

## **Jewish Profiles in Courage: Many Women and One Man**

### **Noam Zion from *A Different Light***

*“It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long, that we are thought of as sheep to be slaughtered” (Psalms 44.23).* This verse refers to the woman [Hannah] and her seven sons. (*Lamentations Rabbah 1*)

*Having failed to convince Elazar the old philosopher, Antiochus turned to the seven young sons of Hannah and began to flatter them, on one hand, and to threaten them on the other in order to convince them to bow down to a pagan idol:*

“Young men I admire you... and because I pay high honor to such beauty and such a numerous band of brothers, I counsel you against raging with the same madness as that old man who has just been tortured and I urge you to yield to me... Renounce your ancestral Law... Share in the Greek ways, change your way of life, and take pleasure in your youth. If by your stubbornness you rouse my anger, you will force me to have recourse to terrible punishments and to destroy you with torture.”  
(*IV Maccabees 8:5-9*)

[To show he meant business, Antiochus ordered] the guards to bring out torture wheels and instruments for dislocating joints, racks and wooden horses,...caldrons and braziers, thumbscrews and iron grips, wedges and bellows: The tyrant then resumed, and said: “Lads, be afraid [and do not fear your Law, for] the Law which you revere will be indulgent to violations committed under pressure.” (*IV Maccabees 8:13-14*)

*As each son from the oldest to the youngest was brought before the king and instructed to bow down to the idol, they each refused and were cruelly tortured to death. Thus the executions continued until the turn of the seventh, last and youngest son.*

The king said to him: “Your [older] brothers had had their fill of years of life and had experienced happiness; but you are so young, you have had no fill of years and life and have not yet experienced happiness. Bow yourself before the image and I will bestow favors upon you.”

[The seventh and youngest son] replied: “You are of no account and so are God’s enemies. A human being lives today and is dead tomorrow, rich today and poor tomorrow; but the Holy One, blessed be He, lives and endures for all eternity.”

The king said to him, “Look, your brothers lie dead before you. [Here is your last chance], I will throw my ring to the ground in front of the idol. {Bend down and} pick it up, so that everyone will think that you have obeyed my command.”

The boy answered, “Woe unto you, O Emperor! If you are afraid of what human beings might think, even though they are the same as yourself, shall I not fear the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, the God of the universe?”

The king asked him: “Does the universe have a God?”

He replied, “Shame on you, King! Do you, then, see a world without a Master!”

The Emperor asked: “Why doesn’t your God save you from me in the same manner that He rescued [Daniel from the lion’s den and] Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from the furnace into which the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar threw them?”

The boy answered, “The Holy One, blessed be He, will avenge our blood on you!” The king ordered him to be put to death, however, the child’s mother said to the king, “By the life of your head, O Emperor, give me my son that I may embrace and kiss him.” They gave her seventh son to her, and she bared her breasts and fed him. She said to the king, “By the life of your head, O Emperor, put me to death first and then slay him.”

[The king refused and then] the mother threw herself upon the child and embraced and kissed him. She said to him: “My son, go to our father Abraham and tell him, ‘This is what my mother has to say to you, Abraham, do not boast of [your righteousness] in building an altar and offering up your only son [Isaac], for I have offered seven sons in one day. Yours was only a test, but mine was in earnest.’ ” While she was embracing and kissing him, the Emperor gave an order and they killed him in her arms.

After a few days the woman became mentally unstable and fell from a roof and died... A voice from heaven proclaimed, “*A happy mother of children*” (*Psalms 113:9*); but the Holy Spirit cried out: “*For these things I weep.*” (*Lamentations Rabbah 1.16.50 and T.B. Gittin 57b*)

## A Woman's Protest against Abuse: Mattathias' Daughter ignites the Maccabean Revolt against the First Night "Privileges" of the Greek Viceroy

### A Medieval Midrash\*

*In some Sephardic communities the seventh night of Hanukkah is dedicated to Jewish women. Therefore our readings suggested for the 7th and 8th candle describe two legendary Jewish heroines associated traditionally with Hanukkah - Hannah daughter of Mattathias and Judith who beheaded Holofernes. Neither legend is historically credible but both present a powerful image of a Jewish heroine. The selection below reflects an ancient and medieval feudal custom of "first night privileges" – the right of the feudal lord to sleep with his subject's bride on her wedding night.*

*The legendary tale of Hannah daughter of Mattathias portrays her - rather than her father - as the one who incited the Maccabees to act. The initial cause of the revolt was, according to the tale below, not only religious persecution but the sexual exploitation of brides under the infamous "first night privileges."*

*Note that "Hannah of the seven sons who were martyred" is **not** the same as "Hannah daughter of Mattathias" in this folktale and that her bridegroom, Elazar the Hasmonean, is not portrayed as Mattathias' son as he is in the Book of the Maccabees. Medieval midrash often recalls historical details differently than history books do. However, whatever its historical veracity, it is wonderful story.*

The Greeks plotted: "Come let us invent [harsh] new decrees that will cause the Jews to reject their God and believe in our gods."

First they decreed that **everyone with a door needed to inscribe on the door bolt the words, "Israel has no relationship to the God of Israel."** All violators of the decree would be pierced by the sword. When Israel heard the decree, they tore out their doors in order to evade its implementation. As a result, without doors, the Jews had no honor, [for a house without a door offers no dignity and no privacy]. Everyone can go in and out at will, whether during the day or at night, so Jews could no longer eat nor drink nor sleep with their spouses in dignity. Jews could not sleep securely night or day just as was predicted in the Biblical curse "*you shall be afraid day and night*" (Deuteronomy 28).

Since the Greeks saw that the Jews persevered despite the first decree, they added a second decree that **everyone was forbidden to let his wife go to the mikveh** [The mikveh is the ritual bath at which she purifies herself after her menstrual period which is a prerequisite, according to the Torah, for having sexual relations with her husband). A husband who violates the decree would be pierced by a sword. Anyone who sees a woman going to *mikveh* (and informs on her husband) earns the right to marry her and enslave her children. When the Jews heard this second decree, the Jewish couples decided to avoid [the temptation to have] intercourse without ritual immersion by separating from their spouses completely.

Since the Greeks saw that the Jews seemed impervious to their previous decrees, they legislated an even more bitter decree – "**first night privileges**". Every Jewish bride should go from her *chuppah* (her marriage celebration) directly to the local Greek official to have sexual relations with him for the first night and only return to her husband subsequently.

When Israel heard this most awful decree, they grew weak and many refrained from becoming engaged, preferring to grow old as virgins. This decree continued for three years and eight months until the wedding night of Hannah, the daughter of Mattathias the priest, who married Elazar the Hasmonean. On her day of joy they placed her on a bridal chair and all the great personages of Israel attended the wedding feast.... As they sat down to eat,

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\* This reading is a composite of two versions of this midrash composed in 10<sup>th</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> C. in Europe and found in A. Jellinek's anthology, *Beit HaMidrash* 8.

Hannah rose from her bridal chair, clapped her hands together (a gesture of mourning in those days), tore off her bridal wreath and tore her clothes. She stood exposed before all of Israel, before her father, her mother and her bridegroom.

When Judah and his brothers saw her exposed in public, they were ashamed and cast their glances down to the ground and tore their clothes in mourning. Then they were filled with anger and declared: “*Take her out and burn her,*”<sup>\*\*</sup> for she dared to appear naked in public, but do it so that the Greek government does not hear, lest the whole community be endangered.”

