

ZIMBABWE

One of the unsung heroes of Rav Berland's time in exile was the Israeli diamond mine millionaire, Yaron Yamin.

As Rav Berland started on the next leg of his exile, in deepest Africa, Yaron Yamin began to play an increasingly prominent role in the events surrounding the Rav.

Yamin, a self-described secular businessman, and Rav Berland, have known each other for 20 years, from the time they first met in Uman. Yamin recalls about their first meeting: "Suddenly, I found myself next to him [Rav Berland], and he was giving me a *brachah*, and I didn't even know who he was. Someone told me afterwards that he's one of the biggest *Tzaddikim* there is, but as I'm not a religious man, I didn't think it was a particularly big deal."

Nevertheless, their relationship began to develop, and the Israeli businessman would occasionally go to the Rav for advice and encouragement. Yamin continues: "Ten years ago, I had a big business failure, and the Rav told me to go to Africa, to Zimbabwe, and to dig. There, I was going to find a fortune.

"I thought to myself, 'How can I begin anything?!' All I had in my pocket was \$10,000, and by the time I got to Zimbabwe it was \$4,000... So I got there, and I wondered what the Rav wanted from me, and why he'd sent me there. Why here? Why Zimbabwe? It seemed completely unrealistic."

To cut a long story short, Yamin miraculously managed to purchase a plot of land in Zimbabwe practically for free from an old Jew. Rav Berland advised Yamin to start digging — and he discovered an enormous diamond mine that instantly catapulted him into the ranks of the super-wealthy. Overnight, he went from being almost bankrupt to being one of the wealthiest people in the world.

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To this day, Yamin becomes very emotional when he tells the story of how Rav Berland literally transformed his whole life.

"I met with him at a very difficult point in my life," he says. "I have a letter that I wrote to the Rav that I keep in my *tefillin* from the time I got there [to Zimbabwe], and the whole letter is soaked with tears. In terms of my finances, I never even dreamed that I'd get to the level I ultimately reached. I keep the letter so I'll never forget where I was, so I'll remember everything that the Rav did for me."

As a result of his African diamond mine, Yamin became a multimillionaire before the age of 30. Today, he's known as one of the most successful businessmen in Israel.

When Rav Berland had to leave Morocco, one of the first people he called was Yamin. "The community didn't want the Rav to stay with all of his followers," he explains. "It was very difficult for them to host everyone and provide what they needed, like kosher meat and so

forth. So then it got to the papers, and then to the King of Morocco, and they decided to publicize what the King of Morocco said: 'Either you leave, or your followers leave.'"

Yamin continues: "The Rav would never prevent his students from coming to visit him — his *chassidim* mean everything to him. I had a conversation with him and he asked me to come and see him [in Morocco]. The Rav told me, 'By tomorrow, we won't be here already.' The Rav wanted to continue the institutions he'd established. The subject upset him, and sometimes he'd cry over what was happening to the institutions he'd founded."

Once the decision was made to leave Morocco, Rav Berland and the small group of people accompanying him moved fast. They first took a plane from Morocco to Cairo, on the same day that the leaders of the G6 nations in Geneva continued to discuss well into the night what to do with Iran.

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Egypt at that time (November 8, 2013) was hardly a welcoming place for an obviously Jewish, elderly chassidic man.

At the time of the Rav's flight from Morocco, Northern Africa was in turmoil, with civil war, political unrest and Muslim terrorist groups sprouting up in practically every corner¹. A few short months before the Rav's detour via Egypt, the country had voted the radical Muslim Brotherhood into power and was now in the grip of what was threatening to become a nascent civil war, as the Egyptian army had overthrown the Muslim Brotherhood and seized control of the country.

As the Egyptian army continued its crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt continued to be a hotbed of terrorism, intrigue and unrest. And into this chaotic, anti-Semitic and violent atmosphere flew... Rav Berland.

When the passport clerk at Cairo Airport asked the Rav who he was, the Rav jokingly told the clerk that he was part of Al-Qaida. The Rav repeated this statement twice, and the Egyptian clerk smiled broadly and welcomed him into the country to await his connecting flight.

The Rav and his traveling companions, including Yaron Yamin, safely caught their connecting flight from Egypt to South Africa. At the passport control in South Africa, when the clerks saw him wrapped in his customary *tallis* and *tefillin*, they came over to take a closer look. The Rav started singing a Jewish song — and the African clerks joined in.

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The Rav arrived in Johannesburg in time for Shabbos, and as the Rav danced, prayed and sang throughout his first Shabbos in Johannesburg, the political leaders in Geneva continued trying to iron out their agreement with Iran.

¹ The so-called 'Arab Spring' had begun in neighboring Tunisia in December 2010, and subsequently spread to many parts of North Africa and the Middle East, including Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Egypt and Syria.

