

A DANGEROUS CROSSROADS – RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND ANTI-ZIONISM

A Lesson for Tikkun Leil Shavuot 5782

Background:

Enduring Understandings:

- The Soviet policies effectively destroyed Jewish life in the USSR, cutting off over two million Jews from the rest of the Jewish world. The once rich culture was destroyed, bringing an end to the shtetl culture of Eastern Europe and the Pale of Settlement.
- The Soviets ushered in the era of anti-Zionism, a phenomenon that is anti-Semitic at its root and was used to universally discredit both the Jews in the Soviet Union internally and the State of Israel externally.

Overview of the Journey:

PART I: Introduction

- 1). Text 1: Mike Wagenheim interviewing Mikhal Dekel about her book, *In the East* for jns.com in the article entitled, “How Do Putin and Zelensky Get the Holocaust So Wrong?”

PART II: The Jewish Situation at the end of WWII

- 2). Text 2: Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil* (his autobiography) New York: ©1998 Random House, pp. ix-xii.
 - How did Stalin’s policies affect the Jews in the USSR, especially in the wake of WWII?
 - What were the concerns of Jews in Communist Russia?
 - What was Jewish Identity like in the USSR?

PART III: “Fake News” – Soviet Disinformation

- 3). Text 3: Drozdov, L. (1976). “Zionism.” Great Soviet Encyclopedia. (Translated by Academic Language Experts). Moscow: Gosud. Scientific Publishing House Soviet Encyclopedia, vol. 23, pp. 445-446.
 - How does this encyclopedia entry portray Zionism and Judaism?
 - What is the significance of the way that the entry describes “Greater Israel”?
 - What (if any) was the distinction between Jews and Zionists?
- 4). Text 4: A political cartoon from the Soviet newspaper *Sovjetskaya Russia*, October 1982
 - How does this cartoon portray the Jews?
 - What does it accuse the Jews of doing?
- 5). Text 5: A political cartoon from the Soviet newspaper *Pravda Vostoka*, December 1971
 - How does this cartoon portray the Jews?
 - What does it accuse the Jews of doing?

PART IV: Jewish Responses

- 6). Text 6: Menedelevich, Y. *Unbroken Spirit: A Heroic Story of Faith, Courage and Survival*. ©2012 Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing, pp. 3-5.
 - How does Menedelevich’s response reveal both how Jews were perceived (and treated)?
 - What do his actions tell us about the options available to Jews?

Text 1: Mike Wagenheim interviewing Mikhal Dekel about her book, *In the East* for jns.com in the article entitled, “How Do Putin and Zelensky Get the Holocaust So Wrong?”

It's a piece of the Holocaust that even scholars misunderstand, or neglect altogether. And it's a story unknown even to the descendants of a quarter-million Holocaust survivors.

The United Nations Holocaust Outreach Programme hosted author and academic Mikhal Dekel on May 11 to discuss her book, *In the East: How My Father and a Quarter Million Polish Jews Survived the Holocaust*, a finalist for the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature, the National Jewish Book Award and the Chautauqua Prize. Dekel's book—part-historical, part-memoir—presents a unique narrative about the Polish refugees fleeing the terror of the Holocaust en route to the Soviet Central Asian Republics and the Middle East.

Investigating her late father's mysterious identity as a “Tehran Child,” Dekel delved deep into rare Soviet archives previously unavailable to Western scholars, charting the path of Holocaust refugees to Siberia, Uzbekistan and Tehran, where her father and aunt were among those who survived the war.

Why do the Russians insist that they are de-Nazifying Ukraine? How can Ukraine's president lecture Israel's parliament that his country aided the Jews during the Holocaust? According to Dekel, it revolves around a Soviet perspective of the Holocaust that has little to nothing to do with Jews.

JNS chatted with her to understand what has eluded even dedicated students of the Holocaust.

Q: How was your webinar with the United Nations?

A: A webinar is very strange because you don't see the audience; you don't know who is there. And the only other person I saw was my interlocutor. So, you don't have any energy from the audience. From what I heard, from what people wrote me and also from the United Nations itself, I think it went well.

Q: What kind of questions do you get when discussing your book?