Then Hannah rose to accuse her judges: “Listen my brothers and cousins. If you are so zealous over [my immodest behavior in] appearing naked before this righteous audience - though I did not sin sexually - then why aren't you zealous about my purity when you yourselves are handing me over to be exploited by this uncircumcised Greek? Will I be disgraced more before my brothers and friends than when you desecrate me and take me to sleep with the Greek ruler? Shouldn't you learn from the brothers of Dinah, daughter of Jacob, who was raped and held hostage by the prince of Shechem? Dinah's brothers, Shimon and Levi – even though there were only **two** of them – showed they were zealous for their sister's honor and they endangered their lives to sanctify God's name. With God's help, they invaded a big city like Shechem in order to rescue her and avenge themselves on the men of the city. Aren't you ashamed, since you are **five** brothers – Judah, Yochanan, Elazar, Jonathan and Simon along with another 200 young priests? Trust God and He will help you!” Then Hannah prayed aloud to God and wept: “Master of the Universe, if you will not have mercy on us, then at least defend the honor of your holy name which is identified with Israel and avenge us today!”

As soon as Judah and his friends heard this, they took counsel to slay the Greek magistrate. They dressed Hannah in royal apparel and made a *chuppah* of myrtle which they carried from the house of the Hasmoneans to the house of the magistrate. The players of lyres and harps and the singers sang and danced until they arrived at the home of the magistrate.

As soon as the magistrate heard this, he said to his officers and courtiers, “See the leaders of Israel, the seed of Aaron the priest, how happy they are to do my will. They are deserving of great honor.” He commanded his officers and courtiers to exit. Judah and his friends, along with Hannah, entered and cut off the magistrate's head. They plundered everything which was his and slew his officers and courtiers. ...The Jews who were in the city were terror-stricken on behalf of those brave youths. A voice from Heaven went forth and said, “The lamb, which went forth to do battle with Antiochus, has been victorious.” The youths returned, closed the gates, did *teshuvah* and busied themselves with Torah and Righteous Deeds.

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<sup>\*\*</sup> “Take her out and burn her” is an application of the law that a priest whose daughter becomes a prostitute should be burned (Leviticus 21:9). It is a direct quote from the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38: 24). There, Tamar dresses as a prostitute, sleeps with her father-in-law Judah in order to keep his seed alive. In the story Tamar is in the right since Judah has refused – against the law – to marry his third son to Tamar who was widowed of his first sons. When Tamar becomes pregnant from Judah, he pounces on the occasion to decree that she be “taken out and burned” as an adulteress. Yet in the end Tamar reveals that Judah is the father of her fetus and Judah admits his error – “She was more righteous than I.”

## **A Woman Warrior: Judith confronts Holofernes** ***Ma'aseh Yehudit: A Hanukkah Midrash***\*

*An ancient Jewish historical romance, which became a famous theme in European art (see page---- ), tells about a beautiful, pious and wealthy widow, Judith, who surprised the men of her generation and saved Israel from the Greek King Holofernes. Jews have retold this story on Hanukkah. It became an excuse to eat cheese dishes and to include women in the mitzvah of candle lighting on Hanukkah on an equal basis since women, by virtue of Judith, played a central role in the redemption celebrated on Hanukkah. There is no historical basis for this tale nor is there any connection between King Holofernes and Antiochus, however this story was originally written in the era of the Greeks in Eretz Yisrael. Here is an abbreviated version of the medieval tale.*

### **Holofernes' Siege of Jerusalem**

Holofernes, king of Greece was a great and mighty king, who conquered many nations and powerful kings, destroyed their castles and burned their palaces. In the tenth year of his reign he decided to go up to Jerusalem, the holy city and conquer it. The king said, "The children of Israel who are in Jerusalem *differ in their religion and do not practice the religion of the king (based on Esther 3:8)*. They are filled with malice; fraud and deceit never leaves their marketplace. Arise and let us go and attack them, so that the name Israel is no longer remembered."...

Holofernes [besieged the city and] found the water sources which lay outside the city [and blocked them.] The next day Holofernes commanded [his army] to go forth to battle. The people under arms were 120,000 foot soldiers, 12,000 horsemen, and 92,000 archers gathered as a mighty force against the children of Israel. When the Israelites in Jerusalem saw the multitudes, they sat down on the ground, placed ashes on their heads, and cried out to the Lord... "The soldiers were seized with trembling, like a woman in the throes of labor" (*Psalms 48:7*). They then entered the Temple of the Lord and worshipped the Lord in weeping and with a great and bitter outcry" (*Esther 4:1*).

The people of Israel assembled before their king, Uzziah – all the men, women and youths together...and said: "Isn't it better for us to worship God and be slaves to Holofernes, than to die of thirst and ...to see our sons and daughters die in our presence? ..."

When the outcries and the weeping ended, Uzziah arose, his eyes over-flowing with tears. He said to them: "*Be strong and of good courage (Psalms 31:25a)*, my brothers, and hope for mercy from the Lord. Perhaps God will relent of His anger and give glory to His name. If after five days God does not deliver us, then we will [surrender to Holofernes]..."

### **Judith's Secret Plan**

News of these matters reached the widow Judith, a woman of such great piety that she had prepared in the upper story of her house a separate room for prayer. She was a very beautiful woman who found favor in the eyes of everyone who saw her ...

When she heard that Uzziah intended to turn the city over after five days, she sent for the priests. When they came to her, Judith asked: "What is this? Does Uzziah intend to turn over the city to the enemy, if the Lord does not deliver us within five days? Who is he that he should test the Lord?"

"I will pray to the Lord on your behalf and you also pray to the Lord for me that God fulfill my plan to avenge the Israelites upon the Greeks. At nightfall my maiden Amta and I will leave the city. Do not question me about where I am going."...

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\* This translation is abbreviated and adapted from Bernard H. Mehlman and Daniel F. Polish, *Journal of Reform Judaism*. Winter, 1979, reprinted by permission.

The medieval midrashic text of *Ma'aseh Yehudit* made its first printed appearance in the Kabbalist collection *Hemdat Yamim* (Livorno, 1793). The translation follows the text of A. Jellinek, *Bet Ha-Midrash*, volume 11. It is based on *Judith* the Hellenist historical romance preserved in the Septuagint and the Christian Bible. This version reflects a medieval reworking with many Biblical allusions. *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Winter, 1979.

Then Judith entered her prayer-room, put on sackcloth and ashes, placed dust on her head and prostrated herself before the Lord. In fasting and with crying she poured out her heart.

Lord, God of my ancestor Shimon [son of Jacob], who took sword in hand to take revenge on the strangers who defiled and raped Dinah his sister ...

Cast Your eye on the camp of this evil enemy and let their sword enter their own heart and let their bows be shattered. Let this evil one who vexes us, King Holofernes, be ensnared by his eyes to love me and smitten with desire for me.

Give my soul strength to resist him and give me power to destroy him; *'Let the wicked fall into their nets while I alone come through'* (Psalm 141:10). Thus your great name will be remembered for the Lord our God handed over Holofernes *into the hands of a woman* (Judges 4:9) [as Yael defeated General Sisera as he slept in her tent. She hammered a tent peg through his forehead].

