

## THE ZIMBABWEAN IDYLL ENDS

The *Gemara* in *Maseches Sanhedrin* 98 tells us that there is no clearer sign of Moshiach than when we see our true religious leaders and *talmidei chachamim* being persecuted and given no peace.

Shortly before Pesach, 2014, hundreds of Rav Berland's followers started arriving in Zimbabwe en masse, to start getting ready for the holiday. Once again, the Rav's enemies saw that their tremendous efforts to tear the Rav away from his followers hadn't worked, so they decided to change tack, and to bribe some corrupt bureaucrats to do their dirty work for them.

On April 7, 2014, these corrupt Zimbabwean government officials came to visit Rav Berland at Yaron Yamin's house, and told the Rav that he was being placed under arrest because his visa had expired (even though it hadn't). They then forced the Rav to wear a prisoner's uniform, and publicly handcuffed him.

When the Rav heard that the police had come to arrest him, he recited the *Shehechianu* blessing, thanking God for bringing him to this new situation.<sup>1</sup> From the moment the Rav was arrested, he continuously held a bottle of water in his hands, even while wearing handcuffs. Many people wondered about this, as it's widely known that the Rav never asks for something to eat or drink, and that even when he's given food and drink he usually eats only a little, and takes very few sips of liquid.

So why was the Rav going to such great trouble to take a bottle of water with him? Afterwards, it became known that the Rav had been concerned about not being able to ritually wash his hands before every prayer, as is required by *halachah*. The Rav didn't know where he would be taken after his arrest, or for how long he would be there, so he wanted to make sure that he would have enough water available to wash his hands.

Rav Berland's persecutors had left no stone unturned to maximize his public humiliation. They arranged in advance that the Rav would be forced to dress in prisoner's clothing for 10 minutes, and that someone would remove the *kippah* from his head. The photographer would be on-site, ready to take the picture as soon as they'd stage-managed the 'special' image they were after.

In the past, many people had returned to religious observance just from seeing Rav Berland's picture, so his persecutors figured they'd give the world an image of the Rav they'd never forget. But instead of turning people off, the picture of the Rav being so profoundly humiliated actually had a boomerang effect. Suddenly, it became clear to many people what sort of people had been chasing the Rav all over the world, ceaselessly harassing and maligning him, while the Rav accepted everything that happened to him with love.

More and more people starting to question why the Rav was being treated in such an unnecessarily extreme and disgraceful way.

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<sup>1</sup> The Midrash in Yalkut Yeshayahu (60:499) that expounds about the tzaddikim who suffer for Am Yisrael also teaches that some tzaddikim are required to spend time in prison, in order to atone for Am Yisrael's sins.

As the press went all out to make the Rav a household name, both in Israel and abroad, for all the wrong reasons, a lot of people who'd never even heard of him before started trying to find out more about him. Who was this Rav Berland, who was at the heart of so much controversy? What was he doing in Africa in the first place? Why had he been arrested in such a public, shameful way, if the only complaint the Zimbabweans could come up with was that his visa had expired?

At this time, one of the Rav's students, Rav Chaim Ness, was spending a lot of time in Tel Aviv working with more secular people, trying to bring them closer to *Yiddishkeit*. He recounts that people started approaching him and asking for more details about what was happening with Rav Berland. To keep up with the demand, Rav Ness started organizing gatherings in Tel Aviv that attracted hundreds of participants.

As a result of these gatherings, many formerly secular Jews began keeping more *mitzvos* — and the people who get the credit for that are, ironically, the Rav's persecutors.

One man wrote into the Shuvu Banim *Yeshiva* to say: "I'm not a Breslover *chassid*, and until today I didn't even have an opinion about everything surrounding Rav Berland. But after I saw that picture [of the Rav handcuffed in Zimbabwe], I began to understand that the Rav really is suffering for us. 'He takes our sickness upon himself'<sup>2</sup>."

At the same time, many of the Rabbis who had been staying silent about the matter started to comment on what was going on, and to publicly come out in support of the Rav. A number of religious leaders who'd been sitting on the fence, or who were even considered to be opposers of the Rav, completely changed track after they saw that picture. Some even went as far as to call the Rav up directly to offer their support, and to ask forgiveness for the earlier doubts they'd harbored against him.

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On April 7, 2014, the world leaders again tried to come to some agreement about Iran, this time meeting in Vienna. On that same day, the Zimbabwean police came to arrest the Rav in Bulawayo. The Rav spent many hours being interrogated in prison, and then went to court on April 8, where he was given the choice of paying a fine and being expelled from the country, or going to prison.

