

Around the Community 

Yosef Mendeleovich Addresses Yeshiva Ketana of Queens



Yosef Mendeleovich, a courageous refusenik, arguably one of the main protagonists in bringing the Iron Curtain down in 1990, visited Yeshiva Ketana of Queens middle school grades to share his experiences as a young man in the Soviet Union. He related how he had become interested in Yiddishkeit even though that interest was a risky one in totalitarian Soviet Union. Insofar as the Russians did not want young Jews knowing about or practicing their religion, Yosef was committing a crime by learning about Jewish tradition, halacha and Hebrew. His rebellion reached its climax when he, with several others,

attempted to hijack an airplane to fly to Israel. He was caught and told he would be receiving the death penalty. Instead, he was sent to Siberia where he was incarcerated for 11 years.

R' Yosef's love for Yiddishkeit was apparent when he told his audience how he had withstood lots of pressure in his attempt to keep every mitzvah that he could possibly keep and to reinforce to the government that he was willing to fight to keep his religion and not allow himself to assimilate into the Russian culture. The most painful story he told us was how he refused to take off his yarmulke – a handkerchief that he had tied with several knots to make

it into a head covering – even when the authorities would not permit him to see his father who had traveled 20,000 kilometers from Latvia to visit unless he removed his head covering. This happened for several years, and in the end, his father died without ever seeing Yosef again.

What was especially uplifting was R' Yosef's description of how he was able to keep Shabbos with “nothing”. His father had sent him two pounds of raisins which he made into “wine”; for challah, he salvaged two pieces of bread from his meager daily rations; and he cut a small piece of the handkerchief that he wore on his head as a yarmulke to create a challah cover.

The most poignant detail R' Yosef recounted was how he discovered a small nail stuck into the wall when he decided to clean his cell *I'kavod* Shabbos. Absolutely thrilled with his find, Yosef took the nail and etched Shabbos candles on the wall and imagined that he was *bentching* light. He then danced joyfully and sang, bringing Kabbalas Shabbos into his tiny, squalid prison cell.

His narrative was absolutely inspirational, and many boys signed on to the waiting list to read the copies the yeshiva has of *Unbroken Spirit*, Reb Yosef's memoir.

TEAM Shabbos

End-of-life arrangements are never easy to talk about but delaying the conversation sets the stage for serious problems – at a most difficult time. Join TEAM Shabbos and help your community open the dialogue about these important issues now, before crisis strikes.

Under the leadership of Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, the TEAM Shabbos initiative was founded to address important end-of-life issues, and encourage our community to take appropriate action.

And now, the highly anticipated fifth TEAM Shabbos is right around the corner. On Shabbos Parshas Vayechi, January 11, 2020, hundreds of shuls in communities nationwide will join the annual TEAM (Traditional End-of-life Awareness Movement) Shabbos, a project of the National Association of Chevra

Kadisha (NASCK).

It is difficult for most people to imagine the wide variety of issues that can arise at the end of life – and the many ways that secular society promotes decisions that are antithetical to Jewish values. Looking at Parshas Vayechi's account of Yaakov's illness, his last words to his children, and his instructions regarding burial, provides rabbis across the country with a natural way to open a conversation with their congregants about the many Torah issues regarding illness and death.

Topics for discussion include: the Torah's view of the intrinsic value and sanctity of life, the importance of being prepared to make proper medical and other end-of-life decisions, writing wills in accordance with halacha, and choosing – and helping others to choose – tradition-

al Jewish burial practices.

But TEAM Shabbos is not just about a *drasha* or *shiur*. TEAM Shabbos inspires community members to take responsibility – and to take action. TEAM Shabbos encourages individuals to create living wills that ensure the people they choose will be in charge of their medical decisions if they are unable to speak for themselves, to reach out to family members who may be considering a non-halachic burial for a loved one, to begin the process of writing a halachically valid will, to consider which life insurance best protects their families, and to spark a conversation about end of life with their parents.

“Due to a lack of awareness about the inherent sanctity of every moment of life, many people end up making end-of-life medical decisions that are contrary to To-

rah values,” Rabbi Zohn explains. “TEAM Shabbos has created a unified national movement to raise awareness about these issues. We encourage communities and shuls to join NASCK's many ongoing programs dedicated to supporting, informing, educating, and inspiring all those seeking information about traditional Jewish burial, including programs promoting halachic living wills and Emergency Medical Education and Sign-up (EMES) cards,” continues Rabbi Zohn.

By opening the dialogue about end-of-life topics, TEAM Shabbos enables the Jewish community to allow Jewish values to guide their most sensitive decisions.

To have your community join TEAM Shabbos, or for a comprehensive list of resources, please call 718-847-6280 or visit TEAMShabbos.org.