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YIDDISHKEIT UNDER PUTIN

A candid conversation with Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar

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INTERVIEW

by **RABBI AVRAHAM Y. HESCHEL**

YIDDISHKEIT UNDER PUTIN



DURING A VISIT TO NEW YORK TO ATTEND THE ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHABAD EMISSARIES (KNOWN ALSO AS THE KINUS HASHLUCHIM), **RABBI BEREL LAZAR**, THE CHIEF RABBI OF RUSSIA, HELD A CANDID CONVERSATION WITH HAMODIA ABOUT THE CURRENT FATE OF THE JEWS IN RUSSIA, HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN, HIS THOUGHTS ON THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR, AND HIS VIEW OF THE ROLE OF A JEW IN THE DIASPORA.

Marina Roscha Synagogue in Moscow.



B BEFORE WE ADDRESS SOME OF THE BURNING ISSUES OF THE DAY, PLEASE GIVE OUR READERS SOME BACKGROUND. HOW MANY YEARS HAVE YOU BEEN LIVING IN RUSSIA?

I came to Russia the first time 35 years ago, in Cheshvan 5747/1987, as a *bachur*; it was still under Communist rule at the time, part of the USSR, under Mikhail Gorbachev. Things were beginning to change, but no one back then expected it to turn in the direction it did.

Until then, there used to be people visiting, like a Rav used to come for a few days, give some *shiurim*, do whatever he felt was needed and then leave. I asked the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *zt"l*, and he said I should go; and we established what we called a “yeshivah on wheels,” because every day they would meet somewhere else. It was a big *chiddush* at the time.

They weren’t allowed by the authorities to officially meet. So, we used to gather in a different apartment each day. It was a yeshivah, and *kollel yungeleit* and *bachurim* used to sit and learn from 6.30 in the morning till 1 o’clock at night, *mamash*. Nonstop.

We were there for a month and a half. When I left, they begged me that I should come back. It was highly unusual for the same person to keep on coming. But *baruch Hashem* I was there three times and then, a year later, I got married and I wanted to go right away back to Russia.

That was my dream. However, the Rebbe said to stay in *kollel* another year. And then, a year later, in 5750/1990, I moved there with my wife and, *baruch Hashem*, I have been there with my wife and kids ever since.

HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO DEVELOP A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT?

Eary on, I met with Boris Yeltsin. I had meetings with other officials as well, but that wasn’t my goal. I met them *derech agav*, somebody asked me to go, so I went. Incidentally, Yeltsin wanted the meeting to remain a secret. He didn’t want any issue connected to Jews to be publicized. The year 1990 was a time when a lot of Yidden left. At the same time, there was a lot of antisemitism — for a lot of different reasons — they were blaming the Jews for everything, they were saying that they took all the money.

Our shul was burnt and completely destroyed. Then it was bombed twice. People came into shuls with knives. In the streets people were being attacked. And even then the government wanted to keep it quiet, they didn’t want it to become an issue about antisemitism or about Jews in general. So that is when we started really dealing with the government and tried to explain to them that it’s not going to work, and that Jews were not going to remain there and keep quiet about what was going on.

The mayor of Moscow, Yury Luzhkov, was a notable

exception. He was ready to come and speak up. When the shul was burned he came in front of the shul... But others, including the leaders of other religions, like the Patriarch of Moscow, didn’t want to touch this subject. He said don’t mention it, don’t make any issue about the Jews. They wanted that we should all disappear, not be seen and not be spoken about.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST GET TO KNOW PRESIDENT PUTIN?

Prior to becoming president he served as prime minister. We were arranging a *kinus* of the Rabbanim from all the *kehillos*. It was the first time we were making a gathering on a large scale. We felt that there should be someone from the government attending to the [growth of] *Yiddishkeit*, the *mosdos*, the yeshivos, and schools. I actually wanted to invite then-President Yeltsin to come. I was told there was no chance he was going to come, I should not even try. But I called his office anyway and they said he was not going to come but I could try the prime minister. By *hashgachah pratis* Putin had just become prime minister — Yeltsin was at that time changing prime ministers every few months.

Putin said that he was not going to attend the *kinus* but if I want I could come to see him in his office. And that was the first time we met him. From the first meeting, we established a strong relationship.

He told me then how he grew up in a very poor family. His parents were never home, always out working.

In Russia there is such a thing called a communal apartment where three, four, even five families had their own bedroom but shared one kitchen and one bathroom. The Putin family lived in such an apartment and the second family was a *frum* family.

He described to me how the husband *davened*, how he sat covered with *tallis*, sitting and mumbling some words. How they used to have a *seudas Shabbos* and then after *seudas Shabbos* he used to take out a *Gemara* and learn for hours. This *frum* family would give him food; they helped him with his homework. They literally took care of him.

