

by Rifka Junger

There is something about the warmth of a glowing *menorah* in the cold Russian winter that evokes special sentiments to *nes Chanukah*. The weak, persecuted Jews prevailing over a powerful and mighty power. After seven decades of fighting for their beliefs, with the fall of the Iron Curtain, Jews of the former Soviet Union were finally able to reconnect to their roots.

But it would take a long time before communities would be re-established. One of the first to step on the spiritually frozen grounds of Mother Russia and ignite the spark was Chabad emissary **HARAV BEREL LAZAR**, who moved to Moscow in the late 1980s. Today he is Chief Rabbi of Russia, chairman of the Rabbinical Alliance of the former Soviet Union and still intent on bringing every last Russian Jew back to Torah and *Yiddishkeit*.

Jewish Warmth In the Russian Cold

How

does an Italian-born, American-educated *bachur* come to teach Torah to Jews in communist Russia? Sometimes a childhood fantasy ends up becoming reality, says Harav Berel Lazar. “I always heard these stories about Jews in Russia, Chassidim, refuseniks, all of which fascinated me. I remember going to the central station in Milan, seeing the ‘Milan-Moscow’ train and dreaming of hopping on and going there to help them. I would see these people arrive, heroes of the Jewish people who, notwithstanding all the difficulties, kept *Yiddishkeit*. It left a strong impression on me and became a dream to go there one day.”

“I told my wife Russia is the only place in the world where we didn’t have to worry about fundraising. I don’t think there was any kind Jew who didn’t want to help Russian Jewry.”

At the age of 23, while studying in the Chabad Yeshiva in Crown Heights, he was asked whether he would be willing to go to the Soviet Union with another *bachur* and teach *Yiddishkeit*. As procedure demanded, the *bachurim* had to get permission from their parents and the yeshivah before writing to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *zt”l*.

“When I told my parents, I was extremely excited, this was my dream come true,” and the joy is still discernible on his face. “But my father said, ‘We have to think about it.’ I was surprised. What is there to think about when you have such an opportunity?”

But his parents knew their son all too well. Years later, the senior Harav Moshe Lazar, of Chabad in Milan, admitted to his son that, deep down, he knew that if he would permit him to go once, at some point he would end up moving to the Soviet Union for good.

Once the two *bachurim* were given the go-ahead, they traveled to the Soviet Union and visited numerous communities, teaching full days and helping wherever they could, all under a mantle of secrecy, in order not to get anyone into trouble with the KGB.

“I wrote a 60-page report to the Rebbe,” Rav Lazar describes. “While in Russia we couldn’t take notes,

lest the police get their hands on it. We had to do all that from memory once we were back home.”

Before leaving, he promised to assist with whatever they needed. And they needed a lot of help, everything from medicine to books and so much more. There were requests on halachic matters and questions for the Rebbe.

“There were many different Jewish organizations doing big things,” he says. “But it’s the small things that fall through the cracks, where we tried to help.”

By age 25, he had been back to Russia twice and his parents insisted that he get married before thinking of going again. With his heart set on this mission, he knew he had to find a wife who would be willing to join him. “On our first date,” he recalls, “the first question I asked my future wife was whether she would be willing to go to Russia. Once she more or less agreed, I knew this was a good *shidduch*.”



At the Rebbe’s insistence, they spent the first year of marriage in a *frum* community, before receiving the Rebbe’s *haskamah* and *brachah* to go on *shlichus* to Russia and always be *mevaser besoros tovos* from there.

And so, the young family, husband, wife and newborn baby, readied themselves for an adventure to last a lifetime, in impoverished communist Russia. They were off to a rough start, but Rav Lazar credits his wife for her perseverance and their ultimate success both as a family and in their *shlichus*.

And the work wouldn’t wait. “I was teaching, advising, trying to build some sort of organized community.” He describes “arrangements for the holidays, opening a school or yeshivah, humanitarian programs.”