Just after that Shabbos, on November 9, 2013, the French President Francois Hollande stormed out of the meeting in Geneva and broke the injunction of silence that had been laid on all of the participants by revealing to the world what exactly had been going on behind closed doors. He disclosed that all the other countries, including the U.S., Russia, Britain, Germany and China, had already consented to sign the agreement that would give Iran unfettered access to developing a nuclear bomb.

If the agreement went through, Iran could have a nuclear weapon within two weeks.

At the last minute, the French president balked at the idea of giving Iran carte blanche to become a nuclear power and pulled out of the talks, refusing to sign the agreement. This alone was a shocking development, as France has traditionally not been aligned with Israel's best interests in the international arena.

As the talks disintegrated into bitter recriminations and a swift face-saving operation by the Obama administration, no one could understand why the French president had pulled out in such a dramatic fashion, at the very last minute.

A couple of weeks later, on November 24, 2013, a short-term pact was signed in Geneva with Iran which specified that the Iranians would freeze crucial parts of their nuclear program in exchange for a number of economic sanctions being lifted. In the meantime, all the parties involved committed themselves to ongoing talks to reach a longer-term agreement.

At least for the moment, the immediate danger seemed to have passed.

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On December 13, 2013 (10 Teves 5774), the city of Jerusalem was hit by the heaviest snowstorm in more than 20 years.

Much of the city, including the areas where many of the Rav's followers lived, was without electricity for three days and largely cut off from the outside world, as the country scrambled to deal with the severe weather.

From South Africa, the Rav gave a *shiur* to the Shuvu Banim Yeshiva via a live hookup where he began by saying: "Everything will become white, white, and all the sins will be erased, as though it was Yom Kippur²." The Rav continued that every year, on the fast of the 10th of Teves, the difficulties that had been decreed on Jerusalem were renewed again.

Israel's worst winter storm for decades happened at exactly the same time that the Israeli government started imprisoning *yeshiva* students who refused to enlist in the army, as well as others for protesting against the new draft laws.

The Israeli radio station Kol Berama reported that after the snowstorm, one of the Knesset members had calculated how much the storm had cost the Israeli economy, and found that it

² Referring to a verse in *Yeshayah* 18.

came out to exactly the same amount that the government had cut from the Torah world's budget and family allowance.

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When the Rav first arrived in Johannesburg, Yaron Yamin escorted him to his home with full honors, and also arranged for the Rav to be flown around South Africa in his private jet.

But the Rav's first visit to South Africa was very short. Already by December 2, 2013, the sixth day of Chanukah, the Rav had contacted some of his students at Shuvu Banim back in Israel and asked them to increase their prayers for his success. He told them that there was another city in Africa that he needed to travel to, located near the southern part of the Sahara desert.

There, the Rav explained, there would be enough place for everyone, and all of his followers and students could start to visit him again.

Shortly afterwards, the Rav took up residence in the city of Bulawayo, in Zimbabwe, where Yamin took it upon himself to ensure that the Rav's needs were completely taken care of. He arranged and paid for the Rav's lodgings in a luxury hotel in Bulawayo, organized a *mikvah* for him to use, and even took it upon himself to travel out to Israel and bring the Rav all of his holy books, so he could maintain his learning schedule. Yamin went to the Rav's home in Jerusalem and ordered a shipment including two and half tons of books.

But perhaps the biggest kindness that Yamin tried to do for Rav Berland at this point was attempting to clear his name.

The wealthy businessman went to the media in Zimbabwe and Israel and gave two emotional interviews where he described the Rav's daily schedule, his *avodas Hashem*, and also tried to explain a little of the greatness of the Rav:

"Do you know who the Rav really is?" Yamin asked the journalist from Israel. "I'm going to try and explain and define him to you," Yaron tears up, "and not as a 'dati' person."

"There are a lot of Tzaddikim in Am Yisrael, all of whom learn Torah and keep mitzvos, etc. But the Rav is above all of them for one reason. He believes himself to be absolutely nothing. And this is the trait that these people [referring to the group of people who were libeling and persecuting the Rav] used for their own personal interests and gain.

It's known throughout all the generations — look at the seven shepherds³ of Israel. All of them were in exile. All of them were imprisoned. All of them were at the center of controversy [machlokes]. There's no Tzaddik that didn't experience opposition, not even Rebbe Nachman."

Yamin then started to describe a little of the Rav's daily schedule: "The Rav seems to be living in two realities at once. In some ways, it's the best time of his life. He himself says that he prayed for this for the last ten years, to go and do hisbodedus alone in the fields; to use the mikvah as much as he wants; to pray as much as he wants..."

³ Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Yosef, Aaron, Moshe and King Dovid

The interviewer interrupted at this point, to ask Yamin about reported plans to build the Rav a “dream house” in Zimbabwe.