A: First of all, factual questions about the what, when, where, how, why. There were Holocaust survivors in Tehran? In Kazakhstan? So, people are very shocked and confused, and it's across the board. It's really extraordinary. Even scholars and people who studied this don't really understand the details. Secondly, these (discussions) are for people who just don't have any relationship to the story. So, for instance, people who are children of survivors. I get many, many emails asking very specific questions, saying something like, ‘I knew that my parent was in some gulag but you know, I don't really understand the story or how did they get to Iran.’ Questions about research and how to help them find more information.

From the United Nations, there comes a lot of the questions are about the refugee aspect, although I always like to emphasize that it's a story of refugees within a genocide. So, it's not just a story of refugees. But that's an aspect that people always ask me how relevant it is for today's refugee crisis and whether we can learn anything from it, and whether I'm willing to talk about the past and the present in the same breath. Questions about the global history of the Holocaust, which we're not used to thinking about in this way. We're used to this kind of Nazi occupation of Europe, but this is a story that spans completely different territories, and it has to do with the Soviet Empire and with the British Empire. I get these kinds of questions; it depends on the audience.

Q: I understand that the Holocaust has faded from memory for many and that it isn't been taught in schools as much. But how is it that academics—scholars, people educated on the subject—aren't aware of this component of the Holocaust?

A: That's a great question. There are several answers there—technical answers, political answers. We'll start with the technical because this is a story that took place mostly in the Soviet territories. We didn't have access to archives in Russia until the fall of the Soviet Union, and even today we don't have access to complete archives in the way that we have access through, Massey archives, archives in Germany and in Poland. It's a whole other story. And if you read my book or your readers will read my book, you'll see that some of the research that I did was dangerous. I was in areas that are still very Soviet. They're not Moscow, and they're not Saint Petersburg. They're in the Russian interior, and I had plainclothes policemen follow me. I was working with some clandestine human-rights activists who were working in Russia, and ... you have to earn their trust. So, it's a little bit like a thriller in that sense. Secondly, the Soviets truly didn't document in the same way that the Nazis did. The Nazis actually documented their atrocities.

In my father's hometown in Poland, there was one of the first mass executions. There are photographs of people walking to be executed; there are photographs of people kneeling at a mass grave that was dug up; and there are photos of their bodies after they've been shot with machine guns. We don't have any footage of the gulag. If somebody wants to make a documentary about the gulag, they have to create footage. There are a handful of photos. Even those are very generic and are not very good. And if you think about how we remember events, it's very visual. We remember the child from the Warsaw Ghetto. We remember the liberation of Auschwitz. We remember the man falling from the Twin Towers. That's how we remember atrocities. So, we don't have the visual imagery. We didn't have archives. And still, the question remains. Because what we did have were memoirs, and people wrote about their experiences. But few heard those experiences. It wasn't heard on a kind of collective level, like a story is told at the Holocaust museum in Washington or the institutions that we, as Jews, have for memory. They didn't really feature the story in a prominent way. It doesn't mean that they don't have testimonies. They are testimonies even in Yad Vashem, but when you go to see the regular exhibition in Washington, you're not going to see the story.

If you think about it, I'm telling a story that's very complex. On the one hand, it's a survival story for many people, and, of course, the deaths of many people. But the reason these people survived is because they were deported to gulags instead of to death camps. That's the bottom line. The gulags were themselves crimes. The gulags were horrible, inhumane. [Still], for many people who were in the gulags, that faith was still better than dying in a gas chamber. So, the fact is that the survivors themselves I think had a hard time talking about it in the sense that their entire families were decimated. They survived in this way that was horrible, but they still survived.

But to the political aspect, if you think about it, the Soviets were the victors and the saviors. To say something negative after the war about the Soviets ... the Soviet Union helped Israel in 1948 with military aid, and Israel was a semi-Socialist country. So the political conditions were such that there was no place for the story for psychological reasons, for political reasons. There is a seminal memoir of the story (*Journey Into the Land of the Zeks and Back: A Memoir of the Gulag*) by a man called Julius Margolin. He wrote that memoir in Tel Aviv in 1946. It was published in Hebrew for the first time around 1983. It was published in English for the first time in 2020. So all these years, it couldn't get published.

Q: I don't like stretching or trying to make comparisons that don't exist. And so, I'll try to avoid it here. Do you feel at all that the current tensions between Israel and Russia will lead to more research and more questioning of the Soviet era during this time? Do you feel that that might evolve in some way?

