

# To Remain a Jew: The Life of Rav Yitzchak Zilber

(translated from Russian by Eliezer and Sherry Dimarsky, Feldheim 2010)

## Read the following excerpt from the autobiography

...In Kazan (in the Soviet Union) a bris milah was not a common occurrence (only a few thousand Jews lived there), and because the town was poor and people could not afford to buy a train ticket for the mohel, they would wait three to four months until a need for a few "brises" accumulated. Then all the families who needed the mohel's services would split the price of the mohel's train ticket.

Once, in 1949, the mohel, Rav Shlomo, arrived in Kazan, made a few "brises" and was about to go back to the train station when he found out that I had just had a baby boy. The Rav immediately sold his ticket and waited for a week in Kazan, leaving his wife with all the grandchildren. When the day of my son's bris arrived, the Rav said that he had been waiting for a bris like this one for twenty-five years.

The reason for his statement was this: In 1924 there was a new law that forbade the release of new mothers from the hospital before their baby was nine days old... So for twenty-five years the Rav did not have a single opportunity to perform a bris on the eighth day, as commanded in the Torah!

So how did I arrange for Gita to be released on the eighth day? The wife of the Minister of Health, Sofia Yosifovna Koshkina, a Jewish gynecologist, occupied an important position in the ministry, and I turned to her.

I did not know what sort of a person she was or whether she would turn me in or not, but I felt I had to try. I would go to the office, take a look at her, and decide on the spot how to proceed.

[In those days, the Soviet government was hostile toward Jewish traditions like the Brit Milah. Many families avoided performing the ceremony out of fear of punishment, losing their jobs, or facing social stigma.]

I entered and said, "I have a request. I am Jewish, I just had a son, and I want my wife to be released from the hospital on the eighth day."

She asked why. I explained that G-d commanded the Jews to perform circumcisions on the eighth day, but here the mothers were released only on the ninth day. Sofia Yosifovna wrote down the hospital's phone number. On the eighth day I went to our neighbor, asked him to prepare everything, and invited friends, not yet knowing whether my wife would be released or not. I decided to be ready just in case. At two o'clock she was released and the bris took place on time...

## Answer the following questions together:

- What were the main challenges in performing the circumcision in Kazan during the described period? (Try to think of at least two challenges)

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**The author says he preferred to take a risk in order to perform the circumcision on the eighth day.**

- What risk did the father take upon himself?
- What considerations might have led him to act this way? Do you think this was the right choice?

**Create a diagram of the "path" of each of the characters in the story.**

Write how their moral decisions led to significant outcomes.

At the top of the diagram, write the situation: A son is born to a family in the Soviet Union. Then draw what each character could have done, and circle what they ultimately chose to do. For example: the mohel (could have chosen to go home with his original ticket or sold the ticket, etc.)

The diagram will illustrate that in this story, only the combination of the brave actions of the father, the mohel, and the wife of the health minister led to the baby being circumcised on time. Each character could have made a different decision.

### ***A family living in the Soviet Union had a baby boy***

