



SONGS OF FREEDOM IN A SYRIAN PRISON

On Thursday, April 2, 1970, an Israeli Phantom jet was shot down over a Damascus suburb. The pilot **Pini Nahmani** was imprisoned in the al-Mazza Prison in Damascus. In his secret diary he describes his Festival of Freedom:

It's hard to imagine the holiday atmosphere here: in the morning, we gave the cell a thorough scrubbing, something the concrete floor had never had. We drew a Seder plate on a piece of cardboard, with a Magen David in the middle, and a different item at each of the star's points. In the afternoon, we managed to give ourselves baths in ice-cold water, and then we put on our cleanest clothes.

These were difficult hours of soul searching. When you are a prisoner of war, the memories rise up and choke you. You think about home, trying to sense the smells and the holiday feeling at twilight. You know that your family and children, that the entire Jewish people, are waiting and hoping, while you're still here, tossing and turning, helpless, on your stinking mattress. Time crawls by at its own pace.

Two Haggadahs and some matza crumbs sent by the Chief Rabbi of Zurich gave us the feeling of a real Passover. When Boaz, the youngest among us - almost a kid - sang the four questions, tears welled up in my throat. But then came the singing! It was such a strange scene. In the most heavily guarded prison of an enemy state, three Israeli prisoners are singing songs

of the ancient holiday of liberty.

While we were still celebrating and reading the Haggadah, the guards appeared and demanded that we stop. It seemed that our singing had disturbed the ousted Syrian president in the next cell, Nur al-din Atassi. He had thrown us in jail and declared that "the Israeli pilots would grow old in a Syrian prison!" Now [after Hafez al-Assad, father of the present leader of Syria, seized power in a military coup] Nur was in the same boat we were. At any rate, we refused to stop, even when they threatened to throw us into solitary confinement as a punishment for making noise, for even that awful threat could not silence the sound of freedom.

We finished the Haggadah with *Had Gadya*, and went on singing other Israeli songs - Naomi Shemer's "Jerusalem of Gold" - just to continue the celebration long into the night and to avenge ourselves a little bit... I had never taken part in such a long Seder. We had to be taken prisoner in order to fulfill the Haggadah's description of the five rabbis in Bnai Brak: "The whole night long they spent retelling the story of the Exodus."

THE LAST ETHIOPIAN SEDER, 1991

From the eyewitness report of Micha Odenheimer, journalist and director of a program for Ethiopian olim.

"I brought you to Me on eagles' wings" (Exodus 19:4)

On Friday night, May 24, 1991, fourteen thousand four hundred Jews from Beita Yisrael crowded into the Israeli Embassy compound in Addis Ababa, the capital. They were caught between a nightmare and a dream, the danger of slaughter by the rebel army that encircled the capital and the opportunity to make aliyah to Israel at the last possible moment before the invasion by the rebels.

Months earlier the Jews of Ethiopia who had lived for centuries as farmers in the Gondar region abandoned their homes, sold their property and migrated – often by foot – 700 km south to the slums of the capital of the Marxist regime, hoping to leave from there to Israel.

Eight weeks earlier the priests (called *kesim*) celebrated at the Israeli Embassy their last Passover in Ethiopia. After purifying themselves in water they laid their hands on ten one-year-old sheep, blessed them, and then ritually slaughtered and roasted them. When the *kesim* honored me by offering me – an Ashkenazi Orthodox Jew – a piece of the lamb, I hesitated for a moment because their kashrut is different than my own. Yet I knew that eating the Pesach lamb has always been the symbol of inclusion in the Jewish community, so I expressed my solidarity with their Exodus and ate my first Paschal sacrifice.

Now, only weeks after Pesach, the final Exodus was to begin under the title "Operation Solomon." The Marxists who ruled the capital had made a deal with Israel for a \$35,000,000 bribe

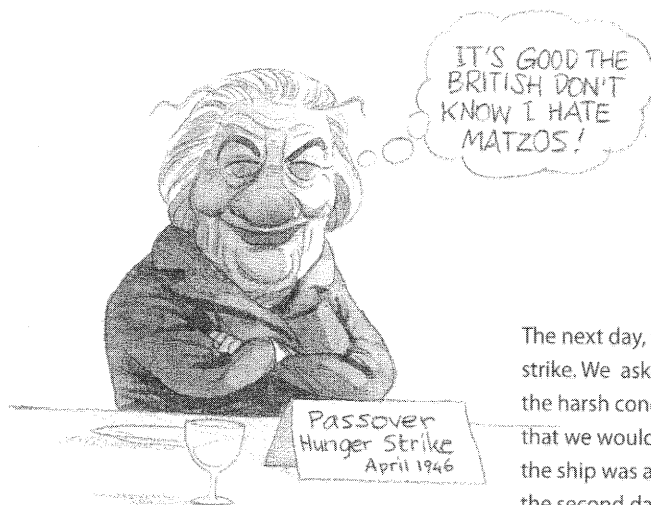
(paid by American Jewish philanthropists) to release the Jews in a massive airlift just days before the government fell.

At the Israeli embassy, 14,400 Jews spent all night long in darkness and exceptional calm and discipline. They experienced a mixture of fear and hope (reminiscent of the children of Israel in Egypt on the first Seder night).

That night the Ethiopian Jews passed from one station to another at the embassy grounds. First the head of the household's identity card was checked and his children counted off and given a sticker with the number of their bus to wear on their forehead. Then all their local money had to be thrown into a box, as demanded by the Ethiopian government. Afterwards all their possessions were relinquished, for lack of space in the planes. Only what they wore – their nicest clothes and gold jewelry – came with them, along with bread which was wrapped in their flowing garments.

