

# ESCAPE FROM IRAN



## Persia.

**A place spoken about in מגילת נחמ' ,דניאל, עזרא, אסתר. A place of Jewish communal life for over 2,700 years. But in 5739, with the overthrow of the Shah by the fanatical Ayatollah Khomeini, Persia (Iran) became a place of radical Islam, and the Yidden were trapped. Below is the amazing story of how a Lubavitch operation rescued thousands of children from behind enemy lines.**

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**In** the summer of 5738, Rabbi Hertzel Ilulian - then a bochur of 19 years old - and Rabbi Sholom Ber Hecht, a Shliach in Queens, representing American Jewry, travelled to Iran on a unique shlichus with the Rebbe's brocho. They came 'armed' with special "10 mitvzoim" pamphlets translated into Farsi, mini- Siddurim for children with Shacharis and the 12 pesukkim printed inside, along with other tashmishei kedusha. They had asked for a brocho twice before, yet only on their third time did the Rebbe give his brocho. The goal of the shlichus was to see if there was potential for a shliach to eventually go to Iran, and of course to generally strengthen the level of Yiddishkeit. Upon arriving, they immediately began to notice that although the yidden were very warm towards yiddishkeit, their knowledge of Torah and Mitzvos was very limited. Rabbi Ilulian and Rabbi Hecht visited many communities doing mitvzoim, making many contacts along the way. The trip was presented as a project of "Mercaz Shlichus", yet was sponsored as well by Persian Jewry. Although they didn't publicize their trip in the newspapers in order not to be especially noticeable in a muslim country, many Yidden found out that they were there and were very excited. When speaking in the "Avishami" shul in Tehran, for example, over 1000 yidden who heard of their visit came to see them. Rabbi Sholom Ber Hecht spoke and Rabbi Illulian would translate into Farsi.

One of the main peulos of their trip was to convince families to enroll their children in Yeshiva in America. They focused strongly on the fact that the children would be learning together with other Jewish children; they would also be able to learn English, etc. Many people were interested, and they succeeded in convincing around 20 children to come and study in New York.

At that time the Shah was the monarch in Iran. He was a close friend of Eretz Yisroel, and the Yidden in Iran were extremely wealthy. During that time however, winds of change were on the horizon. A fanatical Muslim leader named Ayatollah Khomeini was gaining support, and rumors of

change for the country in general and Yidden specifically were circulating. These conditions helped persuade parents in deciding to send their children to Yeshiva.

Rabbi Ilullian was in contact with Rabbi Chadakov the entire time. Rabbi Chadakov instructed him to remain in Iran and not to be afraid. He also instructed him to tell the Yidden stories of Tzaddikim, teach them to say Boruch

Hashem, etc.

After two weeks into their visit, Rabbi Hecht – who had his young family back in New York- had to return, and Rabbi Yossi Raichik A”H took his place. At that time, the Rebbe was calling for Tanyas to be printed all throughout the globe, and Rabbi Raichik brought the metal plates necessary to do a printing in Iran.

(An interesting story with this printing of the Tanya: Due to technical reasons,

the printing of the Tanya was progressing slowly and in the meantime, the Iranian Revolution had already begun. Rabbi Yehudah Ezrachian, the head of the Jewish community council, went to the printing house to take out the Tanyas that had already been printed in order bring them to the community library. The new government at that time made a law that all official papers, documents, books, etc. that had the symbol of the previous government were to be destroyed. Any picture of the Shah, Koresh, etc. that was to be found in someone’s possession after one month’s time subjected them to a severe punishment; and if found to be intentional, would subject them to the death penalty. The community library- being over 100 years old- had all of its books embossed with the Shah’s emblem on it; there were also many symbolic

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**“HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?” ASKED RABBI HECHT. MR. SHOFET ANSWERED “AS MANY CHILDREN AS YOU CAN SAVE...”**

