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HIR - The Bayit

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Parashat Yitro has a lot in common with the UJA Federation of NY's Rabbinic Mission to Moscow I just participated in with 9 other rabbis from the New York area.

First of all, I went with my father-in-law. And he gave me plenty of advice along the way.

And like the giving of the Torah, there were definitely a lot of clouds and thick gray gloom around us all the time.

And, in a way, like the way we stood at Mount Sinai, I felt united with Am Yisrael as one with a depth and connectedness I rarely feel.

And, in a way, I felt I received the Torah anew.

I went to tell you about my experiences by telling you the stories of two women who represent welfare and renewal - two of the core aspects of the life of our brothers and sisters in the FSU and of the amazing work Federation and its funding - our dollars - are doing there.

It's an overcast morning. After our minibus pulls over on the side of a wide street, and we trudge up 5 long flights of stairs in an old nondescript walkup building with a heavy metal door, we rabbis sit, enthralled, as Nina tells her story in Russian through a translator - a young Jewish girl telling the story of a woman who could be her great-grandmother.

Nina is 93 years old. She was a doctor for much of her life. The hardest years were under Stalin. In the Doctors Plot of 1952, many of her friends lost their jobs, their employers finding pretexts to fire them, while it was really all because Stalin thought Jewish doctors were plotting to overthrow the government. But Nina was beyond reproof, her record impeccable. So her employer, heavy-hearted, tells her, you just have to resign. Bitter irony: after Stalin dies, those who were fired get their jobs back, but Nina had resigned. She can't get her job back, and struggles to find work for a few years.

She always knew she was Jewish, but what did that mean to her? Not much, she says. But in recent years, she's been more interested in learning more. She reads the Russian humash the Chabad rabbi brought her. She uses the Internet and loves to read and learn about Jewish communities around the

world. She wants desperately to go to the Museum of Jewish Life and Tolerance that opened recently in Moscow. Her aide tells her she'll take her in the spring.

Because Nina's physical world is confined. She has problems with her legs. She has not been outside since the fall, when her aides help carry her down the 5 flights of stairs and wheel her outside in the wheelchair.

Her son predeceased her, and she has a surviving grandson, and he does what he can to care for her. But in a post-Soviet Moscow, she has no safety net. No food stamps, no medical support. But Yad Ezra - literally, helping hand, saves her life, she tells us. They fund a home health aide for 40 hours a week for her, who, among many other things, can do her grocery shopping, and they provide a food voucher to help make some of that possible. They bring her hot food, and help with her medicines.

Powerful rabbis from around New York City, and John Ruskay, the sensitive, wise CEO of New York Federation, listen with *kavod*, and we ask her about her life. I ask her if she knows the origin and meaning of her name, Nina. Her eyes sparkle. She says, it's not Nina, it's Nechama. She repeats the name, Nechama.

And I think of Rabbi Akiva seeing the foxes on the Temple Mount and laughing - where destruction and oppressive rule reign, only rebuilding and renewal must follow. Akiva - *nihamtanu*, say the rabbis. You have comforted us. So it was with our Nina. Where oppression and repression once ruled, rebirth and life now reign. What a Nechama!

We get back on the bus and the director of Global Initiatives of the JDC, Elliot Goldstein, puts it in perspective. Nina is one of over 140,000 such clients of Yad Ezra in the former Soviet Union - some 30,000 in Moscow alone. And Elliot says to us, this is a forgotten world. We have our local needy in our home communities. We have our American Jewish brethren, and we have Israel, to which our hearts and our wallets are pulled. And for many of us, our values drive our attention to turn then to the Global South, to the neediest of our fellow humans in Africa, where Nina's nearly \$600/month pension would be a gold mine. And this "2nd world", as he calls it, of our Jewish brothers and sisters in the FSU, is forgotten.

It's true for me. I was astonished to learn that the FSU is arguably the largest Jewish Diaspora after the USA, with estimates ranging from a conservative 300,000 to a more likely 700,00 Jews. I honestly thought that almost all of the Jews of the Soviet Union left in the movement to free Soviet Jewry.

So who is this Yad Ezra, this helping hand? It is the Joint Distribution Committee, that longtime Jewish Institution that sees itself as an arm of the organized Jewish community helping Jews wherever they may be. And they do not just reach Jewish in the big cities. They serve Jews in smaller towns, including the Jews scattered in farm villages around Russia which the government is now essentially wiping off the map - turning off the water and electricity and utilities to, and leaving them to fend for themselves.

And who is the single biggest funder of JDC's work in the FSU? It's UJA Federation of New York. I felt great when I heard that. Proud that the organization that Shira & I entrust with a good chunk of our tzedakah dollars is finding my Jewish brothers and sisters in need that I am not even aware of - maybe especially my Jewish brothers and sisters in need that I am not even aware of, and supporting them.