On April 9, the Rav left Zimbabwe to fly to South Africa. When he landed at the airport in Johannesburg, the South African police detained him for a couple of long hours while they checked his legal status in Israel.

While all this was going on, another mass prayer rally for the Rav's success was being held at the Kotel. Throughout the prayer rally, the Rav's followers were in close contact with some of the people who were traveling with the Rav, and miraculously, the moment they finished saying the last *Kaddish* at the Kotel, the Rav was given permission to stay in Johannesburg.

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<sup>2</sup> A quote from *Isaiah 53:4*. (See the entire chapter as it describes how the tzaddik takes on himself the suffering of the Nation – according to Ramban's commentary in *Kisvei HaRamban*).

At exactly the same time that all this was going on, the meeting between the world leaders in Vienna ended without any agreement being reached about the Iranians.

Throughout his ordeal at the hands of the Zimbabwean authorities, Rav Berland maintained his composure and *emunah*, and the people who were accompanying him even reported that he seemed to almost be in a state of rapture, as though he was engaged in the biggest *mitzvah* of his life. His happiness was contagious, and when he was released from prison in Zimbabwe and allowed to fly out to South Africa, the Rav left the country like a king, wearing his *tallis* and *tefillin*.

The picture of the Rav in handcuffs appeared on news sites around the world on 10 Nissan 5774 (April 10, 2014), exactly 30 days after he'd first spoken about the Iranians' plan to drop a nuclear bomb on Israel the next month. Everyone with a Jewish heart was completely shocked when they saw that terrible picture. Some people literally tore *kriah*; others sat on the floor and just cried their eyes out. That image landed like a bombshell in the heart of the frum Jewish world — but the humiliating media blitz seemed to have taken the place of the Iranians' nuclear bomb.

One of the students who'd been with the Rav in Johannesburg related what the Rav had said to his daughter just after that picture was publicized. The Rav said to her, "When I was handcuffed and dressed in the prison clothes, I felt as though I was holding the nuclear bomb in my hands."

The Rav himself later commented about his two-day incarceration in Zimbabwe: "How good it was for me over there [in Zimbabwe]! I sat on the floor with the locals and the criminals, and the whole time I sang and thanked Hashem and I reached [spiritual] levels that I otherwise would never have reached in a million years!"

At around the same time that the shameful picture of Rav Berland in Zimbabwe hit the news, many Rabbis in Israel were sent a fake newsletter that had been deliberately designed as an exact copy of Shuvu Banim's own Knishta Chada newsletter, with the exact same name, logo and design. This phony newsletter was filled with lies and slanderous stories about the Rav, and also included entirely falsified quotes from a number of leading Rabbis.

As the outrage mounted, more and more people who saw this forged newsletter began to seriously question the integrity of the people who had been persecuting the Rav within the Breslov community itself. Many of the Rabbis who'd been falsely quoted contacted Shuvu Banim to set the record straight, and once again, the trap these Breslov zealots had set for the Rav rebounded on themselves. A number of the rabbis who contacted Shuvu Banim explained that now, they were starting to understand the moral caliber of some of the people who'd been persecuting the Rav — and also the greatness of the Rav, who'd borne all the abuse and affliction in silence, for decades.

When Rav Eliyahu Ifargan, the founder of Mosdot Keter Shalom, was told that the Rav had been arrested, publicly handcuffed, put in prison and then expelled from Zimbabwe, he sat down on the floor in middle of his *shiur* to participate in the exile and sorrow of the *Shechinah*.

Rav Ifargan then told his students: "Rav Eliezer Berland took upon himself exile and humiliation before Pesach, just like Rebbe Eliezer Hagadol, who was put into *cherem* before Pesach [by his

contemporaries at the time the *Gemara* was being codified, around 2,000 years ago]. Everyone has to participate in his sorrow and in the sorrow of the *Shechinah*.”

Rav Ifergan continued that according to the esoteric sources, when the Tzaddik takes such harsh judgments upon himself, it's only because of the sins of *Am Yisrael*, and that not every *tzaddik* can stand up to such a harsh test.