You, O Lord, have always hated the arrogant kingdom. You attend to the cry of the needy and deliver...

### **Judith's Weapons: Wine and Cheese**

When Judith finished praying, she removed her widow's garb and the sackcloth. She washed her body and anointed herself with myrrh and plaited her hair and placed a diadem on her head. She donned fine and gilded clothing, jewelry, purses, crescents, earrings and signet rings. She beautified herself with all manner of cosmetics and twenty-four adornments.

The Lord gave her splendor and great beauty to find favor in the eyes of all who saw her. Judith gave a jug of **milk**, a skin of **wine**, a flask of oil, meal, bread and **cheese** to Amta, her servant, and went on her way out of the gates of the city...

At dawn, when they were coming down from the mountain, some of Holofernes' guards seized her, and asked her, "Where did you come from? Where are you going?" Judith answered them: "I am an Israelite woman and I have fled under cover from the city. I know that the people of Israel are delivered over to your hand. Therefore, I thought I would take myself to Holofernes' camp to reveal to him the secrets of the people and to instruct his army in the way that they should conquer the city without losing even one person of his camp."

When the men who seized her heard her words, they looked at her appearance and her beauty and were impressed by it. They were amazed by the pleasantness of her words, by her counsel and knowledge. They said to her: "You are blessed with discernment, that you have saved yourself from death and were wise enough to come to our lord. Be assured that when you present yourself to him it will go well with you and you will find favor and mercy in his eyes."

They brought her to the king. As soon as she came before him and he saw her beauty and splendor, a fire of lust and desire burned within him and the king was smitten with desire. All of the officers, courtiers and nobles who had been sitting before the king said: "Who could loathe the Hebrew people who have women as beautiful as this, and who would not do battle to possess them?" When Judith, seeing the king seated on his royal throne, prostrated herself, the courtiers raised her up, for thus was the king's command. Then the king said to her: "Rejoice and do not fear, for I do not wish the death of any that desire to serve me. I would not have raised my swords and my spears against your people if they had not rejected me. Now tell me why you fled from them and chose to come to us?"

Judith told them: "We sinned before the Lord our God. Therefore, God spoke to the people through the prophets to punish them for their sins. That is why the Israelites are afraid of you – for they have sinned before the Lord their God and the famine is great among them."

The king ordered that she be brought to his treasure house and served food from his table. Judith replied to him: “Your servant cannot eat what you have ordered to be given me, lest a catastrophe befall me [for this is not considered ritually pure for our religion]. I shall eat what I have brought with me.”

Judith asked permission to leave the camp at night and at dawn, in order to pray to the Lord her God three times a day. “ I, Judith your servant, will be unable to worship the Lord my God, here with you [in a pagan army camp]. So I shall go out of the camp three times a day to pray to the Lord my God. I shall prostrate myself before my God, and He will tell me when He will recompense them for their sins and evil actions. Then I will come and tell you. I will lead you through all the courtyards of Jerusalem, and all the community of Israel shall be like a flock which has no shepherd. ‘*No dog shall snarl*’ (*Exodus 11:7*) at you. For all of this has been told me in a divine vision.” So Holofernes commanded his men to permit her to come and go as she wished in order to pray to her God. So she left the camp every night to immerse herself in a pool of water...and to pray.

### **A Night in Holofernes’ Tent**

On the third day the king made a great feast for all his officers and courtiers. He said to his eunuch, the keeper of his harem: “Go, see if you are able to entice or convince this Judith that I come to her.” So the eunuch went to Judith and said to her: “Do not be ashamed, do not cringe when you come to my lord. It will go well for you when you eat and drink with him.” Judith answered him: “Who am I that I should withhold from my lord anything that pleases him? I shall do all that is worthy in his sight, for whatever my lord the king wishes shall be my delight all the days of my life.”

So she put on splendid clothing and went and stood before him. When the king saw her beauty, he was immediately smitten with love for her. He said to her: “Eat your bread in joy and drink your wine in joy, for you have found favor in my eyes.” Judith answered him: “I will drink, my lord, for today I am happier than any day in my life.” So she sat down and ate. “Then she opened a skin container of milk” (*Judges 4:19*) and she drank and also gave the king to drink. The king rejoiced in her exceedingly and he drank much wine, more wine than he had ever drunk in his life.

After this all the servants of the king retired to their posts and the king’s eunuch closed the door behind Judith and the king. So Judith was alone in the tent with King Holofernes who was fast asleep on his bed. She ordered Amta to station herself outside, to stand guard in front of the tent...

Judith approached the head-post of his bed and drew his sword, the sword of Holofernes himself, which was hanging on the post. She grasped him by the hair of his head and said: “Strengthen me, O Lord God.” She struck his neck repeatedly until his head was severed and gave the head of Holofernes to her maiden, to place it in her sack.

Then the two of them went out, as was their custom, to pray. They traversed the whole camp and none said a word to them or cried out after them, for so the king had commanded. When they had gone around the valley, they came to the gates of the city. Judith called to the guards on the walls from afar in a happy voice: “Open the gates, for God is with us, He has brought great salvation for Israel.”

When the people of the city heard her voice, they all gathered, young and old, and went out to greet them in gladness and with song (*Genesis 31:27*) and with praises and thanks to the Lord. They lit **candles** in all the streets of Jerusalem and in the courtyards...

### **By the Hand of a Woman: A Man has lost his Head**

Judith went up to a high place and silenced the people, saying:

“Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem, who acts righteously through His handmaiden.  
The Lord handed over this enemy of Israel into the hand of a woman on this night...”

Then Uzziah, chief of Israel, said to her: “*Blessed are you of the Lord (Ruth 3:10) above all women. Blessed are you more than the women of the tent (Judges 5:24).* May the memory of your splendid deed not depart from the mouth of all who remember the mercies of the Lord forever. For you did not spare yourself in the time of your people’s trouble and sorrow.” And all the people answered: “Amen and Amen.”

Judith said to all the people: “Hear me, my brothers and my people. Hang this head at the top of our walls. When the sun rises, each of you take your weapons and go forth with a battle cry... At sunrise they hung the head of the enemy and troubler of Israel on the top of the walls. Then every man took his weapon in hand and went forth, giving war cries and shouting mightily.

When the [Greek] watchmen saw this, they went to the tent of their king Holofernes. They gave a great cry at the door of the tent to awaken him. When the officers and captains came, they said to the eunuchs: “There is no time to hesitate! Go, wake up the king, for the mice have come out of their holes, challenging us to battle.” Then the king’s eunuch, the keeper of the harem, entered Holofernes’ tent, stood before the curtains of his bed and clapped his hands, [thinking] perhaps he is asleep and will awake. For he thought that he was still sleeping with Judith. But when he did not sense anything, he approached the bed and turned back the curtains. He saw the body of Holofernes sprawled on the ground, wallowing in his own blood, headless. Then he let out a cry, sobbing. He rent his clothes. He entered Judith’s tent but did not find her. So he went out to the people and said to them: “One single Hebrew woman did this great wrong.”... When the soldiers heard that their leader was slain and dead, all sense left them and they fled out of fear and terror...

After this great salvation...the people celebrated this deliverance for three months. For the rest of Judith’s life no adversary arose against Israel. After her death the land was tranquil for many years. “*And all the children of Israel enjoyed the light in their dwellings*” (*Exodus 10:23*).