A: I think it will. Somebody asked me that in the U.N. event—not exactly in these terms—but they ask how this current war affects the way my book is being read, and I said that first of all, it makes reading my book more possible because people are thinking about Soviet crimes. And in fact, my book is very much related, because of a few things. But one of them is this rhetoric that Putin is using when he says, ‘I’m fighting Nazis.’ To us, it’s insane, right? Where is he getting this? This is a cynical use of World War II. But, in fact, when you travel in the areas that I traveled, World War II is not even over. They’re still talking in these terms. You started by saying Holocaust teaching is on the decline, but you have to understand that in those regions, they don’t know anything about the Holocaust. You think here it’s on the decline? They think the war between the Nazis or the fascists, and the Soviets, is that this is Russia vs. the world. The Jews have nothing to do with it or very little to do with it. They don’t even know about the concentration camps, half of these people. It’s shocking.

Q: It brings up (Ukrainian President Volodymyr) Zelensky’s interview recently, where he described his own family members perishing in the Holocaust but never used the word “Jew.” Or Holocaust, for that matter. It really speaks to a perspective of the Holocaust that isn’t known outside of that region.

A: I agree with that completely. Zelensky’s perspective as someone who grew up in Ukraine is also completely off because, if you’ll recall, he spoke to the Knesset and said Jews should save Ukrainians the way the Ukrainians saved the Jews, and people are sitting there saying, ‘Oh, my G-d.’ But he wasn’t being cynical because he grew up on that. It doesn’t matter that he’s a Jew. He grew up in that education system; they tell a whole other story. They tell the story of Soviet and Nazi aggression against Ukraine. Again, the Jews are not part of this, and in fact, the Ukrainians were the great, poor victims, and so ethnic Ukrainians were just as much victims as the Jews. We know that’s not true from every piece of evidence we have. There were, of course, exceptions, but I’m speaking generally. That’s the story that’s being told in Poland and in Ukraine and Lithuania. Both Putin and Zelensky are speaking from a cultural, social, political world that I don’t even understand. I mean, I understand it, but the general public in the United States doesn’t understand it and or in Israel, so I think maybe this will help unearth these things. Before this war, there were few scholars working on this. My book came out, and it’s kind of the right moment for it.

Text 2: Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil* (his autobiography) New York: ©1998 Random House, pp. ix-xii.

...I was only five when Stalin died, but the memory of that day in 1953 is still clear in my mind. Solemn music filled the streets from the radio loudspeakers, and the people of Stalino, as the Ukrainian city of Donetsk was known in those days, wore black armbands. Enormous portraits of Stalin hung everywhere. “No laughing or rowdiness today,” explained our kindergarten teacher. “This is a very sad day. Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, our leader and teacher, is dead.”

[...]

Mama was crying when I came in, and only later did I learn the real reason for her tears: she was afraid of pogroms. During Stalin’s final days his revived campaign of anti-Semitism, which was especially virulent in the Ukraine, had grown even more heated. Who knew what terrible events might follow in the wake of his death?

Earlier that day, Mama had been in the town square, where people gathered to listen to the news. As Mama watched in horror a man walked up to an old Jewish woman and slapped her in the face. “Damn kikes,” he shouted. “You killed our Stalin and now you’re crying?” Nobody came to her defense, and my brother and I weren’t allowed to leave the apartment for days.

[...]

... [Papa] told me and my brother, Leonid, who was seven, that Stalin had killed many innocent people, that in his final years he had begun persecuting Jews, and that we were very fortunate that this terrible butcher was dead. Papa warned us not to repeat these comments to anyone.

[...]

When I was young, Papa taught me that being Jewish was nothing to be ashamed of, which was an important lesson in a society where well-bred people considered it vulgar to use the word “Jew” in the presence of a Jew. Like most of my generation, I grew up completely unaware of the religion, language, culture, and history of my people. Words like Torah, Passover, Yom Kippur, and even Shabbat meant nothing to us. But Papa was a storyteller, and he sometimes told us tales from the Bible—about Joseph and his brothers, or Samson and Delilah. Did these stories leave a special imprint on my soul? Did I feel that this was *my* history, that those were *my* ancestors who went down to Egypt to escape the famine in their own land, and ended up in slavery? If so, those feelings lay dormant for years.

No, in those days my conscious association with the word “Jew” was limited to the bureaucratic phrase “fifth line.” In the identity papers of my parents and most of our acquaintances, the word *Yevrei*, Jew, was filled in under “Nationality” in the fifth line of the document. Above all, it meant that our opportunities in Soviet society were limited.

