Jewish Tribune – Toldos

**Testing Testing**

Avrohom Ovinu’s greatest nisayon was the akeidah. It was certainly the most dramatic and it represented the highpoint of Avrohom Ovinu’s avodas Hashem. As the possuk says, עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה, now I know that you are a G-d fearing man (Bereishis 22,12).

Yaakov Ovinu’s “akeidah moment” takes place in this week’s sedra. He had to grapple with his middah of emes and (instructed by his mother who was guided by Ruach Hakodesh), had to seemingly compromise the truth when he receives the brochos.

In truth, we all have our “akeidah moments”. Let me share with you a story I heard recently from Rav YY Jacobson, in his guest appearance in the JLE’s brilliant History for the Curious podcast series.

Rabbi YY Jacobson told a story about Reb Mendel Futerfas, the legendary mashpia of Tomchei Temimim in Kfar Chabad, and someone I have mentioned before in this column. Reb Mendel Futerfas was a paragon of living chassidus and mesirus nefesh, and spent many years imprisoned and sentenced to hard labour in Siberian Gulags for his efforts to transmit Torah and for arranging the clandestine escape of hundreds of Jews from the USSR in 1946.

His life was not an easy one. His shem kodesh was Menachem Mendel ben Menachem Mendel, his father dying before he even had his bris. After eight years in the Siberian Gulags, he was denied exit from Russia for an additional eight years, until his request was finally granted in 1963. He lived in London and after all he had gone through lost a married daughter in a tragic car accident.

Yet his spirit was unbreakable. He was a legend in his lifetime and would go to any lengths to help a fellow Jew. He was known for his sharp wit and humour and his well-attended farbrengens were interspersed with life lessons creatively drawn from his experiences in Siberia.

At one farbrengen, Reb Mendel shared a lesson learned from the following experience.

Because Reb Mendel was so different from the other inmates, many of his fellow “prisoners” felt comfortable confiding in him. They recognised that he was a G-d fearing Jew and a man of enormous principle. They saw how he only ate kosher, did not work on Shabbos and tenaciously cleaved to his religion and to his Creator. They knew he would not betray their trust.

One time, a non-Jewish Russian peasant who was imprisoned in Siberia, confided in Reb Mendel that he was planning to escape. Reb Mendel was surprised. “But there are guards here 24 hours a day watching your every move!”

“Don’t worry”, the man reassured him, “I have noticed that every night, when the shift changes, there is a window of 20 seconds where there is blind spot. If I run as fast as I can, I can make it deep into the forest before they even notice me.”

“But what about the dogs?” asked Reb Mendel. They are expertly trained to hunt you down and they can tear you to shreds!”

“Don’t worry” replied the Russian, “I have a plan for the dogs” he said with confidence.

That evening, Reb Mendel curiously and nervously kept an eye out and, as the guards changed shift, he watched his friend run for his life. A minute later, the guards noticed the escape and the dogs were released. Whilst the bullets could no longer reach the Russian, the dogs could, and they hurtled ferociously at breakneck speed towards him.

The Russian had taken a big chunk of meat with him, and as the dogs came close, he threw the meat down. Immediately the dogs stopped running and began devouring the meat. The prisoner continued running and made his escape.

When the dogs returned from the aborted chase, each with a big chunk of meat still in their mouths, the head guard took out his gun and shot both dogs dead.

Reb Mendel had observed the who scene and could not understand why the guard had shot the dogs. True they had failed in their mission, but these dogs were expensive and had been expertly trained for years. Surely they were still of value?

Some weeks later, Reb Mendel noticed the guard was in good spirits and he started a conversation with him. Reb Mendel found the opportunity to ask his question. Why did the guard shoot the dogs?

The guard explained that these dogs were indeed highly trained and really all the training was for the very moment the prisoner escaped. If at that point, a piece of meat is more alluring, then these dogs have failed and are no longer of value.

Reb Mendel derived an important life lesson from this incident. Our lives often prepare us for our “akeidah moment”. In a way, it is one long training. The challenge is to rise to the occasion and not to be allured or distracted when the moment arrives.

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