“The Rav doesn’t need a ‘dream house’ or anything like that!” replied Yamin. “He’s the epitome of modesty, as anyone who knows him can testify. He’s happy to wear the same pair of shoes for years. You give him a plate of food and he just picks at it and eats two spoonfuls at most. He barely sleeps; one to two hours a night, no more. I’ve witnessed this with my own eyes!

He dips in the mikvah 20 to 30 times a day. Prays for three to four hours. And when he’s not praying, dunking or doing hisbodedus, he’s in a Torah book — and not just one book, but many of them.”

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The interviewer interjected that, nevertheless, people had made some serious claims about the Rav...

Yamin was visibly upset at this point in the interview, and close to tears.

“Look, I’ve been with the Rav for 20 years, and the Rav is never by himself with a woman,” he replied. “He’s never even so much as touched a woman’s hand, okay.”

“The people who spread these stories and libels about the Rav, I want to ask the Israeli police one thing. Do you even have a single piece of real evidence? Do you have any recordings? Do you really have anything at all in your hands? Or do you just have someone who was trying to get out of being prosecuted for attempted murder, and who decided to bring his wife along in order to slander Rav Berland? Is that all you really have in your hands?

Then a few other unhappy, destructive individuals joined in, people who are known to be emotionally disturbed, and that’s all you have against him.”

An impassioned Yamin continued:

“The Rav is not a criminal, the Rav is not a fugitive, and he’s not running from place to place, as they describe it in the media. The Rav despised the way [certain people in the community] treated him, the way they controlled him... and certainly there is no need to mention what the media did — you read it every day.

There is no warrant for his arrest, nothing on Interpol, no reason to detain him at any border. I myself crossed four borders with the Rav, and as a successful business man I wouldn’t dream of helping a criminal or fugitive from justice. Everything they are saying against the Rav, all the people involved in this, it’s a group, a handful of people who are working against the Rav. There is absolutely no evidence.”

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In a separate interview, Yamin reiterated that the Rav could return to Israel of his own free will whenever he chose.

There was no warrant for his arrest, no case against him, and he'd left the country as a completely free man — all indisputable facts that the media and the Israeli government had been hiding from the general public, keen as they were to perpetuate the myth that the Rav was a “fugitive from justice.”

For now, Yamin's efforts to set the record straight appeared to be enough to get the media to leave the Rav and his followers in peace.

While Yamin and the Rav's assistants continued with their plans to build a residential complex and study hall for the Rav and his followers, including a number of guesthouses for the Rav's followers and anyone else who wanted to fly out to Zimbabwe to see him, the Rav himself was being housed in an unusual luxury hotel that was known as a hunting resort, located in the middle of the African jungle.

“We want that the Rav should be available to all of *Am Yisrael*,” concluded Yaron Yamin. “He doesn't belong to just his *chassidim*, or just his community, or to you or me. He's the Rabbi of all of *Am Yisrael*. Every person can go speak to the Rav, visit him, consult with him — he's the Rav of *Am Yisrael*. He's the Tzaddik of the generation.”

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Yamin had arranged for the Rav to stay in a private villa on the grounds of the hotel that was located in the middle of the African jungle.

From the safety of the hotel grounds, which was surrounded by an electrified fence and had a security team on duty 24/7, the guests could see every type of wild animal and creature pass by them, including monkeys, giraffes, zebras and elephants. The more dangerous animals could also be seen, including lions, tigers, crocodiles and hyenas.

The hotel guests could also hear the sounds of the wild animals very clearly from the hotel grounds, particularly at night. It was a beautiful sight to behold, but it was also very dangerous to get too close. While guests could order a special jeep to take them deeper into the forest, accompanied by armed rangers, no one, not even the native Zimbabweans, dared to venture into the forest without their jeeps and their weapons.

When Rav Berland arrived, he started leaving the hotel grounds to go and do *hisbodedus*, alone and unarmed, in the African jungle. The hotel management was initially incredulous that someone would want to do something so apparently dangerous and didn't know what to say to him. Later on, they were even more amazed when the Rav repeatedly returned to the hotel after hours spent alone in the forest, completely unharmed.

On another occasion, the Rav was walking [in the jungle in Zimbabwe] amongst a pride of lions, when suddenly a jeep appeared with five soldiers in it, who started screaming at him: “Where did you go?! Where are you going?! These lions killed a buffalo here just two days ago — you can see how they preyed on it!”

When the Rav told them that he was doing *hisbodedus*, personal prayer, in the forest they were stunned. “So, you’re not coming back with us?” they asked him. The Rav responded: “No! You can go on without me...”

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Every day, the Rav would ask the guards by the hotel gates to open them, to enable him to go and pray alone in the jungle.

And every day, they would spend quite a lot of time trying to dissuade him, sometimes even bringing his family members along to try to talk him out of it. “At least stay close to the hotel!” they tried to persuade him, but the Rav ignored them and headed out deep into the jungle until the guards couldn’t see him anymore.

