

# A Moscow Simhat Torah diary

Half a century ago, inspired by Elie Wiesel, Rabbi Jonathan Porath traveled to Moscow to celebrate Simhat Torah with Soviet Jews. It was a life-changing experience. The following are entries from his diary written about that eventful night

Simhat Torah evening, 5729 – October 14, 1968

As Elie Wiesel wrote in *The Jews of Silence* (paraphrasing the Mishna): "He who has not witnessed Simhat Torah in Moscow, has never seen joy in his life!" I had to see with my own eyes, and so I traveled nearly 8,000 kilometers from the US to the capital of Soviet Russia for this one evening. Would I experience that joy as well, or had I come in vain? Maybe what Reb Eliezer had seen a few years ago was the exception, and no one would show up this year? There was no way to know but to be there with them.

The crowds begin to gather on Arkhipova Street from 5 p.m. They are of all ages. The older folks go inside while the street fills with younger people. The synagogue itself was a foreign place to them, strange and not welcoming. But the dimly-lit street which had turned into a Jewish pedestrian mall that night, especially with the masses who were streaming there, made it seem somehow "safe" and almost tolerated by the authorities.

I am standing in the crowd, looking in vain for an English or Hebrew speaker (and me, with only a modest knowledge of Russian), when a guitar suddenly appears and we begin to sing. We grasp hands on shoulders and circle around and around to the music. Familiar words flow from my mouth: *David Melech Yisrael, Hevelim Shalom, Aleichem, Hava Nagila* – I sing and so do they. In the fervor of the moment, a crowd of about 50-70 gathers around me and I switch to Israeli and Zionist songs: *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav* (it is only a year after the Six Day war), *Muhar, Sharm e-Sheikh*, "Exodus," *Od Avinu Hai*.

I sing in Hebrew – and they respond in Russian: "Jerusalem Zoloti" (*Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*).

"How do you know that?" I ask.

"We listen to the secret Israeli radio station Kol Tzion Lagola every night!"

The swell of the crowd is too great, and we break into a smaller group. I offer to teach them a Russian Jewish song I had learned from Chabad: *Nyet Ni Bayus Ya Nikavo – Tolko Boga Adnavo*, "I am afraid of no one – only of the one God!"

I deliberately whisper the words, fearing that songs about God are off-limits and even seditious in the Soviet Union. Only the Russian Jews in the street are not afraid that evening and they scream out: *TOLKO BOGA ADNAMO!* – "ONLY ONE GOD!! ONLY ONE GOD!!"

I am very anxious but they are not. I suddenly remember that the synagogue is located only a few blocks away from Red Square, and I could but imagine Lenin turning over in his mausoleum at the sound of Jews praising God in downtown Moscow!

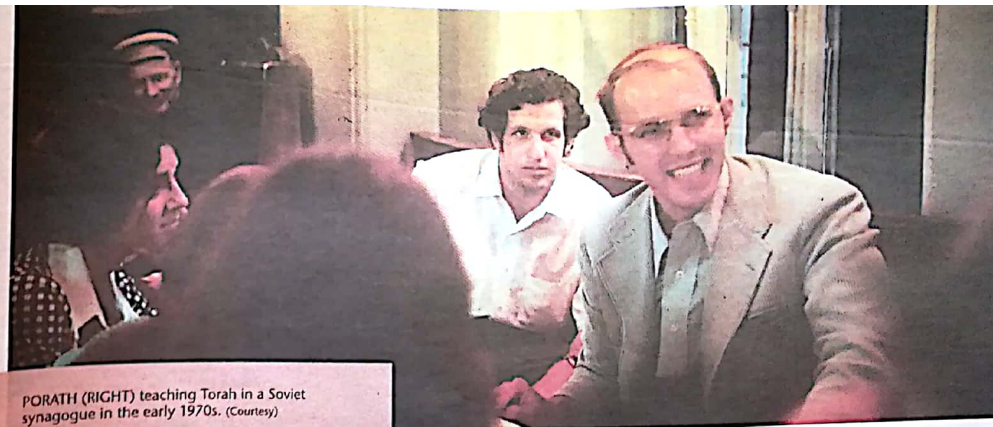
In the crowd, I meet staff members from the US Embassy who have come to monitor the event – and also to participate. One of them says that from all of the festivals and celebrations he has witnessed during his time in the USSR – including May Day and the November anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution – none compares with the heartfelt joy and spontaneity of Simhat Torah. His Jewish wife says that she has been to shul

more in their year in Russia than in the previous 10 years of their marriage.

