



**Self-Sacrifice in the Valley of Tears
Parshas Vayigash**

The train screeched as it sped from Siberia towards Moscow. The train stopped at many stops on the way, with passengers getting on and off, all but one man.

Rabbi Mendel Potrapps barley peered out the window. He was contemplating the past decade he had spent in Siberian camps, away from his family and his activities on behalf of the Jews, for which he was sent to the Gulag.

His arrest came as a surprise. Troops burst into his home and ordered him to join them. He was tried and sent to 10 years in exile for running a network of *Cheiders*, Jewish preschools. His family managed to escape and cross the border, and so he found himself disconnected from his entire life.

Rabbi Mendel was not broken easily. In the few letters he was allowed to send to his family in London he strengthened them with words of belief. He promised better days after he served his time in prison. He told him about his life in Siberia and gave them hope for the future.

Now, on the train ride back, he reminisced on those dark days.

A few days before he was released he was told by the KGB that he was being let out on condition that he leaves Russia for good.

He was supposed to get off the train in Moscow and then cross the border.

If he did not adhere to the condition, he could face another decade in Siberia or even death. No one defied the regime. He sat there thinking of his brethren who were left behind the Iron Curtain. He had never forgotten them, and had plans to reestablish his educational venture after his release.

He was deeply upset by the Jews' oppression under the Communist regime and the KGB, and especially about the youth who knew nothing of their Judaism. For their sake he wanted to stay behind and continue his work.

And what about the KGB's threat? He thought for a moment and then decided that he would do what he would do, the KGB would do what it did, and G-d would do what He did. He got it in Moscow, determined to carry on with his holy mission.

In our weekly parsha we read about Yosef's encounter with his brothers after many years of separation and Yaacov's descent to Egypt.

Just before entering Egypt, Yaacov orders his son Yehuda to establish a place of Torah study in Egypt.

"He sent Yehuda ahead of him to Yosef, to direct him to Goshen, and they came to the land of Goshen."¹

The Midrash Tanchumah says that Yaacov sent Yehuda to establish for him a house of study, from which teaching would emanate.

Why is it that Yaacov sent Yehuda on that mission, and not Reuven his firstborn, or Yissachar the scholar?

We find the answer at the beginning of the parsha, where we find Yehuda stepping forward and intervening on behalf of Benyamin.

Yehuda tells Yosef: " For your servant assumed responsibility for the boy from my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him to you, I will have sinned against my father forever.'"

Midrash Rabba explains that Yehuda said: "Now if you ask why I enter the fray more than my other brothers, I will reply that they are all standing from the outside without commitment, while I have bound myself with a strong bond to be an outcast in both worlds."

Our sages teach us that at the time G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish People he asked them who would vouch that they would actually keep its commandments? They answered that their forefathers would vouch for them. G-d did not accept that answer. They then said that their prophets would vouch for them. G-d declined that answer as well. When they replied that their children would assume responsibility, G-d accepted that answer, for when one is willing to sacrifice his dearest, his children for the sake of Torah, it shows that there is a strong bond.

When Yaacov searched for someone who would open a Torah institution in Egypt, he searched for someone who would take sincere responsibility and would be willing to sacrifice everything for this. Yehuda, who had proven his worthiness in the past, will do so again.

In the middle of the day they heard a knock on the door of a Moscovite Jew. They were shocked to see Rabbi Mendel standing there. No one believed he was still alive.

After a short sit down, Rabbi Mendel introduced the reason he had come: to reestablish his educational network.

And so, facing a real threat, Rabbi Mendel went back into Jewish education for several years, and then he reunited with his family.

Rabbi Mendel became an influential teacher, with the Lubavitcher Rebbe saying of him that he was a self-sacrificing educator.

¹ Beresheit 46:28.