Then, after three or four hours of *hisbodedus*, he’d return as though nothing unusual had happened. The Rav explained to the hotel staff that he’d waited 77 years for the opportunity to pray in a place like this, a forest like this, in the same way that King Dovid had done, many centuries earlier. Once the security guards saw this miracle for a few days in a row, they developed a profound respect for the Rav and when they overheard telling each other, “This is not a human being, this is an angel!”

Once, the Rav invited one of his followers to join him in his “jungle *hisbodedus*,” but the man demurred. He’d been out into the jungle already in an armored jeep, and what he’d seen then had been frightening enough. He told the Rav that he was scared to join him, because he didn’t have the same Heavenly protection that the Rav was obviously enjoying. The Rav replied simply, “But you’re with me!”

So then the student agreed to come, but as they reached the gates and all the sounds of the jungle filled their ears, he had a change of heart and decided he just couldn’t accompany the Rav after all.



On a different morning, the Rav asked his student to come and dip with him in the stream that was near the hotel, which the Rav was using as a natural *mikvah*. Again, the student demurred, because he was scared of being attacked by crocodiles. The Rav told him: “You have nothing to fear.” The Rav went over to the stream, immersed, and then returned — while the amazed student looked on, because he’d just seen a hippo emerge from the stream a few seconds after the Rav had exited. In Africa, it’s well known

that hippos kill more human beings than any other animals.

When Rav Dovid Chaim Stern heard from one of the *yeshiva* students how Rav Berland had been praying alone for hours in the African jungle, in places where no other person would come

without an armored jeep and a gun, Rav Stern said, “It’s because of his incredible *kedushah!* The animals don’t have permission to harm him — not the animals, and also not the human beings!”

Throughout his stay in Zimbabwe, the Rav spoke a great deal about King David, and how he’d continued to sing to Hashem despite being chased and in danger of losing his life. “The more they chased King David, the more he sang,” he remarked. “A person needs a lot of merit to see the song that’s contained in everything, in all of creation. That was the strength of King David, who turned everything he experienced into the songs contained in the Book of *Tehillim*, and that will also be the strength of Moshiach ben Dovid, too.”

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Very soon after the Rav moved to Zimbabwe, his followers from Israel, including Rav Moshe Tzanani, started flying out to visit him again.

If Morocco was like a different world for an Israeli *chassid*, then Zimbabwe was a completely different planet.

One of the Rav’s followers flew out to visit the Rav in Zimbabwe, but ran out of money halfway through the trip.. He didn’t even have enough money to hail a taxi once he arrived at the airport in Zimbabwe to take him to where the Rav was staying. He also hadn’t told anyone he was coming, so there was no one who knew about his visit and no one who could help him.

This follower decided to take a cab to the Rav’s hotel anyway, hoping that someone at the hotel where the Rav was staying would help him pay for it once he got there. As the cab drove up to the gates, the Rav came out with a \$100 bill in his hand and gave it straight to the taxi driver, without saying a word – even though the follower hadn’t been in touch with the Rav at all, beforehand.

Rav Berland then asked the taxi driver to take the newly-arrived follower, together with one of the Rav’s grandsons, to a different, specific hotel, where they could check in and leave their suitcases, before immediately bringing them back to the hotel where the Rav was staying. In the meantime, the follower didn’t have a suitcase with him — only an item of hand luggage — but he knew better than to question the Rav’s instructions, so he settled in for the drive.

This second hotel was located quite a few kilometers away, and throughout the drive they passed a number of other hotels that were much closer to where the Rav was staying. They simply couldn’t understand why the Rav had told the taxi driver to take them to a place that was so far away, to drop off the luggage they didn’t even really have. But as soon as they arrived, the mystery was solved — because they found two other students from the *yeshiva* in the hotel, who were as shocked to see them as they were.

None of these other students had told anyone else about their travel plans, yet the Rav had still known they were coming. One of the *yeshiva* students explained that they’d landed in Zimbabwe and headed straight over to the Rav’s hotel. However, they been unable to find him, so they’d continued on to their own lodgings — the cheapest hotel they could find, which they’d

booked ahead of their trip. It was only when they got there that they realized that instead of the hotel they thought they were coming to, they'd actually ended up at a seedy, bad-smelling B&B that was full of dangerous-looking locals.

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The heat in Zimbabwe was unbelievable, and their “hotel” didn’t even have a single air-conditioning unit.

The *yeshiva* students were actually feeling a little down about their situation. They’d made such an effort to come see the Rav, but now they were staying in a dump miles away from him, and they didn’t even know if they’d have the merit of actually meeting with the Rav. In addition, they had no idea what they were going to do on Shabbos.

As they sat in the hotel lobby feeling depressed about the way things had turned out, all of a sudden they spotted these two other followers of the Rav — who had apparently been sent expressly to them, via taxi, by the Rav himself! Not in a million years did they think that other Jews would ever show up in that place, let alone people they actually knew from the *yeshiva*.