YOU FEEL THAT THIS CAUSED HIM TO HAVE A SENSE OF GRATITUDE TOWARDS FRUM JEWS?

First of all, he felt a sense of appreciation for what *Yiddishkeit* is, what a Jewish family is, what learning Torah is, what keeping *mitzvos* is. The morality, the values. I think that was number one. He felt probably some kind of *hakaras hatov* for what they did for him.

IT WAS UNDER PUTIN THAT YOU WERE OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED AS CHIEF RABBI?

It was after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when Russia became a separate country.

I didn’t want the position. I fought against it. I didn’t mind giving a *shiur* but becoming the Chief Rabbi was *mamash* the *hepech* of my *metziyus* and my dreams and goals. But the people involved insisted there had to be somebody that the government would recognize and that it was going to be a real Rav — under the communists there was a *Rav mitaam* — a rabbi chosen by the government...

So they made an *asifah* of all the Rabbanim in Russia and they announced it. Putin was then president. A few months later, there was formal governmental recognition.

HOW MANY JEWS ARE NOW STILL IN RUSSIA?

We believe that the number is huge.

Most Yidden living today in Russia don’t even know they are Yidden. One of the things that we started lately is trying to find out who is Jewish through family trees, DNA tests, through finding distant relatives, archival documents, and the like.

For us, helping them discover their identity is the most important thing. Their grandmothers used to hide the fact they were Jewish; they tried to change documents. So the challenge is to find original documents and various ways to figure out who is a Yid and who is not a Yid.

We estimate that there are [at least] a million Jews in Russia because if you go into any city, any building, and you start searching and researching, you’ll find that at least 0.5% are halachically Yidden. There are about hundred and thirty million people living in Russia.

The problem is that most of them don’t know they are Jewish. So our goal is actually to get them excited to come out to us. And we have in the *beis din* a whole section taking care of *berurei yahadus* and proving if somebody is a Yid according to *halachah*.

ONCE YOU MAKE THEM AWARE THAT THEY ARE JEWISH, WHAT PERCENTAGE OF THEM REACT POSITIVELY?

Nowadays it is huge. The interest is way above anything we ever dreamt of. In the last few months it has *mamash* become incredible.

Russian Yidden are very different than American Jews. Let’s put it this way. Number one, they are very serious about it. If they find out they are Yidden, they want to do something. They don’t want to just say okay I’m a Yid at heart. He wants to get involved.



KIRILL KUDRYAVTSEV/AFP via Getty Images

Russia's Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar (4th R) attends the Chanukah celebration at the notorious Butyrka remand prison in Moscow, on December 4, 2013.



DMITRY ASTAKHOV/RIA NOVOSTI/AFP via Getty Images

Then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (2nd L) looks at *sefarim* while visiting a Jewish community center in Birobidjan on July 2, 2010.

I'll give you a small example: There is a Russian businessman who I've known very well for many, many years. He found out that he is a Yid when he was 16 years old. And from then on he got involved and he is learning, and now *mamash* he got so involved that his wife (*baruch Hashem* his wife is a Yid) and his kids are all learning — *Yiddishkeit*, Torah, *mamash* everything. I got him a special private teacher to learn with him. He tells me a story that he has a friend who is very popular, very famous, very important — I don't even know who he is yet — he told me this story not too long ago — who got on his birthday a DNA test; somebody gave it to him as a joke. Today with a DNA test you can practically *kimat* prove like 95% who is a Yid and who is not a Yid. It's actually something our *beis din* started. The whole idea of proving Jewish identity through using DNA testing to prove family relationships is something that originally was very controversial. Today it is widely accepted.

So he got this test, he made the test, he sent it in. And he all of a sudden gets the results and he sees he has relatives in Israel, he has relatives in America. He was shocked and started researching it and found out his maternal grandmother was actually adopted but she was born a Yid. It means his mother was a Yid. And because he found this out, he started learning *Gemara*...

So this is an example of a Russian Yid. They were estranged because of 70 to 80 years of communism. But once they do find out, there is no opposition against *Yiddishkeit*. There is no such thing as going to a Russian Yid and asking him to put on *tefillin* and he is going to say I

don't want to put on *tefillin*, I don't want to come to shul. There is no such thing *chas v'shalom* as a Reform, Conservative temple; it doesn't exist in Russia.

HOW MANY YIDDEN DO YOU ESTIMATE CURRENTLY IDENTIFY THEMSELVES AS JEWISH NOW IN RUSSIA?

We have a program now that we started, very recently, and it's a big revolution for us: To be in touch with every Yid who is interested in *Yiddishkeit* and their level of interest and observance.

So we started, and on the general list we have over 130,000 Yidden.

