

YANOV TORAH—THE TALE OF OUR LIVES RH 5777

Somehow this New Year moment is an affirmation of our survival,
having made it through God-knows-what—sadness and celebrations,
Milestones and heartbreak,
changes & challenges you could hardly have imagined
which have lead us all back here—back home...
And though most every one of us enters from a different direction,
Carrying our own tale of wonder—worry—woe...
 Of family struggle, of personal triumph,
 Of loss, of love reclaimed/renewed,
Know—our stories are not as distinct as you might think.
For the Holy Days weave our life-tales together in a virtual scroll;
One account echoing the next—stories so connected they speak to each other,
Creating from our disparate journeys a *Torat Chayim—Torah of our Lives*.
And through the telling we all share a singular hope:
To be renewed for tomorrow, for yet another chapter in a very long book...
YET in looking forward [as we cannot help but do]
We dare not miss the miracle of this very moment.

 For our gathering back together does not only transform our life-tales
 into a scroll of survival and hope,
 but actually animates the life-spirit of our people's story,
 and with it, the secret power that telling our tale reveals...

LVOV, 1978...

Tonight's timeless tale does not begin with a "Once Upon a Time..."
But on October 28th, 1978, when Emmanuel Orlove, a 31-year-old doctor,
Having just arrived in Los Angeles, his newly adopted city,
with his wife Esther and their two little children,
was desperately trying to make it in this new land.
Three months before, they were residents of L'vov.
Before the War, it was part of Poland; then in 1944, the Nazi's took it over.
After the Nazi's, the Russians ruled.
So, from the time Emmanuel was born, the former Soviet Union was his home.
But life was never easy for a Jew in the USSR,
And with an official invitation letter from his sister Elana,
Who lived in LA, in his pocket, Esther & Emmanuel took their places at the end of
a long line at the Emigration Office. Yes, they had highly respected jobs:

He was a doctor—she. A civil engineer.
But as Jews who could hardly express their Jewishness,
they were no longer comfortable in their homeland....
A week after submitting the forms to leave L’vov,
Emmanuel was fired from his hospital, and soon after, Esther from her position.
But the Orloves lived on hope...
16 months later, exit papers came. They could hardly contain their excitement.
The instructions were precise: in two weeks’ time, they had to be gone.
The first person they called was Grandpa Orlove.
He had lived in Moscow all his adult life,
and nothing they could say or do could get him to move to L’vov.
Though at 80 years old, he still visited the family in L’vov a couple times each year,
and they him...The ties between generations were strong.
Though sad at their going, Grandpa Orlove totally supported their desire
To make a new life in America.
Of course he would come to spend their last days in L’vov together with his family
“I will arrive tomorrow afternoon at 3:43PM. Don’t be late!”
On the second day of his visit,
Grandpa asked his grandson Emmanuel to take him to see an old friend
Who lived on the other side of the city...
The taxi took them to an old, dilapidated building in a crumbling section of L’vov.
They slowly climbed the stairs to the third floor.
Grandpa knocked persistently on Apt 320 until,
Finally, a feeble voice called back from the other side of the door,
Inviting them in...
A gaunt old man lay in an ancient cast-iron bed.
He barely stirred as they entered the room.
Grandpa approached the bed and bent over his friend:
“It’s Orlove, Sasha Orlove. Dear friend, I have come from Moscow to see you!”
The old man managed a weak smile as the two men embraced.
The reunion meant more than Emmanuel could know,
Yet the lump in his throat witnessing it still left him speechless...
Which was OK, since Grandpa did most all of the talking.
He regaled his friend with recollections of life experiences from long ago.
They laughed...cried....
After a while, there was silence—the old man exhausted from remembering.
The moment had come to reveal the real reason for their visit.

“My children are going away...”

So Grandpa began, reciting the plans we’d made to leave L’vov.

“In less than 10 days I shall say goodbye to Emmanuel for the last time.

You are a fine Jew, my old friend, truly a gutte neshoma—a good soul.

