

## HE SLEEPS AND SLUMBERS NOT

Taken from “*The Prisoner and Other Tales of Faith*” by Rabbi Salomon Alter Halpern and published by Feldheim. Reprinted here by kind permission of the Author.

The Ministers of Tsar Nikolai the First were waiting anxiously in a spacious room in the Imperial Palace. They had been suddenly called from their homes for an Emergency Meeting. But none of them had any idea of what the emergency might be. For once, all was quiet in their departments: no war, no rebellion, not even a financial crisis or international dispute that might call for urgent measures. Whatever it was, the Emperor alone knew of it.

At last, the Tsar arrived. He was in one of his dangerous moods, when anyone who disagreed with him would be considered as a traitor.

He came to the point at once. “Gentlemen,” he said, “I have called this meeting to settle once and for all the Jewish Question. This stubborn race is the greatest danger to the unity of Our Dominions. They refuse to speak our language or give up any of their outlandish ways. They are a state within the State. Their numbers and influence are increasing. We must get rid of this menace. I shall not be satisfied until they have either embraced our faith or left the country.

“We have planned laws to this purpose more than once. But these devils are cunning, and their bribery has often made traitors of high-placed men. There may be traitors even amongst you here.”

Some of the Ministers winced inwardly. Was he going to ‘expose a traitor,’ and ‘make an example’?

“Each time,” he went on, “they have gained information about the laws before they came into force, sometimes even before they were passed, and by bribery or international protests managed to get them suppressed before they were even due to be carried out.

“It shall not happen this time. This *Ukase* is going out in sealed letters to the Provincial Governors and will not be opened until the thirty-first of March — which is the first day of their Passover — and it will then be carried out immediately. You, gentlemen, will not leave the Palace until you have worked out the *Ukase* and it has been signed. Until it comes into force you will be under secret observation, and I would advise you, gentlemen, if you value your lives, not to meet any Jewish spies.”

The Ministers were struck with fear and indignation. Was this the way to speak to the noblemen of Imperial Russia? But they did value their lives, and no one uttered a word of protest.

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“I take it then,” the Tsar continued, after a glance round the table, “that we are agreed. Now for the details.

“We must strike first of all at the things from which these infidels draw their strength in spite of all the restrictions under which I — and my predecessors — have placed them. We must strike at the means by which they pass on their rebellious ideas and their fanatical religion.”

From his inside breast pocket, he drew out a sheet of paper and read:

**“To be closed:**

- (a) The Hebrew Schools known as *Cheder*. Proper schools may be opened provided that all teachers are Russian Christians.
- (b) The Seminaries called *Yeshivos*.
- (c) The Synagogues.
- (d) The Jewish baths called *Mikvahs*.

**“To be prohibited:**

- (a) Circumcision.
- (b) The Jewish Sabbath. All shops and factories must be open on Saturdays, and the police must see to it that every worker and trader is doing his work on Saturdays.

**“To be arrested:**

- (a) All Rabbis.
- (b) All Community Leaders.
- (c) Any person who tries — or might try — to obstruct the carrying out of this law, or who makes protest against it.”

There was silence. The Foreign Minister was thinking of what the English newspapers would say. The Home Secretary thought of the sheer logistics of dealing with a couple of million Jews and how many deportations would result and then found himself wondering how in the world he was going to find the extra tens of thousands of dependable and incorruptible policemen who would ensure that the law was carried out — if the thing wasn't called off first. The Minister of Justice thought of how on earth he could have such a thing on the lawbook without looking ridiculous ...

But no one said a thing. It was no use — and highly dangerous — to answer back.

The Tsar broke into their thoughts. “It is now your task to formulate these points so as to leave no loopholes, and to give some convincing reasons for each of them. Any reference books you may need will be brought to you here, and since your work will take a number of hours I have arranged for dinner to be served in the next room. You will also find light refreshments there whenever you want them.

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“Now tell me,” he went on in a somewhat friendlier tone, “how long do you think you will take to complete a draft?”

After a moment’s silence, the Prime Minister replied:

“In view of the urgency of the matter, Sire, I, and I believe my colleagues, will agree to forgo dinner today and be content with light refreshments during the work. Even so, I think we shall need twelve hours for a rough draft. As it is now two o’clock, this means we cannot be finished until two o’clock in the morning.”

“In that case,” answered the Tsar, “I will not keep you any longer from your work. Tonight at two o’clock, then, I shall come and see what progress you have made. The Meeting is closed.”

With these words, he rose and walked out of the room.

The Ministers stood in their places for a moment. They thought many things but did not speak. It was not healthy to speak too much in the Imperial Palace.

They set to work. The Home Secretary, who had most knowledge on the subject, went over the points proposed by His Majesty. Each point was discussed, then the work was shared out between them. They found it hard work without their assistants, but by nine o’clock each had finished working out his part.

The separate sheets were read out and discussed. Some points needed changing. Each took his notes back again for a final draft. By eleven thirty they had combined them into a unified document, and the Minister of Justice had begun to copy it out in clear writing.

The others sat down to a late dinner. It was only now they realized how tired and hungry they had become. Glad that the task was over, they ate heartily.

Suddenly, shouted commands were heard outside. The guards were presenting arms — the Tsar was coming. They had hardly time to file into the Conference Chamber before he came in, alone.

