

Reading “Epistle to Yemen” in Moscow

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David Berger

David Rozenson’s [excellent account of R. Adin Steinsaltz’s project in Russia](#) evokes inspiring memories. (His account can be supplemented by [this article](#) by Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, Chief Rabbi of Moscow.)



I was one of four teachers in R. Steinsaltz’s institute in Moscow during its first mini-semester, which lasted for seven weeks in early 1989, ending the week before Pesach. The institute was primarily a yeshiva for about twenty students, some of whom had achieved a remarkable knowledge of Hebrew and Judaism in large measure through the study of the Steinsaltz Hebrew Talmud.

But it also had additional dimensions. In the afternoon, I taught *Navi* and, I think, *Pirkei Avot* to women, and Jewish thought to the men. In the evening there were parallel co-ed classes for other students on basic Judaism, Jewish history, and *Humash*. The prominent and highly knowledgeable refusenik Vladimir (Ze’ev) Dashevsky came regularly and often provided the simultaneous Russian translation of the *shiurim* during the day, which was necessary even though many of the students understood spoken Hebrew. When I was about to return home, he let me know that when necessary, he improved what I had to say.

At this stage, the school was located in an apartment on the ninth floor of an apartment house in Moscow. My apartment was on the thirteenth floor of a building in the same complex, which means that I got much-needed (though not much-welcome) exercise on Shabbat.

I considered this a development of such historic importance that for the only time in my life I kept a diary. There is far more to say, but let me just note three vignettes.

A brilliant teenage woman from a *frum* refusenik family was scheduled to leave for Israel in two weeks. I asked her to mail a letter that I wrote and addressed to my son, who was in Yeshivat Har Etzion. When she looked at the envelope she asked a question that was in one sense absurd and in another sense a striking and deeply moving indication of what she and her family had heroically endured to gain the remarkable Jewish knowledge that they had. She said, “*Kotvim be-Ivrit?! Al ha-ma’tafah?!*” (“You write in Hebrew?! On the envelope?!”)

And, now, two vignettes about R. Steinsaltz himself.

On *Shabbat Parashat Shmini*, he spoke to the students about the moment, after the lengthy and laborious building of the *mishkan*, when the Jews waited breathlessly to see if all that effort would be rewarded. And then a fire came down from God and consumed the sacrifice. I had never come close to appreciating the drama of that moment before hearing his riveting presentation. I can only imagine how the students reacted.

On a lighter note, R. Rozenon related that R. Steinsaltz did not suffer fools gladly. One weekday morning, an American Jewish politician joined us for *Shaharit* and had his photographer take his picture with R. Steinsaltz in front of a picture of Lenin that we found in the apartment and could of course not remove. I was acquainted with this politician and was not very impressed. After he left, I asked R. Steinsaltz if he knew him. He responded, “*Nidmeh li she-nifgashti itto—ve-nidmeh li she-zeh lo kavod gadol.*” (“It seems to me that I met him; and it seems to me that this is no great honor.”)

About fifteen years later, I prepared a paper entitled “The Uses of Maimonides by Twentieth-Century Jewry” for a conference commemorating the eight hundredth anniversary of the Rambam’s death. Here are the concluding paragraphs:

In early 1989, I spent seven extraordinary weeks teaching at the inaugural mini-semester of the Steinsaltz yeshiva in Moscow, the first such institution to be granted government recognition since the Communist revolution. The students consisted largely of refuseniks who had risked careers and livelihoods to commit themselves to Jewish learning and observance. In addition to the study of Talmud, Bible and more, there was a slot twice a week for Jewish Thought. I decided that the text I would teach would be Maimonides' *Epistle to Yemen*, a work directed to a beleaguered Jewish community pressured to abandon its faith. It was as if Maimonides had composed the work for the students in that yeshiva. The greatest challenge in teaching the Epistle to Yemen in that environment was to read the words without shedding tears.

I conclude then with one small selection from the many relevant passages in which Maimonides speaks to Soviet Jews during the transitional moments between implacable persecution and the beginnings of hope.

“Persecutions are of short duration. Indeed, God assured our father Jacob that although his children would be humbled and overcome by the nations, they and not the nations would survive and endure. He declares, ‘Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth,’ that is to say, although they will be abased like the dust that is trodden under foot, they will ultimately emerge triumphant and victorious. And as the simile implies, just as the dust settles finally upon him who tramples upon it and remains after him, so will Israel outlive its oppressors. The prophet Isaiah predicted that during its exile various peoples will succeed in their endeavor to vanquish Israel and lord over them, but that ultimately God would come to Israel’s assistance and put an end to their woes and afflictions. . . . The Lord has given us assurance through His prophets that we are indestructible and imperishable, and we will always continue to be a preeminent community. As it is impossible for God to cease to exist, so is our destruction and disappearance from the world unthinkable.”

This project, which one Moscow resident told me had transformed Jewish life in Moscow in a few weeks, would have served in almost all instances as a crowning achievement for even the most impressive of Jewish leaders. The fact that it has largely disappeared into the recesses of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s remarkable resume is testimony to a record of stunning achievement.

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