#### SIDEBAR

#### **The Modern Judith of Nicaragua (1970’s) by Joe Kirchberger\***

In the Bible, there is a tradition of strong and courageous heroines which contradicts the cliché of female weakness and timidity... [But] no other woman in biblical tradition has been so honored as Judith was with the statement that “*no fear was in Israel when Judith was alive*.”...

This bloody story at first meant little to me; it seemed to me overloaded with pious sentiments and charged with a strange notion of heroism. But my displeasure disappeared when I heard a contemporary story, which seemed to breathe the same spirit. In Nicaragua under the dictator Somoza, a woman in the liberation movement performed an analogous deed in the 1970s. General Vega, a member of the tyrant’s ruling party and an infamous torturer for the secret service, had cast his eye on a beautiful lawyer, Nora Astorga, and tried to seduce her.

One day she let him know by phone that she was ready to cooperate and he should prepare to receive her. Her plan was to capture the drunken general with the help of resistance fighters and to exchange him for imprisoned freedom fighters. But her lover, refusing all preliminaries such as cognac or other refreshment, flung himself upon the woman as she entered, dragged her upon the bed and left her no choice but to alarm the hidden guerillas. In the ensuing shooting the general was killed. Later, after the Sandinista rebels came to power and Nora

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\* From Dorothy Solle and Joe H. Kirchenberger, *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature*, 1994, William.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission of the publisher; all rights reserved.(p. 213).

Astorga was designated Nicaragua's ambassador in Washington, this story was published by the media. This modern Judith was morally condemned.

[However, in my judgment] this Judith, too, subordinated her personal concerns to the liberation of her people. She too used her sexual appeal as a weapon. She too demonstrated strategic wisdom, determination and courage. As it was said of Judith, "*there was no fear in Israel as long as Judith was alive,*" one can probably say of this unusual Central American woman that, for a short while, she diminished the fear of the poor people in her country.

### **Martha Graham, The Mistress of Modern Dance and Judith (1935 CE)**

What I did not permit in the dance studio was any discussion of politics or religion. But there was a time for that, and a place, too. Late in 1935, I received an invitation to dance with my company at the International Dance Festival that was part of the 1936 Olympic Games to be held in Berlin. The invitation was signed by Rudolf Laban, president of the Deutsche Tanzbuhne, by the president of the organization committee of the Eleventh Olympic Games, and by the Reichminister of Volksaufklarung und Propaganda – Dr. Joseph Goebbels.

Actually, before the formal invitation arrived I received a call from the German Embassy in Washington. I was asked if I owned a shortwave radio because a message beamed directly to me from Berlin would come the next day. I went to hear the message read by Goebbels. He said that when the borders of Europe were one for all time another great celebration would be held in Germany, but for now the great artists of the world would join with each other in Germany, and my name was read. The formal invitation arrived, late in 1935. It never entered my mind even for a second to say yes. How could I dance in Nazi Germany? I replied:

"I would find it impossible to dance in Germany at the present time. So many artists whom I respect and admire have been persecuted, have been deprived of the right to work for ridiculous and unsatisfactory reasons, that I should consider it impossible to identify myself, by accepting the invitation, with the regime that has made such things possible. In addition, some of my concert group would not be welcomed in Germany. They are Jewish."

When I was told they would be perfectly immune, I said, "And do you think I would ask them to go?" The Germans said, in that case they would ask an inferior dance company to represent the United States. I said, "Do. But just remember this: I hold the official invitation and I will publish it across the country to show that Germany had to take second best." No American dance company went to the festival.

After the war in Berlin, I was found on a list of those to be "taken care of" when Germany would control the United States. I took it as a great compliment. And when I later performed in Berlin's new Philharmonic Hall, I took as my solo [dance the theme of] a triumphant biblical Jewish heroine, *Judith*, with a score by a Jewish composer, William Schuman.

## **A Social Activist Pursues Justice: Bella Abzug's Bellowing Ways (1920-1998)**

**by Blanche Wiesen Cook with selections from Liz Abzug and Mim Kelber \***

*"My mother said I was a feminist from the day I was born."* Bella Abzug

*" 'A women's place is in the house' – the House of Representatives"*

*Slogan for Bella Abzug's Congressional Campaign in 1970*

*"Win or lose, Bella Abzug could never be entirely comfortable in a society that did not care enough to yell."*

*Liz Abzug (her daughter)*

*Bella Abzug is a special brand of American Jewish heroine who grew up in the New York City immigrant community and went on to transform her country's political outlook in the name of civil rights for all, black and white, woman and man, while maintaining her loyalty to Judaism and Israel. Not everyone liked her style and content of politics but everyone took notice of her agenda for moral and social reform.*

### **Battling Bella**

**by Blanche Wiesen Cook**

According to her mother, "Battling Bella" was born bellowing. A spirited tomboy with music in her heart and politics in her soul. Born in the Bronx on July 24, 1920, Bella (Savitzky) Abzug predated women's right to vote by one month. A fighter for justice and peace, equal rights, human dignity and environmental integrity. She was elected to Congress and served three very productive terms from 1970-1976. She was the first woman in New York State to run for the US Senate in 1976, and the first woman to run in New York City for Mayor in 1977. Continuing to practice law, she lectured around the U.S. and then finally, during her last 10 years, turned to the international fight for women's rights in the United Nations.

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\* Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Jewish Women in America* edited by Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore (copyright by the American Jewish Historical Society, 1998, reprinted by permission of Routledge, Inc., p. 6-9) with a few selections from Liz Abzug, "A Tribute to Bella Abzug at NY State Democratic Convention, May 28, 1998" by permission of the author and Mim Kelber, "Super-Bella: Her Life and Legacy" from *Bella Abzug* memorial booklet, by permission of WEDO, the Women's Environment and Development Organization.

## **As a Child: Playing with the Boys and Praying with the Men**

A natural leader, although a girl among competitive boys, she delighted in her prowess at marbles, or “immies”. When the boys tried to beat her or steal her marbles, Abzug defended herself fiercely with unmatched skill. She also played checkers [and poker,] traded baseball cards, climbed trees, became a graffiti artist, and understood the nuances, corners, and risks of city streets, which were her playground.

Her Hebrew school teacher recruited her to a left-wing labor Zionist group, Hashomer Hatzair. By the time she was eleven, Bella and her gang of socialist Zionists planned to go to Israel together as a kibbutz community. In the meantime, they were inseparable and traveled throughout New York City, hiked in the countryside, danced and sang all night, went to free concerts, museums, the theater, picnics, and meetings. Above all, they raised money for a Jewish homeland –with Abzug in the lead. At subway stops, she gave impassioned speeches, and people tended to give generously to the earnest, well-spoken girl. From her first gang, Bella learned about the power of alliances, unity, and alternative movements.