In the next few months we hope to visit 25,000 of these Yidden. We are now 500 volunteers, which also includes *sheluchim* and *baalei teshuvah*; they are going to visit these families. So our goal is actually that 500 people are going to go visit at least 50 people each in the next few months. and that is 25,000 Yidden. And we go into their homes and make sure that there is a *mezuzah*, *sefarim*, candlesticks for lighting Shabbos candles, a *kiddush* cup and the like.

THESE ARE YIDDEN WHO ARE PLANNING ON STAYING FOR THE TIME BEING IN RUSSIA?

Very few Jews are now leaving Russia. The number that people talk about, that 20,000, 30,000 Yidden left Russia, I would say 85-90% of them are Yidden who went to Israel, got a passport and then came back to Moscow.

HAVE YOU SEEN AN INCREASE IN ANTISEMITISM BECAUSE OF THE UKRAINIAN WAR?

During the last 20-plus years, there almost hasn't been any antisemitism in Russia. The first time that we saw anything was last week, two weeks ago. After the war with Hamas started, all of a sudden there was a spark of Muslim anti-Israeli — that's what they call it. But we say clearly this is antisemitism; we don't make any differentiation. So there was a big story in an airport, in Makhachkala. There were two or three minor incidents and there was a major story in the airport. But the government cracked down completely, very strongly on it. Even in Makhachkala, the Yidden there feel perfectly fine. We told them, we are going to bring you planes, we are going to get you out, but they didn't want it. Not one person left.

IN MOSCOW, YOURSELF, YOU ARE NOT FEELING IT AT ALL?

No. Suddenly in the press, in the beginning of the war, what was transpiring was being portrayed in a very bad way. *Baruch Hashem* it changed now. At first they spoke about what happened on Simchas Torah, but then the whole the next 30 days they were talking about what is going on in Gaza. So every day they are showing again Gaza, Gaza, Gaza, so this brought out this Muslim anti-Israeli feeling. *Baruch Hashem* today it is calm and we don't see anything. The *Eibershter zol helfen veiter*.

DURING THE LAST FEW WEEKS THE RUSSIAN PRESS CAME OUT VERY STRONGLY AGAINST ISRAEL IN REGARD TO THEIR BATTLE AGAINST THE TERRORISTS IN GAZA. NOW, HOW IS

THAT AFFECTING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH PUTIN, AND HOW IS IT AFFECTING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JEWS AND THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT?

First of all, I came out quite strongly against the position that Russia took in the beginning of the war. I spoke about it with the government officials. I spoke about it with President Putin also. And actually, even in the past two or three days, there has been a big change in the way the Russian press is portraying the whole situation of Israel and Hamas. There is no question that Russia has a relationship with a lot of Arab countries. Their approach is that the only way that we can control them is by having a relationship with them and that fighting them, in truth, is only going to bring more animosity.

It's not that they are choosing the Arab countries because they believe that they are the biggest saints. Some of these relationships are just because that's the way it works out better for Russia.

Now, I personally think that in this story of what happened Simchas Torah and all the aftermath, I think they completely, according to my opinion, missed what really happened. They didn't really understand the severity of what really happened. No videos of what happened were shown to them. Nobody tried to engage them and explain it to them.

We had an official meeting with President Putin. I spoke very strongly that Hamas is a terrorist organization — number one they have to be recognized as a terrorist organization, which in Russia hasn't happened yet. Number two, with terrorists you cannot make a deal. You cannot make peace. So don't ask Israel to make peace; we have to destroy terrorism.

At the same time, there is no question that what we have to worry is that there should not be antisemitism in Russia. Russian relations with Iran or other countries shouldn't *chas v'shalom* affect the Yidden in Russia. Because I don't think it is in any way connected.

We were promised that the whole story of what happened in the Middle East, what happened on Simchas Torah, would be told in a different way and *baruch Hashem* we see a difference. They also promised us that they are going to make sure that there shouldn't be antisemitism in Russia.

SO YOU'RE SAYING THAT IN YOUR MEETING WITH PUTIN HIS REACTION TO YOUR STANCE WAS A POSITIVE ONE?

Extremely positive. We sat for a long time and the reaction was actually very warm — both towards Israel, but also and especially towards the Jewish community.

YOU WOULD DESCRIBE PRESIDENT PUTIN AS A FRIEND OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY?

I would say that all these years what he has done for the Jewish community in Russia is unprecedented in Russia. Any Russian Jew will tell you the Russian Jews never lived as well as they live today.

EVEN NOW WITH WHAT IS GOING ON, EVEN AFTER WHAT HE SAID ABOUT HAMAS?

I sat with him two weeks ago for an hour and a half. I still believe he cares very much for the Yidden; he cares very much for Israel also. He does, of course, have to play his political role that he plays regarding the Arab countries. He certainly is a big supporter of the Jewish community. He has many Jewish friends. He feels very close with them. I believe that he is going to do whatever he can to prevent antisemitism in Russia.

Your efforts concentrate solely on quiet shtadlanus, not through public protests and demonstrations.