Without a word, he went to the Minister of Justice’s place, took up what he was writing and glanced through it, then through the remaining sheets. At last he gathered all the papers into a sheaf, went up to the grand fireplace — and threw them into the flames.

Still without speaking, he walked out. The whole thing had only taken a few minutes. Outside the guards were called to attention again — and he was gone.

“This is too much!” exploded the Home Secretary. “We are treated like naughty boys, first locked in to do our lines, then — ” He pointed to the fire.

Nobody said a word in support. Indeed, the Home Secretary seemed to regret that he had spoken.

“It seems,” began the Finance Minister, “that His Majesty does not require our services any more tonight. I move, therefore, that we adjourn.”

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The Prime Minister turned on him. "I cannot agree at all," he said. "His Majesty has not dismissed us. It is certainly clear that he is displeased with our draft. If so, it is our duty to prepare a better one, but certainly not to leave our posts."

"But on what lines," retorted the Finance Minister, "do you propose to plan a new draft? This one was based on His Majesty's own wishes. If that was not good, how can other ideas satisfy His Majesty better?" To this, the Prime Minister had nothing to say.

At last it was agreed that they would stay until two o'clock, the time originally arranged, in case the Tsar would return with new proposals. In the meantime they would go on with their interrupted dinner.

Food and wine restored their good humour and they were drinking one toast after another when shortly before two o'clock they again heard the commands outside and the Tsar returned, with two Adjutants.

He too was in a genial mood. "Well, gentlemen," he addressed them, "so you have finished the work and started celebrating? I thought it couldn't take all that long. Now, if you are ready, I'd like to see the draft."

Astonishment and confusion were in the expressions of the Ministers. At last the Prime Minister brought out: "B-but Your Majesty did inspect the d-draft at midnight, and — " He broke off when he saw the Tsar's sudden gesture of anger and disgust.

"Is there," demanded the Tsar in an icy tone, "is there one amongst you gentlemen sober enough to tell me what this man is babbling about?"

The Ministers looked to the War Minister, who was regarded as a favourite of the Tsar, and he addressed his master in his most conciliatory manner:

"Your Imperial Majesty! If we have incurred Your Majesty's displeasure by having dinner whilst waiting for new orders, we most humbly apologize. But when Your Majesty rejected the original draft we thought — "

"What on earth," interrupted the Tsar, "are you talking about?"

The War Minister tried to rally his dignity. "Does not Your Majesty please to remember that shortly before midnight Your Majesty inspected the draft we had completed, and burned it? We were awaiting further orders and in the meantime ..."

The Tsar's anger was mounting. "Are you suggesting that I have been here before?" He looked round the table and saw them nodding in agreement. "Is that what all of you say?"

The Ministers affirmed this.

"A conspiracy!" thundered the Tsar. "By Heaven, a conspiracy! The whole Cabinet bought by the Jews! But you must be out of your minds to sit here feasting all this time and then tell me the most stupid lie ever invented! Von Gradewitz!" he addressed one of the Adjutants, "call the guards and have these men locked up until I decide whether they belong in the mad-house or in Siberia!"

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Obediently, the Adjutant went to the door and shouted a command. A platoon of guards marched in and stood awaiting orders.

The Tsar had changed back to his cold, ironic mood. He said in French: "*Messieurs les Ministres*, I know that in your hearts you probably think of me as a tyrant. But let none of you say that you have been condemned without a fair trial and proper evidence. Von Gradewitz, ask these plain, honest soldiers whether these gentlemen are lying or I myself."

Gradewitz spoke to the Sergeant of the Guard. "Has anyone entered this building since you came on duty?"

"No one, Sir," replied the soldier, "except His Majesty alone."

"Fool!" countered Gradewitz, impatiently. "We know that His Majesty entered or he would not be here! I asked you if anyone came in before this."

"Yes, Sir," answered the man, with composure, "and that was what I said. His Majesty came here, alone, at ten minutes to twelve, stayed for three minutes, and left again."

"An impostor!" exclaimed the Tsar, whose face had turned white with anger. "A traitor can impersonate me, and walk past my guards unchallenged! Damnation, I say! What have we come to if in my own Palace — Call the Officer of the Day!"

He whispered to Gradewitz, then stepped behind the heavy curtain drawn over the long windows. When the officer came in, Gradewitz asked him: "Have you seen His Majesty the Tsar tonight?"

"Yes," replied the officer, "I saw His Majesty twice. The first time just before twelve, and again just now."

"Are you quite sure?" asked Gradewitz. "I happen to know that His Majesty did not leave his private apartments from ten o'clock until now. Could it have been someone else, perhaps someone impersonating His Majesty?"

"Impossible," declared the officer, emphatically, "quite impossible. I opened the doors for His Majesty myself on both occasions, and you will agree that it is my business to know His Majesty's appearance. Besides, I had to ask him for the password."

"And he gave it?" asked Gradewitz.

"Naturally," said the officer, "why should His Majesty not know his own password?"

"Enough!" said the Tsar, stepping out from behind the curtain. He bared his head reverently.

"Gentlemen," he said in solemn tones, "at twelve o'clock I was asleep in my room. But it is clear that the Guardian of Israel does not sleep nor slumber. The man you saw was His Heavenly messenger — sent to hold us back from an ill-considered step. I bow to His Will.

"Gentlemen, the *Ukase* is withdrawn!"