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THE BOCHURIM TAKING A GROUP OF A FIELD TRIP IN NEW YORK



coins printed by the Jewish community with Jewish and Government symbols. Yet, obviously they decided to comply with the new law. Towards the end of the month, before Rabbi Ezechian had a chance to complete the entire process, two Inspectors came suddenly to check up on the Library. Rabbi Ezechian was terrified. Here right outside the door were two inspectors from the new fanatical government, and a short few feet away are hundreds upon hundreds of “forbidden” items. He started to say Vidui and Shema, expecting the worst. They came in, and the first sefer which one of them picked up was a Tanya from the stack of Tanyas just brought from the Printing House. The Inspector turned to Rabbi Ezechian and asked him to explain what this book is about. Rabbi Ezechian started to explain to him about Chabad, the Baal Shem Tov, etc. Seeming interested, the Inspector opened up the Tanya and randomly turned to a page. The page he opened to was the first page of Shar Hayichud Vihaemuna and he asked Rabbi Ezechian to translate. Rabbi Ezechian translated the entire first page, from beginning to end. The Inspector was extremely moved from the content; he kissed the Tanya and exclaimed: “In a library with books like these, there’s no need for an inspection!” Rabbi Ezechian asked the Inspector if he could sign the Visitor’s book to the library...The inspector did so, including the date he had come and also wrote that he had inspected the library and that everything was found to be “kadosh vitahor”....)

After spending almost a month and a half in Iran together with Rabbi Yossi Raichik, Rabbi Ilulian eventually returned to New York. It was arranged that Rabbi Yaakov Yehudah “J.J.” Hecht would take responsibility for these 20 boys to come learn in Hadar Hatorah. Rabbi Hecht had previously asked the Rebbe, who had not only given his brocho, but had even said that the program would turn into a source of income as well!

In middle of Chol Hamoed Sukkos, shortly after his first trip, Rabbi Ilulian

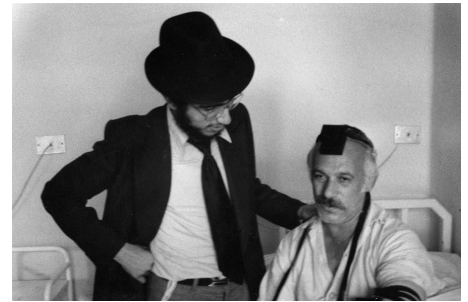
returned to Iran with twenty I-20’s in hand for the boys who he had met that summer. But by then, chaos had struck in Iran. The rumors of a real revolution came true. Demonstrations were being taken place all over the country, and the Yidden became very concerned for their safety.

Upon his arrival, hundreds of parents came over to him asking him to arrange their children visas and take them to America. For all purposes, it was perhaps their children’s only chance to escape. The President of the Jewish Community, Mr. David Shofet, called up Rabbi Hecht describing to him the danger that the Jewish community was in, imploring him to take more children. “How many children are we talking about?” asked Rabbi Hecht. Mr. Shofet answered “As many children as you can save...”.

Rabbi Hecht wrote in to the Rebbe asking for a brocho in starting an operation to rescue the Persian Jewish children with I-20’s. The Rebbe’s answer was to do all you can to save as many children as possible. This was a very difficult task, for in order to secure a visa, one had to guarantee support for the student as well.

Rabbi J.J. Hecht put himself bilev vonefesh into this project. The goal for the mission wasn’t accomplished once the Yidden were rescued; there were also all the arrangements that had to be taken care of once they arrived. This included places to sleep, eat, a proper school, and all the day-to-day needs of these children, bigashmiyus uviruchniyus.

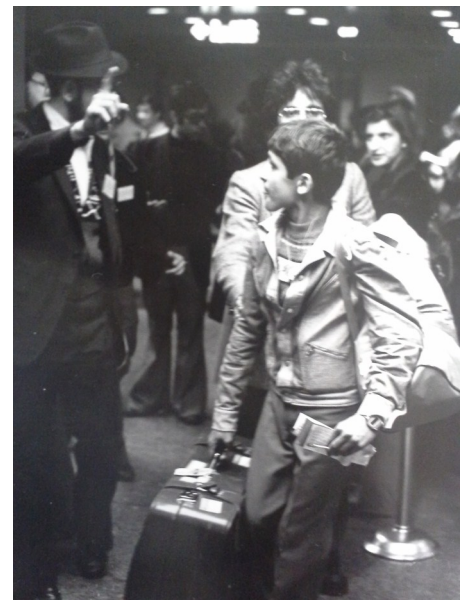
The young adults, ages 14 through 20, started to arrive in New York. After around four months however, all diplomatic relations between Iran and America ceased, so a change of plans was put into place. The children would first travel to Italy, a country which one could travel to without a visa, and from there they would arrange a visa to America. In the meantime, children were coming in the hundreds to Italy, sometimes up to 300 at a time! Rabbi Ilulian came was in Rome then, and stayed in Rome until around 1000 children had come. He was



