

Odessa and *T'chiyat Hameitim*
Sermon for Beth-El, Fort Worth
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In 1966 the great writer and Holocaust witness, Elie Wiesel, visited the Soviet Union during Sukkot. As the festival ends, as you know, we observe Simchat Torah, literally “the joy of Torah” as we march—or the Hasidically-inclined dance—round our sanctuaries with the Torah. How blessed we feel! We have finished an annual cycle of Torah readings, and we immediately begin again, never exhausting the Torah’s wisdom, and giving ourselves an anchor, as it were, in the storms of history. Our situation changes. The way we interpret Jewish tradition may change. But God still calls to Abraham and Sarah—and us, and Jacob, wrestling, still earns the name Israel for himself and his descendants. The 10 Commandments and so much more are still there to measure ourselves against.

Wiesel was in Moscow as Simchat Torah arrived. Only the brave few, in those days, would go to the synagogue, but in 1966, with Jewish consciousness growing, quite a number came. The presence of Jews inside, probably each being photographed by the KGB, scarcely prepared him for what he found when he went outside. He—we—had been told there were still people who knew, of course, that they were, ethnically, Jewish. But the Communist revolution had been half a century before. Religion in general had been discouraged, and Jewish religion in particular was the object of vicious repression. Russian Jews—and of course others in the old Soviet Union, Georgians, Ukrainians, and so on—who had the audacity to go to a synagogue, or to have *brit milah* or *bar mitzvah* for their children, could find themselves suddenly unemployed. Those who said they wanted to move to Israel or the United States were taking the same risk.

You were obviously a disloyal citizen if you wanted to leave the “worker’s paradise,” and saying you wanted to go when it was nearly impossible meant putting your whole family at risk. So Jewish life seemed dead.

Wiesel exited the synagogue after services that night, and reported as follows, in what became one of the seminal works of the Soviet Jewry movement, *The Jews of Silence*:

Deliberate or not, they had been lying to us. With good intentions or bad, they had misinformed us. They wanted us to despair of Jewish youth in Russia, had attempted to persuade us of its increasing alienation from Jewish life. For years they had spread such lies, supporting them with arguments whose logic was hard to refute. After all , we were talking about the third generation after the Revolution. Even if they wished to be Jewish, where would they begin? Even if they wanted to study Torah, who was there to help them? It is only natural that they have forgotten their past; tomorrow they will have nothing to forget. . . .

But they surprised us ([Wiesel goes on]. Soviet Jewish youth has remained Jewish to a degree beyond anything we could possibly have expected.

I do not know where all these young people came from. They didn’t tell me, although I asked. Perhaps there is no one answer, but tens of thousands that are all the same. No matter—they came. (pp. 74-5)

Throngs of young Jews—estimates ranged as high as 30,000—came to the square outside the synagogue on Simchat Torah, 1966 to sing and dance, to talk with one another, to be Jewish—if only briefly. To show that if, God willing, the regime ever changed, there was still a spark of Jewish identity that could be fanned back to life.

When I looked up Odessa, one of the major cities of the Ukraine, a couple of days ago, one of the things I learned was that the same phenomenon also existed far from Moscow. After a brief history of Jewish life in the city, to which I shall return in a minute, and an all-too-typical description of atrocities committed in the Sho'ah against the Jews of what had been a major Jewish cultural center, here is what the Encyclopedia Judaica, copyright Jerusalem, 1971, says about the “Contemporary Period”:

After the Jewish survivors (of the Sho'ah) returned, Odessa became one of the largest Jewish centers of the Soviet Union. However there was no manifestation of communal or cultural life. Until 1956 Israel vessels visited the port of Odessa for loading and unloading, and Israel sailors visited the harbor club and were seen in the city's streets. In 1962 private prayer groups were dispersed by the authorities and religious articles found among them were confiscated. A denunciation of the Jewish religious congregation and its employees appeared in the local paper in 1964. Mazzah baking by the Jewish congregation was practically prohibited during 1959-65. It was again allowed in 1966. In 1968 the synagogue burned down, but was later rebuilt. While it was still in ruins, thousands of Jews, many of them youngsters, came to the site of Simchat Torah eve to

dance and sing. In the 1959 Census 102,200 Jews were registered in Odessa, but the actual number has been estimated at 180,000 (14-15% of the total population). There remained only one synagogue in Odessa, on the outskirts of the city

That was the era when Jews began getting out, first in a trickle, then a flood. Out to Israel. Out to America. There are Jews in Fort Worth who came from Odessa. As you well know, in 1991 the Soviet Union came unglued. Jewish life in the new Russia, and the new Ukraine, did not flower again over night, of course. There had only been one synagogue in Odessa, we just read, for 180,000 Jews. Maybe a few tens of thousands left—I don't know the numbers, but there were plenty, there *are* plenty, still there.