She worked in her father’s butcher shop on 39<sup>th</sup> Street and 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Manhattan, which he named “The Live and Let Live Market” [in the spirit of Woodrow Wilson’s post World War I policy of giving democratic self-determination to all nations.] Then the year Hitler came to power, her father Emanuel died, and Bella emerged as an outspoken thirteen year old girl willing to break the rules. Prohibited by tradition from saying *kaddish* for her father in synagogue, Bella did so anyway. Every morning before school for a year, she attended synagogue and davened. The congregants looked askance and never did approve, but nobody ever stopped her. She just did what she needed to do for her father, who had no son – and learned a lesson for life: **Be bold, be brazen, be true to your heart**. She advised others: “People may not like it, but no one will stop you.” [Bella told her daughter, Liz, that it was perhaps this early experience of reciting the kaddish as a young girl when only boys and men were supposed to do this, that formulated the roots of her later feminism and her battles to achieve equality for women. “I have a funny idea that being sent up to the balcony” – the women’s section of the synagogue – “had something to do with the way I turned out to be.” (*Liz Abzug*)]

### **Boycotting Japanese Silk Stockings in College**

[In 1940 in Hunter college Bella was elected President of her class at a time when every girl was expected to wear a pleated skirt and silk stockings. However the silk stockings were purchased from Japan, Hitler’s ally, in exchange for scrap iron. So Bella organized a vociferous boycott and the girls wore lumpy cotton stockings instead of silk.]

### **Bella’s Hats and Hollywood**

Bella’s daughter, Liz, reports that: “Early on in her life as a young girl, Bella knew she wanted to become a lawyer, even though she didn’t know any lawyers and certainly not any female lawyers. She decided she would apply to the best, most prestigious law school in the country – Harvard Law School. When she was turned down by this, her first choice, because Harvard Law School did not admit women, she instead accepted a scholarship to attend Columbia University Law School.”

Immediately after law school, Bella joined a labor law firm that represented local unions. Routinely overlooked when she entered an office to represent the United Auto Workers, or the Mine, Mill and Smelting Workers, or local restaurant workers, she decided to wear hats. Hats made all the difference when it came to recognition and even respect, and they became her trademark. Bella used to say, *"We must each wear the hat of an advocate and pledge to bring passion to our work."*

During the 1950s, Bella Abzug was one of very few independent attorneys willing to take "Communist" cases. She opened her own office, and defended teachers, entertainment, radio, and Hollywood personalities assaulted during the witch-hunt (led by Senator Joe McCarthy in the early 1950's. Bella called herself a "nut" about the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights that protects free speech). [Later famous Hollywood performers stood by her in all her campaigns and in exchange Bella made a brief appearance as one of Ted Turner's first commentators for a little-known upstart network called CNN and Woody Allen featured her in his film *"Manhattan"*, making a political pitch in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art. (*Mim Kelber*)].

#### **A Test of Physical Courage for a Pregnant Lawyer in Jackson Mississippi, 1950**

In an internationally celebrated case, Willie McGee, a black Mississippian, was falsely accused of raping a white woman with whom he had a long-term consensual relationship. [Although this white married woman had often had sexual relations with McGee, she cried "rape" when her husband caught her committing adultery. While other defense lawyers declined to represent McGee], Bella agreed. She appealed the case before the Supreme Court and achieved two stays of execution when she argued that "Negroes were systematically excluded from jury service." But she did not achieve a change of venue, and after the third trial and conviction, all appeals were denied.

On her trip south to [segregationist] Jackson for the special hearing board appointed by Mississippi's governor, Abzug never thought much about her personal safety, even though she was, (eight months) pregnant at the time. She realized she was in trouble, however, when the hotel room she had booked was denied her and no other room made available. When a taxi driver offered to take her fifteen miles out into the country to find a place to stay, she preferred to return to Jackson's bus station and to spend an unsettling night [in a locked bathroom stall to avoid anti-semitic racial bigots who tried to "persuade" her to leave town]. At court the next morning, she argued fervently for six hours on behalf of racial justice, protesting the clear conspiracy to deny Willie McGee's civil rights, as well as the long tradition of race prejudice and unfair discrimination. To cancel his death sentence, she argued in 1950, would restore faith in US democracy throughout the world. Despite world-wide publicity, protest marches, and Abzug's fervent plea to prevent another legal lynching, McGee went to the electric chair. Abzug had a miscarriage, but her dedication to the cause of justice was strengthened by her days in Mississippi.

### **Ms. Abzug goes to Washington**

[In 1961, Bella helped organize the Women's Strike for Peace and led thousands of women, mothers and youngsters on lobbying expeditions to Congress and the White House on behalf of a nuclear test ban. The group gained national stature and influence, and in response President Kennedy, shortly before his assassination, announced his limited test ban treaty (*Mim Kelber*)].

In 1970, Bella Abzug, a leading reform Democrat, a successful attorney, and a popular grass-roots activist, was urged to run for Congress, which she agreed to do at the age of fifty. Stunning and galvanizing, with her hats and her homilies, she became a household symbol for dramatic change. Representing Greenwich Village, Little Italy, the Lower East Side, the West Side, and Chelsea, she was the first woman elected to Congress on a women's rights/peace platform. One of only 9 women in the 435 seat House of Representatives, Bella was the first Jewish woman in the House. New York agreed, "This woman's place is in the House – the House of Representatives." And so, her daughter Eve proclaimed: "We got her out of our house and into your House." [Her first official act was to introduce a resolution calling on President Nixon to withdraw all US forces from the Vietnam war, then at its height despite mass protests nationwide. She was the first member of Congress to introduce a resolution calling for the impeachment of President Nixon in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Earlier, in January 1973 when Nixon was formally inaugurated for his second term, Bella led a counter-inaugural ceremony attended by thousands of protesters at the Washington Monument (*Mim Kelber*)].

She wrote the first law banning discrimination against women in obtaining credit, credit cards, loans, and mortgages, and introduced pioneering bills on comprehensive child care, Social Security for homemakers, family planning, and abortion rights. In 1975, she introduced an amendment to the Civil Rights Act to include gay and lesbian rights. As chair of the Subcommittee on Government Information and Individual Rights, she co-authored important pieces of legislation: the Freedom of Information Act, and the Right to Privacy Act. Abzug's bills exposed many secret government activities to public scrutiny for the first time.

[In 1978 after Bella had left the House to run unsuccessfully for the Senate, President Carter named Bella co-chair of his National Advisory Committee for Women. When the Committee protested federal budget cuts affecting women, however, the President dismissed Bella, engendering a tidal wave of protests from the Committee (most of whose members resigned) and from the general public. (*Mim Kelber*)]

### **Bravery and Breast Cancer**

[In 1993 she chaired the New York City Commission on the Status of Women, and presided over ground-breaking hearings on links between breast cancer and the environment. Ironically, Bella herself was diagnosed with breast cancer only three months after the first public hearing in 1993, but she recovered quickly (*Mim Kelber*)]. Bella used to say, "*In the face of so much pain and my own personal history of breast cancer, I remain an*

*incurable optimist.*” **“Whether you are one-breasted, two-breasted, or no-breasted, this is a two-fisted fight against cancer.”**

#### **Bella’s Legacy: her Life after Death**

In her last speech, given at the United Nations on March 3, 1998, the day before she reentered the hospital, Bella pointed out that she had been battling for human rights and women’s rights for 65 years. “For all that time,” wrote Blanche Wiesen Cook in a personal tribute, **“Bella was a team player. Her understanding that politics cannot be an isolated individualist game, that power requires a gang, a loyal and trusted group of associates who will work and play and fight together, that will laugh and sing and argue together, made her the unique leader and prophet we enjoyed battling beside.”**

The long-time Jewish activist and Jewish Renewal Rabbi Arthur Waskow responded to Bella’s death in a style she would have appreciated: “[When] I heard of the death of Bella Abzug, I felt as if a hole had suddenly appeared in a piece of the foundation that holds up Reality. She was perhaps the toughest, smartest, bravest Jewish progressive of our generation... I very much doubt that she will want to spend eternity resting in peace. I am sure she has been making fun of the Heavenly Patriarchy, demanding bold and practical reforms on behalf of justice, since 12 minutes after arriving in what the official reports, like all official reports, call Paradise.”