Emmanuel needs your blessing. For my sake, will you bless him?”

As the old man dragged his body into a sitting position on his bed,

I thought, “The last thing I needed was a blessing. I need luck!”

With one hand gripping Grandpa’s shoulder, the old man pushed himself upright, and without a word, limped out of the room.

When he reappeared,

the old man was clutching what seemed to be a Torah scroll.

Still unsteady on his feet, I rushed to help, but the old man shrugged me aside.

He gently deposited the scroll on the bed, bent over it lovingly,

And untied its red binding, opening it to reveal the faded brown script.

Seeming to forget we were there, still standing over the scroll,

The old man pointed his bony finger and began to chant:

“B’reishis Bara Elohim...”

Emmanuel did not understand.

Minutes later, now sitting alongside the bed next to the scroll,

The old man beckoned them close.

“This,” he whispered loudly, “is the Yanov Torah!

There is no other Torah like it in all the world.

It is proof of *Tchiyas HaMayseem*—of God’s ability to bring the dead back to life.”

The old man urged them to come even closer...

Opening the scroll a few columns, he continued:

“Look...See how different the writing is here, and there...This is not the proper way for a Torah to be written. A Torah must be clean and nice, not like our dirty, discolored Yanov Torah.”

The old man seemed almost proud that his Torah was flawed.

Emmanuel did not understand...He was impatient for an explanation.

But this story was beyond explanation—beyond imagining...and so he began.

YANOV, 1941...

When Hitler, may his name be erased,

Wanted to kill us, he first sent his soldiers to our beautiful city of L’vov.

They built a camp in nearby Yanov, a “work camp,” they called it.

They drove into it every Jew from this part of the country,

Every Jew who could lift a shovel or wield an axe...
The rest, too sick or too old, were allowed to stay home,
Without their families or anyone to care for them...
It was a horror!
The elderly & sick Jews who remained in L'vov did not complain,
Their limited freedom far better than life in the camp.
At the start of the war, those left behind were allowed to visit weekly, to
share with their imprisoned families what little they possessed.
The greedy guards actually encouraged them.
For the sacks of food, toiletries, clothing they brought
were often confiscated. But who dare argue?...
The work was back-breaking...The rations meager...
But we did not complain, God forbid...
One day, six of our men were informed that, because of good behavior,
They could return home for 24 hours. They couldn't believe it!
So the six lucky Jews returned to camp the next day,
With sweets and gifts, most all of which the greedy guards took...
Six weeks later, excitement returned
as the furlough process was to be repeated, but this time, with 24 men!
Spirits soared in Yanov...
It was during this second visit that two of the lucky 24 revealed their plan.
Every day, in the darkness of the barracks,
services were being conducted in secret.
Jews who knew the prayers by heart taught them to those who did not.
Starved by their captors, fatigued by forced labor,
they found strength in praying together. And now, they wanted a Torah!
"Impossible" everyone agreed, "The Nazis would never allow such a thing.
It was just too dangerous..."
Several of our leaders met with the rabbis,
who debated the request for a long time. Finally, a decision was reached.
Word was whispered from house to house.
The dozens of sacred Torah scrolls not destroyed by the Nazi's which had
been buried for safekeeping in the Jewish cemetery would be dug up.
Their parchments would be separated, and, piece by piece,
They'd be smuggled into Yanov...

Moshe the tailor was the first to volunteer—a quiet man,
Deeply religious and very clever.

No one was surprised when he stepped forward.

“Nor were we surprised,” smiled the old man, “that he had a plan...”

Moshe asked to be left alone with stacks of separated parchments

The rabbis left their study hall, and in a few minutes, came back.

Nothing appeared to be different,

Except that Moshe had a mischievous look on his face.

Slowly, he began to unbutton his shirt, revealing the scroll

Skillfully wrapped around his body—sacred words,

a few columns of text pressed to his flesh...

He buttoned his shirt again and walked around the Rabbis

standing and staring in disbelief.

Suddenly, they all broke into applause. Moshe had found a way.