The Rav had once remarked when he was in Morocco: “At the very same instant that someone thinks about me, I’m also thinking of them” — which this experience clearly showed. The two new arrivals left their small bags at the B&B, as per the Rav’s instructions, which reassured the other students that they weren’t alone in Zimbabwe after all.

When the taxi brought the first two students back to the Rav, the taxi driver told the Rav that after everything he’d just witnessed, he didn’t want to take the Rav’s money, and he tried to give it back. “You’re a big saint!” he told the Rav. “I don’t want to take your money.” Then, he got out of the car, gave the Rav a big hug, asked the Rav to give him a blessing, and snapped a selfie of himself standing next to the Rav.

The Rav gave the taxi driver a blessing, then asked him to start keeping Shabbos. By this point,



the students were truly shocked, as it hadn’t crossed their mind that their driver could be Jewish. He certainly didn’t look Jewish, and nothing in his conversation or behavior had suggested the possibility, yet the Rav seemed to know otherwise.

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Before his exile, the Rav had once explained that the Ten Tribes had originally been dispersed and “lost” on the African continent, and that many of the locals in

the places where he was staying in Africa had a “spark” of Jewishness in them, retained throughout all the years, because these people had continued to only marry each other.

(This idea is borne out by the famous story involving the Ohr Hachaim, who also took the decree of exile upon himself and ended up in the same area as the Rav was staying, where he also discovered remnants of the Ten Tribes.)

The Rav continued that you could see which of these people truly had a Jewish soul by the way they honored the Jews.

Having reassured his distant students that he knew about them, even in their dumpy hotel that was miles away, he now told the other two students that they could stay with him in his hotel, and arranged lodgings for both of them.

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On another occasion, a group of zebras came right up to the electrified fence where the Rav and one of his students were praying the morning service.

The Rav jokingly commented that they'd come to make up the *minyan*, and were already wearing their *tallisos* (the black and white stripes resembled a *tallis*). As soon as the prayers were over, the zebras disappeared back into the forest.

The student laughed, but the next day the same thing occurred again, and continued to happen each of the subsequent days that this student was with the Rav. The Rav would take him down to the field to pray the morning prayers and each morning as they were beginning, eight zebras would appear and stay there for the duration of the prayers, before quickly dispersing. The student noticed that each time, exactly eight zebras appeared.

The Arizal explains in his writings that sometimes, souls are reincarnated in animals, and that these animals then seek out a *tzaddik* to help them achieve their spiritual *tikkun*. This didn't just occur with evil people; sometimes, even *tzaddikim* themselves would petition for permission to return in animal form, in order to achieve some minute rectification that they hadn't managed to complete previously⁴.

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The Rav was thrilled with his new lodgings, and he told some of his followers:

“What a miracle, that they threw us out of Morocco and that we came to a place like this!”

He then quoted a saying from Rebbe Nachman, to the effect that while many people say that the old days were better, he believed that God was actually running the world in a better way each day.

Later, he explained that the saying in the *Gemara Kesubos* 110b, that “a person who lives outside of Israel, it's as though they don't have a God” only applied when someone chose not to

⁴ There is a famous story from modern times about how the Klausenberger Rebbe in Boro Park told a cat who was sitting under the table during one of his lectures that he could leave, since he'd now received his rectification. Immediately, the cat left the room.

live in Eretz Yisrael. But when they had to leave Eretz Yisrael against their will, then, the Rav explained, “The opposite is true. Every place he goes, it’s Eretz Yisrael; every place he goes, it’s Jerusalem. Here, it’s Eretz Yisrael! It’s Jerusalem!”

That’s not to say that the Rav wasn’t yearning to return to Eretz Yisrael proper. At around this time, Rav Berland asked his followers back in Jerusalem to start arranging a number of big public prayer rallies at the Kotel, with the first being held on the 12 Adar Alef 5774 (February 12, 2014).

The Rav hoped that these prayer gatherings would achieve a number of big spiritual aims, including saving Israel from its enemies and giving the Rav himself the spiritual merit he needed in order to return to the Holy Land.

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Rav Berland was still very concerned about the Iranian plans to drop a nuclear bomb on Israel, and he returned to this theme on many occasions during his stay in Zimbabwe, but particularly over Purim 2014.

On one occasion, he sent his students a recorded message that said: *“Just as Hashem enabled Mordechai to triumph over Haman, so He’s also going to help us to triumph over all our ‘Hamans’ too, and all the enemies of Israel, like Al-Qaida and Hamas. And with that help from Hashem, we’re going to be able to save Am Yisrael from all of the terrible harsh decrees, including their desire to drop a nuclear bomb on us next month [April 2014].”*

He continued: “They already have everything they need to do that; all the necessary raw material and components. That’s why we’re holding a huge prayer gathering now, in order to cancel their plans to drop a nuclear bomb on Israel. In the merit of that gathering, even if they actually try to drop their bomb on Israel, it will all just turn into candies [i.e., be ‘sweetened,’ spiritually.]