PUTTING ON TEFFILIN IN A HOSPITAL IN IRAN



RABBI ILULIAN WITH YOUTH IN TEHRAN



GREETING THE ‘NEW ARRIVALS’ AT THE AIRPORT

working closely with the American Embassy who were doing all they could to help the process go quicker. They even gave a big hall they owned in the center

of Rome for them to use to organize and distribute the visas. There were nisim and niflaos. The entire Iran was trying to get visas to America, and the children being brought by Lubavitch had their visas arranged for them within two, three hours at no cost of charge.

A similar scene was also taking place in London, England, where Rabbi Yossi Raichik A"H was taking care of *his* group of around 200 children. The group stayed in the prestigious "Carmel College" where they joined as students for more than a month, until their visas were ready. (It is interesting to note, that a certain time, all visas for Iranian refugees were denied due to President Ronald Reagan's new policy of cutting off ties with Iran. Yet, President Reagan wrote in his bill, "This does not include the children brought in by Rabbi Hecht...")

In the span of a year and a half, from after Sukkos 5739 until Pesach 5740, there were between 1500-2000 children brought out!

Unfortunately, other children who did not receive visas did not all manage to escape. There were those who were fleeing through Afghanistan and Pakistan on donkeys, and R"L died or got killed on the way.

There were also some other organizations who helped as well, after Lubavitch had started. For example, the Rabbi of the city Shiraz, Iran would in previous years send one or two bochrin a year to Yeshiva Ner Yisroel in Baltimore. This Yeshiva again sent visas for some children to come to America, along with other institutions. Yet Lubavitch was unique in the aspect that it wasn't just sending visas until their quota of students was maxed out. Lubavitch was intent on rescuing as many children as possible, taking in numbers of children and the responsibility which goes along with it, in a manner that would only be able to be termed as 'Ima'ala mita'am voda'as'...

Rabbi J.J. Hecht was involved in the children's lives from beginning to end. The children were staying in Hadar Hatorah, Machon Chana, 570 Eastern

Pkwy, and even Lefferts General Hospital (now Beis Rivka) was bought to become a dormitory! Yet, there was still not enough room. The kids kept on coming and coming. Within a short time span,



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## ALL THE CHILDREN TOGETHER RESPONDED "INSHALLAH!" THE REBBE WAS EXTREMELY HAPPY...

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there were around 1200 kids in crown heights! A lot of families, although not rich at all and despite their own children, took in two or three (or more) children to host. Classes were held in many places, including the Bnei Avrohom shul in East Flatbush. Sightseeing trips were arranged, and even a camp called Machane Mordechai was later established (al sheim Mordechai Hayehudi...)

Almost all the Persian kids were not frum at all. In the course of time, Bar Mitzvas were made, along with brisin as well. Slowly but surely, a lot of them started learning in Yeshiva on Ocean Parkway, Machon Chana, and other places.

It was also very tough for a lot of the Persians. Most of them came from extremely wealthy homes, and sleeping on the floor in a two bedroom apartment wasn't the America they were dreaming

about. Some even protested due to the hard conditions, and moved on to other places. This all did not deter Rabbi Hecht's devotion, and he continued working day and night on behalf of the Persian Jews.

The Rebbe's love and care for the children was obvious. At the Purim Farbrengen of 5739, many of the recently immigrated children were present. The Rebbe said that all those who had just come out of 'פרס' should all say l'chaim together. The Rebbe then requested that they sing a niggun from Iran. The children started to sing 'Yigdal Elokim Chai' in the tune known to them. (In middle of the niggun, the Rebbe turned to R' Yoel Kahn and said "M'zagt az du nemst [gut] iber a niggun - They say that you 'pick up' niggunim well..." and after a short time turned again to R' Yoel and asked: "Nu, du nemst oyf dem niggun? - Nu, do you know the niggun already?...")