“We were told ‘American Jewry will back you [financially],’” he says. “I told my wife that Rus-

sia is the only place in the world where we didn’t have to worry about fundraising. I don’t think there was any kind Jew who didn’t want to help Russian Jewry.” Unfortunately, the enthusiasm soon dissipated and many programs the Lazars had initiated were missing funds, requiring them to add fundraising to their task list.

Plans to help build *Yiddishkeit* as the Iron Curtain was falling were met with a different reality. “Most people were on the way out, leaving for Israel,” says Rav Lazar, “so we were mainly helping Yidden move.”

According to Rav Lazar, in their *temimus*, after decades of *mesirus nefesh* for *Yiddishkeit* under communist rule, they fully believed Israel to be a religious country. The shul was packed with ongoing classes. *Brisos* and *chasunos* were performed.

“Our shul was a central station,” he recalls.



Visiting the Skverer Rebbe, *shlita*, together with Rabbi Yehuda Garami, the Rav of Iran.



With former General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev.



Putting tefillin on bar mitzvah boys: "A new generation growing up educated as Yidden."



With Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"We got to know people, saw them become *frum* and next thing we knew, we were at the train station or airport saying goodbye. The running joke was that soon no Jews will be left in the country that we [the Lazars] will be the ones to shut off the light. But we had a *shlichus* from the Rebbe, so we continued."

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Constant upheaval, recurring uprisings and instability in the early 1990s, led to a surge in nationalism.

"It was a time of transition from the Soviet Union to Russia. There was immense poverty, nothing to eat. Who do you blame? Of course, the Jews. We felt antisemitism all over."

One such incident that Rav Lazar described was the shocking tragedy, when their shul was torched. The *sifrei Torah* were saved, but the entire structure had burned to the ground. A communi-

"We were not going to let these antisemites win and were determined to build a stronger, bigger community. That's when we started building the community center."

ty that had been through so much, finally tasting life as Jews, now felt threatened and were insistent that they had to emigrate.

"Our decision was to do the exact opposite," he says. "We were not going to let these antisemites win and were determined to build a stronger, bigger community. That's when we started building the community center."

While they were rebuilding a home for the community, Rav Lazar wanted to ensure that the Jews would remain connected, so he launched various campaigns such as matzah distributions before Pesach, public *simchas beis hasho'eivah* in the large Gorky Park, and, of course, continuing the trademark Chabad event of the year — lighting public Chanukah *menoros*.

In Chanukah of 1991, the first such lighting took place in front of the White House of Moscow and a Chanukah concert was organized

at the Kremlin. Antisemites spread the word, "Jews shouldn't be allowed to step foot on the holy stones of the Kremlin."

"People feared a pogrom," he recalls, "but I firmly believed that the more we would go public with the message that Jews are here to stay, the bigger our chance for growth. Enough of being scared; my goal was to break the fear and show that we can be proud Jews. I was tired of watching them hide their identity from their own children. We expected 6,000 people, yet 12,000 showed up."

The government at that time was not interested in helping decrease the ongoing antisemitism. President Boris Yeltsin told Rav Lazar that the community had to keep a low profile. "It was a long process to make them understand that Jews were no longer in the Soviet Union. We have our rights and we want the government to stand up for us."

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Too many were still lost to *Yiddishkeit*. The older people had memories of Jewish life in czarist Russia, but their children were bereft of any such sentiments; the greatest chance was reaching the young generation.

"By giving them an education, we could bring about change," Rav Lazar explains. "A new generation growing up educated as Yidden."

With the public education system being on an all-time low and food scarce, the promise of a good education and three meals a day at Jewish institutions persuaded unaffiliated parents to send their children to the newly founded schools, kindergartens, yeshivos, seminaries, summer camps, and Jewish university — all at no cost.

As these institutions and Jewish infrastructure such as shuls, *kashrus* and other facilities increased, many people realized there was a future for Jewish life in Russia after all, and decided to stay. This caused friction with the Israeli government, claiming the Lazars were "keeping people from making *aliyah*."

Rav Lazar recalls Prime Minister Ariel Sharon demanding, "We have to get another million Jews from Russia to Israel!" But Rav Lazar remained adamant — this million still has to be discovered and they need a "*zehut Yehudi*" first.

