



**The Unbreachable Fence**  
**Parshas Vayigash**

The phone rang early at my home. Rabbi Ovadya Yosef's assistant was on the line. Rabbi Ovadya wished to speak with me. I understood that something of great significance was at hand.

He told me of a ban the Jews of the Island of Djerba in Tunisia had set against studying secular subjects at school. "This is a ban set by previous generations, as they feared the influence of the Haskalah (enlightenment) movement," Rabbi Ovadya explained, "Only with this steadfastness were they able to maintain their unique way of life."

What has changed? I inquired. "New comers are trying to change their customs and introduce the study of non-religious studies. Are they not fearful? He who breaches the wall may be punished."

He asked me to travel to Djerba with Rabbi Raphael Cohen to strengthen the notion that the study of Torah should not be mixed with other studies.

I began to prepare for the journey.

Rabbi Cohen explained on the way that the Alliance movement was responsible for the secularization of the community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its effects were still felt until this day.

The PLO headquarters was in Tunisia at the time, and the airplane was filled with PLO terrorists. I kept on reminding myself that the Talmud teaches that he who is on a mission to perform a Mitzvah is not harmed. We anticipated the landing with apprehension.

When we landed it became apparent that our visas were not in order, for all we had were our Israeli passports. We were held for three hours and then released to go to our hotel. We were ordered not to leave the hotel and were told to report to the airport the next morning.

We received a warm reception by Rabbi Chaim Madar, the community rabbi. He hosted us lavishly in his home. He owned rare books, and so we sat all night and studied. In the morning we went with him for the morning prayers in the synagogue.

Some ten policemen raided the synagogue during prayers. They came searching for us in the hotel and learned that we were staying with Rabbi Madar. Rabbi Madar took them to the door and pointed at the Mezuzah. He told them plainly: "There are holy Jews and cannot stay in a place with no Mezuzah. How can you expect them to stay at the hotel?"

They accepted the rabbi's explanation. They waited until we concluded our prayers and then we returned to the airport. After another long nerve wracking wait we were permitted to go to Djerba. We were very thankful that our travels were not for naught.

I remember the great excitement when some 1,000 Jews came to greet us. They came to a general assembly, in which we conveyed Rabbi Ovadya's message. They vowed: no to general studies, yes to Torah study. Those were unforgettable moments of sanctifying G-d's name.

\*\*\*

In our weekly parsha we read about Yaacov's descent to Egypt. Our Sages tell us about this descent that Yaaciv should have been brought to Egypt in chains, but that would have been disrespectful, and so his son went first and he followed him, even though it was not for his benefit.



The simple reading shows that Yaacov followed his son Yosef to Egypt, but another reading can show us that he was actually following his son Yehudah. Before Yaacov goes to Egypt "He sent Yehudah ahead of him to Yosef, to direct him to Goshen, and they came to the land of Goshen."<sup>1</sup> Our Sages teach us that this means that Yehudah went to establish for him a house of study, from where teaching would emanate.

This is a bit odd – where have we seen that Yaacov established a house of study before he came to Egypt? Why was this necessary specifically in Egypt?

One can explain that when in a place of spiritual filth such as Egypt one needs to be more vigilant and diligent about maintaining his purity if he wishes to safeguard his children.

This is the feeling that accompanied us throughout our visit to Tunisia. We knew that a special safeguarding was required here, and if the previous generations decided that the study of Torah was required to maintain their special Jewish way of life, so be it.

\*\*\*

After the assembly we met with the children. Their classes were named after the Talmud tractates each grade was studying.

I told them that just as in Egypt Yaacov sent his son to establish a house of study, so too did G-d send his sons to establish Torah there. Do you know who established Torah study in Tunisia? I asked.

"Sure", they all replied. Rabeinu Hananel, the Rif and Rabeinu Nissim. For me these were moving moments when I witnessed a burning ember that has burnt for millennia.

When I returned to Israel, Rabbi Ovadya told me: "Even though they have been distant for decades they still maintain a Jewish way of life. They set an example for us all."

<sup>1</sup> Bereshiet 46:28.