



Light in the Darkness

Yosef was a prisoner of Zion. He fervently wished to leave the Soviet Union and come to the Land of Israel, a wish which for many others resulted in punishment and a prison term from the Soviet authorities.

There were hundreds of Prisoners of Zion; brave men and women courageous enough to stand up to a ruthless regime. Yosef was unusual in that he not only wished to live in the Land of Israel; he tried in the most dramatic way to carry out that desire.

The day that he attempted to escape to Israel he was arrested by the infamous KGB – the Soviet secret police – and sentenced to death. Due to pressure applied by free countries all over the world, his sentence was eventually commuted to a long and harsh prison term in the horrible Vladimir Prison in Siberia.

The Vladimir Prison is a chilling factory engaged in destroying man's spirit. Inside the prison compound, there is no standard diet or menu. Prisoners' rations are selected from 18 un nourishing varieties which vary in the number of calories from sub-average to starvation level. Likewise, the amount of exercise and fresh air allotted to a prisoner can range from two hours down to none. Contact with the outside is limited to several letters a year, but this too can, and often is, curtailed. Technically a prisoner is allowed two meetings a year with his family, but years can pass without any visits at all.

The KGB has an elaborate and remarkably pragmatic way of controlling an inmate's body and even his thoughts. After the initial shock of life at Vladimir has been experienced, a KGB representative will

invite the inmate for a talk. The prisoner will be offered coffee, tea, meat or a visit to a restaurant in civilian clothing. An officer from the secret police might tempt the prisoner with a letter from his family, or by permitting a visit from a friend.

To earn these privileges a prisoner merely has to be willing to inform on a cellmate or confess to a crime he never committed.

Yosef would never inform on a cellmate or confess to a crime he hadn't committed, so he never got any special privileges. Needless to say, he was denied all religious articles, as well as permission to perform *mitzvot*.

But the KGB, for all their terror, intimidation, and frequent punishments, couldn't break Yosef's iron will to keep G-d's commandments.

Somehow he managed to observe, in the most primitive fashion imaginable, whatever *mitzvot* he could. He virtually risked his life not to work on Shabbat. He refused to eat non-kosher food and avoided *chametz* on Pesach.

One frigid winter, a single thought managed to warm Yosef's soul: the holiday of Chanukah was approaching.

Yosef dreamed of how he would be able to observe the *mitzvah* of lighting the candles, a seemingly impossible act under the circumstances. Certainly, the prison authorities would never permit it and would react harshly to the very proposal of such a notion. Regardless, Yosef put his mind to the mission and developed a clever, viable scheme.

Every day he saved a little bit from his meager rations, even though this meant subsisting on next to nothing.

When no one was watching, he secretly slipped a part of a slice of bread or a small piece of potato into his pocket. Later on, he carefully placed these scraps on a small ledge in his cell and prayed that a guard would not notice his collection.

The day before Chanukah, Yosef could barely contain his excitement. So far his little gathering had gone unnoticed and there was only one final, critical detail to be arranged.

Trying to attract as little attention as possible, Yosef purchased a pack of cigarettes in the prison store, although he didn't smoke. He knew that packets of cigarettes were accompanied by matches, and they were the crucial missing ingredient for his plan.

With trembling fingers, Yosef opened up the box of matches and discovered that there were 37 matches inside – exactly the number he needed, with one extra to serve as a *shamash*, for the lights.

Late on the first night of Chanukah, when everyone was sleeping and no guards were in sight, Yosef inserted the matches into his slivers of dry bread and slices of potato. These scraps were his secret Chanukah menorah!

The matches burned for only a few seconds, but they provided endless light and inspiration for Yosef Mendeleovich in the depths of the Vladimir Prison in Siberia.

Heard from Yacov Mordechai.

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