

Essential Workers

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Shoftim 5782

In the first half of the 20th century, the city of Dorohoi, in far Northeastern Romania was a center of Torah and Chassidus, led by Rav Chanoch Henoch Frankel, the Dorohoi Rebbe. Serving alongside him was his son in law, Rav Pinchas Eliyahu Wasserman, who was appointed the Rabbi of Dorohoi in 1941. Rav Wasserman served in many roles as a religious functionary- as the communal Chazzan, as the Torah reader and as the shochet. In the 1960s, the Ceaurescu regime, in an effort to strengthen ties with the State of Israel, permitted Romanian Jews to make aliyah- but there were two Jews that were not permitted to go with them: Rav Pinchas and Rebbetzin Sima Wasserman. They were held as virtual prisoners in Dorohoi, long after the community had dwindled to tiny numbers. In order to provide their six children with a Torah education, the Wassermans sent them on their own to Israel, while they remained behind. Their numerous applications to travel to Israel, including for the weddings of their four daughters, were repeatedly denied. One might think the totalitarian Stalinist police state in Romania, whose tentacles strangulated every aspect of the lives of every Romanian citizen, was the reason for these denials, but that would be at least partially mistaken. In fact, it was Romania's Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Dr. Moshe Rosen (1912-1994), who used his considerable

influence with the Ceaucescu regime to the approval of their application. The official reason Rabbi Rosen gave for these denials was that Rav Wasserman was the only *shochet* left in Romania. If he were to leave the country, he might wish to do so permanently, and there would be no source of kosher meat left for Romanian Jews.

The legacy of Rabbi Rosen is complicated, to say the least. On the one hand, there is no denying that he gave his entire life to Romanian Jewry. It was through his considerable diplomatic talents that the Gheorgiu-Dej and Ceaucescu regimes developed more favorable attitudes toward, and diplomatic relations with Israel, and it was because of him that so many Romanian Jews were allowed to move there. Furthermore, his efforts allowed Jews in Romania to exercise their religion with relative openness, providing the many small communities throughout the country with kosher food, Hebrew books and Torah materials. Through his influence, he was able to save hundreds of shuls across Romania from destruction, even securing funds for their preservation to this very day, and preserving the heritage of Romanian Jewry as a result. He was a vociferous fighter against anti-Semitism, successfully marginalizing anti-Jewish hate groups and political parties in a country with a long history of hatred of Jews. And he did all of this while, as unsealed documents later revealed, virtually every step he took, in Romanian and abroad, was monitored by the Securitatea, the Romanian secret police. On the other hand, he exercised his control over the Jewish community with an iron fist, fostering

something of a personality cult; To his detractors, he was “The Red Rabbi,” who had, perhaps with initially good intentions, sold his soul to the devil, growing entirely too close and similar to one of the most despotic people and corrupt governments ever to hold office.

Rabbi Wasserman’s sons, Yosef and Yehuda, waged an aggressive campaign against Rabbi Rosen. They staged a sit-in in front of the Romanian Embassy in Tel Aviv and, when Rabbi Rosen came to Jerusalem for the International Congress of Synagogues and Communities,” they held a hunger strike in front of Heichal Shlomo, at the time the seat of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. Holding placards with slogans like “Let My Parents Go,” they were relentless in their efforts. Rabbi Rosen claimed that, in advocating for the denial of Rav Wasserman’s application, he had a supporting ruling from Rav Ovadia Yosef. In a meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe¹, Rabbi Rosen reportedly asked the Rebbe what to do. The Rebbe insisted that Rabbi Rosen permit Rav Wasserman to leave...temporarily. According to Rabbi Solomon Trau, a communal leader from Manhattan who was present at the meeting, the Rebbe told Rabbi Rosen

This is not a matter of halacha, Jewish law, this is an issue of menshlichkeit, human compassion. On the one hand, the man wants to see his children, and it is a very

¹ https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/2218102/jewish/Whose-Time-Is-It.htm

humane thing to let him. On the other hand, thousands of Jews will be left kosher without meat because he is the only [shochet](#) available...My advice is to tell him that he can leave for six months to see his children, but under the condition that after six months he comes back.

Rabbi Rosen did not listen to the Rebbe, despite the forceful language the Rebbe used. In 1975, Rav Wasserman was granted permission to go to Israel for the briefest of visits, but when he returned, Rabbi Rosen presented him with an ultimatum: either he leaves the country immediately, or he signs a document abandoning his efforts to travel to Israel. Circumstances did not permit him to travel to Israel immediately, so he signed the letter under duress. In 1980, he was permitted to travel to Israel for his son Yosef's wedding, but this time, he was threatened with the confiscation of all his assets and possessions if he failed to return. In 1989, he was again permitted to travel for his granddaughter's wedding. While there, Rabbi Rosen demanded that he return immediately, threatening that if he didn't, he would be fired from his position. Rav Wasserman didn't cave to Rabbi Rosen's threats this time, and applied for asylum from the Israeli authorities, who immediately granted him Israeli citizenship as an *oleh chadash*. While he was in Israel, the Ceaucescu regime was toppled in the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, rendering Rabbi Rosen's threats toothless. Rav Wasserman never returned to Romania; Leaving

behind his possessions, he started anew in Israel, where, until his death in 1996, he was the unofficial Chief Rabbi of the Romanian Jews who moved there.

