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Sent On A Mission

In the Autumn of 1971, the ongoing political controversy over “Who Is A Jew?” which was to define Jewish identity in the State of Israel, was at a peak. At that moment, the Lubavitcher Rebbe sent a delegation of Russian Chabad Chasidim, former refusniks who had recently arrived in Eretz Yisrael, on a mission to meet with various community leaders and share a message on behalf of the Rebbe. The topic was the importance of *mesirus nefesh*, self-sacrifice in the battle to ensure that Israel’s Law of Return would always clearly state that it applies only to one who was born to a Jewish mother or who had undergone a *halachic* conversion. As part of their tour, the men met with Reb Moshe Feinstein, zt’l, Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivta Tiferes Jerusalem, roundly recognized as the *Gadol haDor*.

Reb Moshe, who had once served as the Rav of Luban, Russia, and fled with his family, was deeply moved by the self-sacrifice and perseverance modeled by the Chasidim. He was astounded at their level of learning and their high spiritual attainments, and marveled at how they had developed into *talmidei chachamim* and even maintained their visibly Jewish and Chasidic appearance with long beards,

under such dangerous conditions.

With a tear of amazement in his eye, Reb Moshe asked them, “Please, how were you able to survive under the terror of Stalin’s religious oppression? How were you able to accomplish all of this?”

One of the group, R’ Yaakov Notik, answered with luminous *temimus*, simplicity and sincerity: “What choice did we have? We are Jews, and we did what God expected of us.”

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This week marks Yud Tes (the 19th) of Kislev, the celebration of the release of the Alter Rebbe, Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi, from imprisonment in Czarist Russia in 1798. More than simply a commemoration of the personal liberation of the Alter Rebbe, also known as the “Ba’al haTanya”, the author of *Sefer haTanya*, Yud Tes Kislev marks a turning point in Jewish history. The spontaneous liberation of the Rebbe ushered in a new era for the revelation and teaching of the “inner soul” of Torah.

Reb Shlomo Chayim Kesselman, zy’a, was the primary educator and beloved *mashpia*, spiritual guide, of Tomchei Temimim in Tel Aviv, Lod and Kfar Chabad in the first half of the Twentieth Century. An *oveid*, ‘servant of God’, and pedagogue who dedicated his life to building up people, he shaped the inner world of generations of *talmidim*, cultivating depth and spiritual focus in countless future leaders of

Lubavitch. Reb Shlomo Chayim demanded the highest standards of contemplation and commitment from the students, encouraging them to strive for true righteousness in their *avodah*. His required *farbrengens*, transformative soul-gatherings, lasted for hours, sometimes through the night without a break.

Back in 1926, having been caught red-handed and found guilty by the Soviets of the ‘crime’ of teaching Torah, Reb Shlomo Chayim was sentenced to six months of forced physical labor, including cleaning the streets and removing garbage, a punishment meant to degrade and humiliate him. For the resolute Reb Shlomo Chayim, however, his *Hisbonenus*, ‘meditation on God’, and his devotion to his mission of disseminating Torah, were his only badges of honor, and these could never be taken away. In fact, taking pride in being punished for his *mesiras nefesh*, he would don his Shabbos clothes before going out to the street to do his job.

At a *farbrengen* held on *Yud-Tes Kislev* that same year, the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, the “Rayatz”, mentioned Reb Shlomo Chayim:

The time for *mesirus nefesh*, self-sacrifice, will soon be gone, because in the near future, teenagers will be able to study Torah overtly. Fellow Jews: seize the opportunity for self-sacrifice! Seize it, because there will soon come a time of complete religious freedom, and when that happens, you’ll search for some way of experiencing self-sacrifice, but you won’t find it. There will soon come a time when you will speak admiringly of a person who served time (in prison) because he was a *malamed*, or

because he maintains a *cheder*, or yeshiva, or a *mikvah*. You will envy such people, and will feel sore that you yourselves did not have the merit of doing so yourselves. When that time comes, the hem of Shlomo Chayim’s coat will be considered holy!

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The Alter Rebbe explains,

The force of the Divine light of the blessed Ein Sof which is clothed in the soul... is great and powerful... enables one to withstand a test of self-sacrifice to the extent of even refusing to do some single act that is contrary to the faith in the One God, such as, for example, bowing to an idol, even without acknowledging it in his heart at all... This is called “fear that is contained in love”, the natural love of the Divine soul that is found in all Jews, the intrinsic desire and will of which is to be attached to its origin and source in the Light of the Blessed Ein Sof. (Tanya, Chapter 19)

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Yud Tes Kislev, “the Rosh Hashanah of Chassidus”, is a uniquely auspicious day for re-committing ourselves to values that are worthy of self-sacrifice.

לשנה טובה בלימוד החסידות ובדרכי החסידות
תכתבו ותחתמו!

May we be written and inscribed for a good year in the study of the Soul of Torah, and its ways of fearless righteous action; May we always live our Yiddishkeit — our *shlichus* and mission — with passionate dedication and depth, amid revealed good! ■

