

THE WONDERFUL WAY OF LIVING

# Christian Life

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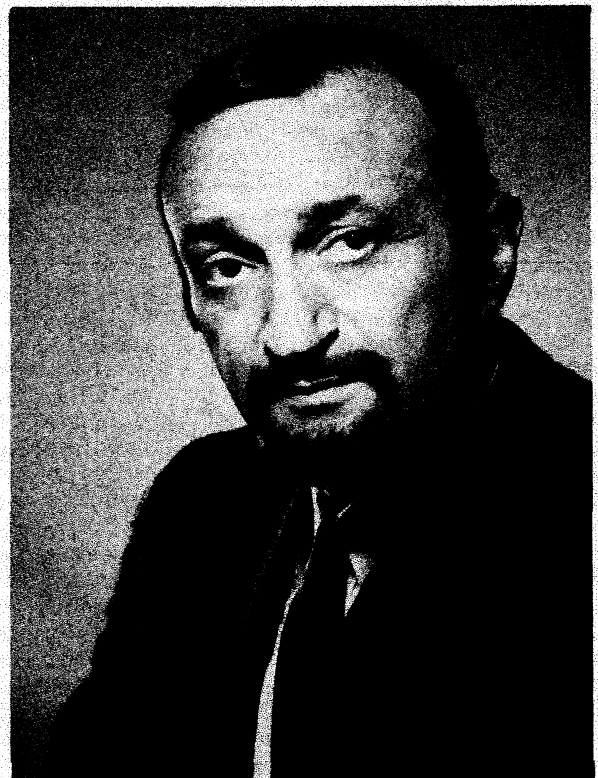
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SPECIAL REPORT

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# LET MY PEOPLE GO

BY HAROLD B. LIGHT



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As a Jew who does not believe in Christ as the Savior, I have for most of my adult years assumed that Christians tend to be anti-Semitic, and therefore, do not love their fellow man, despite the precepts of their religion. Since 1967, however, when I became heavily involved in the struggle to free Soviet Jews, our movement has been helped by so many Christian leaders that I now realize I was wrong.

However, I know that few Jews share my opinion. Christians say they love the Jews—and write about that love. Clergymen voice their support for Soviet Jews, and participate in interfaith actions. But most Jews do not witness any broad concern for them. We Jews need your love, and we need it desperately. We want to be persuaded. And while we welcome articles and proclamations of your prestigious leaders, we look for your personal involvement. By that, I mean the personal involvement of millions of Christians in the struggle for freedom of the Jews in the Soviet Union.

Hundreds of case histories already have documented the daily harrassments, increasing imprisonments specially meted out to Jews who wish to emigrate. This is not to say that the inhumanity of Soviet authorities is practiced only on Jews. We need only recall the recent exile of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, an active member of the Russian Orthodox Church, and a winner of the Nobel prize, who dared to reveal the brutality of the present regime in his book, *Gulag Archipelago*. His account of the vast network of Soviet prison camps and insane asylums, which house untold thousands of "political dissidents," reveals the brutalities visited upon those who value their freedom to practice their religion, and to pass it on to their children. Devotion to the Church or Synagogue is dealt with harshly, and all evidence indicates that the situation is worsening.

More than 400 synagogues have been closed, leaving about 60 now in operation, with perhaps 6 Rabbis, all in their 70's and 80's to serve them. Many churches have been turned into museums, with no regular services.

Last year, five Congressmen were invited to visit the Soviet Union. Included were Congressman E. F. Landgrebe of Indiana, and Congressman James H. Scheuer of New York. They both visited synagogues

and churches. Landgrebe, a Baptist, distributed Bibles. Scheuer had dinner at the home of Professor Alexander Lerner, an eminent Jewish scientist. Both were arrested by the secret police, and forced to leave the U.S.S.R. before their visas expired.

There are, of course, more serious ways of dealing with the "religious problem" when Soviet citizens are involved. Jews and Baptists, especially ministers, are special targets for persecution. It requires no charge of illegal activities to be brought before medical examiners. Special asylums are designated for the "political dissenters," and it doesn't take long for prescribed drugs to do damage.