I remembered the Biblical verses describing a similar "Night of Vigil" in which no one slept, on Passover evening in Egypt: *"The people took their dough before it was leavened...wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders. That was...a Night of Vigil" (Exodus 13:9).* Even the numbered stickers on the foreheads reminded me of the command, *"This shall serve you as a sign upon your hand and as a reminder on your forehead... that the Lord freed you from Egypt with a mighty hand."* (Exodus 13:9).

**In less than 24 hours
El Al passenger
planes and Hercules
transports took
14,400 people in
the largest, longest,
and fastest airlift
of refugees in the
history of the world;
40 journeys over
1,560 miles and back
in 24 hours.**



On April 8, 1946, I received the following telegram from Italy:

"We are 1100 Jewish refugees. We sailed from Spezia for Palestine - our last hope. Police arrested us on board. We won't leave the ship! We demand permission to continue to Eretz-Israel. Be warned: we will sink with the ship if we are not allowed to continue to Palestine, because we cannot be more desperate."

THE HUNGER STRIKE SEDER, 1946

Golda Meir, Israel's first female prime minister, tells of one memorable Pesach Seder in the midst of the struggle against the British Mandate's restrictions on Jewish immigration.

The next day, the refugees went on a hunger strike. We asked them to stop because of the harsh conditions on board, and decided that we would take their place and fast until the ship was allowed to sail to Palestine. On the second day of the hunger strike, every Jew in Palestine over the age of 13 fasted. We suddenly felt that we were a single, united, people.

The third day of the hunger strike was Pesach Eve. Thousands of people carrying flowers came to Jerusalem to show their support. The chief rabbis, who joined our fast and presided over the unusual Seder, decided that everyone would eat a single piece of matza, no bigger than an olive. We put out cups of tea rather

than wine for the hunger strikers.

We read from the Haggadah: *"Every generation must see itself as the one that left Egypt...the Lord saved not only our ancestors, but us, as well."* We repeat these words at Seder every year, but this time they took on a new meaning.

I will never forget my children joining me at the Jewish Agency for the Seder, which may have been their most important lesson in the suffering of the Jews, the love of Judaism, and the resilience of the Jewish people.

The day after the Seder, we were notified that the refugees had been allowed to enter Palestine. So, on the first day of Passover, the 101-hour fast ended.

DREAM FREEDOM, 2002

This is the story of how Jewish middle school students in Los Angeles became abolitionists – today in the 21st century:

It all began as a program to make the holiday of Passover more meaningful for the students at our school. The entire school, students and teachers, read Sonia Levitin's book *Dream Freedom* which chronicles the modern problem of slavery in Sudan, where Muslim gangs with army support take over Christian villages and sell men, women and children as slaves. Two weeks before Passover, the school convened to meet Francis Bok, a Sudanese slave who escaped to America. One student wrote: *"Before meeting Francis Bok, slavery seemed like*

a horrific nightmare, but I never imagined that the nightmare would stand right in front of me. To witness a slave was an enlightening experience, and I thank God every day that I am free. The whole concept of selling people like property and treating them like animals is the most horrendous and disturbing problem that faces our world today. I learned that 27,000,000 people are enslaved today. Now all my problems seem so miniscule. Today I am helping to free several in bondage."

It costs only \$36 to free a slave, to buy their

freedom from the Sudanese captors. Many students made bracelets engraved with the name of a slave who had been recently captured. Others wrote a prayer for their Seder tables to remind us that we who were once slaves need to work for the freedom of others. In two weeks, the middle school students collected a whopping \$14,700 – enough to free 411 slaves! As Jews, we know that we cannot remain silent while others have been abandoned into bondage.

Rabbi Leah Kroll, Milken Community High School of Stephen S. Wise Temple, Los Angeles



THE ETHIOPIAN JOURNEY TO THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Shlomo Gronich and the Sheba Choir, the Ethiopian Immigrant Band

Words: Chaim Iddiss

The moon is watching from above
On my back is a light bag of food
The desert beneath me has no end ahead
And my mother promises my little brothers
"A little more, a little more
lift up your legs, a last push
towards Jerusalem"

The moonlight stood fast
Our bag of food was lost.
The endless desert
Cries of jackals
And my mother comforts my little brothers
"A little bit more, a little more
soon we'll be redeemed
we won't stop going
to the land of Israel"

And at night bandits attacked
With a knife and a sharp sword
In the desert, the blood of my mother
The moon is my witness and I promise my brothers
"A little bit more, a little more
The dream will be fulfilled
One last effort before we get to Jerusalem"

THE EXODUS – TAKE TWO

During the 1980's, the Jews of Ethiopia sought to emigrate to Israel, though it was illegal, by crossing the border to the Sudan on a long journey on foot. Police guards, thieves and the desert often made this a march of death. The popular Israeli song (above) describes this courageous migration toward the Promised Land.

Later in 1991, during Operation Solomon (named after King Solomon who hosted the Queen of Sheba, which is today's Ethiopia), Israeli Air Force Hercules cargo planes picked up almost 15,000 Ethiopian Jews from the capital city of Addis Ababa. Several months later, there were still stragglers

from distant agricultural areas bringing up the rear of this massive Exodus. Here they are shown carrying all their possessions and their younger children on their backs on a fifteen day trek to a collection center.

Photograph by Aliza Orbach, 1992