#### **On the Courageous of Spirit from Bella Abzug’s Speeches**

- There are those who say I’m impatient, impetuous, uppity, rude, profane, brash, and overbearing. Whether I’m any of those things, or all of them, you can decide for yourself. But whatever I am – and this ought to be made very clear at the outset – I am a very serious woman.
- Women will change the nature of power, rather than power changing the nature of women. Change is not about simply mainstreaming women. It’s not about women joining the polluted stream. It’s about cleaning the stream, changing stagnant pools into fresh, flowing waters. Our struggle is about resisting the slide into a morass of anarchy, violence, intolerance, inequality and injustice. Our struggle is about reversing the trends of social, economic and ecological crisis. For women in the struggle for equality, there are many paths to the mountain top. Our struggle is about creating sustainable lives and attainable dreams. Our struggle is about creating violence-free families. And then, violence-free streets. Then, violence-free borders. In that order. Because the root of the problem is persistent inequalities and growing inequalities. For us to realize our dreams, we must keep our heads in the clouds and our feet on the ground.
- First they gave us a day for women. Then they gave us a year. Then they gave us a decade. I said then, who knows, maybe if we behave, they’ll let us into the whole thing. But we didn’t behave. Now we are hoping for a century – and maybe then they’ll let us into the whole show. We make it our business to ensure that as we move into the new millenium, there will not only be a women’s day or a year, but a women’s century.
- I urge you, never hesitate to tell the truth. Never give in and never give up.
- Together, women and men, we must learn from the wisdom that surrounds us. When we can truly empathize with the least of us on the planet, we will find our footing. And we will climb together, men and women. And the next millenium will be written as the triumph of the weavers and the dreamers, the poets and musicians, peacemakers and caretakers, **the generous of heart and courageous of spirit.**

## **Arming a Threatened Nation: The Heroic Fundraiser, Golda Meir**

**(Israel and U.S.A., 1948)**

**by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre\***

*Golda Meir, Israel's first woman Prime Minister (1969-1974) has always been a popular hero due to her down-to-earth, no-nonsense style of leadership. Born in Russia, educated in America, she became a socialist Zionist in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and she made aliya in 1921. By sheer willpower she established herself in Israel in the otherwise male, Russian-Jewish elite of David Ben Gurion's inner circle.*

*The heroic moment we have chosen to highlight is the difficult winter of 1947-1948 before the War of Independence began officially on May 15, 1948. During this period of British control and American arms embargo to the region, the civil war with local Arabs had already begun. But the decisive struggle would be the military confrontation with the seven well-armed invading Arab armies. The underground Hagana and the pre-state Jewish Agency had little money to buy arms on the black market of post World War II and the 600,000 Jews of the Yishuv, the pre-state Jewish community of Palestine, were in mortal danger. The American Jewish community was not yet fully committed to supporting Israel either politically or financially, though it was generous to European Jewish refugees. At this moment Golda stepped in to educate the American Jewish philanthropists to a new sense of responsibility for Jewish military self defence in the post Holocaust age.*

[In the winter of 1948 there was an enormous] problem preoccupying the leaders of the Jewish Agency in Tel Aviv. One January evening they were summoned to hear a report by Eliezer Kaplan, their treasurer. Kaplan had just returned from a fund-raising trip to the United States with his pockets virtually empty. The American Jewish community was growing weary of the incessant appeals for aid [to Jews from abroad], he reported. The time had come, Kaplan said, to face a bitter reality. In no case could they count on more than five million dollars from America in the critical months ahead.

That figure hit the group gathered around Kaplan like a thunderbolt. One by one, their glances turned toward the stubby man who had followed Kaplan's report with ill-disguised impatience. David Ben-Gurion was better placed than any of them to understand how serious were the consequences of what Kaplan had just said. The rifles and machine guns [which he had already purchased in Prague on the black market] could hold back the Palestinian Arabs [who had already attacked after November 29, 1947]; but against the

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\* Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *O Jerusalem* (copyright 1972), reprinted by permission of Simon and Shuster, pp. 162-165.

tanks, artillery and aircraft of the regular Arab armies [who would invade on May 15, 1948 after the British evacuated and the State of Israel was proclaimed,] they would be useless, however courageous the Jewish soldiers might be. Ben-Gurion had drawn up a plan to equip a modern army. To carry it out, he needed at a minimum five, six times the sum mentioned by Kaplan. Springing from his seat, he growled to the men around him, "Kaplan and I must leave for the United States immediately to make the Americans realize how serious the situation is."

At that moment a quiet female voice interrupted him. It belonged to the woman who had found her Zionist faith taking up a collection in Denver, Colorado. "What you are doing here I cannot do," Golda Meir told Ben-Gurion. "However, what you propose to do in the United States I can do. You stay here and let me go to the States to raise the money."

Ben-Gurion reddened. He liked neither interruptions nor contradictions. The matter was so important, he insisted, he and Kaplan should go. The other members of the Agency Executive, however, supported Golda. Two days later, with no more baggage than the thin spring dress she wore and the handbag she clutched in her hand, she arrived in New York on a bitter winter's night. So precipitate had her departure been that she had not had the time to take the convoy up to Jerusalem to fetch a change of clothes. The woman who had come to New York in search of millions of dollars had in her purse that evening exactly one ten-dollar bill. When a puzzled customs agent asked her how she intended to support herself in the United States, she replied simply, "I have family here."

Two days later, trembling on a podium in Chicago, Golda Meir found herself facing a distinguished gathering of the members of that family. They were the leaders of the Council of Jewish Federations, drawn from the forty-eight states of the Union. Their meeting and her arrival in the United States had been a fortuitous coincidence. Before her, in one Chicago hotel room, were most of the financial leaders of the American Jewish community, the very men whose aid she had been sent to seek.

For the carpenter's daughter from the Ukraine [who had grown up in Milwaukee] the task before her was an intimidating challenge. She had not been back to the United States since 1938. On her earlier trips, her associates had been [a very small band of] dedicated Zionists and Socialists like herself. Now she faced the whole enormous spectrum of American Jewish political opinion, much of it indifferent or even hostile to her Zionist ideals.

Her friends in New York had urged her to avoid this confrontation. The council's leadership was not Zionist. Its members were already under great pressure for funds for

their own American institutions, hospitals, synagogues, and cultural centers. They were weary, as Kaplan had discovered, of appeals from abroad for money.

Yet Golda Meir had insisted. She had telephoned the director of the United Jewish Appeal in Chicago and, despite the fact that the speakers' program of the meeting had been drawn up long in advance, announced that she was on her way. Then, pausing only to buy a coat with which to face the American winter, she had set out for Chicago.

