

## Drash by Jeffrey Janis

March 2, 2007  
Beth Chayim Chadashim  
Los Angeles, CA

## Parashat Tezavveh

I have wanted to join the Peace Corps since college. But I put it off for a number of reasons. Basically I felt I needed to have a career first. One day in 2003 I realized the time was right. Many friends thought I was crazy to leave in the middle of my career and join the Peace Corps but I kept assuring them that I would make it work somehow. While I was in the process of applying to join the Peace Corps, an ex-girlfriend of mine, died suddenly of an aortic aneurysm. At the funeral people were talking about following your dreams, and life being short. I knew the time was right for me to follow my dream.

The application process typically takes about 12 months, and only 15% are accepted into the Peace Corps. And about 30% come home early before their two years are up. Well, after 10 months I was finally accepted. My assignment Ukraine. And that's where I lived from February 2004 to April 2006.

Ukraine is about the size of Texas with 48 million people and it currently has a negative birth rate. The life expectancy is 61 years for men and 72 for women.

During my first 3 months I lived with a host family in a small town that looked exactly like the village Anatevka in Fiddler on the Roof. Imagine what it was like my first few nights with them at the dinner table. We sat and nodded our heads and smiled, and then nodded a little more and smiled some more. I didn't know a word of Russian. They didn't know any English. But we made it work! And during the time I was there and throughout my time in Ukraine they became an important part of my life. Getting to know them was a highlight of my Peace Corps experience. I always called them Mama and Papa - although they are only about 6 years older than I am.

After 3 months of training, I was sent to my official Peace Corps site for the next 2 years.

Ukraine became an independent country, and separated from the USSR in 1991. Today it is a proud, if impoverished country. The first line of the Ukrainian national anthem is Ukraine is not yet dead. Americans feel it's their right to the "pursuit of happiness". Ukrainians aggressively pursue their right to survival.

I knew that any country the Peace Corps sent me to would necessitate having to go back into the closet. And this was certainly true for Ukraine. Although I was out with my Peace Corps friends, I was

totally closeted to all my Ukrainian friends and most of them had never met a gay person before. Or maybe I should say - someone they KNEW was gay!

I did come out to the one other non Ukrainian in my city. A French writer named Marie. She knew I was gay - and then fell in love with me. She even followed me to West Hollywood and was stalking me...but that is a whole other story!

But going back into the closet was not nearly as hard as dealing with being Jewish.

In Ukraine being Jewish is a NATIONALITY or an ETHNICITY. Under the Soviets, anyone who was Jewish had their passports stamped with "Jewish" as their nationality. I was not viewed as a Jew in Ukraine, as my nationality is American. Even to the Ukrainian Jews I met, they didn't consider me Jewish. They considered me as an American who happens to also be Jewish. Assimilation is common. I met very few people there who are Jewish on both sides of their families. And, I met very few Jews there who are observant on any level. Although it reported that there are about 500,000 Jews left in Ukraine, probably only about 20% really self identify as being Jewish.

Under Soviet rule for 75 years, the establishment of all religious institutions educational or communal-was illegal. Jews were denied the right to assemble as Jews or to maintain links with other Jews. This left them with very little sense of what being Jewish is - or even how to be part of a Jewish community.

In 1933 there were 2.5 million Jews in the USSR. It is estimated that six hundred thousand Ukrainian Jews were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II. This is the greatest number of Jews killed during the Holocaust in any of the other former Soviet republics. It is now less than 1% Jewish for the whole country. During WWII Ukraine was considered to be the worst country in their treatment of the Jews. Hitler was confident that mass exterminations on the spot could "solve" the Jewish question in Ukraine by murdering all the Jews. There were little resources spent in Ukraine to set up ghettos, or to deport Jews to camps or murder sites. The killings were simply done in the Ukrainian towns and villages. Jews were rounded up and killed, on site, in mass graves. The local Ukrainians were known for working closely with the Nazis and helping them round up the Jews and then helping to kill them. The worst incidence of this was at Babi Yar in Kyiv where almost 34,000 Jews were shot and killed in a mass grave in a period of 2 days.

I lived in a city with a population of about 255,000 people. In the late 1890's the city of Khmel'nitsky (then known as Proskurov) was 80% Jewish. Now, Jews comprise less than 1/2% of their population. It was renamed in 1954 after Bogdan Khmel'nistky who in 1648 killed more than 250,000 Jews and destroyed more than 300 Jewish communities. (I used to tell my friends in the U.S. that I felt like I was living in a place called Hitlerville.)

Anti-Semitism is still alive and well and continues to be a part of everyday life in Ukraine. In the two years I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer, there was a rise in anti-Semitic propaganda and violent incidents in Ukraine.

There is a very strong Chabad presence throughout Ukraine. There is also a Progressive (Reform) presence-although it is much smaller and not as powerful as Chabad. There are now 2 Progressive rabbis in Ukraine.

My site placement was with an organization called Hesed-Besht. There are 170 Heseds in the former Soviet Union and 11 Heseds in Ukraine - all supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. I was the first Peace Corps Volunteer placed at a Jewish site in Ukraine, and probably in all of Peace Corps. The Peace Corps could do this because Judaism is viewed an ethnic group in Ukraine.

The Heseds are similar to a Jewish Community Center and Jewish Family Service offering financial support to pay for heating / used clothes / Jewish education training / food packages / discussion groups / and medical support, just to name a few of the services they provide. My Hesed had a staff of 150 people and a budget of \$600,000. But since they had little Jewish education, they taught many of the prayers incorrectly, typically leaving out key words - and often putting the stress on the wrong syllable. There was no teaching about tzedakah. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur the office was open. No one went to temple except me and one co-worker.

