

תשפ"ד · Bnos 5784

Parshas

Sukkos



Story

A SUCCAH FOR TWO

The year was 5698 (1937) in a distant small town in one of the Asiatic republics of Soviet Russia. The hero of our story is Leizer, a Jew who wouldn't give in or give up. For his activities to spread yiddishkeit in his hometown, teaching Jewish children Torah, and other such "crimes," Leizer was finally arrested and sentenced to be banished from his home and family.

In the new strange place, Leizer teamed up with a young man who had been banished there for similar "offenses against the state." They shared a small apartment, which they rented from a Tartar. It was not the most suitable neighborhood for Leizer and his younger friend. The house in which they lived was sandwiched between the headquarters of the NKVD (Secret Police) on one side and the home of the chief of the local prison on the other side, with only a few houses separating them from their "worthy" neighbors. But it was the only place Leizer and his friend could find at a price they could afford. Besides, at the time they rented the place they did not know who their neighbors were.

Leizer worked in a factory in town, and his younger friend worked a couple of miles beyond the town. Both had to comply with strict orders, such as to report in person at the local headquarters of the Secret Police every tenth day, to have no contact whatever with local Jews or other deportees, and to engage in no unlawful activity. Leizer and his friend carefully observed these rules, knowing that the slightest infringement could mean a long term prison sentence with hard labor, or deportation to a slave camp, or even death.

So they did not even go to the local shul every day, but prayed at home. However, they could not resist going to shul on Shabbos morning, taking care to sit separately, away from other worshippers. They did not even exchange "Good Shabbos" greetings with the other worshippers, for they knew that the Secret Police had agents and spies everywhere. One could not be overly careful. Succos was approaching, and Leizer and his friend asked their landlord, the Tartar, to permit them to build a small hut, a succah, in their courtyard. They told him that their religion required it of them; otherwise they would have to go without food for seven days, as they would not eat outside a succah. The Tartar, a devout Muslim, understood. He had a lot of respect for his two Jewish tenants: they were never drunk, paid their rent on time, and were quiet, decent neighbors.

And so Leizer and his friend built a small succah just for the two of them. Quietly they made kiddush and ate their meals in the succah. They could not invite anyone to their succah, nor did anyone invite them to visit their succahs, though there were quite a few of them in town, as Leizer and his friend were pleased to discover.

On Hoshanah Rabbah, the seventh day of Succos, Leizer's friend suggested they buy a bottle of vodka. "Let's celebrate," he said. "After all, it is Z'man Simchaseinu, the Festival of Rejoicing, and boruch Hashem even here we have much to rejoice. It could have been quite different, chas v'sholom."

Leizer, older and wiser, tried to talk his friend out of the vodka. "We will take one drink, and another, and before you know it we may be carried away and forget where we are. It would be too dangerous. Remember, our neighbor the prison chief does not like us. I know he told our landlord to get rid of us; we were 'undesirable elements,' he told him. So why look for trouble?"

But the young man was not to be talked out of it. "It's Yom Tov, and there is no law against taking a drink of vodka in honor of Yom Tov. I want to rejoice; I'd do it even to spite our enemies. Let them see they cannot break our spirits. But if you won't join me, I'll do it alone."

Leizer finally allowed himself to be persuaded. From their meager savings the two of them bought a bottle of vodka. They sat down in the succah and said "l'chaim" to each other, then once again. They really felt wonderful, thankful to Hashem that even there, in exile, they were able to have a succah and celebrate Succos in style. They began to hum a chassidic melody and, then without noticing it, began to sing louder and louder, and finally they jumped to their feet and began to dance and sing, without even hearing the heavy steps that approached the succah. "What's going on here?" they heard the gruff voice of the prison chief, and his face was red with anger. The Tartar, standing at his side, was a little frightened and a little amused.

"I told you," the Tartar said to the prison chief, "there was nobody here but the two Jews. They are only celebrating their festival. No harm done. As a matter of fact, it's the first time I see them a little 'high.'"

Leizer, having recovered from the shock, put on his kindest smile and offered his unexpected visitors a drink. The prison chief turned around and angrily left the scene, followed by the amused Tartar. The following day, the Tartar met Leizer and told him with obvious anxiety that things did not look good for him. The deputy chief of the Secret Police had told him that many "complaints" had been received from unknown persons. According to the complaints, Leizer's home was the gathering place of suspicious and undesirable characters; that he agitated against the regime; that he was undermining the morale of the workers at the factory where he worked; that he was planning acts of sabotage, and similar charges - any of which was enough to send him away for many years hard labor in the wastes of Siberia.

"I told him," the Tartar said, "that it was all untrue; that you are a holy man and the best tenant I've ever had. Anyway, you be careful, or it may be too late ..."

Little did Leizer know that his fate had already been sealed. The complaints, behind which was none other than the wicked prison chief himself though he never put his name to them, did their work. It took a few more weeks until the "case" against him was completed. One day, as Leizer and his friend were celebrating 19th Kislev, the anniversary of the liberation of the Alter Rebbe from prison after he was cleared from charges of high treason against the Czar (in 1798), an agent of the NKVD came with a warrant for Leizer's arrest. The agent searched the apartment, and though he found nothing incriminating, he gathered whatever valuables Leizer had and put them in a valise. Then he ordered Leizer to follow him to headquarters. The investigation did not take long this time. After spending a week in prison, Leizer was told that he had been sentenced to be shot. He was given a paper to sign in which, among other things, he was to authorize the authorities to transfer the valise, and a food package that had in the meantime been received for him in the post office, to his wife.

