva.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the rendition on Chabad.org, as translated from Sichat Hashavua, no. 1248, and Sippur Shel Chag, p. 38. Reprinted with permission.