

A Courageous Request

In the province of Smolensk, Russia, an area rich in forests, many Yidden found a successful livelihood in the lumber trade. Unfortunately, the local non-Jewish forest owners could not bear the sight of the success and wealth of the Jews. Therefore, they began quietly spreading anti-Semitic lies and rumors against them.

Within a short period of time the subtle gossip and fabricated reports began to leave their mark. The streets became a hostile environment for any Jewish-looking individual. There were cases where rioters assaulted Jewish business owners, and the air was filled with a burning hatred of the Yidden. It seemed as if all that was missing was a small spark to ignite the flaming fire of an anti-Semitic pogrom.

Many Jewish leaders and public figures tried to influence the organizers of the riot, but to no avail. The one person who took it upon himself to prevent the looming disaster was the Rebbe Maharash, who was well known for his care and concern for Klal Yisrael. When the Rebbe saw that the regular efforts and negotiations were unsuccessful, and

that the pogroms seemed inevitable, he resolved to embark on a daring and dangerous plan.

The Rebbe traveled out of Russia to different European countries, and met with government leaders and prominent businessmen in an effort to influence them to pressure the Russian government into an agreement regarding the safety of the Jewish population of Russia. The Rebbe met with leading bankers in France and Germany who had trade associations with business people in Russia. He successfully persuaded them to deny loans to the Czar's government until the security of the Jews was effectively and vigorously ensured.

Upon returning from his journey, many of the Jewish activists in Russia were afraid to come into contact with the Rebbe; they feared that his rash actions abroad would incriminate them. However, the Rebbe himself was not at all perturbed.

"I do not see a method to prevent the imminent pogroms other than an audience with the Czar himself" the Rebbe said.

The *askanim* were apprehensive about

the audacious venture, and were afraid to accompany the Rebbe to the capital city of Petersburg.

"If you are frightened" the Rebbe informed them, "I will take with me two of my chassidim that are not cowardly, who are afraid of nothing and of no one".

Escorting the Rebbe were two chassidim, Reb Chaim of Oshayev and Reb Nochum Harment. Upon their return from the capital, the two of them recounted the Rebbe's fearless activities.

"We journeyed with the Rebbe to Petersburg, where the Rebbe set up an appointment with the Interior Minister himself. The meeting was set for the following week, and in the preceding days we attempted to discover what the Rebbe planned to tell the Russian authorities.

"I am no different than my ancestors who were *moiser nefesh* for the Yidden. I am not taking myself into account at all", was the Rebbe's response.

On the date of the appointment with the Interior Minister, we arrived at his large and exquisite mansion. The Rebbe's majestic appearance, his impressive garb, and pleasant voice made a visible



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impression on him. He hurried to rise from his seat and receive the Rebbe with a handshake. He then invited the Rebbe to sit at his side during the discussion. However, it did not take long for the Minister to change his previously benevolent expression; and he soon raised his voice in anger.

“Do you think we do not know of your activities abroad?! The Czar’s government is familiar with everything about you; with whom you met, and what you said! You should know that we consider you to be a rebel against the Czar!”

“We glanced at the Rebbe and we noticed” the Chassidim continued “that in spite of the sharp words that the Minister said, the Rebbe was not alarmed. On the contrary, it was when the Rebbe opened *his* mouth that the *Minister* was startled...”

“So what does the Russian Government suppose,” the Rebbe started in a fierce tone “the blood of our sons and daughters will be shed, our property destroyed, and we will be submissive and obedient? We are loyal citizens with equal rights. You confined our living space to specific areas without any justification.

Are we not deserving of any protection on the part of our government, to defend us from the blood thirsty hate filled marauders?!”

“The minister was visibly taken aback; as this was obviously not the reaction he had anticipated. After a short pause, the Rebbe continued:

“I have come here today in the name of all my brethren, Russian Jewry, to request an audience with the exalted Czar, so that I may enlighten him regarding our bleak situation. Perhaps he will reach out to his Jewish subjects and provide them with the aid and protection that they so deserve”.

The Interior Minister, himself a partner in a number of decrees that were set upon the Yidden, was clearly bewildered. It was quite apparent that he did not know how

to respond. He sat broodingly for a few moments, and then composed himself.

“Give me a few days to clarify the issue, and then I will be able to respond to your request” the Minister said.

“That evening, as we returned to our lodgings the Rebbe fainted. A physician was immediately called, and he treated the Rebbe until he returned to his strength. Afterwards, the Rebbe told us the following:

“The audience with the Minister was very difficult for me, and has affected my health; nevertheless I am sure that it will bring about positive results”.

A few days later, the Rebbe was invited back to the Interior Minister’s offices, where the Minister informed him that the audience with the Czar would not take place due to his many duties; however he was assured that the request he mentioned in the previous meeting would be fulfilled.

Sure enough, within a few days, the governors of the provinces received explicit orders, which put an end to the atmosphere of pogroms, and began a period of peace and tranquility for the Jews of Russia. **D**