

Memories of a Journey: Teaching the Bible in Russia ***October 2-October 24, 1991***

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In the winter of 1990, Lee Levine informed the instructors at the Seminary for Judaic Studies in Jerusalem that the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York was seeking teachers of Jewish studies for its program at the Russian State Humanities University in Moscow.

My decision to begin a sabbatical in the first half of 5752 (Fall 1991) left me free to teach at the beginning of the year, after Shemini Atzeret. I asked myself: How could you live with a refusal to participate in a pioneering effort in your own field, when the destiny of a vast Jewish community hangs in the balance; and, when given the circumstances, one could hardly ask for better conditions? I responded that I was prepared to organize a three-week course entitled "A Historical Survey of Biblical Literature."

Planning a Course of Study

I recalled a series of seven lectures on the Bible that I had prepared in English in 1972 which had been translated into Russian for *Kol Yisrael la-Golah*. Four of these lectures were still in *Kol Yisrael's* files, and a former student of mine translated the three missing lectures.

During a stay in New York in August, we had the opportunity to meet the Vice-Rector of the University, Natalya Ivanovna Basovskaya. We were struck by her energetic support of the program. She saw it as the spearhead of a new field at the University: comparative religion. She anticipated that students from diverse disciplines would take an interest in the program because there was a thirst to learn about Judaism in general and the Bible in particular, both among students and scholars. I was also astonished to hear that in the previous year, a Russian Orthodox priest had given a course on "The World of the Bible"--and was later murdered. The case is still unsolved, and there is no way of knowing whether the murder had any connection to the subject matter.

With the holidays upon us, I began to compose the lectures. I decided to prepare a synopsis of each lecture, both to avoid making mistakes in basic details, like dates, that I hadn't taught in years, and to provide the students with useful course outlines. I decided that my primary goal was for them to read as much Biblical literature as possible. I assumed they had never read the Scriptures, and that the best approach was to explain the contents of the books and the ideas that inspired their authors, using the text itself as a constant reference.

Finding our Bearings in Moscow

The ride from the airport was our first "Soviet" experience. It was a rainy night; the driver was a Russian fluent only in his native tongue. We were brought to a huge building, the Higher Party School, formerly the disseminator of the Communist credo to party members from all over the world.

Today it is the scene of a protracted dispute regarding the rights of ownership to the campus in the wake of the democratic revolution. This branch of the University, whose main campus lies elsewhere in the heart of the city, near the Kremlin, was a large complex of offices and classrooms that dominated the neighborhood.

Our accommodations were on the fourth floor, in room 44, where David Fishman was waiting for us. At long last, a familiar face! I learned what my teaching schedule would be like: four hours of teaching on Tuesdays and four more on Thursdays (4:45-6:15 PM and 6:30-8:00 PM). In the later class I would repeat the material I had taught to the earlier class. Wednesday evenings were set aside for student colloquia.

We were to live on the fourth floor of "Block 4," a hallway flanked by about eight rooms. At one end there was a spacious lounge with about eight armchairs bolted to the walls and a coffee table in the center. At the other end was a kitchenette with a refrigerator, gas range, a small cabinet, sink, table and chairs---and roaches. These facilities, like the building itself, looked much the worse for wear.

A maid replaced our towels every day, tidied up and changed the linens often. A cook provided hot kosher meals in the evenings, and we prepared the other meals by ourselves with food we had brought with us or purchased from local markets.

At the University

Three times a week, in the late afternoon, our driver Slava picked us up and drove us to the University. Occasionally I tried to spark a dialogue in my broken Russian, and Slava would respond in a torrent of words that soon overwhelmed me. He would then try German, which he had picked up in the Soviet army while stationed in East Germany, and my response proved equally overwhelming to him.

The University building at 15 Nikolskaya Street resembles the Bikur Holim Hospital in Jerusalem before it was renovated: a warren of buildings and wings annexed at different times and now in varying degrees of shabbiness. The classroom for the "day course" (room 50) lay just beyond an interior courtyard. The room had two rows of tables with four chairs at each table. There was a blackboard, one third of which was so worn out as to be unusable (David supplied the missing chalk and eraser). Half the lighting fixtures were on the blink. Room 42, for the evening class, was on the third floor. It was similarly equipped, although it was bigger and all the lights worked. There were constant squabbles with another lecturer who insisted that she had a right to the room because her class was larger than ours. Despite the Dean's repeated assertions that the room was rightfully ours, ultimately it came down to the principle of first come, first served.

Such is the magic of a class immersed in study that it transcends its surroundings. At the first session, Russian Bibles were distributed to anyone lacking a copy, and synopses of my lectures, plus the material in Russian I had prepared, were handed out. Twenty to twenty-five students, about whom I knew nothing, attended each class. In simple English, I began to lecture on the structure of the Bible and on the differences between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. The new terminology was difficult for the students. Nevertheless, they paid close attention, although I couldn't be sure how much of my lecture they actually assimilated. Russian students do not ask the lecturer for further explanations; their role is to obediently copy down every word. (In response to my first words at that opening session--"Good evening"--the entire class leaped to its feet in attention.) At first no one approached me after class, either. Eventually they overcame their habits and got used to participating

in discussions and staying after class to continue them.