Leizer refused to sign the document, demanding first to see his wife.

"Your wife wishes to have nothing to do with you," the investigator said. "As a matter of fact, she is here in town and declared so herself."

Leizer's heart jumped, but he did not believe the investigator. He refused to sign before seeing his wife.

"We do not really need your signature," the investigator said. "But if you sign this paper I promise you to do what I can that you should see your wife before the sentence is carried out."

Leizer knew that these deceitful and tricky investigators could not be trusted, but he hoped against hope that perhaps he would indeed get a chance to see his wife for the last time, and he signed. Then he was sent back to prison.

Several weeks went by, the longest weeks in his life. Then, one dark night, he was awakened from his sleep and told to get dressed. He was led into the prison yard, where several other prisoners were lined up. An open truck was waiting. It was bitterly cold. Soon the chief of the Secret Police arrived, accompanied by his deputy, the prison chief, and the investigator. They were all drunk and in high spirits.

"Into the truck!" came the order. The prisoners began to climb into the truck. Leizer did not budge. "I demand to see my wife!" he said. Then, turning to the investigator, he pleaded desperately, "You promised. Remember?" The investigator just laughed in his face. At that moment, the deputy chief of the Secret Police gave Leizer a shove and told him to get a move on. At the same time he whispered to him, "Don't be a fool; this is your only chance. Here you will be shot."

Leizer thought that if they wanted to shoot him, they could do it there as anywhere else. But, instinctively, he felt he should make no further trouble, and he climbed into the truck.

They traveled the whole night. The prisoners tried to huddle together to keep warm, but it was no use. The icy wind penetrated through their scanty prison garb. At dawn they arrived in a larger town, and the truck halted in the yard of a large prison of maximum security. They were told to get out, but they were too stiff from cold to move. A few proddings with rifle butts put them quickly on their feet. Leizer thought that the end had come, but he was still puzzled why they had not been shot in the other prison. He had often heard shots in the night, and knew they were executions "at the wall." Why bring them here?

After the prisoners had been lined up and checked, they were not shot, but sent to their cells in the new prison.

The following day, Leizer was called into the warden's office. Here the warden sternly informed him that for his "counter-revolutionary" activities he had been sentenced to ten years imprisonment with hard labor.

Leizer could not believe his ears. He himself had signed his own death warrant, and now this. But, of course, this time Leizer had no intention of arguing with the authorities. It was in the month of Teves 5698 (January 1938) that Leizer was given a new lease on life, and for the next 28 years he wondered how that miracle had come about. Then he finally solved the mystery, when he came to spend Rosh Hashonoh 5726 (1965) in Lubavitch at Crown Heights of Brooklyn. Here he was delighted to meet his young friend and "brother in banishment." The young friend was no longer as young as when he had last seen him; now he was the father of a large and happy family. It was a happy and emotional reunion. Leizer's friend cleared up the mystery for him. He had learned it from the Tartar. It so happened that about a week or so after Leizer was arrested, the Tartar arranged a family feast. Among the guests was also the deputy chief of Secret Police, who was also a tenant of the Tartar. When the deputy was in high spirits, after a good many drinks, the Tartar asked him, "By the way, whatever happened to my Jewish tenant?"

"You mean that black-bearded Jew who, you said, was a holy man? Well, a strange thing happened. He had been sentenced to be shot. The execution order had to be signed by our 'troyka' (threesome): the chief, myself as deputy, and the chief investigator. We usually sign these death warrants at night, after a celebration ... Something extraordinary happened that night, and I could not join my comrades for the celebration. The execution orders were left on my desk for my signature, having been signed by the other two. The following day, when I came to my office - I was quite sober then - the first order was the one about your Jewish tenant. Usually I do not even bother to read those death warrants; I sign them mechanically ... But this time my eyes caught the name of the doomed Jew, and I remembered your telling me that he was a holy man. I went through his file. There was not a shred of evidence that had been substantiated against him. You know, I was afraid to send that holy man to his death. So I told the secretary to write out a different sentence for him - ten years' imprisonment. It was not easy to get my chief to agree, but I told him the condemned man was a neighbor of mine and I could personally vouchsafe for his innocence, and he finally agreed. You know, I am glad I did what I did; after all, you said he was a holy man ..."

Leizer could not help feeling a deep gratitude to that Tartar. But Leizer knew that the Tartar was only Hashem's strange messenger to save him. Deep in his heart Leizer felt that it was the joy of Succos in those difficult and dangerous circumstances that had stood him and his younger friend in good stead.

Recipe

Pomegranate Passion Fruit Sorbet

Ingredients:

2 cups Beleave's Frozen Passion Fruit cubes

2 cups Heaven & Earth Pomegranate Juice

1 cup simple syrup

Simple Syrup:

1 cup water

1 cup granulated sugar

Instructions:

1. Prepare the syrup: In a small saucepan, combine water and sugar. Bring to a boil and cook until sugar dissolves, five to seven minutes. Cool completely.
2. Puree the passion fruit in a food processor until smooth.
3. Add pomegranate juice and syrup and pulse until combined and smooth. Pour through a sieve to remove seeds.
4. Pour mixture into an ice cream machine and churn until frozen. Alternately, pour into a shallow dish and freeze, stirring every half hour or so, until frozen and scoopable. Best eaten within a few days. If frozen too hard, thaw for five to 10 minutes before serving.

Middah of the Week

Sukkos

We want to hear from you!!

Questions, comments, or suggestions?
Email us at bnos@agudah.org.