I don't believe that anywhere in the world demonstrations help; in general that is my *shittah*. But for sure not in Russia. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, even in the years of communism, was extremely against these demonstrations; it doesn't help. When they see pressure, they are going to answer back with pressure. They don't want to be forced to do something.



ALEXEY NIKOLSKY/AFP via Getty Images
Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) speaks with Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar during their meeting in connection with the observance of Rosh Hashanah, in Moscow on September 9, 2018.

MUCH OF THE WORLD PERCEIVES PUTIN AS A MODERN-DAY NAPOLEON SEEKING TO SWALLOW COUNTRY AFTER COUNTRY AND IF HE WOULD BE ALLOWED TO CONQUER UKRAINE HE WOULD THEN SEEK TO DO THE SAME TO POLAND AND THE REST OF EUROPE.

I strongly don't believe that his goal is to conquer Europe. I don't think anything like that has even been in his mind. I do believe that the way Russia sees the world is that it should be divided into spheres of influence. In other words, Russia believes that they were part of the Soviet Union, and that when it comes to the entirety of the former Soviet Union, outsiders should not interfere. Any Russian in the street feels that America interfered in the revolution in Ukraine, the reason it happened is because there was money from America, intelligence from America, involvement from America, and this is something that they want to change. There are parts of the world that are under the influence of America, and they fully understand it and let America run it. But there are parts of the world that are under the influence of Russia and some countries in the world will have to choose who they are connected with. But Washington should not be the one to run the show everywhere.

For instance, in regard to Syria, they believe that they have always been involved in Syria much more than America; leave it up to us. When speaking again to a regular Russian about what America did in Iraq, what they did in Lebanon, he will say that the involvement of America brought worse results because America doesn't really understand the mentality of these countries.

HAVE YOU SPOKEN PUBLICLY ABOUT THE WAR WITH UKRAINE?

We spoke a lot. Our position is that the best solution is to find

some kind of compromise. This war is not going to bring anything good to anyone. So the question is, who is the one who is really blocking, preventing the finding of a solution? So some people blame Russia, some people blame the Ukraine, some people blame America, some people blame everybody. Now our position has always been not to get involved in any politics. We are not politicians, we are not diplomats, we don't deal with these issues. We don't get involved in anything that has to do with politics. Our job is to be *mekarev* Yidden. Incidentally, many Yidden are married couples where one is Ukrainian and the other Russian.

We and the *shluchim* in the Ukraine are best friends. Just this morning I met probably 15 or 20 of them here at the *kinus hasheluchim*. We always work together, the communities always work together, we share one language, one mentality. Everything was being done together. So it's very, very painful to see what is going on. Again, who they point fingers at, who is at fault, it's not our job. Our job is really to call for a ceasefire, peace, finding a compromise, finding a solution, because the more it goes on, the worse it is for everybody.

DO PUBLIC POSITIONS TAKEN BY JEWS IN AMERICA REGARDING THE WAR IN UKRAINE AFFECT RUSSIAN JEWS?

Not at all.

I even believe that the Russians believe in every country that the Jews are going to be patriots of their country. So the Jews in Ukraine are going to be patriotic for Ukraine, Jews in America to America.

I strongly believe it has nothing to do with Jews. And it happens to be that America strongly took the Ukrainian side, which Russia believes was a mistake.

The way I see it, the real issue is not between Russia and Ukraine, it's between Russia and America. In the eyes of Russia, as long as America won't step out and tell Ukraine and Russia to work it out on their own, nothing is going to happen. The line in Russia is that there was already a peace accord, there was already a solution, and America didn't let Ukraine sign it. That is the general belief in Russia.

FROM A HASHKAFIC PERSPECTIVE, HOW DO YOU THINK JEWS SHOULD LOOK AT THE WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE?

So first of all, the *midrash*:

"*Im ra'isa malchuyos misgaros eilu b'eilu, tzapeih l'raglo shel Moshiach* — If you see the great nations fighting with each other," say Chazal, "look for the footsteps of Moshiach" (*Bereishis Rabbah* 42:4). It is a sign that Moshiach is coming. Today it's not a cold war any more. *Baruch Hashem* there is no war between Russian and America yet, but it's terrible. There never was such a [level of tension].

THIS IS WORSE THAN VIETNAM AND KOREA?

Much worse... For sure I believe it is a sign of the *geulah*. That is number one. Number two, I think it is important that we should understand that a Torah Jew shouldn't be getting involved in these issues. If something is happening in Eretz Yisrael it is certainly a Yiddische issue. But when it comes to Russia and Ukraine, and it is not a war about the Ukrainian Jewish community, which sadly suffered terribly because of what is going on — they happened to be living in Ukraine and they happened to be caught in this whole situation. But it is not something against the Yidden. So I think that we have to stay out of it. That's my general opinion. ■