In my early years of involvement with the struggle of Soviet Jews, it was difficult for me to evaluate the situation and the degree of its seriousness. Casual tourists to Russia tried to convince me that serious oppression and reports of official anti-Semitic practices were highly exaggerated. Moreover, I believed that most non-Jews had accepted the atheistic doctrine of Communism. In order to resolve these doubts, so that I could be objective about the work, my wife and I travelled the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for ten weeks.

The second day in Moscow, I was looking for a taxi stand, when a priest approached me to offer help. I was surprised at his excellent English until he explained that he was an American Catholic serving the U.S. Embassy. After about one minute of small talk, I decided to tell him that I was interested in religious persecution there, adding that I was a Jew. He smiled, took my arm, and spoke quietly as we walked along toward the stand.

"This is an anti-religious state," he said, "so it's no great place for converts. I get along pretty well because of my diplomatic status. But my Soviet colleagues have to be extremely careful. There are about 35 million members of the Russian Orthodox Church, with about 8,000 churches to serve them; perhaps 2 million Protestants, largely Baptists, in about 3,000 churches. I understand there are 3 to 4 million Jews. But Soviet statistics are hard to verify. Three Russian Orthodox seminaries enroll 250 students each. There are no Protestant or Jewish seminaries at all.

"More and more young people are be-

coming disenchanted with the mythology of the Communist doctrine. As they struggle for their identity, they try to learn more about their Christian or Jewish background. That's when their troubles begin. Thousands of Bibles are smuggled into the Soviet Union yearly, and each one is highly prized by the recipients. Underground publications are printed, often recopied by hand, and widely distributed.

"Article 142 of the Soviet Penal Code forbids any 'unofficial' attempt to instruct or inform the young about the Christian Gospel or the Jewish faith. The penalty is usually three years in prison for the first offense. Those who persist may be charged under Article 70 for 'anti-Soviet activities.' Sentences can run from 10 to 15 years. The result? Untold thousands are now imprisoned in the Soviet camps. Their crime? Spreading the Word of the Lord!"

By now, a taxi had arrived, and my new friend entered it with me. As we drove the grim streets of Moscow, he pointed out the various sights in glowing terms. When we reached my hotel, he insisted on paying the fare and, much to my surprise, alighted with me, took my arm again, and led me down Gorki Street, instead of into the hotel lobby.

He continued, "It is not my place to give you a sermon, Harold. However, I must warn you that your Jewish people are in a most dangerous position. Since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, when the Soviet people saw its huge military investment in the Arab countries wiped out in six days, the Kremlin has engaged in a virulent anti-Semitic campaign in the daily press and other media. They must convince their citizens that their mistake is due to a huge world-wide imperialist conspiracy of Zionists. All Soviet Jews, most of whom have not been Zionists at all, are now suspect by the State and have become the victims of increasing anti-Semitic feelings from their former friends.

"Their natural resentment has led them to search their background, to begin to feel more 'Jewish.' Underground study groups keep springing up, are closed by the KGB (Secret Police), and reopen with new leaders in new locations. Letters of appeal for freedom are smuggled out to the West. The KGB crack down with midnight

arrests, and Jewish leaders disappear into special political prisons, which operate under unbelievable conditions.

"These harrassments do not dampen the Jews' spirits; they merely increase their determination. I must warn you that Stalinism has not died here. And there is no limit to the State's attempts to put down even the slightest threat to its totalitarian rule."

Stopping to light a cigarette, he turned to face me. Suddenly he shook my hand.

"I must leave you now. We have been followed since we left your hotel entrance," he said. "When you return to America, you must alert everybody. Tell them the Jews must leave here. There is no possibility for them to be allowed back into the mainstream of Soviet life. Their only hope is to get out of here. Maybe some can claim their right to return to their homeland Israel, or to join relatives in America or Europe. I don't know all the answers, but I know there is no hope for them here."

I was so shaken by his words, that I glanced behind me. When I turned to thank him, his back was already disappearing in the late afternoon rush. I never saw him again.