The real test would come in just under 24 hours

When he returned to Yanov gate. Could Moshe get past the guards?

...The elders prepared three packages: cakes, candy, and a new pair

of shoes for Moshe to take...It might keep the guards busy...

Next morning Moshe arrived and presented his papers.

One guard, more gruff than usual if that's possible,

Snatched them out of his hand...He was ordered to move on to the

search station. “Packages on the table Jew!”

Stiff with fear, Moshe dropped them on the wooden table.

The package with the shoes split open and fell to the ground.

Moshe coughed nervously...his heart beat quickened.

One of the Nazi soldiers picked up the shoe and eyed it suspiciously.

Then he moved around the table and grabbed Moshe by the shoulders,

pressuring him until the tailor's knees dropped to the ground.

Moshe saw the hobnail boot as it began its arc toward his head.

He tumbled back and fell like a rag doll to the ground....

Moshe awaked in his own bunk in the barracks.

The faces of friends all around slowly came into focus.

Remembering his mission, still lying down,

with frantic fingers he tore at his shirt.

And the sacred parchment appeared, wrapped still around his body.

Moshe smiled through his tears. The Torah has entered Yanov!

When the guards heard the cheers from the barracks,

they were too busy with their cake and candies to investigate....

At Yanov we worked very hard...Ask your Grandfather.

We were slaves to an insane slave master.
Many died...We survivors were the lucky ones...
We were starved, beaten, cursed...
13 hours a day, we were expected to work.
And there was no place in Yanov for those too weak or too sick...
They were taken...and never returned...

One morning in June, 1945, we awoke to a strange silence...
The wake-up siren had not sounded..
No guards entered shouting or cursing at us...
We opened the door just a crack. The courtyard was empty.
All of a sudden, a terrible noise. A thousand motors.
They're coming to take us all!
With a crash, our barrack door burst open.
Russian soldiers enter with rifles pointed.
One of our group cried out:
"Don't shoot us. We are slaves, Nazi prisoners."
Then, in a calmer, more dignified voice added, "And we are Jews."
The Russian commander, looking around in disbelief
at the hundreds of pale, skinny trapped men said simply,
"And now you are free!"

At the moment of our liberation I did not think about the Torah.
I had but one thought: I'm alive!
One day soon after, I learned that Moshe had been traveling through L'vov,
Speaking with inmates, asking all the same question:
"Where did you hide your Parchment?"
They were ingenious: Some were hidden in bedrails, others in loose bricks
behind the sink, still others covered with dirt in holes beneath the floor...
Moshe went and uncovered every one, collecting the dozens of disparate
parchments from where they were hiding.
Months later, I attended a special meeting—the survivors of Yanov.
As he spoke tears streamed now down the old man's face.
Grandpa Orlove, crying too, patted the old man's shoulder.
"Sasha," the old man continued,
Now for the most important part of the story.

The handful of us who had not fled L'vov after the war met after liberation

to discuss our future...We had agreed not to spend time dwelling on the horrors of the past. As survivors, with so many gone, we had to move ahead with our lives...

Just before the end of our meeting our chairman announced:

“We are not Yanov’s only survivor’s”

Taking a bulky package from behind the rostrum,

The chairman smiled for the first time as he began to unwrap it.

“My friends,” he said as his voice broke. “My dear friends,

This precious survivor was created from the torn remnants of our past.”

He lifted a Torah high above the table, then rested it lovingly in the crook of his arm.

“This is our Yanov Torah, pieced back together, portion by portion, by Moshe.

It is a sign and a memorial—a Yad VaShem.

Though so many of our loved ones were murdered

their stories live on in our people’s story...Yes, our Torah lives,

and so, must we!”

The chairman called Isaac Levi forward, bent and limping.

“You, Isaac Levi, are the oldest Jewish survivor,

so we entrust our Torah to your care.”

“I will protect it with my life,” Levi answered,

“And when I die, I will pass it on to the next oldest survivor of Yanov.

The old man finished and rose from his bed, his spindly legs offering him little support.