That Pesach there were four Sedarim arranged. One in the "Farband" with 500 boys, one in Beis Rivka Crown with 400 girls, and another two in Machan Chana and Hadar Hatorah. The Rebbe instructed that rice should be served at the sederim, following the Persian minhag that kitniyos are eaten on Pesach. (A bochur from then related that the Rebbe checked the pots at the Seder, seemingly to ascertain that rice was being served!) The Rebbe also gave R' Leibel Mockin pure silver coins to give out to all the children lichovod Pesach. The Rebbe visited all of the Sedarim (except for the one in Beis Rivkah). Rabbi Ilulian was zoche to go to all the Sedarim together with the Rebbe, and when the Rebbe gave the children a brocho in Yiddish, Rabbi Ilulian translated in Farsi. By the seder in Machon Chana, the Rebbe told Rabbi Ilulian that he should tell the children to answer amen in Farsi. All the children together responded "Inshallah!"; The Rebbe was extremely happy...

By Acharon Shel Pesach that year, there were hundreds of children present by the Farbrengen of Seudas Moshiach (around 250 boys and 150 girls). At that Farbrengen the Rebbe spoke an





PART OF THE GROUP AT KOS SHEL BROCHO

unbelievable sicha about the Iranian Revolution (Sichas Kodesh 5739 vol. 2 sif 47). The Rebbe spoke then how some people are niskarev to Yiddishkeit through a ("יעלה רוח ממרום") an inspiration from above), while others Hashem leads them to place of Torah and Mitzvos; "הוה גולה למקום תורה". And when the "הוה גולה למקום תורה" isn't occurring (naturally), it is accomplished

through an undesirable manner. Hashem is "טבע הטוב להטיב", so why would Hashem do this? Rather because the Yidden were in a place (Iran) that was very far removed from Yiddishkeit, ("און מ'האט געפרוואווט...מוסיף זיין... אין ענינים פון (אידישקייט, און ס'איז ניט געגאנגען בהצלחה..."). So the Aibershter brought them here, a place they could fulfill Torah and Mitzvos easily...

(It is interesting note, that experts were always puzzled why the Iranian Revolution occurred. The usual reasons for a Revolution such as: defeat at war, national debt, peasant rebellion, financial crisis, etc. were all not present. Very few people expected a modern army of 400,000 with international support should fall in the in the matter of months by unarmed demonstrators...)

The Rebbe continued, addressing the puzzlement of many people, "How was it possible to have such an extreme change in Iran?" The Rebbe explained how the same thing really occurred generations before in פרס (Iran) during Purim. "Why do we read in the Megilla the entire beginning part of the story about Achashveirosh being ruler of 127 countries, about Vashti, etc.? The reason is, because the entire kavanah of *why* there were 127 countries, etc. was to bring to a "ונהפוך הוא" (a revolution) to bring the Yidden to a level of "ליהודים... היתה אורה ושמחה וששון ויקר... אורה זו תורה... ויקר אלו תפילין". And so too now, we *clearly* see how the children of today are being brought to a place where they are only adding in Torah and Mitzvos..." (It is interesting to note, that the Rebbe once said that the name Khomeini's root is from the word Haman...)

The Rebbe spoke later about the concerns people were having about the capability of keeping the children in the daled amos of a Torah atmosphere. The Rebbe promised that if they would only really want ("אויב מ'וועט נאר וועלן...") they would be successful, especially –the Rebbe pointed out- how we just saw how they participated in the Tahalucha in a manner of טופח על מנת להטפוח...

Today there are firmly established Persian communities throughout New York, California, Eretz Yisroel, and all around the globe. Many of the families, after reuniting with their children, were niskarev to Yiddishkeit as well. We clearly see how the Rebbe's words of a "Revolution of Yiddishkeit" were accomplished, in a manner of "ונהפוך...הוא...ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששון ויקר". ■