This week's Torah reading features a list of people who are allowed, and even required, to leave the battlefield rather than joining the war effort.

וְדִבְרוּ הַשָּׂרִים אֶל־הָעָם לֵאמֹר מִי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר בָּנָה בֵּית־חֹדֶשׁ וְלֹא חֲנָכוֹ יֵלֶךְ וַיָּשֻׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פְּנִימוֹת בַּמִּלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ אַחֵר יִחַנְכֶנּוּ:

Then the officials shall address the troops, as follows: “Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it.

וּמִי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־נָטַע כָּרֶם וְלֹא חֲלָלֹו יֵלֶךְ וַיָּשֻׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פְּנִימוֹת בַּמִּלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ אַחֵר יִחַלְלֶנּוּ:

Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard but has never harvested it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another harvest it.

וּמִי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אַרְשׁ אִשָּׁה וְלֹא לָקַחָהּ יֵלֶךְ וַיָּשֻׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פְּנִימוֹת בַּמִּלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ אַחֵר יִקְחֶנָּה:

Is there anyone who has paid the bride-price for a wife, ***paid the bride-price for a wife** *Thereby making her his wife legally, even though she has not yet moved into his household.* but who has not yet taken her [into his household]? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another take her [into his household as his wife].”

וַיִּסְפוּ הַשּׁוֹטְרִים לְדַבֵּר אֶל־הָעָם וְאָמְרוּ מִי־הָאִישׁ הַיָּרֵא וְנָרָה הַלֵּבָב יֵלֶךְ וַיָּשֻׁב לְבֵיתוֹ וְלֹא יִמָּס אֶת־לֵבָב אֶחָיו כְּלָבָדוֹ:

The officials shall go on addressing the troops and say, “Is there anyone afraid and disheartened? Let him go back to his home, lest the courage of his comrades flag like his.”

Now, I can understand the last exemption. Cowardice is contagious, and troop morale is of particular concern during wartime, where desertion can have catastrophic consequences. Better to release the lily livered to a civilian existence rather than ruin it for everyone else. But what about the others? Someone who betrothed a woman- they get to go home, because if they die, someone else will marry her. Someone who planted a vineyard gets to go home lest someone else enjoys the sweetness of its first fruits. To quote Rabbi David Fohrman, *this man will be dead*. It's the *death* that's the worst part- everything else just adds on to the fundamental tragedy. Furthermore, it's war! We need able-bodied warriors and we need to prepare for some casualties. That someone else will eat a few grapes should not rank high among our primary concerns!

I'd like to suggest that the Torah is teaching us something about relationships, and about our role in the world. The Torah is concerned that someone else might marry

this woman- because, if this man dies, someone else *will*, please God, marry this woman. It is concerned that someone else might take over the field because someone else *will* take over the field. None of us should view ourselves as irreplaceable in any way, no matter who loves us or how good we are at our jobs. But we must also realize that, for the people who love us and count on us, we are *essential*. Yes, someone else could marry this woman- but she loves *this man*, who is now being called to battle. Yes, someone else could live in the house this man built or till his vineyard- but he knows the growth cycles, the delicacy with which certain plants must be pruned and treated, how to fix it when the door tends to jam. Did Rabbi Rosen keep Rav Wasserman in Romania as a political stunt to crush a potential rival, or because he was really concerned about Romanian Jews having kosher meat? Was it both, or neither? We don't know. It is a fact that Rav Wasserman was the only shochet in Romania; did that mean he should never have been permitted to leave, for any reason? Certainly not. Indeed, the question of whether Rav Wasserman had an obligation *on his part* to stay is itself a complicated one. It is clear that Rabbi Rosen was placing Rav Wasserman's essential role to Romanian Jewry above his essential role *to his family*, and that may be a sign of corrupted priorities, but there is something very powerful about being a person counted on by an entire country, or even an entire community. Rav Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar Movement, as well as Rav Simcha Zissel of Kelm, one of its giants, both offered this as a tip to tip the scales on the day of judgment. On

Rosh Hashanah, it is only *individuals* who need to worry about their verdicts, but communities always emerge triumphant, so as much as possible, a person needs to be like a *tzibbur*, like a community- by being a person who is *needed* by the community. Serving in leadership capacities, involving ourselves in planning communal events, getting involved in organizations that serve the community like Bikur Cholim, the Chevra Kadisha, the Free Loan Society and others, spearheading Torah study programs and being involved in tasks and projects for the shul that use our unique talents. Yes, none of us is irreplaceable, but we can all be essential, so that we are inscribed for a 5783 of health, joy and all kinds of blessings.