And, since all religion was banned under Soviet times, Christmas was not celebrated. Instead all Ukrainians celebrate New Years - with Father Frost and a New Years tree. EVERYONE.

PORK and cheese was served at all Hesed events.

At the Hesed-Besht holiday party I have a great photo of the Director of Hesed-Besht Igor making a toast with vodka. Behind him is a Christmas tree with Santa Claus on the top. In front of him is a platter with pork and cheese.

Igor was a stereotypical soviet style boss. He tried to tell me who could be my friends. He told me to shave my beard and cut my hair. He would insult me in front of the other staff members. He tried to control my every move. He also made numerous sexual advances towards me.

One of my favorite sayings that I heard in Ukraine was "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us."

Peace Corps told us that corruption was rampant in Ukraine. And I discovered this to be true also at Hesed-Besht. I knew if I complained to the Peace Corps - they would probably send me home. So I kept my mouth shut and did my best to deal with this difficult situation.

I had many Secondary Projects

I taught American Sign Language to deaf Ukrainians. This gave me tremendous pleasure and I have some very funny stories from this experience.

I had a weekly English Club for University students. I had no idea it would be so tough to teach English. But I loved challenging them to think out of the box.

There was an HIV/AIDS group in Ukraine of Peace Corps Volunteers and I was the chair of this group. Ukraine has one of the fastest growing rates of infection of HIV in the world. Currently 1.7% of their population is HIV positive. This number has doubled for the past 3 years and is estimated to continue to double for the next few years. It currently consists mostly of IV drug users. But this is changing rapidly as only 55% of sexually active people in Ukraine use condoms. They have minimal accurate information on HIV/AIDS. It reminds me of the US in the mid 1980s.

I lived through the Orange Revolution in November 2004. Their President was poisoned and his face is now all pock marked. It was a very exciting time and it was a very peaceful revolution - but the truth is - nothing really changed.

I lived on about \$200 a month. My rent was \$80 and my total apartment space was 370 sq ft. I had water and electricity - usually. It went out on a regular basis. I walked everywhere and had to hand wash all my clothes including my jeans, sheets, and towels - in the bathtub. The weather for half of the year was dark, short, gray, cold days. A typical winter day was a high of 25 F and a low of 10 F. There was no sun or any fresh fruits and vegetables for at least 3 months. The coldest day was -20F. They have very LONG hot summer days - but there is no air conditioning and all the windows are closed as Ukrainians believe an open window will cause a draft, you can get sick from this draft and then DIE! Even in 95 degree heat they believe a draft will get you sick! Only one tiny window in my apartment opened. All the rest were either painted shut or nailed shut.

And Ukrainians are not known for being friendly to people they don't know.

But - none of this was that hard. What was really hard was the loneliness.

I got home every evening by 6:00 pm. From 6:00 pm until 9:00 am the next morning - I had to figure out how to entertain myself. I had no TV. No internet. I had a telephone - but it was too expensive to call the U.S. or even other Peace Corps Volunteers in Ukraine.

I did laundry on a regular basis as I needed space to hang my clothes to dry.

I did lots of cooking.

I read more than a book a week.

And I wrote in my journal - a lot!

Now - I don't want it to sound like I didn't have ANY friends - I had a small group of close friends. And as luck would have it my best friend in Ukraine won the green card lottery and is moving to the US to live with me on May 24th.

Although I often walked around saying I hate this country. I hate my job. I also found myself walking around saying "I am having such an amazing experience!" I stuck it out because even with everything I've mentioned, it was truly an experience that provided me with memories which will last me for the rest of my life. And the reality is that none of the above mentioned reasons seemed like a good enough reason to go home early - although my Mom and sister would often say to me "Jeff - things sound just terrible - why don't you just come home or do you think you haven't suffered enough yet!?"

I never seriously thought about coming home early. I made a 2 year commitment to do this, and I was not willing to let these things stop me from fulfilling my dream. I had a dream and I needed to see it through. I knew that if I could stick this out and make it work - it would give me the confidence that I can make it through just about anything.

I learned things about myself and about life that I had never even thought about. I learned to be more self reliant and independent. I gained a tremendous amount of inner strength and confidence, and patience. I found that my brain was constantly being bombarded and challenged and I loved that feeling. I learned first hand about the Jewish community there and I became good friends with the Chief Progressive Rabbi of Ukraine. I learned to speak Russian - not great - but I can now speak Russian. I learned how to avoid my boss and keep him away from me. I figured, if I could make it work with him, I can survive any boss in the U.S. On the really tough days, I took it in bite size chunks. One day at a time. I knew all of this was for a limited time period and I knew that I would return to the U.S. after 2 years. I always knew I could go always home if I really I wanted to.

But most important of all, I knew I was making a difference in so many people's lives. I felt needed and useful in ways I have NEVER felt before.

I helped save a life - Victoria - a 13 year old client of Hesed-Besht needed a special breathing apparatus. I was able to obtain funding to purchase the apparatus that saved her life

Every day I felt I was making a difference and saving lives. Especially every time I spoke with Ukrainian college students about HIV/AIDS. And that was a very powerful feeling. It's something which got me out of bed every single day. Knowing I was needed and knowing I was also truly making a difference - just about says it all. Isn't that what life is all about! Isn't that really what all of us want? To make a difference in this world. To be remembered. How often do we get the opportunity to see that we are making a tangible difference? To feel that we are truly needed and have an impact.

As many of you know, one of my best friends - Mike Harris - just died two weeks ago. This reaffirmed in my mind the cliché - Life is short.

Follow your heart and your dreams  
Do something where you are truly needed.

Ask yourself - what are you doing to make the world a better place? It doesn't need to be big. But if every one of us does something, then collectively the world will be a better place.

Shabbat Shalom