

## **A SHOFAR IN SIBERIA**

**(A True Story by a young woman named Chaya Halberstam)**

**Told by Rabbi Susan Nanus on the Second Day of Rosh Hashana**

**It was the end of the brief Siberian summer, sometime in the early 1940's. My grandfather, Rabbi Meir Halberstam, was just a young boy of 13 and imprisoned in a work camp together with his grandfather, the Rebbe of Zmigrad, Rabbi Sinai Halberstam.**

**Before the war, in 1936, young Meir had moved to the holy city of Jerusalem with his family. In honor of his upcoming bar mitzvah, his father sent him back to Poland to celebrate the auspicious day in the Chassidic court of his holy grandfather. He arrived in Poland just as the rumble of imminent war was making itself heard. Disciples, family, and community members were all scrambling to save their lives. Young Meir, unable to return to Jerusalem, escaped with his grandfather and immediate family to Russia. At last they were safe, or so they thought.**

**The Russian government seized the opportunity to put the many Polish refugees that now flooded the country to work. Meir, his grandfather, and their entire entourage were charged as enemies of the state and sentenced to heavy labor on the unforgiving Siberian tundra.**

**Rosh Hashanah approached as the fleeting summer abruptly ended, replaced with howling, bone-chilling winds. Young Meir noticed that with each passing**

day his grandfather grew more and more depressed. "How will we blow the shofar?" cried the Rebbe. Although he had with him the holy shofar that had been passed down from his ancestors, the thought of being caught by the evil Russian guards filled him with dread.

Two nights before the holiday young Meir devised a daring plan. He awoke in the middle of the night and wrapped cloth around his hands and feet in order to muffle any sounds he might make. From his window, he watched the guards drinking raucously and dancing late into the night. He waited until they were slumped over in a drunken stupor before quietly trudging through the wind and cold to the front of the camp where a giant bell stood. He looked in every direction and shinnied up a tall post until he reached the top of the bell. Mustering all his strength, he unraveled the rope holding the bell up, and watched it crash to the ground where it shattered into thousands of tiny pieces. Just as quickly and quietly he slid back down the ground and returned to his barracks.

The next morning there was an uproar. The guards saw the broken bell and realized they now faced a massive hurdle. How would they wake the prisoners each morning? It would take weeks, if not months, until they could procure a new one! By the time the prisoners were up, the guards were angrily looking for someone to blame.

Meir quietly told his grandfather of the brave mission he had carried out the previous night and explained his plan.

His uncle stepped forward and offered to help the head commander solve the problem. He had an old shepherd's horn, he explained, that his father would gladly blow each morning to wake the prisoners until they received a new bell. The commander demanded he bring the horn at once. The Rebbe arrived, shofar in hand, and began to blow clear blasts that carried clearly through the camp. "Let me blow it," the commander yelled, grabbing the shofar from the Rebbe's hands. He brought it to his mouth, but no matter how hard he blew, no sound emerged.

At this moment of frustration, young Meir's uncle advised the commander that his father was a "professional horn-blower," and perhaps he should be the one to sound the horn each morning. The commander acquiesced and appointed the Rebbe the position of "official waker." Until a new bell was mounted, it would be his responsibility to wake the prisoners each morning.

Word spread quickly throughout the camp, and soon all the Jewish prisoners knew that the Rebbe of Zmigrad would blow his holy shofar the following morning, the first day of Rosh Hashanah. As the sun snuck over the horizon ushering in the frosty morning, the Jewish prisoners were up and ready, eagerly awaiting the familiar sounds. The Rebbe wept as he blew, the prisoners cried and prayed, and young Meir shook proudly as he watched the piercing notes of the shofar break through the darkness and flood the camp with hope and strength. It was a shofar blowing he knew he would never forget.

The shofar speaks to us in every generation, delivering the messages we need to hear. Sometimes it's a call to faith, courage, hope. Sometimes an exhortation to strength, vision, action. This year, what is the shofar's message for you? What are Tekiah, Teruah, Shevarim trying to tell you? As you hear the blasts, close your eyes and listen with your soul and let the shofar guide you into the New Year.