He lifted the Torah from the bed and asked Emmanuel to stand.

“I am the last survivor of Yanov in L’vov.

This Torah has been in my care for the last 18 years.

Take it with you, yes, take it my son. For in America our Torah will live!”

Emmanuel felt a sense of awe as he placed the Yanov Torah in his arms.

The Hebrew letters crudely embroidered on the bright blue cloth

were meaningless to him, yet he felt their power.

This Torah, which had survived so much, was now in his trust;

His story somehow now part of the scroll...

But before America, the Torah would once again have to pass the guards

This time, at the Russian border.

DEPARTURE, 1980...

Each adult was allowed to carry one suitcase, yet children were not allowed anything except a small toy. The Orloves knew they’d have to leave so much behind,

But the two suitcase limit posed a big problem: What about the Torah?
Emmanuel would have to carry it separately.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t take it?” Esther hesitated.

“You know how mean the Russian guards can be. Leave it. Grandpa will understand.”

Somehow, Emmanuel thought, if he protected the Torah—it would protect them.

“But I promised Grandpa and his friend...the last Yanov survivor.

It is a trust. I must bring Torah to America—to live!”

When they came to the Czech border, the bus stopped and they were ordered out.

Half a dozen frowning guards stood looking them up and down.

The soldier nearest Emmanuel grabbed the papers that he offered

Disappearing into a little wooden shack. Emanuel’s heart stopped as he waited.

Five minutes later he emerged and handed back their papers.

Another Russian officer motioned them to move on,

Then noticed the blue bundle resting on their luggage.

“What’s that!? Open it! What are you trying to smuggle out!?

Open it or I’ll cut it open!”

Quickly lifting the pillowcase while mumbling something about a family heirloom,

The guard grabbed it from Emmanuel,

Carrying it like a sack of potatoes back to the shack.

Twenty minutes later, a dark car pulled up to the shack

and a serious looking man in a suit got out. Through a window,

they watched him examine the Torah.

When the officer and stranger emerged, holding the blue bundle, they weren’t smiling.

“Two hundred rubles,” the officer announced.

“It is worthless to us, but its extra luggage, so you must pay!”

200 rubles was all the money the Russian authorities allowed them to take out of the country to start their new lives in America...Emmanuel paid.

Exhausted, they were now penniless, but they were free...

And Emmanuel began to fulfill his trust—The Yanov Torah was on its way to America.

In America it will live...And So too, its story...

For the Yanov Torah became the possession of Rabbi Erwin Herman

When Emmanuel Orlove walked into his study in his L.A. synagogue back in 1980

With a bundle under his arm,

speaking in broken English, commanding:

“You buy my Torah?!”

Orlove needed money desperately.

He was not allowed to practice medicine until he passed the licensing exam. He was working as a hospital orderly, studying English, so he could pass his Boards.

The Torah was all he had left.

Over the next two hours he told Rabbi Herman the tale of the Yanov Torah.

The rabbi pleaded with Orlove to accept financial help, but he would not, insisting: "I, doctor!"

The next day, Rabbi Herman invited two dear friends, leaders of the Jewish community to his office and told him the Yanov Torah story.

They purchased it for a very generous sum...

Dr. Orlove was able to get his license and is a practicing physician, his family expanding to three generations...

And WHAT of the Yanov Torah?

The benefactors' check to Dr.Orlove came with a note to the Rabbi.

Dear Rabbi Herman,

We have purchased this Torah for you, but it must not be given to a museum.

We ask, rather, that you carry this Torah from place to place,

Open its scroll and tell its story...Let it be understood that although

millions of Jews were murdered, our people's story,

our Torah still lives.

So tonight, recognizing our stories echoed in our people's story, affirming the miracle of our having all made it to this moment, we stand in tribute: [The YANOV TORAH!]

...Tribute to the spirit of survival which is the soul of our people...

And so, too, the heart of our hope this new year:

That in telling the tale—holding Torah close

linking our lives through a single scroll,

We [might] bring our spirits back to life...