“Everyone should come to the prayer gathering at the Kotel, to cancel the terrible decrees that are being passed on yeshiva students. They want to put every yeshiva student in the army! They want to try to extinguish the fire of Torah and teshuvah! But it’s only going to continue to grow from moment to moment. They’re promoting the lowest types of people and behavior, and they want the lowest people to rule Am Yisrael... Instead of building more yeshivos, they want to build more prisons, so that there’ll be more work for the policemen, the judges, the lawyer, and the prison guards.

“But instead of spending a billion dollars on building more prisons, better to spend a million dollars building a new yeshiva [so that people’s characters will be refined, and they won’t be sent to prison in the first place]. The prayer gathering [on Taanis Esther] will nullify all the decrees hanging over the whole of Israel.”

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As the day for the prayer gathering rolled around, on March 13, 2014, Israel was hit with a fierce rainstorm.

One of the organizers recalls: "Despite the fact that there were a lot of students with the Rav in Zimbabwe for Purim and the weather was so awful, when I got down to the Kotel I was amazed to see it was still packed with people. People had come from Eilat, from Nahariya, and from all over the country to sing and dance together and to hear a *shiur* from the Rav."

All told, between 300 to 500 people showed up, despite the very inclement weather, and prayed, sang and danced together, before reciting the *Tikkun Haklali* three times, and then reciting the special prayer that the Rav had written especially for the occasion.

THE PRAYER WRITTEN MANY YEARS BEFORE THE PRAYER GATHERING ON PURIM 2014 - (BOX OUT)

Shortly before the Purim prayer rally, one of the Rav's students discovered a prayer that Rav Berland had written many years' earlier, at a time when the Rav rarely if ever left Eretz Yisrael. As soon as the student realized the prayer's relevance to the Rav's current circumstances, he printed out hundreds of copies of the prayer, and distributed it to be read at the prayer rally.

It seems Rav Berland knew many years in advance that he would be exiled from the land of Israel. Here is what the prayer said:

"Master of the World, who can do everything, from whom no evil design is hidden or concealed. Please rescue Eliezer ben Ettia [Rav Berland] from the terrible decree that is hovering over him, the terrible decree to be exiled from the Holy Land, from the foundation stone, from the holy Kotel, the root of all the salvations and all the healing. [And instead, he is fulfilling] the decree of, 'And Hashem removed them from upon their soil, with anger, wrath and great fury and He cast them into another land' (Parshat Netzavim, 29:27).

"And he has been cast off to a different country, to a foreign impure country and the verse of Lamentations has been fulfilled.Please bring him back in peace to our land, and cancel all of the terrible decrees, and let him not need to leave the holy land again, the foundation stone, mount Moriah, never again in his life, and let us never again be left alone and despised without anyone to support us and raise us up. And let this terrible wandering be the end of all our troubles, and let it be considered as a redemption for our soul. And by way of this exile and wandering around, we should merit that all our sins should be atoned for, and we should merit to receive the complete redemption, *amen*."

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The organizers were a little disappointed by the turnout, but when they contacted the Rav later on to tell him how it had gone, he reassured them that every single person who's come had been equivalent to 10,000 people, because of the amount of self-sacrifice that had been required to brave the terrible weather.

"Afterwards, the Rav told us that the gathering had helped matters a great deal, and that if we would continue to do something similar every week, he believed he could be back with us in Israel before Pesach 2014," recalls the organizer.

While that didn't happen, some of the prayer rally's effects were felt much sooner. That same night, the terrorists in Gaza fired four rockets at Israel — and every single one of them miraculously landed in an open area, where they detonated harmlessly.

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Rav Berland and his followers spent Purim in the city of Bulawayo, one of only two cities in Zimbabwe that still has anything resembling a fixed Jewish community.

In the whole of Zimbabwe, there are now less than 150 people officially registered as belonging to the Jewish community, and less than half of them live in Bulawayo.

Which is why it was so strange that when the Rav's followers got to the city of Bulawayo, they discovered an enormous new synagogue and events hall that was filled with Jewish books, but virtually empty of Jews.

The Rav commented on the synagogue in Bulawayo: "This place has been waiting for Shuvu Banim to come and spend Purim here since the sixth day of creation!" And it really did seem that way, as the Rav's followers found themselves staying in the synagogue hall connected to the enormous new synagogue that had recently been built by the remnants of Bulawayo's tiny Jewish community.

The head of the Bulawayo community invited the Rav to come and stay with him at his house, which was less than a 10-minute walk from the synagogue, while the men bedded down in the adjacent hall on mattresses, and the women and children found rooms to rent in a hotel that was close by.