Getting to Know the Students

Who were the participants? They were mostly students at the University, being trained in diverse fields such as history, museum conservation, and archival affairs, who wanted to advance their knowledge of Jewish studies. Women outnumbered men, and there were both Jews and non-Jews, although we do not have exact numbers. Some estimated the number of non-Jews at 40%-50%; we did not ask the students about their origins. Further complicating this issue is the difficulty in determining who is Jewish, because of the high rate of intermarriage in the Soviet Union.

To become better acquainted with the students, we invited a group of twelve to a social gathering at our quarters on the third *motzei Shabbat*, a novelty that took them by surprise. Pesakh Fiszman, the Yiddish instructor, invited the students by phone. Some interpreted his call as an order to attend a "student assembly." After the teachers explained their reasons for participating in the program, some of the students discussed their own motives. One girl stated that she was Jewish and wanted to learn about the heritage that was her natural birthright. Another, who was Russian, intended to write a history of her people. Since Jewish culture had once flourished in her land, she wanted to know what it was about. Others were drawn by the challenge of being the first to learn an entirely new subject in Russia, and some welcomed the opportunity to perfect their English.

Mixed motives seemed to characterize the group. How is one to evaluate the "confession" of one student ("My story is terrible."), who said he had been born in Syria to a Russian officer advising the Syrian army on defense against missile attacks (by Israel)? In response to a question I asked him in the course of conversation, "Which country would you want to visit first if you could travel abroad?" he said, "Israel." And which would be second? "Syria."

And one girl's deeply touching comment: "We expected you to be like all the other lecturers; talking nonstop, blah, blah, blah. And now we realize that you really care about us and want to help us understand and to learn."

Russians Grapple with the Bible

In my lectures I tried to balance the survey of Biblical texts and ideas with a sampling of critical questions about the authorship and composition of the books, and their differing perspectives. I tried to illustrate the types of issues that would intrigue an active researcher and the ways he or she would go about resolving them. This last topic was hard to explain to those who lacked basic knowledge of the Bible's contents. I am not sure if I managed to engage them in the methodology of Biblical research. The students asked no questions about it. Their queries were about ideas that surfaced in their minds as they read: the conflict between the commandment "thou shalt not murder" and the ubiquity of capital punishment in Biblical law; the contradiction between "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children" and "the fathers shall not be put to death for the children"; the limits of divine power and knowledge; the Israelites' loss of an expiatory ritual after the destruction of the Temple (this last query from a believing Christian).

Their questions reflected a genuine interest in religious thought and possibly existential concern. I wondered if I would not have done better to dwell less on criticism and analysis and more on the

contents and concepts of Biblical texts. In any case, it is clear to me that anyone teaching Bible to students at a Russian University must be prepared to apply both a diachronic-conceptual and synchronic approach to explain Biblical thought and the beliefs of the authors.

This last point was brought home to me on another occasion, when the Department of Museology asked me to give a lecture to its students. I discussed the Biblical/Jewish notion that the Torah is the property of every Jew, "the inheritance of the Congregation of Jacob," which led to an immediate invitation to present another talk on the nature of Jewish exegesis. In this second lecture, I distinguished between *peshat* (plain meaning) and *derash* (homiletical interpretation). I drew my examples from the Midrash on the book of Genesis and from the Mishnah. Two instructors of English literature asked me questions of an exegetical and theological nature (from a Christian perspective) about the Garden of Eden. I received the distinct impression that the scholars were attracted to listening to a positive existential message to counter the prevailing atmosphere of depression.

The Course Comes to an End

The students aroused our admiration and our compassion. With such fervor they kept at their studies, despite the difficult conditions! Absenteeism was less of a problem in Moscow than in Jerusalem. In our last class the students came up to me to thank me and to let me know that they would have wanted the course to go on much, much longer. One young girl gave me a bouquet of flowers. I took this all to mean that I had at least succeeded in presenting Bible study as a serious and rewarding undertaking, worthy of one's best efforts.

How does one construct an exam that tests a student's comprehension of material taught in English, without failing the student for the inability to write articulately in English? My solution was to present the answers in the context of other material, obliging the students to distinguish the right answers from the wrong ones, along the lines of a multiple-choice test.

My lecture series over, the three of us professors met with the President of the University, Dr. Yuri Afanasyev. At the meeting, Afanasyev shared his vision of establishing a department or specialization at the University in the research of world religions. He saw our program as paving the road toward that goal and he promised to do his best to ensure its success.

Epilogue

Like our arrival to Moscow, our departure was also on a rainy night, but there the similarity ended. Three weeks earlier we were wondering how we would meet this challenge and what, if anything, our trip would accomplish. Upon our return, we thanked God for keeping us well, for showing us an exceedingly great city that radiated both light and darkness, and for the privilege of letting us be the ones to plant the first seeds of Biblical scholarship in the context of a Jewish studies program at a Russian university. It is hard to predict the future of the program, just as it is hard to gauge the prospects of the disintegrating Soviet Union. But speaking for myself, I believe that one can predict with certainty that the events of these three weeks, during which a new path was forged at a state university in Russia, will nor be forgotten by us or by the students who are continuing in this program.