Now Golda Meir heard the toastmaster announce her name. At the sight of her simple, austere figure moving to the speakers' stand, someone in the crowd murmured, "She looks like the women of the Bible." Then, without a text, the messenger from Jerusalem began to speak:

"You must believe me," she said, "when I tell you that I have not come to the United States solely to prevent six hundred thousand Jews from being wiped off the face of the earth. During these last years, the Jewish people have lost six million of their kind, and it would be presumptuous indeed of us to remind the Jews of the world that six hundred thousand Jews are in danger. That is not the question. If, however, these six hundred thousand Jews survive, then the Jews of the world will survive with them, and their freedom will be forever assured." But if they did not, she said, "then there is little doubt that for centuries there will be no Jewish people, there will be no Jewish nation, and all our hopes will be smashed."

In a few months, she told her audience, "a Jewish state will exist in Palestine. We shall fight for its birth. That is natural. We shall pay for it with our blood. That is normal. The best among us will fall, that is certain. But what is equally certain is that our morale will not waver no matter how numerous our invaders may be."

Yet, she warned, those invaders would come with cannon and armor. Against those weapons "sooner or later our courage will have no meaning, for we will have ceased to exist," she said. She had come, she announced, to ask the Jews of America for twenty-five to thirty million dollars to buy the heavy arms they would need to face the invaders' cannon. "My friends," she said in making her plea, "we live in a very brief present. When I tell you we need this money immediately, it does not mean next month, or in two months. It means right now..."

“It is not up to you,” she concluded, “to decide whether we shall continue our struggle or not. We shall fight. The Jewish community of Palestine will never hang out the white flag before the Mufti of Jerusalem... but you can decide one thing – whether the victory will be ours or the Mufti’s.”

A hush had fallen on her audience, and for an instant Golda thought she had failed. Then the entire assembly of men and women rose in a deafening wave of applause. While its echoes still rang through the dining room, the first volunteers scrambled to the platform with their pledges. Before coffee was served Golda had been promised over a million dollars. They were made available immediately in cash, an act without precedent. Men began to telephone their bankers and secure personal loans against their own names for the sums they estimated they would be able to raise later in their communities. By the time that incredible afternoon was over, Golda was able to telegraph Ben-Gurion her conviction that she would be able to raise the twenty-five “Stephans” – twenty-five million dollars, in the code they had chosen (using the name of American Zionist leader Rabbi Stephen S. Wise).

Astounded by her Chicago triumph, the American Zionist leadership urged her to set off on a cross-country tour. Accompanied by Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Franklin D. Roosevelt’s former Secretary of the Treasury, she set a grueling pace, speaking sometimes three and four times a day. From city to city she moved on her pilgrimage, renewing before each of her audiences her dramatic plea, eliciting from each the same spontaneous, overwhelmingly generous reaction she had produced in Chicago. And from each stop a telegram went back to Tel Aviv tallying the “Stephans” raised during the day. From time to time along the way other telegrams went out from her hotel room. To Ehud Avriel in Prague, and others seeking to buy equipment for a Jewish army, they brought the most reassuring news those men could hope to receive – the details of the bank transfers which would allow them to go on with their purchases.

Only once in her extraordinary pilgrimage did she falter. It was in Palm Beach, Florida. Looking at the elegance of the dinner crowd before her, their jewels, their furs, the moon playing on the sea beyond the banquet hall’s windows, she suddenly thought of her soldiers of the Haganah trembling in the cold of the Judean hills that night. Drinking black coffee on the dais, thinking of the contrast between that scene and the one before her, tears came to her eyes. “These people don’t want to hear about fighting and death in Palestine,” she thought. But they did, and Golda spoke so movingly that before the evening was over the gathering at Palm Beach had pledged her a million and a half dollars, enough to buy a winter coat for every soldier in the Haganah.

The woman who had arrived in the United States one bitter January night with no winter coat and with ten dollars in her pocketbook would leave with fifty million, ten times

the sum Eliezer Kaplan had mentioned, twice the figure set by David Ben-Gurion, three times the entire oil revenues of Saudi Arabia for 1947. Waiting for her airplane at Lydda Airport was David Ben-Gurion, the man who had wanted to go in her place. No one appreciated better than he the magnitude of her accomplishment in the United States or its importance to the Zionist cause. "The day when history is written," he solemnly told her, "it will be recorded that it was thanks to a Jewish woman that the Jewish state was born."

## **Fear No Evil: Hanukkah in the Soviet Gulag\* (Russia, 1980's)**

**by Natan Sharansky**

*Natan (Anatoli) Sharansky was arrested in 1977 for his Zionist activism, his insistence on the right of Russian Jews to make aliyah to Israel. However he was accused of the much more serious crime of treason for spying for the United States. He sat in prison from 1977–1986 including eight years in a Soviet prison camp in Siberia. After continuous public protest in the West, spear-headed by his wife Avital, Natan Sharansky was released in a spy exchange between the US and the USSR in 1986. After making aliyah and establishing a Russian immigrant party, he became Israeli Minister of Industry and Trade and later of the Interior.*

*His memoirs of the Soviet period are filled with sparkling anecdotes about the power of the few against the many – the power that derives from "fearing no evil" and laughing in the face of oppression. The phrase, "fear no evil," is taken from the little book of Psalms, which he carried with him through his long imprisonment.*

The holiday of Hanukkah was approaching. At the time, I was the only Jew in the prison zone, but when I explained that Hanukkah was a holiday of national freedom, of returning to one's own culture in the face of forced assimilation, my friends in our "kibbutz" decided to celebrate it with me. They even made me a wooden menorah, decorated it, and found some candles.

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\* *Fear No Evil* by Natan Sharansky, p.305-308, reprinted by permission of Random House, copyright 1988 by Natan Sharamsky.

In the evening I lit the first candle and recited a prayer that I had composed for this occasion. Tea was poured, and I began to describe the heroic struggle of the Maccabees to save their people from slavery. For each *zek* [a prisoner in the Soviet Gulag] who was listening, this story had its own personal meaning. At one point the duty officer appeared in the barracks. He made a list of all those present, but did not interfere.

On each of the subsequent evenings of Hanukkah I took out my menorah, lit the candles, and recited the appropriate blessing. Then I blew out the candles, as I didn't have any extras. Gavriliuk, the collaborator whose bunk was across from mine, watched and occasionally grumbled, "Look at him, he made himself a synagogue. And what if there's a fire?"

On the sixth night of Hanukkah the authorities confiscated my menorah with all my candles. I ran to the duty officer to find out what had happened.

"The candlesticks were made from state materials; this is illegal. You could be punished for this alone and the other prisoners are complaining. They're afraid you'll start a fire."

I began to insist. "In two days Hanukkah will be over and then I'll return this 'state property' to you. Now, however, this looks like an attempt to deny me the opportunity of celebrating Jewish holidays."

The duty officer began hesitating. Then he phoned his superior and got his answer: "A camp is not a synagogue. We won't permit Sharansky to pray here."

I was surprised by the bluntness of that remark, and immediately declared a hunger strike. In a statement to the procurator general I protested against the violation of my national and religious rights, and against KGB, the Russian secret police, interference in my personal life.

When you begin an unlimited hunger strike, you never know when or how it will end. Are the authorities interested at that moment in putting a swift end to it, or don't they give a damn? In a few weeks a commission from Moscow was due to arrive in the camp. I didn't know this at the time, but the authorities, presumably, were very aware of it, which probably explains why I was summoned to Major Osin's office two days later, in the evening.