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In one of his lesson given during Purim 5774, the Rav said the following:

"Why have we still not managed to rebuild the Temple? Because if we built it now, it would just immediately burn down again. At the very moment that a person came to the Temple thinking bad thoughts, it would burn down. People don't know that their thoughts [particularly their lustful thoughts] are like the fire of Gehinnom. Every time you look at things that you shouldn't — that's the fire of Gehinnom. A person can burn down the Temple literally every second.

That's why Rebbe Nachman taught that a person has to be very careful to avoid evil [lustful] thoughts... And he can only overcome these sorts of lustful thoughts by learning Gemara, as Rebbe Nachman taught in Likutey Moharan Lesson 101 ...

... In another month, they [the Iranians] want to drop a nuclear bomb on us. We'll have exactly five minutes [from the time they press the button] because it will have to travel 1,500 kilometers to get to us, and their rockets cover a distance of five kilometers every second. Three hundred seconds is five minutes. So assuming the warning siren goes off immediately, there'll be just enough time to say the Tikkun Haklali, or at least some of it.

Just reciting a single *Tikkun Haklali* has the power to explode every nuclear bomb in the world, and to change everything into candies. [Meaning, to 'sweeten' everything.]

At every moment, we are facing terrible decrees, like the decree to forcibly enlist yeshiva students. Every day, we hear of more problems, and all this is only happening because of evil thoughts and lustful fantasies. That's the reason it's happening! Rebbe Nachman taught that the first priority has to be *tikkun habris*, and that's the main focus of Breslov and the main focus of *Shuvu Banim* — to have holy, pure thoughts."

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Over Purim, the Rav read the *megillah* and lead the *davening*. Afterwards, he remarked, "We haven't seen a Purim like this for 50 years!" The festivities continued afterwards, as well, as two boys from Israel celebrated their bar mitzvahs in Bulawayo, and another two students celebrated their *aufrufs*, with one of the weddings being held right after Purim, with the Rav officiating.

One of the leaders of the Zimbabwe Jewish community in Bulawayo told the Rav at the wedding that there had probably never been such a big gathering of Jews in a Zimbabwe synagogue. "Now that you've come here with your *chassidim*, you've really livened the place up," he said.

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Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Morgenstern

During his annual Purim *tisch* in 2014, Rav Yitzhak Meir Morgenstern, the noted kabbalist and Breslov leader, announced: "Oy, this generation has no *tzaddikim*... until we got a true *tzaddik*, but now he's in Zimbabwe!" He then started to talk about the greatness of Rav Berland, and how he'd merited to nullify himself to Hashem so much, that everyone else was now obligated to follow whatever Rav Berland told them to do.

One of the drunk young men at the *tisch* started to make some derogatory comments about Rav Berland. Without batting an eyelash, Rav Morgenstern silenced him by throwing a cup of Arak over him, then commented, "People still have their free choice, but this is the main test of our generation — to nullify ourselves to Rav Berland."

Rav Morgenstern's *gabbai* came over to refill his cup with more schnapps, but the Rav stopped him and said, "I don't want to drink from this cup anymore. It's defiled."

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The Jews of Bulawayo weren't the only locals who celebrated Purim with the Rav.

Two Jews from Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, drove seven hours to visit the Rav, once they heard he was in their country. One of the Harare Jews brought his small, black-skinned child to greet the Rav. The Rav paid this child particular attention and bent down to speak to

him. He told the father a few times that the child had the eyes of a *gaon*, a Torah genius. They were with the Rav for four days.

After Purim, these two Jews returned to their homes, taking along with them two students from the *yeshiva*, as they had a return flight to catch from the airport in Harare at 9:15 p.m.

By 7 p.m., they were still three hours from the airport, so the students called the airport officials and asked if they could hold the flight for them. They were told no, and that check-in was going to close at 8 p.m. The driver told them that there was no way they could make their flight, and then, just to cap things off, it also started to rain really, really hard.

But the two students reassured their driver that in the power of the Tzaddik, they would see miracles. They started to sing a *niggun* and to say the *Tikkun Haklali*, and they reassured the driver that in the merit of the Rav, they'd have a miracle.

While the driver was very impressed with the students' optimism and *emunah*, he still didn't think they had any chance of making the flight. In fact, he told them that if they managed to make their flight, he'd start keeping kosher. As the words left the driver's mouth, the rain cleared up, and somehow they managed to reach the airport in Harare at 9 p.m., a quarter of an hour before the plane took off.

The staff at check-in initially told them they'd have to leave their bags behind and just run to catch the plane, but in the end they were allowed to take their bags with them, too. As they were running through the gate, they heard the Jewish driver who'd brought them muttering to himself, "Why did I promise to keep kosher? You can't even find any kosher food in Zimbabwe!"

The *yeshiva* students exchanged phone numbers with the Zimbabwean Jews, promised to keep in touch, and the plane took off as soon as they boarded.