**W**e went to Kiev, in the Ukraine, and visited the only synagogue. As we entered, we were greeted by a youngish man, perhaps in his 40's. (Everyone else seemed to be in his 60's or 70's.) He wore a nice brown suit, a shirt and tie, and a felt hat, which distinguished him from the others who wore drab worn clothing, and "peasant Lenin caps."

Mr. Brownsuit took my arm and tried to lead me to the front into an area set aside for "special guests," but I insisted on sitting with the congregation. This almost caused a revolution. At least six different men came to my seat. Some politely invited me down front, others finally threatened to report me. But I refused to move.

The old man on my left grasped my arm. "Sit still, don't move," he whispered. Across the aisle, another man looked up from his prayer book. When he was sure he was not being watched, he smiled and winked. All over the congregation, people were whispering and mouthing, "Gut Shabbas" (a good Sabbath to you). After the services, I was surrounded with men, all trying to shake my hand and ask questions, but Mr. Brownsuit grabbed my arm and shouted at them in Russian. They fled. (Every synagogue has its appointed KGB men to keep foreign visitors from mingling with the people. They are Jews who are paid extra for their services, and they are hated by their fellow Jews who look upon Westerners, especially Americans, as their road to freedom.)

I decided to visit Babi Yar, a burial ground where 90,000 Jews were murdered by the Nazis during World War II. Mr. Brownsuit insisted upon accompanying us, although we tried to dissuade him. Babi Yar is marked by a small granite memorial stone, inscribed, "On this site were mur-

dered 90,000 Ukrainian martyrs during the German occupation in 1941-42." No mention of Jews. We all said the Kaddish (memorial prayer) together, and our guide, Mr. Brownsuit said he would leave us now. We thanked him for his courtesy.

As he turned to leave, he said, "You think I am a bad one."

"No, I do not think you are a bad one," I replied. "But I am sorry that you think you have to do this."

He threw his arms around me, hugged me tightly, shook hands formally with my wife, and said, "Shalom." I could see the tears in his eyes, but he fairly bounced as he walked away. I guess he felt that my words had vindicated him, but I was angry at myself for not telling him what I really thought.

That night, I was so excited I could not sleep. Finally, at one o'clock, I quietly put on my slacks, shirt and sneakers and went out to cool off. The streets of Kiev were empty. An occasional taxi passed, but otherwise all was quiet.

As I looked into a dark shop window, I thought I heard music, so I followed the sounds through an alleyway into a large courtyard surrounded by apartments. Now I could clearly hear the music and, to my amazement, I recognized the song. It was "Hava Nagila," perhaps the most popular Hebrew song of our time. This seemed impossible, for in all our travels in the USSR we had not seen an open display of Jewishness—not even a Star of David about the neck (nor a cross either).

I cautiously mounted the dark stairway. At the top of the landing a brawny Jewish lad blocked my path, shouting at me loudly in Russian. I shouted back in Yiddish, hoping he would understand. "I am a Jew . . . from California . . . 'Hava Nagila' . . . I want to hear it."

He nodded his head and led me down the hall. The music stopped. It started again, but it was no longer "Hava Nagila." It sounded like Greek music. I tried to push open the door, but it was held shut. The young Jew put his broad shoulder against it, and we were inside a room about 20 feet square, filled with youngsters in their late teens.

As four young men danced in the center, everyone clapped to the rhythm. I approached a pretty young girl and said, "I am a Jew from America. Play 'Hava Nagila.'" She looked blankly at me.

I turned to a musician. "Play 'Hava Nagila.' Dance, sing for me! I am a Jew." Still no response. Frustrated, and a little frightened, I turned to leave. The door was guarded by another strong youngster. On impulse, I grabbed his hand and said, "Shalom," the universal greeting of Jews all over the world. I realized later that what I really was saying was, "Look, I am a Jew, and you are all Jews. No one can take that away from us."

He opened the door, and when I walked out I found him outside in the dark hall with me. He closed the door and slowly reached for my hand, putting it over his heart.