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In 1999, 67 communities comprised the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia that appointed Rav Lazar as Chief Rabbi of Russia, a position he holds to this day. When he convened a conference for the community leaders, they invited President Yeltsin to attend but he declined. However, then-unknown Prime Minister Vladimir Putin invited them to his offices at the conclusion of the conference. This meeting proved to be the beginning of a strong and ongoing relationship



"When they discover the richness of the Torah, they start keeping mitzvos."

between Rav Lazar and Vladimir Putin, who only months later would be elected President of Russia.

"It was an amazing meeting," Rav Lazar recalls. "I had no idea who he

was, but it was obvious that his approach was completely different from what we were used to. He insisted that it was time that the government changed its approach, no longer keeping quiet after antisemitic attacks and actively supporting the Jewish community. I walked out of the meeting thinking, 'OK, this is a new kind of person.' At that time, the government kept changing; no one knew what was coming next. We definitely did not know that he would become the next President!"

After the devastating fire at the shul, Rav Lazar insisted they build bigger and better. Understanding that for many unaffiliated Jews the idea of attending shul wasn't as compelling as attending a concert, the idea of a Jewish community center was born. "Many didn't even know what it means to come to shul," he explains. "But a community center offering concerts, events, kosher food, libraries — in addition to a shul — was tempting."

After seven years of planning, the Maryina Roshcha

community center was inaugurated in September 2000. The man whom he had met less than a year earlier, Vladimir Putin, was now the most powerful man in the country and attended the inauguration. It was one of Putin's first appearances as President and he delivered a speech that Rav Lazar is convinced changed the face of Russian Jewry.

"He said, of course Jews left Russia, they and their children were suffering; and he added how happy he felt to see so many young [Jewish] children. 'This is the future; we have to make sure of it.' People couldn't believe it; he was speaking like no Russian leader before him had for hundreds of years."

In the following weeks, people told Rav Lazar that for "the first time in our lives, we're walking with our heads high; we always hid who we are, but if the President can come to shul, I too can come to shul," and "something changed; now we can be Jewish."

With this new wave, he expanded his outreach. Within a short time, 67 communities became 200, and continuously grew. *Shluchim* were brought in and local people were trained and encouraged to take on leadership positions. Infrastructure was set up even in far-flung communities, all of which he visited.

"We started a youth revolution, to get every young boy and girl not to just be a recipient, but to be proactive, a leader. *Baruch Hashem*, today we have over 6,000 young boys and girls in leadership training. That's really what brought the big change all over Russia."

Despite the hardships that the COVID pandemic

wrought, including his own difficult battle with the virus, there are positive outcomes too. Lockdown meant not going in to work, which enabled people to keep Shabbos properly. They, in turn, invited their unaffiliated family and friends and Rav Lazar realized how many more Jews were disconnected, inspiring his next goal. "Our dream is to find a million Russian-speaking Jews in the former Soviet Union. Get to know who they are, what they do. Do they have a *mezuzah* on their door? Do they send their children to the Jewish school? To the camp kindergarten? To make it exciting enough that they should want it."

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Rav Lazar's relationship with Vladimir Putin is well known. While official on camera, he describes a very different man behind the scenes. At official meetings, once the journalists leave, it becomes a different kind of conversation. "It's not just the President of the country but a person who really cares and shows genuine interest in a person's life. There are countless incidents I witnessed where he helped improve one individual's life.

"He once told me, 'We often think we can change the world order. That's all nonsense. By helping one individual, we can really make a difference. That's what we're here for, to help one person at a time.'"

One such a story occurred after the horrific antisemitic attack that saw Tatyana Sapunova become a victim of a bomb explosion, rendering her blind and disfigured. The community sent her to Israel for treatment, where she received excellent care and returned home with her eyesight and features restored. Putin invited her to the Kremlin, and inquired how he could help. All she asked was that her neighbors stop harassing her for her newfound fame. How does the President of Russia solve such a problem? Within a short time, a new apartment was waiting for her.

