

# HERE'S *my* STORY

## LIGHT IN PRETORIA

MRS. JILL KATZ



From time to time, since the early 1970s, whenever my husband would travel to New York, he always made it a point to request an audience with the Rebbe. On this particular occasion, he arrived a few days before Chanukah — the year was 1978. This was when my husband was working as chaplain at the Pretoria Central Prison, the biggest prison in South Africa where many Jews were imprisoned, a lot of them for their anti-apartheid views.

As he later related to me, the Rebbe's first question to him was, "What are you doing for the Jews confined in South African prisons?" My husband replied that he did what he could, although not much was permitted. He visited the prisoners regularly, brought them food parcels for Passover and Rosh Hashanah, and distributed prayer books. The Bible was the only book that the prisoners were allowed to have, and he would say to the prison wardens that the prayer book was "our Bible."

"What about Chanukah candles?" the Rebbe asked.

"This would not be permitted," my husband said.

But the Rebbe did not accept this answer: "Do you realize how much a little bit of light would mean to somebody

incarcerated in a dark cell? How important it would be if they could light Chanukah candles? Can't you arrange it?"

My husband promised that when he returned home, he'd try. "I will do my best to see that it's done next year." But again the Rebbe did not accept this answer:

"What about this year?"

My husband pointed out that he was in New York at the moment, far away from Pretoria and, besides, there was not enough time to do anything. But the Rebbe simply said, "You can use the telephone. Make whatever phone calls you need, and see what you can arrange."

My husband promised to call in the morning, but the Rebbe said, "Why not now?"

My husband explained with the seven-hour time difference between Pretoria and New York, it was now the middle of the night over there.

"If you could call, whom would you call?" the Rebbe wanted to know.

My husband said he was friendly with General Sephton, an Afrikaans minister who was the religious director of prisoners.

"Can't you call him?" the Rebbe persisted.

"Yes, in the morning."

"But if you were to call him now, he would realize how important this is ... since you are calling him from overseas in the middle of the night."

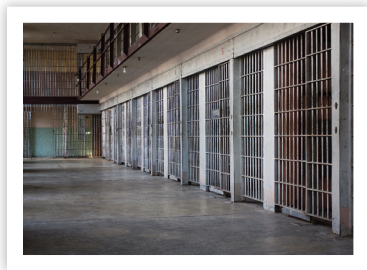
So my husband agreed, and he placed the phone call. First, though, he called his secretary to ask her to wake up the minister and tell him to expect an urgent phone call from overseas. When my husband reached him, the minister was very impressed with the importance of the issue — just as the Rebbe had predicted. Of course, he wanted to know what was involved, and my husband said he would ask his colleague, Rabbi Yirmiyahu Alloy, to explain it all. At the end of the conversation, the minister promised to see to it that the Jewish prisoners in South African prisons would be able to light Chanukah candles.

*continued on reverse*

So my husband went to the Rebbe's office and waited until the Rebbe came out. "Nu?" the Rebbe asked. My husband said, "It's all arranged. The prisoners will be able to light Chanukah candles." To that the Rebbe said, "I'd like to see you later."

My husband called on the Rebbe a bit later on. When the Rebbe saw him, he said, "Now that you've arranged it in South Africa, I'd like you to arrange it in New York. You know, in America, there's only one state where it's not allowed. In each of the other states, the prisoners light

Chanukah candles, but in New York State they don't. I would like you to please try and do something about that."



My husband was very taken aback, and he said, "Well, I knew the proper person in South Africa, but here, I wouldn't know

where to start!" But the Rebbe simply directed him to see Rabbi J.J. Hecht, who would know the right person to call.

By this time it was the 24th of December, and when my husband called the director of the New York State Correctional System, the man said, "You're interrupting me in a middle of a Christmas party. But it must be important if you're calling me now."

My husband told him the story — that he had just arranged permission to have Jewish prisoners light Chanukah candles in all of South Africa. And he ended with, "Surely it can be done in New York State." And the director said, "Yes. And it will be."

When my husband informed the Rebbe of his success, the Rebbe said he wanted to give him a gift. At first, my husband didn't want to accept it, but the Rebbe said, "I don't want to be indebted to anybody. I want to give you a gift — a book." So my husband requested a *Tanya* for our son, which the Rebbe promised would be waiting for him later in the office.

When my husband went to get it, he also found two other books, intended for the Afrikaans minister and his wife — *Challenge* for him and *Woman of Valor* for her — which he brought back to South Africa.

When he returned home, my husband phoned the minister and told him that he had something for him from the Rebbe. "I'll come and fetch it right away," the minister said, and within twenty minutes he was at our house because, as he explained, "If your Rebbe, sitting in Brooklyn, America, can

think of me here in Pretoria and send me gift, I must get it as quickly as possible." He just couldn't believe that the Rebbe would be so thoughtful and considerate of a stranger half a world away.

This entire story made quite a tumult in South Africa at the time. The Rebbe even gave a talk on the subject of lighting candles and mentioned that prisoners are being permitted to light candles. And they still do this in Pretoria. And not only in Pretoria, but in all of South Africa.

*Rebbetzin Jill Katz and her husband Rabbi Sidney (Shabsi) Katz, of blessed memory, served the Jewish community of Pretoria, South Africa, from 1954 to 1991. Rebbetzin Katz was interviewed in New York in December, 2010.*

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## This week in...

> **5744 — 1983**, in an address to children at a Chanukah rally in 770, the Rebbe re-launched the Tanya printing campaign, encouraging that a Tanya be printed in every city across the world where Jews are living.<sup>1</sup> 30 Kislev

> **5748 — 1987**, in honor of the year of *Hakhel*, the Rebbe gave a talk every night of Chanukah, including Friday afternoon just before Shabbos. Each night, the Rebbe discussed the significance of the number of lights kindled that night and the implication of the *Nasi* mentioned in each day's Torah reading.<sup>2</sup> 27 Kislev

1. *Hisvaaduyos 5744* Vol. 2, p. 724 2. *Yoman Shnas Hakhel Kislev, 5748*



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