

An Israeli Journalist's Perspective on CHANUKAH

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As an Israeli journalist, I had the privilege of hearing this Chanukah story from the hero himself; it's a story about the furthest Jews who are actually the closest, a story that more people should hear.

I heard this story from Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein, who told it during a visit to a small classroom at the Zion Brina school in Beitar Illit.

Edelstein described the events of December 19, 1984, the day he was sentenced to three years in prison in a Soviet labor camp in southern Siberia. The charge was "drug possession," but the real reason was his Zionist and Jewish activity.

"After spending three months in a dungeon, I came to court to hear the sentence," Edelstein told the students. "The hall was filled with police and security personnel. In a regular trial, relatives are allowed to come, but the government had filled all the seats with security guards so that there

would be no room for my family members. Only my wife and mother managed to get in."

After the sentence, 26-year-old Edelstein was surrounded by many police officers who were about to return him to the detention cell. On the way out, he somehow managed to push his head through the security detail. He had one question for his wife, who he had not seen for three months, and who he would not see again for years. And what was he inspired to shout at that moment? It was this: "Tanya, what candle is it today?"

Russian security officials thought the prisoner, who had just heard his harsh sentence, was going mad. The truth was that, for the first time, his wife thought so too. She didn't understand what he was talking about. So again he shouted, "What candle is it today?" Only after his third attempt did she understand and immediately shout back, "Tonight we

light the second candle!" Yes, it was the Sunday morning of Chanukah 5745. Yuli Edelstein did not have a calendar in the dungeon, but as he was sentenced, he heard the secular date and calculated that this must be the time for Chanukah. It was important for him to know how many candles to light.

That evening, not in a prisoner's dungeon, but in a cell of prisoners already tried, prisoner Yuli Edelstein, a member of an assimilated family who discovered Judaism and repented, somehow got a hold of two matches. He stood in front of the bars in the window and lit the two matches "And so," he told the younger students in Beitar-Illit, "I stood there in front of the window for a few seconds until the matches really scorched my fingers. It was perhaps the shortest candle lit in history. I don't even know if I fulfilled the mitzvah, but for me, that night, a little light rejected a lot of darkness."