He continued: “We shouldn't just sit here, each one under his vineyard and fig tree and not participate in his exile and sorrow! In the next world, when the Creator of the World asks all of the *tzaddikim* what they did for *Am Yisrael*, everyone will try to say what they did. But then God will ask them, ‘Which of you agreed to take upon yourself exile, in order to help them? Who agreed to suffer for them? Who agreed to take the bread out of his own mouth, to participate in the sorrow of the *Shechinah*?’

This big *tzaddik*, who is the soul of Rebbe Eliezer Hagadol and a spark of Moshiach himself, is rolling around in the dirt because he chose do that [in order to save *Am Yisrael*].”

Rav Ifargan continued that he didn't know how the people who continued to be obsessed with materialistic pleasures and false publicity were going to be able to stand up to the Heavenly accusations they were creating against themselves “at a time when the *Shechinah* is in exile, and a true *tzaddik* is rolling in dirt. Woe to them that they don't try to participate in the sorrow of the *Shechinah*, and in the sorrow of the Tzaddik.”

Rav Ifargan concluded that he had a tradition passed down from his forefathers that “in these days” [i.e., the period of time before Moshiach], the evil side would continue to grow stronger, and would appear to get more powerful from one day to the next. “Therefore,” he said, “anyone who shares in the sorrow of the *Shechinah* and *Knesses Yisrael*, and who shares in the sorrow of the Tzaddik in this very hard time, will help to ease the Tzaddik's sorrow, and give him more power to bring the *geulah*.”

While the Zimbabwe authorities' main target was Rav Berland himself, they also revoked the visas of the students who'd been staying with him in Zimbabwe since Purim. While his followers had been prepared for Pesach in Zimbabwe, they were singularly unprepared for a last-minute forced exile to a different country, literally a day or two before the festival was due to begin.

Although a few of the Rav's students and his main attendants flew out with him to Johannesburg by plane, many of the other students, together with their families, were forced to arrange buses to take them across the border into South Africa. The authorities in Zimbabwe threw them out of the country so quickly, they didn't even give them time to collect the 600 kilograms of matzos they'd arranged for the holiday, plus their other Pesach provisions.

In a scene reminiscent of the original Exodus, the Rav's students hurriedly rented four buses and left for the long journey to South Africa. One of the buses got stuck on the way, and its passengers were delayed in the hot African weather for around 24 hours, with almost no food or drinks to sustain them because they'd been given no time to prepare food or other provisions.

The whole time the bus was stalled by the side of the road in Zimbabwe, the Rav was also “stalled” at the airport in Johannesburg as the South African authorities interrogated him, deciding whether to send him back to Israel or let him into the country.

Some of the students on the bus managed to get through to the Rav on the phone and explained the severity of their situation, that they were stuck in the middle of nowhere, with no food or drink, and with women and small children on board. The Rav reassured his students and told them to dance for an hour, and then everything would turn out okay. After the students had danced for a few minutes, some locals arrived bearing bananas and drinks, and an hour later, a replacement bus turned up to take them on the last leg of their journey.

Meanwhile, back in the Johannesburg airport, the Rav sat there serenely. As was his custom wherever his wanderings took him and whatever difficulties he encountered, he continued his routine of praying, learning Torah, dancing and singing while the South African officials checked and double-checked his legal status.

A short while later, Rav Berland was granted permission to enter South Africa.



When the Zimbabwe authorities came to arrest Rav Berland at Yaron Yamin’s home in Bulawayo, the wealthy businessman had told them, “Beware of this holy man! If he gets deported from here all the rain will stop! Just look at the months he was here, what tremendous blessing the country received. Nearly every day, you had strong rainstorms which are much needed for the economy. Tell Mugabe<sup>3</sup> that if the

Rabbi gets deported there will be no more rain!”



The Zimbabweans ignored the warning and proceeded to publicly dress Rav Berland in prison clothes and handcuff him, before arranging for him to be photographed, and then carted off to the local prison for two days. Then, they deported him and his followers to Johannesburg three days before the festival of Pesach began.

Very soon after that, the rain in Zimbabwe stopped. By the beginning of 2016, the *New York Times* was calling the El Nino drought in Zimbabwe “the worst drought in more than a generation.” As the rain dried up, so too did the crops and the exports which supported the entire Zimbabwean economy. The U.N. World Food Program announced that 1.5 million Zimbabweans needed urgent food aid, as a result of the famine.

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<sup>3</sup> The president of Zimbabwe.



Shortly after this on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January, 2016, the niece of Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe traveled to South Africa to meet Rav Berland and ask his forgiveness, in the name of her uncle and all the Zimbabwean people.