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The day after Purim, the Rav spent many hours talking to and meeting with his followers.

Anyone could come in and talk to the Rav for as long as they needed. One of the Rav's followers asked him, "What can I do to help the Rav?" and the Rav replied, "Pray for me each day that I'll come back to Israel!"

The Rav also said that anyone who took it upon himself to recite the *Tikkun Haklali* three times a day for the Rav's success, the Rav would be indebted to him.

In the meantime, Yaron Yamin announced that anyone who wanted to stay in Africa for Pesach was invited to remain in Zimbabwe, instead of having to fly back to Israel. Sixty people, including a few families, decided to stay with the Rav. The Rav told the students that they could only stay if they sat and learned Torah full-time.

After Purim, the Rav returned to Yamin's home, close to his diamond mine, while all the students stayed in Bulawayo. There, they opened their own synagogue and *kollel*, in fulfillment of the Rav's prediction that Shuvu Banim would open a *yeshiva* in Southern Africa.

As word of the “*Gan Eden*” in Africa filtered back to Israel, more and more of the Rav’s students and followers - including people who’d never met him before - started to make the trip out to Zimbabwe to visit him. But good as things were, the big question on everyone’s mind in Zimbabwe was still: “When is the Rav returning to Eretz Yisrael?” One of his followers actually came out and asked the Rav himself this question. The Rav responded, “In the merit of the prayer gatherings that you’re holding for me by the Kotel, *b’ezeras Hashem* I’ll be back by Pesach [2014]. Keep praying and keep holding the gatherings each week, and I’ll be back before Pesach.”

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While Rav Berland was repeatedly exhorting his followers to pray for the well-being and safety of the nation of Israel, the signs that the redemption of the Jewish people appeared to be imminent continued to multiply during 5774.

One such clue was the statement made by Rav Moshe Sternbuch during his Purim *seudah*, when he said, “When you hear that the Russians are subduing the city of Krim [the Crimea], then you’ll know that the *geulah* has begun. And here we see that last week, the Russians subdued the Crimea, and the whole world is now in an uproar over this. But according to the tradition that we have from the Vilna Gaon, this is a sign of the time of Moshiach.”

Rav Sternbuch’s remarks were referring to the conflict between Russia and the Ukraine, which had begun on February 20, 2014, when pro-Russian separatists sparked a wave of violence in the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, leading to the deaths of about 90 people.

The separatists were demanding autonomy for the eastern region of the Ukraine known as the Crimea, which they wanted to see returned to Russian rule. Russian President Vladimir Putin quickly threw thousands of Russian troops into the conflict, causing tensions in the area to shoot through the roof.

Around Purim time, the neighboring country of Turkey warned Russia that unless it scaled back its military activity in the region, Turkey would close the Bosphorus Strait to Russian ships and commercial activities, severely limiting Russia’s access to Middle Eastern oil, and the Middle East in general. The Ukrainian conflict finally petered out toward the end of 2015, temporarily easing tensions in the area⁵.

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Another “clue” occurred on March 2, 2014, when more than 600,000 Jews gathered just at the outskirts of the city in a place called Shaarei Yerushalayim, or the “Gates of Jerusalem,” to pray for the Torah world in Eretz Yisrael, and to protest the government’s plans to force *yeshiva* students to serve in the IDF.

There’s a special *brachah*, *Chacham Harazim*, that is said when a person sees more than 600,000 Jews gathered together in one place. It’s arguably one of the rarest *brachos* ever said, because

⁵ As of November 2016, the situation in the Crimea was very unstable, and tensions in that region are rising once again.

getting that number of Jews together is a very unusual occurrence. But on March 2, 2014, the *brachah* was said for the first time in living memory.

A few months before this gathering took place, students of Rav Dov Kook in Teveria put together a booklet that contained more of what the Vilna Gaon wrote about the coming of Moshiach, as brought in the book *Kol Hator*, section 6. There, it's written as follows:

“Rabbi Binyamin of Shoklov asked our master the Vilna Gaon what he could do to try to hasten the coming of Moshiach ben Dovid and the redemption of Am Yisrael. The Vilna Gaon answered his student: “If you can gather together 600,000 Jews in a place called the ‘Gates of Jerusalem,’ whenever you’re able to do that, a gathering of 600,000 Jews can completely cancel out the power of the sitra achra that rules at the Gates of Jerusalem — and then, you’ll merit the complete redemption.”

When the Vilna Gaon first wrote those words more than 200 years ago, no such place called the “Gates of Jerusalem” even existed, and barely a handful of Jews lived in the holy city, as economic conditions in the Holy Land were very difficult under the Ottoman Turks.

Similarly, when the students of Rav Kook wrote this information in their booklet, before Rosh Hashanah 2013, no plans for a huge gathering had even been considered.

It seemed to be another clear-cut sign that the redemption was imminent.