

The Unbroken Spirit

While Yosef Mendelevich is most known for having spearheaded the Struggle for Soviet Jewry when he and comrades in the Jewish Underground in Russia tried to hijack an airplane to fly to freedom in Israel, his struggle to keep the Torah during his eleven years in Siberian work camps and prisons stands out as a beacon of Jewish faith and resilience in modern times.

Childhood in Riga

Riga, 1950s.

The Soviet classroom smelled of chalk and damp wool. On the wall, a giant portrait of Stalin glared down, mustache severe, eyes unyielding. The teacher struck her desk with a pointer.

“There is no God,” she declared, her voice echoing against the windows. “Only the Party. Only the future we build with our own hands.”

The children repeated the words like an oath. Only one boy, Yosef, mouthed them half-heartedly. He felt them land flat, like pebbles skittering across stone. Something inside him resisted.

At home, another world flickered. His aunt stood by the window, lips whispering in prayer. The sight was unsettling. Strange words, movements, eyes lifted in longing. Yet the strangeness carried beauty. His parents dismissed such things. Once educated in Jewish schools, they had long ago traded faith for Communism. The synagogues in Riga still stood, ornate and quiet, but only elders entered them. To children, they looked like tombs.

And yet, a shadow of heritage lingered. His grandfather had been shamash to the Rogatchover Gaon. The man had died before Yosef was born, but his presence was a whisper. Something endured, deep in blood and memory.

Awakening Through Zionism

That whisper grew louder when his cousin, Dr. Menachem Mendel Gordin, came to live in their apartment. Thoughtful, scholarly, respectful of tradition, he drew Yosef into circles where danger and hope intertwined. The Zionist underground was small, fragile, hunted. Yet in their secret meetings Yosef discovered stories absent from Soviet classrooms: Jewish history, exile, the dream of Israel.

He was sixteen when he first listened, twenty when he began teaching. Zionism was not only rebellion; it was return — to land, to people, to God. That realization frightened him. To return meant change. To return meant faith.

Then came the conscription notice. The Soviet army called him. Yosef stared at the paper, dread tightening in his chest. That night he made a vow.

“If You exist,” he whispered, “save me from this army. I will be Yours. I will live as a Jew.”

It was a bargain, but a binding one. His life had turned.

The Arrest

The knock on the door was not a knock but a pounding. Boots thundered on the stairs. The KGB stormed in. Yosef and his comrades had plotted to seize a plane, not to hijack but to fly it to freedom. To Israel.

The plan collapsed before it began. Yosef was dragged into interrogation rooms heavy with smoke.

“Don’t be a fool,” one investigator told him. “You are young. Give us the names of your group. Admit your mistake. Otherwise you will rot here, or die.”

Yosef said nothing.

The officer leaned closer, sneering. “You are Russian. Forget this nonsense about being a Jew. There is no God. Torah is a fairy tale. Surrender your foolishness.”

Yosef lifted his head, eyes steady. “I am a Jew. My homeland is Israel. The Torah is my law — not yours.”

The man slammed the table. Papers scattered. Yosef was hauled back to his cell. His ribs ached from blows, but inside he felt steel harden. They wanted him to deny. That meant his Jewishness mattered more than ever.

Siberia

Then began the years of exile. Work camps swallowed him. Factories demanded he carry coils of wire heavier than his frame. Guards barked orders, dogs prowled, snow lashed the barracks. Hunger was constant; beatings were routine.

But Yosef's fiercest battles were not with guards, but with erasure. When his Bible and siddur were confiscated, he stopped eating. Days stretched into weeks. His body shrank, lips cracked, skin clung to bone. At fifty-five days the books were returned. Victory, not of power, but of spirit.

To wear a kippah, to whisper a prayer he barely knew, to honor commandments in fragments — these became his acts of war. Every mitzvah was defiance. Every word of Torah was resistance. He clung to identity the regime tried to crush, finding in it strength that outlasted the cells, the hunger, even the isolation.

The Release

Eleven years passed. Then, without warning, the rhythm changed. Guards entered his cell. "Pack."

A jeep carried him through dark forests, a dog pressed against his side, panting. A train. A plane.

Another cell. Silence.

Two weeks later he was led into a large office. Generals sat in a row, medals gleaming. One read aloud:

"Decision of the Supreme Soviet Council: the exceedingly dangerous prisoner, Yosef Mendelevich, is stripped of Soviet citizenship and expelled."

The words hung heavy. Yosef's heart hammered. Then, without hesitation, he spoke.

"Baruch Hashem."

The generals bristled. "What did you say?"

"I thanked God for the miracle He has done for me."

"Swine! You are expelled from your homeland and you rejoice?"

"Russia is not my homeland," Yosef replied. "You are sending me from a foreign land — to the Land of my People."

The Runway

They drove him to the airport under motorcycle escort, like a dignitary. Engines roared. Eleven years earlier, he had been dragged from a runway to prevent escape. Now they delivered him to one to ensure departure.

At the foot of the stairs he turned to a commander. "Admit it. You made a mistake."

The man exhaled. His voice, stripped of menace, carried a note almost of respect. "We didn't know you people had such unbreakable spirit."

Yosef looked past him to the plane, to the sky. He knew the truth. The strength had not come from him alone. It flowed from Torah, from faith, from the stubborn will of a people who had refused, generation after generation, to disappear.

Just as in Egypt, so too here: the hand of Heaven had lifted him from bondage.

The Iron Curtain still stood. But it had already cracked.