Another incident was after a painful custody battle between a Russian-Israeli couple that caused political ire between the two countries. "I received calls from the Kremlin and the Israeli government asking me to facilitate"; which Rav Lazar relates, he succeeded "on a hectic Erev Shabbos, and with the noise of a big household in the background, my phone rang. President Putin was calling, to thank me for my efforts. I was shocked; the President of Russia took the time to call and thank me. This was an incredible lesson in *hakaras hatov*."

Describing tears during a visit to Yad Vashem in Yerushalayim, and prolonged prayers at the Kosel,

it is hard to match with the image the world has of one of the most powerful men on the planet. Does he ever have trouble balancing the President's political moves?

"First of all, I don't believe that a Jewish community should be involved in politics at all, anywhere," is his clear reply. "What we need is a relationship [with government] and to demand what we deserve. Fighting antisemitism has nothing to do with the Jewish community; it is one of the big mistakes in Jewish communities all over the world. Governments are obligated to ensure this.

"We should definitely not get involved in politics. It says, '*Heve mispallel bishlomo shel malchus*' — whatever the *malchus*, we must *daven* for their success and respect them."

Have they had difficult conversations? "When I have to broach topics that aren't easy, I tell myself that this is my *shlichus* and *achrayus*. Such as with Iran."

Referring to the opportunity he saw in helping our Iranian Jewish brethren through Russia's relationship with that government, Rav Lazar describes how they discussed the matter, which ultimately led to the establishment of an education system in Moscow, training future Iranian Rabbis and helping the community in Iran.

"We are the only ones they can have a connection with," he explains, "since they can't travel anywhere else. We train them in Farsi and in Hebrew. Some of them *mamash* became *talmidei chachamim*."

Today, Rav Lazar estimates, the 20,000 Jews still in Iran are not planning to leave. For him it's déjà vu — a community disconnected from the world who he can help experience a resurgence.

A new relationship between the State of Israel and

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President Putin at the inauguration of the "Maryina Roshcha" Jewish Community Center and Shul Moscow in September 2000.



Rav Lazar lighting the large public Chanukah menorah in 2020.

"Ignite the kad shemen in every Yid and ensure that the flame keeps on burning."

Russia came about through *hashgachah pratis*. Rav Lazar recalls Prime Minister Netanyahu decades ago visiting Moscow and joined the lighting of the Chanukah menorah, which President Putin also attended.

"At some point in the evening I [spontaneously] offered them my office to have a quiet, private conversation. Years later, Netanyahu admitted to me that this historical discussion, which I had facilitated, forever changed the Israeli and Russian relationship."

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There is much to reflect on, over the past four decades.

"No doubt I am most proud of our children," he says, his pride reflected in his smile. "Thanks to my wife, each one of them is above amazing. They all chose to go on *shlichus*. They went to tough locations in Russia and despite hardships they're succeeding above and beyond what I ever dreamed.

"Nothing gives you more gratification than helping others. Sometimes with a doctor, with food, with a lawyer, somebody stuck in jail, whatever it is. And of course, with *Yiddishkeit*. When people say, 'You saved my life not only materially but spiritually,' it's the best feeling. And, *baruch Hashem*, that's what our children

saw and notwithstanding the difficulty in not having their father home every day, they decided to do what I do."

Nothing takes priority over his children, he says. "I always say that when our children call, I could be sitting with Putin, I'll still answer the phone"; although he admits it has never happened, he will pause any meeting when they call.

"If you ask me, what could I have done better? ... I probably should have learned more, should have taught more. I firmly believe there is nothing more important than learning Torah."

"Nothing changes a person like learning; it's the biggest factor," he stresses. "When they discover the richness of the Torah, they start keeping *mitzvos*."

Rav Lazar learns in a one-on-one *chavrusa* with several people and delivers weekly *shiurim* in Moscow and numerous communities, which he visits, but he adds, "Delivering the *shiur* is the part I enjoy; I get a lot of *chiyus* from it. The hard part is preparing for them. I strongly believe that one cannot deliver a *shiur* unless one prepared; that's the minimum respect to those who attend.