Osin was an enormous, flabby man of around fifty, with small eyes and puffy eyelids, who seemed to have long ago lost interest in everything but food. But he was a master of intrigue who had successfully overtaken many of his colleagues on the road to advancement. During my brief time in the camp he had weathered several scandals and had always managed to pass the buck to his subordinates. I could see that he had enjoyed his power over the *zeks* and liked to see them suffer. But he never forgot that the *zeks* were, above all, a means for advancing his career, and he knew how to back off in a crisis.

Osin pulled a benevolent smile over his face as he tried to talk me out of my hunger strike. Osin promised to see to it personally that in the future nobody would hinder me from praying, and that this should not be a concern of the KGB.

"Then what's the problem?" I said. "Give me back the menorah, as tonight is the last evening of Hanukkah. Let me celebrate it now, and taking into account your assurances for the future, I shall end the hunger strike."

"What's a menorah?"

"Candlesticks."

But a protocol for its confiscation had already been drawn up, and Osin couldn't back down in front of the entire camp. As I looked at this predator, sitting at an elegant polished table and wearing a benevolent smile, I was seized by an amusing idea.

"Listen," I said, "I'm sure you have the menorah somewhere. It's very important to me to celebrate the last night of Hanukkah. Why not let me do it here and now, together with you? You'll give me the menorah, I'll light the candles and say the prayer, and if all goes well I'll end the hunger strike."

Osin thought it over and promptly the confiscated menorah appeared from his desk. He summoned Gavriliuk, who was on duty in the office, to bring in a large candle.

"I need eight candles," I said. (In fact I needed nine, but when it came to Jewish rituals I was still a novice.) Gavriliuk took out a knife and began to cut the candle into several smaller ones. But it didn't come out right; apparently the knife was too dull. Then Osin took out a handsome inlaid pocketknife and deftly cut me eight candles.

"Go, I'll call you later," he said to Gavriliuk. Gavriliuk simply obeyed orders. He was a fierce, gloomy man, and this sight must have infuriated him.

I arranged the candles and went to the coatrack for my hat, explaining to Osin that "during the prayer you must stand with your head covered and at the end say 'Amen.'" He put on his major's hat and stood. I lit the candles and recited my own prayer in Hebrew, which went something like this: "Blessed are You, Adonai, for allowing me to rejoice on this day of Hanukkah, the holiday of our liberation, the holiday of our return to the way of our fathers. Blessed are You, Adonai, for allowing

me to light these candles. May you allow me to light the Hanukkah candles many times in your city, Jerusalem, with my wife, Avital, and my family and friends.”

This time, however, inspired by the sight of Osin standing meekly at attention, I added in Hebrew: “And may the day come when all our enemies, who today are planning our destruction, will stand before us and hear our prayers and say ‘Amen.’ ”

“Amen,” Osin echoed back. He sighed with relief, sat down and removed his hat. For some time we looked silently at the burning candles. They quickly melted, and the hot wax was spread pleasantly over the glass surface of the table. Then Osin caught himself, summoned Gavriliuk, and brusquely ordered him to clean it up.

I returned to the barracks in a state of elation, and our kibbutz made tea and merrily celebrated the end of Hanukkah. Naturally, I told them about Osin’s “conversion,” and it soon became the talk of the camp. I realized that revenge was inevitable, but I also knew they had plenty of other reasons to punish me.

### **Sharansky, the Israeli Cabinet Minister, revisits his Cell in Russia, January 30, 1997\***

In 1997 Natan Sharansky, now an Israeli cabinet minister, revisited Russia where he had once been imprisoned and then expelled. On this trip felt he was able to fulfill two major personal goals: visiting the prison cell where he had sat in Moscow and fulfilling a childhood dream.

“When I was young, I dreamed of being a chess champion and having my games published in the Soviet press. Today I made it! Komsomolskaya Pravda published my game with Kasparov.” (That was the game Mr. Sharansky won from the world champion, Garry Kasparov, when Mr. Kasparov played a simultaneous match with 25 Israelis in Jerusalem on Oct. 5, 1996).

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\* Based on quotes from Natan Sharansky that appeared in Serge Schmemmann, “Sharansky Revisits His Cell”, NY Times January 30, 1997.

“Now I’ve really closed the circle. I sat in the punishment cell [as a free man], I met with 1,000 Russian Jews and my game was published.”

The visit to Lefortovo’s prison cell had been reluctantly agreed to by Russian authorities, although Mr. Sharansky’s request for another trip to the Perm labor camp in Siberia where he served much of his term was denied.

“They had the cell totally cleaned, as I expected. What struck me was how much smaller my cell was than I remembered. I guess things grow bigger in your memory. It was a bit different – they took the cover off the window, and there was a bit of light, and there was a radio. But the prison was still oppressively silent.”

Before leaving, Mr. Sharansky left five copies of his book, *Fear No Evil*, which describes his ordeal in Soviet prisons and camps, for the Lefortovo library. “I warned them that their democracy will be judged by whether prisoners see these books or not.”

“They asked me why I wanted to sit in the punishment cell today,” he said. “Was I a masochist? I said no, the cell was the point of my victory, where I felt the strongest. And right from there I went to a meeting with the Jewish community at the House of Cinema. They had distributed 500 tickets, but 1,000 people came and 100 more hid behind the walls. That transition from the cell to the gathering, it was remarkable.”

#### **ANATOLY SHARANSKY'S FINAL STATEMENT IN THE SOVIET COURT\***

presented before being sentenced on trumped-up charges for TREASON and ESPIONAGE, July 14, 1978..

*Sharansky addressed his first remarks to those who were not in the courtroom, his wife Avital who emigrated to Israel and the Jewish people:*

" During my interrogation the chief investigators threatened me that I might be executed by a firing squad, or imprisoned for at least fifteen years. But if I agreed to cooperate with the investigation for the purpose of destroying the Jewish emigration movement, they promised me freedom and a quick reunion with my wife.

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\* Reprinted by permission of Minister of the Interior, Natan Sharansky.

Five years ago, I submitted my application for exit to Israel. **Now I am further than ever from my dream. It would seem to be cause for regret. But it is absolutely the other way around. I am happy. I am happy that I lived honorably, at peace with my conscience. I never compromised my soul, even under the threat of death.**

I am happy that I helped people. I am proud that I knew and worked with such honorable, brave and courageous people as Sakharov, Orlov, Ginzburg, who are carrying on the traditions of the Russian intelligentsia [in defending human rights in the Soviet Union]. I am fortunate to have been witness to the process of the liberation of Jews of the USSR.

I hope that the absurd accusation against me and the entire Jewish emigration movement will not hinder the liberation of my people. My near ones and friends know how I wanted to exchange activity in the emigration movement for a life with my wife Avital, in Israel.

For more than two thousand years the Jewish people, my people, have been dispersed. But wherever they are, wherever Jews are found, every year they have repeated, "Next year in Jerusalem." Now, when I am further than ever from my people, from Avital, facing many arduous years of imprisonment, I say, turning to my people, my Avital, "Next year in Jerusalem."

Now I turn to you, the court, who were required to confirm a predetermined sentence: To you I have nothing to say.

*When in 1986 Sharansky was finally released in an exchange of spies and was reunited with his wife Avital, his first words to her recalled the final words of his declaration in the Soviet court, "Next Year in Jerusalem." He is reputed to have said, with his inimitable sense of humor, "Sorry for being late" .*