Officially, of course, there were no barriers for Jews. But I grew up hearing constant references to the fifth line, which explained why X didn’t get a certain job or Y wasn’t accepted into an outstanding institute despite his qualifications, or why there was no point in applying to this school or that hospital because they already had a Jew there “and the director doesn’t want to be accused of turning the place into a synagogue.” This phrase, incidentally, was the only context where I ever heard the word “synagogue” as a child. There were approximately fifty thousand Jews in Donetsk, but no synagogues. Nor were there any Jewish schools—not in Donetsk or anywhere else in the country. No Hebrew books were published in the Soviet Union, and there were no opportunities to study Hebrew or Jewish history.

Text 3: Drozdov, L. (1976). “Zionism.” Great Soviet Encyclopedia. (Translated by Academic Language Experts). Moscow: Gosud. Scientific Publishing House Soviet Encyclopedia, vol. 23, pp. 445-446.

Zionism (from the name of Zion Hill in Jerusalem) is the most reactionary type of Jewish bourgeois nationalism, which gained a significant following in the 20th century among the Jewish population of capitalist countries. Contemporary Zionism is a nationalist ideology, an extensive and complex system of organizations, and a policy expressing the interests of the top-tier Jewish bourgeoisie, which is closely connected to the monopolistic bourgeoisie of imperialist states. The main content of contemporary Zionism is militant chauvinism, racism, anticommunism, and anti-Sovietism.

[...]

... The ideologues of Zionism try to prove an “inseparable connection of Jews all over the world” to Zionism, to which they should subordinate their interests wherever they are. The politicized dogmas of Judaism about the Jewish people being “chosen by God” and messianic, as well as the mythical thesis of their “exceptionality” comprise one of the foundations of extreme nationalism, chauvinism and racism immanent to this ideology. The ideologues claim that the “Jewish question” is “eternal,” “special” and transcends social class. The Zionists propagate the mendacious idea of class peace between the Jewish working class and Jewish bourgeoisie (“All Jews are brothers”). All forms of class struggle among Jews are denounced by the ideologues of Zionism as treason against the Jewish nation. By means of demagoguery and tactical maneuvers, the Zionists have always tried and still try to conceal the anti-people, reactionary nature of Zionism, attempting to pass it for a “national liberation movement of the Jewish people all over the world.”

Since the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 on part of Palestine's territory, according to the UN resolution, Zionism became the official state ideology of Israel. The declared central goals of Zionism are gaining unconditional support for this state by all Jews worldwide, gathering the Jews from around the world into Israel, and Zionist propagandistic influence on the Jewish population of various states. Zionism purports to expand this state to the borders of the so-called "Greater Israel." To achieve these goals, the Zionists use the claim of "perennial anti-Semitism," and at the same time often resort to escalating it themselves. Zionism lies at the basis of the official national politics of Israel. The State of Israel is proclaimed by the Zionists as the homeland of all Jews wherever they live and whatever their attitude to Zionism may be.

At the 28th Congress of WZO (which took place in 1972 in Jerusalem), in violation of the international law, a motion was accepted stating the "collective obligation of all national (i.e. Zionist and pro-Zionist) organizations to help the Jewish state under all circumstances and conditions, even if they are met with resistance from other authorities" from countries that have a Jewish population. The main strategy of Zionism has always been an overt as well as covert struggle against socialism, international communist and national liberation movements, the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.

Immediately after the victory of the October Revolution in 1917 in Russia, Zionism began an active struggle against the young Soviet state. After World War II from 1939-1945, in the context of the deepening general crisis of capitalism, the anticommunism and antisocialism of the international Zionism took on even greater proportions. The change of the general balance of power in the world in favor of socialism, the successful resolution of the national (including Jewish) question in USSR, the Soviet Union's consistent support of the national liberation struggle of Arab nations – all increase Zionist anti-Soviet and anticommunist propaganda and activity.