"Nisht fergessen!" (Don't forget!), he said. I don't think I answered him. I ran past the guard at the head of the stairs, down the steps into the courtyard. By now, tears were streaming from my eyes. I looked up at the only lit window, and I could see a figure behind the curtain, hand raised. "Hava Nagila" had started up again!

I ran all the way back to my hotel room, where my wife was pacing the floor. She thought I must be half way to Siberia. I told her my story; we cried together, then realized that we should be happy not sad. We knew then that our young people had not lost their Jewish spirit; that they would survive every oppression the Soviet overlords could dream up, and not give up their faith.

**W**e returned to the United States with renewed hope. In 1969, the American movement to save the Soviet Jews experienced a tremendous impetus. Thousands of greeting cards were sent to Russia and the Jews wrote back. We made phone calls to the USSR and, to our amazement, the Jews spoke out openly. They knew that the phone calls were monitored by the KGB, but they were determined to tell the world. They now knew they had friends in America, and they renewed their pressures for emigration visas to leave the Soviet Union. They smuggled letters of appeal which we had printed in the free press of the world.

Suddenly, a few Jews were granted exit visas. The Kremlin thought that by "getting rid of the troublemakers" the movement would die down. The applications increased. The world took notice and mounted demonstrations of support. Heads of State and governments, often led by church leaders, made statements and passed resolutions of sympathy.

The world was saying, "Let the Jews go!"

The Kremlin said, "No! This is an internal matter." But more visas were granted.

In the last five years, about 85,000 Jews have emigrated. Responsible estimates indicate that at least one million Jews would leave if they could. And those who have reached freedom are unanimous in the opinion that public attention brought them out. Moreover, they agree that American pressure is the overwhelming force to save the rest. Why? The Soviet Union is today a super power, but it must deal with the other super power, the United States. This gives the American citizen a unique opportunity to use his bargaining power to save human lives. Let me explain.

As the facts about Soviet oppression have become clearer, our United States Congress has reacted. On February 7, 1973, Rep. Wilbur Mills (Ark.) and Rep. Charles Vanik (Ohio) introduced the Freedom of Emigration Act. Briefly, that Bill would deny Most Favored Nation status and the privilege of U.S. credit accommodations to any nation that denies

free emigration to its citizens. Without these trade concessions the Soviet Union is in serious difficulty. In the opinion of most experts, they will ease their restrictions to get what they want, provided they are convinced that they cannot get it any other way. Indeed, about 70 percent of the emigration was granted during the debate in the Congress on this legislation.

Happily, on December 12, 1973, the House of Representatives passed the Mills-Vanik Bill by an almost unprecedented vote of 319 to 80. Today, the same legislation is in the hands of the Senate, known as the Jackson Amendment, with almost 80 Senate co-sponsors. If the Jackson Amendment becomes law, the Soviet authorities will see that Americans are serious about their demands that Christians and Jews alike must be granted their human rights.

Arguments are made that detente with

the USSR is desirable. I agree. But detente does not necessarily demand that Christian principle be sacrificed. The tremendous needs of the Soviet Union for our goods, our technological and production techniques, and our trading advantages can be used to demand that the Kremlin put an end to its religious persecution.


Is this not a good time to say to the Soviet leaders, "If you are sincere in your aim to improve our relations, ease your restrictions, then we can do business. Americans do not wish to trade human lives for dollars"? We made that mistake when Nazi Germany murdered millions of Christians and Jews, and we must convince the Kremlin that we will not make that mistake again.

Soviet Christians have seen that the Jews are attaining some successes in their struggle, and are taking heart from this new phenomenon. They are beginning to

fight for their rights to be free. God willing, they will succeed. Jews and Christians take courage from each other.

As a concerned Christian, you want to save the Jews. If this struggle gains increasing support, Jews all over the world will join with their Christian brothers working for freedom for all peoples in the Soviet Union.

As a Jew, I stand ready to see Christian people behave with Christian love and concern for other people, and to return my Jewish love and concern in kind.

This universal love and concern for all peoples is perhaps the most persuasive force in the World. 

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