"There is much more I could do," he claims. "I have come to realize how afraid we are to push too much."

A case in point is a young man who had taken on a lot in *Yiddishkeit* but still hadn't had a *bris milah*. This past Simchas Torah, Rav Lazar offered him an incentive: Rav Lazar would give him the opportunity to hold a *sefer Torah* and the young man would undertake a *mitzvah*. After much encouraging the young man agreed to undergo a *bris*.

"I was ecstatic," he says. "But, sure enough, next Shabbos, he didn't show up in shul. Somebody told me, I probably pushed him too much. A week later, I met him and said, 'You committed; we want to know when it will take place.' *Baruch Hashem*, next Shabbos he not only came back to shul, but he came an hour earlier, which never happened before. I was in the middle of delivering the weekly *shiur*; *Parashas Lech Lecha* was about *bris milah*. I pointed out the *hashgachah*



pratis to him. *Baruch Hashem*, this past Friday he had the *bris*."

But the story doesn't end there. This young man's courage inspired three of his friends and his brother to undergo a *bris* as well. "We have to push," concludes Rav Lazar. "It has a ripple effect."

"Often, we're afraid; we want to be politically correct. Of course, we have to do it *b'darkei noam*, *b'darkei shalom* and not, *chas v'shalom*, turn people off. But people are waiting for this. When a person says no, it's only because they don't feel the beauty. If only they would appreciate how special it is to *daven*, to keep Shabbos, *kashrus*. '*Ki lekach tov nosati lochem*,' says the *Eibershter*. When somebody is hungry you don't ask, 'Do you want to eat?' You just put food in front of them. The same with *Yiddishkeit*; just serve it, *taamu u're'u ki tov Hashem*, and they will grab it!"

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There is something about the warmth of a menorah glowing in the long and cold Russian winter that evokes a special sentiment to the *nes* Chanukah. That the Jews of Russia have survived and are thriving is something that Rav Lazar experiences every year, generating numerous individual Chanukah *nissim*, one of which he shares.

Several years ago, right before Chanukah, a Jew he never met before handed him a sizable contribution to deliver to the community in Saratov saying, "Last year I was on a business trip in Saratov, negotiating a tough deal. Three days in, after several hours of discussions, I needed some air and started walking the streets. It was late in the evening, when I suddenly heard singing and recognized Jewish music. I arrived at a square and found a large menorah with people celebrating. I was not religious, but this sight stirred something within me and I decided to

return to my roots."

This man was unaware of the *hashgachah* of Hashem that orchestrated it. The *shluchim* in Saratov had applied for a permit for a public menorah, but were turned down by the Governor. On the first night of Chanukah, hundreds of miles away, Rav Lazar met with Putin, who wished the Jews a happy Chanukah on camera. This message was seen by that Governor who immediately called the *shluchim* in Saratov asking, 'Where do you want to place the menorah? I want to come to the lighting.' That very night this Jew took an aimless walk and discovered his Jewish soul.

"These are the Chanukah miracles in our time," Rav Lazar concludes. "You never know where *pirsumei nissa* will occur.

"There are many things we do symbolizing *pirsumei nissa*, but it's indoors. On Chanukah the *pirsumei haness* must be *bapesach beiso mibachutz*, it should be lit for the non-Jews to see. But much more important is for the Jews to see and acknowledge that Hashem continuously performs miracles for our people.

"The entire Chanukah miracle happened because they believed. They could have said, 'There isn't enough oil; we're not going to light the menorah.'

"Often when things become difficult, people give up. But there is no such a thing; a Yid who is a *maamin* cannot say, I don't believe. If you believe in miracles, they're going to happen.

"The story of Russian Jewry is a miracle that must be shared. Every Jew has a *neshamah* that we have to kindle. Only if we truly believe in them, they will shine. That's my continued mission, to ignite the *kad shemen* in every Yid and ensure that the flame keeps on burning." ■