My newfound Russian Jewish friends invite me to lead them in singing the same songs, yet again and again. I meet a 26-year-old girl from the town of Ufa in central Russia, and greet her with "Shalom!" saying that this is first time at synagogue in her life, and asks me what that word means. She had never heard



THE AUTHOR with Elie Wiesel, his friend and mentor of 45 years. (Courtesy)



PORATH (RIGHT) teaching Torah in a Soviet synagogue in the early 1970s. (Courtesy)

the word "shalom" before, and so I teach her: *Zdravstvuyte, Dosvidaniya, Mir* – "Hello, goodbye, peace."

As I stand in the midst of the throngs of people, a young man approaches me and begins to whisper a familiar phrase in my ear: *Modet ani kfeancha* – the words of the morning prayer. I ask him how he knows it and he says that his grandmother taught him. I ask him if he believes in God, and he answers, "Yes."

"But aren't you also a Young Communist?" I say, a member of the state-run Young Pioneers.

And he says "Yes."

"But how can you be a Pioneer and still believe in God," I question?

And he responds with a smile: "We all believe in God, we just say that we don't!"

It begins to rain and we gather under an umbrella. The main synagogue building had closed its doors at the conclusion of services, but the festivities continue unabated in the street. This was the one time of year when Jews, especially young Jews, felt that it was allowed to be Jewish in public, and they wanted to keep it going as long as possible.

Under the umbrella I am buffeted with questions: "Why did you come to Russia? Is there antisemitism in the US? What is life like in Israel?" They become particularly excited hearing about Israel. I ask them in Russian: "Is it really true that I am in Moscow?!! Can this all be happening to us this evening?"

I tell them that in the entire Jewish world, no one is celebrating Simhat Torah with as much joy and abandon as we are here tonight.

A tall, imposing young man stands at the edge of our circle of celebrants. Turning to him I ask, first in Hebrew: *Ma shlomcha?* "How are you?" And he does not respond. Then I repeat the same question in Russian: *Kak delo?* "What's new?" Also to no response.

So I finally say: "Why won't you answer me?"

At which he looks at me almost disdainfully and says proudly: *Ich bin a Yid!* "I am a Jew!"

He wanted to speak only in Yiddish. That was his expression of his special Russian Jewish pride.

The end is drawing near but the singing and joy continue unabated. At 11:15 p.m., unmarked police cars begin driving slowly up the street in front of the synagogue to signal to the crowd that it was time to disperse. And finally, at a quarter to midnight, one of the Russian Jewish students says to me: "Yonatan, it is time for you to go." And so, reluctantly, I return to my hotel.

Elie Wiesel was right. If I hadn't come to Moscow for Simhat Torah, then I would have never known what true joy and simha are. My entire trip was worth it just for this evening and I must return again. Only, I feared that I was witnessing the demise of Soviet Jewry, the last gasp of a dying community. In this unprecedented public Simhat Torah gathering of Soviet Jews, allowed only once a year for a few hours, they are permitted to be Jews. However, on all of the other days of the year, this is totally forbidden. It was inconceivable to me that Simhat Torah could ever compete with, much less triumph over, Soviet Power.

And I was wrong. The exultation and national renewal in the wake of the Six Day War only emboldened Soviet Jews to demand to leave, and culmi-

nated, within the lifetime of many of those with whom I danced on that Moscow street 50 years ago, in their making their way to Israel or to the West.

From that Simhat Torah on, our task had to be to support, echo and magnify the calls of our brothers and sisters in the Soviet Union, and to bring them home.

Rabbi Jonathan Porath made aliya 35 years ago and lives in Jerusalem. He has visited the Soviet Union and Russia 180 times. He is available for speaking in Israel and abroad and can be reached c/o the JewishSpeaker'sBureau.com.



THE FRONT entrance to Moscow's Choral Synagogue. The verse reads: 'This is none other than the House of God.' (Courtesy)