International Zionism strives to undermine the moral-political unity of the socialist nations, to tear the citizens of Jewish nationality away from participation in building socialism and communism; it undermines the processes of the resolution of international tension, in particular the beginning of normalization of the Soviet-American relations. Being one of the vanguard forces of imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, international Zionism actively participates in struggling against the national liberation movements of the people of Africa, Asia, Latin America. In the Near East, the Zionist ruling elites in Israel conduct a policy of aggression and constant territorial expansion at the expense of Arab nations, foremost, the Palestinian Arab people. This policy has turned Israel into the imperialist policeman of the Near East, and was the main cause of the Arab-Israeli armed conflicts in 1948-49, 1956, 1967, 1973. Zionism has become one of the main allies of imperialism in its global struggle against the world liberation movement. [...]

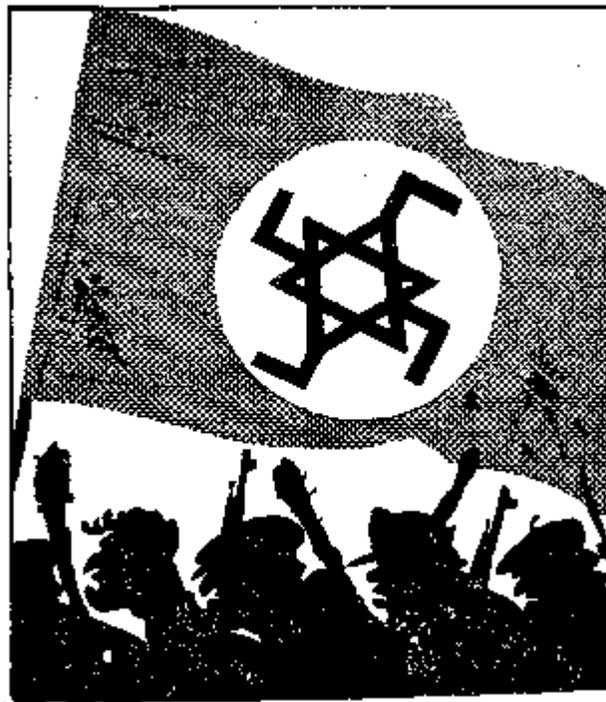
The 30th General Assembly of the U.N (November 1975) characterized Zionism as a form of racism and racial discrimination.

The logically necessary and objective process of the Jews assimilation is increasing all over the world. Not only in Jewish communities of the West, but also in the Israeli population there is a growing awareness that the Zionist policy of the ruling echelons of Israel may lead its population to a true national catastrophe.

Text 4: A political cartoon from the Soviet newspaper *Sovjetskaya Russia*, October 1982



Text 5: A political cartoon from the Soviet newspaper *Pravda Vostoka*, December 1971



Text 6: Menedevich, Y. *Unbroken Spirit: A Heroic Story of Faith, Courage and Survival*. ©2012 Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing, pp. 3-5.

All is lost. They're already taking us to be interrogated on the spot. On the way, these idiots take my backpack, with the weapons inside. Fine, let them search me. They bring me to a small room, packed with high-ranking officers and special investigators, one of whom proffers an arrest warrant. "Read it and sign!" I read it with disbelief. They know everything: "District prosecutor's office... According to the report of the operations department of the security services, a cell of Jewish terrorists has been active in the area of the airfield with the intent of betraying the motherland and fleeing to the imperialist state of Israel, thus violating Article 15-64 of the criminal code. I hereby order the arrest and interrogation of the criminal gang, and warn that if the charges prove true, its members will face the death penalty."

Death penalty? For me? How will I be able to stand this – the KGB interrogations, the trial, the death sentence? These require heroic fortitude, like Judah Maccabee, or Joseph Trumpeldor, the hero of Tel Hai, whose famous last words were, "Never mind, it is good to die for our country," or Mordechai Anielewicz, leader of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. But I'm no hero, just a miserable Jewish student.

[...]

In the car, disguised as a civilian vehicle, I glance outside at the free world, perhaps for the last time. Though it is Russia, the very country I have been trying to flee, here too, under the blue morning skies, people are going to work, mothers are pushing carriages. Life. My life, I think, might be coming to an end.

I ask myself a piercing question: *Nu, what do you have to say for yourself? Do you regret your decisions?*

There are moments in a man's life when he cannot deceive himself, when there is no one to deceive. I think to myself: *NO, I regret nothing*. So deep is my love for my people and my homeland that had I passed up this chance to escape this foreign land I would have despised myself for the rest of my days. For something of the highest importance, you must be prepared to pay the highest price. I was willing to sacrifice even my love of life, and now I feel content.