That's the first half of the story. The other half of the story is Nina's translator, and her generation. Young people awakening in a world where being Jewish actually has little definition, little expectation, little preconceived notions, little - but growing - support and resources - and little baggage. A member of our trip commented that while second-and third-generation Americans moving away from tradition and observance were sometimes considered by halakhah as "*tinokot shenishbu*" - children captured from their traditional origins and preyed upon by a culture antagonistic to religious values, to Torah values, these generations of twenty and thirty-somethings are "*tinokot she-od lo nishbu*" - innocent children with a stirring in their heart in a culture which, extraordinarily, is making room for their religious exploration and growth. They are not rebelling. They are just discovering, renewing.

On our trip to the FSU I carried with me a story of young people in Russia from only 30 years ago, told to me by Russian emigrants in our own Bayit community, a community blessed to have both the great fighters for the freedom of Soviet Jewry from this side of the ocean, and some extraordinary Jews who came from the former Soviet Union who were themselves there and continue here to be great fighters for growth and development in their own Judaism and in the Judaism of their peers. The story was of the ritual springtime phone call, just as the winter ice was thawing, with a voice on the other end of the phone that stated, "How many?". They answered with a number in the small single digits. A short time later, that number of unmarked wrapped boxes appeared at their door. They contained matzot, and

without knowing exactly what they were doing, they ate them on a particular night in the beginning of spring. It is an image of limitation, oppression, constraint.

I held that image in my mind as we met Jana, a vibrant woman in her twenties who heads Dance Guru, which takes Israeli Dance folk songs and resets them to hip-hop beats and moves. We met her at Moishe House, a beautiful apartment in the heart of Moscow where Jewish not for profit funds sponsor 3 young people's living costs to live there on the condition, as Jana described it, that we just do whatever we want - with some Jewish component to it. Host Shabbat meals. Have discussions or speaker on Jewish topics. Watch Jewish movies. Turn Israeli folk songs into hip-hop.

There's no iron curtain in sight. The sky is the limit, and thousands of young Jews are seeking opportunities to discover themselves in this way. Some, the product of Jewish agency's winter camps for teens, have now gone back as counselors, and married, had children, and now want a Jewish kindergarten for their kids. We visited one such kindergarten, and in my limited capacity in Cyrillic script I could sound out the sounds of the word "Tu Bishvat" on the wall with pictures of trees and Israel all around. Truly extraordinary.

Moishe House, grants like Jana's Dance Guru, and the kindergartens, are made possible by JAFI, JDC, and the Federation's support. It is truly extraordinary. Jewish identity is developing and growing in new and interesting ways.

And there are many challenges for this community.

They cannot continue to be sustained by outside support, (not to mention the fact that the Russian government, in its distrust of foreign nations, is making it very hard for any foreign monies to come into non-profits in the country). They cannot continue to be sustained by outside support, but learning to believe in and give to and build community is hard for Russian Jews, who were trained to distrust the "collective", a word Russians of all backgrounds are essentially allergic to. It's not instinctive for them to give, to develop philanthropy, or really to think beyond themselves or their immediate needs. They are to some degree a product of their history and their environment.

There is so much education ahead to do. As one rabbi said to us, "Just give me 20 years to work with my community..." But who knows if we have that time? And the resources. This particular community had so few books on its bookshelves - there is still such a long way to go.

I left with two words interlocking in my head: identification, and identity.

Because what does Yitro give to Moshe in this week's parashah? Moshe is walled in. He has been separated from his family, and the needs of the people have nearly done him in. He can hardly see beyond the moment. Yitro gives him, in that wall, a window. A window to connect with his family - his wife and children, whom Yitro returns to him, and the wisdom of a system of judgment that enables him to reconnect meaningfully with Am Yisrael, his people. And when we take a step back from looking out a window - we see our own reflection. Yitro gave Moshe that, too. A chance to identify with his family and his nation, and a chance to reflect on who he was and who he wanted to be.

This trip was such a window for me. I am so often walled in - happily - by my connections to our own Bayit community. There is so much to do here. But this trip gave me a window - a window to see our family - our Jewish brothers and sisters in the FSU, beyond these walls, and to identify with them, and a window to reflect - on myself and who I want to be.

Identification, and identity.

We must identify with our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world. We have to meet them. They are actually our cousins. And Russian Jews are really our cousins - most of our families come from there. We have to strive to understand and connect to them. It can be such a powerful experience - meeting Nina, meeting Jana, was just like meeting long-lost cousins.

And we have to ask ourselves, what is our responsibility to them? What can we share from our experience, from our resources, to deepen our connections with them?

And identity. What can we learn about ourselves from them? What are our Jewish hangups - what "the collective" represents for Russian Jews, the things keeping us from realizing our Jewish identity potential? And what are our unexplored horizons? What are our opportunities for renewal?

The Rabbis ask at the beginning of the parashah about Yitro's hearing: **מה שמועה שמע וּבא** (Rashi 18:1)? What did Yitro hear, that he came? I would ask, what made Yitro sensitive to hearing what he needed to hear?

What are the walls that still divide us from our Russian siblings, and from ourselves? I learned, in Moscow, to ask that question. I hope to learn, with you, to start to answer it.