Some Ukrainian Jews, after decades of anti-religious indoctrination, are uninterested in Judaism. Others were interested—they danced in the streets on Simchat Torah 40+ years ago, as much an affirmation of identity and defiance as of religiosity. Many still are interested. So in Odessa, as elsewhere around the FSU, we are helping fledgling congregations to get established. But they lack rabbis. They lack synagogues. They lack camps. They lack Jewish books and especially Jewish books in their language. Slowly but surely, though, help from abroad, and especially from the United States, has been arriving. The Chabad Hasidim deserve credit for investing heavily in the FSU. But how many assimilated modern Jews want to become Orthodox mystics?! Some other groups have been trying to help, as well, including, we can be proud to say, our Reform movement through our World Union for Progressive Judaism.

Some of you may have heard Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor talk about the World Union's work when he visited last year. When Jackie and Barry Bzostek went to the URJ biennial this year they attended a World Union luncheon where they heard about a "twinning" program—synagogues from here and elsewhere in the west partnering with groups of Jews in the FSU to encourage them and offer whatever help we can as they struggle to get established and grow. A Beth-El committee met; contacts were made; options explored. If we wanted to get involved, did we want a big congregation or a small one, did it have to be in Russia or would Ukraine or the like be fine; did they have a youth group?, a religious school?—which is to say a future? Were they interested not only in a few dollars to help out but interested in developing a relationship? The long and short of it you have by now guessed, is that Beth-El, Fort Worth, USA and Emanu-El, Odessa, Ukraine are going to be twinned. We will raise them a few dollars, and we will also share whatever expertise we might have, and try—with today's amazing technology, Skype and such—to broaden our horizons and our children's.

Why Odessa in particular? Why not? We thought that, since we could only pick one it would be nice if it were a place that people who travel to the region might want to stop in on, and Odessa is a major—and by all-accounts lovely—port city on the Black Sea. They have 150 or so congregants and they have been at it a several years—no rabbi, but apparently a Cantor, and a teacher with some training from the World Union. They have a building, or at least a part of one, and dreams of restoring a huge and historic one.

As we have talked with people about the Ukraine, moreover, we keep hearing of Beth-El members whose ancestors—like my rabbinic grandfather, *alav hashalom*--came from there. —In my grandfather’s case not from Odessa, but from Kiev. The point, though, is that these are no longer “the Jews of silence,” as Weisel dubbed Soviet Jews in the 60's. These are the remnants of a proud Jewry, reclaiming their heritage, anxious to serve God—and aware that in the modern world a liberal approach to Judaism is more likely to be the wave of the future than the Orthodoxy that *our* grandparents left behind when they came to America.

As a matter of fact, though there were Orthodox Jews in Odessa 100 years and more ago, and still are some, this is a city made for liberal Judaism, a 19th century center of the Haskallah (which aimed at a flowering of Jewish secular scholarship and culture) and an early 20th century center of secular Zionism. If you read an article on Odessa you find that famous Yiddish writers like Shalom Aleichem lived and wrote there, that Zionist leaders like Leon Pinsker (who wrote *Auto-Emancipation*; it was time Jews stopped waiting for God and organized to liberate ourselves!) and Achad Ha’am (Hebrew essayist and “cultural Zionism” visionary) got their start organizing there. Odessa was once full of Jewish schools, both secular and religious, and Jewish culture. Go into our Library or any other halfway decent Jewish library and you will invariably find two major multi-volume Jewish histories, one by Heinrich Graetz of Germany, and one by Simon Dubnov of—you guessed it--Odessa.

When our movement published our new siddur we added *techiyat hameitim*, resurrection of the dead, as optional wording in the Amidah; and when some of us objected to this scarcely

believable but classic concept, the new traditionalists said, provocatively: “Don’t be so literal! In Jewish tradition when you see someone you never expected to see again, it is often termed *techiyat hameitim!*” Don’t put that sort of resurrection, at least, past the God of history! Odessa was a great Jewish community. A small group of its Jewish citizens today, very much in the tradition of the Haskallah writers and Zionist dreamers of yesterday, want to make it one again. In our own small way, it will certainly be a *mitzvah*, probably a pleasure, and undoubtedly a privilege to help them out. Amen