

PASSOVER: 5700

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When the last chorus of "Chad Gad Ya" had been sung and the children all tucked into bed, it was time for the life-and-death discussion.

"I, for one, am going back to Warsaw," David said. "If it's a choice between the frying pan and the fire, I choose the frying pan."

"And what makes you think the Germans are the frying pan and not the fire?" Yitzhak asked.

"Look at history. It's been 700 years since the Germans massacred us. Even now it's the Poles who are murdering us in Warsaw. The Germans stopped them."

"And started them."

"Perhaps. But you don't need Germans to get Poles to hate Jews."

Ruth and Yoheved, their wives, sat and listened like female goats awaiting the result of a battle between great-horned titans. When it was over, they knew, their fates would have been decided.

"Just become a Soviet citizen," Yitzhak pleaded. "That's all the Russians are asking."

David dismissed him with an angry wave of his hand. "You always were a Communist," he said.

"David, we're his guests!" Ruth reminded him.

"At least in Warsaw I can be a Jew," David went on, ignoring her. "I don't have to pretend I'm anything else. I can't pretend I'm anything else. I wear an armband. I live in a ghetto. It's all very clear."

"And this is good?" Yitzhak asked.

"It's better than pretending I'm an atheist. That I love Comrade Stalin. That I believe in the dictatorship of the proletariat. You really think all that crap is going to save you?"

"I don't know if anything is going to save us," Yitzhak said. "There's a war. We'll be lucky to survive."

"Our parents survived the last war. We'll survive this one."

Yitzhak shrugged in frustration.

They were in Yitzhak and Yoheved's apartment in Lvov. David and Ruth had made the risky journey with their three children across German and Russian lines to escape from the Germans in Warsaw, only to find that, in David's words, they had gone from the frying pan into the fire. The Soviets had begun rounding up Jews, especially refugees from the German side of divided Poland, and shipping them to Siberia.

"I can fix it for you," Yitzhak started in again. "I can say you were a Communist with me in Lodz, that we worked together organizing textile workers. Why would I do this, David, except that I want to save your lives? Think of Ruth. Think of your children."

"Believe me, I appreciate it," David said. "I know what you're willing to risk for us."

"One person who knew me from Lodz and we're all on the train to Siberia," Yitzhak said.

"And this is the kind of atmosphere you want to live in?" David asked.

"I want to live."

"Then come with us to Warsaw. The Germans find us useful. They're putting us to work on all sorts of jobs. It's slave labor, but slaves are valuable. You don't kill slaves."

"You starve them. You beat them. This is what you want for your family?"

"That madman in Moscow just shoots them. I'll take Hitler over Stalin any day."

"What a choice!" Yitzhak said. "This madman or that one!"

"*We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt,*" David recited from the Haggadah. "*And the Lord took us out from there with a mighty hand.* Trust in the Lord, Yitzhak. You were never able to do that."

Once they had cleared the table and folded it away, Ruth and David were able to go to sleep on the living room floor. They planned to wake up early the next morning to begin the journey back to Warsaw, but neither could sleep.

"David?" Ruth said. "Are you sure we'll be safer in Warsaw than in Lvov?"

"I'm sure we'll be safer in Warsaw than in Siberia. Where do you think those trains are going? To resorts? To hotels?"

"But if Yitzhak –"

"It's a very generous offer. Very. And a big risk, especially with so many refugees from the German sector looking to ingratiate themselves with the Soviets. Don't think I don't love Yitzhak for risking his life and his family's lives to save us. He's a good, good friend. But think if we're caught. Then we're

dead. And even if we're not caught, how long will it be before that crazy man decides that Jews are a danger to him, even good Communist Jews, and starts shooting us all."

Ruth lay silent for a while, thinking about that.

"David," she finally said. "I love you, and whatever you decide is what I will do. But suppose Stalin is shipping the Jews from the German sector to Siberia to save them. If the Germans eventually attack Russia, then every Jew from the German side who is found over the line will be shot as a possible spy or traitor. Don't you think?"

"I think the notion that Stalin might do anything good for Jews is a fairy tale. Where did you ever get that idea?"

Ruth shrugged. "He needs good Communists he can trust. He knows how much the Poles hate the Russians. But any Jews he saved would be grateful."

"Stalin can't trust anybody. You're talking about him as though he were a rational person, but he's crazy. You want to gamble our lives on him?"

Ruth began crying. "I don't know what to do, my darling! If it weren't for the children, I wouldn't care so much. So what if we died? But if we made the wrong decision for them, it would break my heart."

"Me, too, Ruth, my darling Ruth. But what can we do but trust in God? And hope for the best?"

Of course in Yitzhak and Yoheved's bedroom sleep was just as much a stranger.

"You might have consulted me before you decided to risk all our lives for David and Ruth," Yoheved said.

"It's over," Yitzhak said in an annoyed tone. "He decided not to take me up on it."

"Even so. He might change his mind overnight. For me and you I wouldn't care. I would follow you anywhere, to Siberia, to death. But the children, Yitzhak! How could you risk the children?"

"Sometimes you just have to do what's right."

"I admire you for that, Yitzhak. Really, I do. All your life you've done what's right, whatever the consequences. It's something I've always loved in you. But look who you've put your faith in. A crazy man. A murderer of his own people, not to speak of Jews."

"You want to go to Warsaw with the Glicksmans? Is that what you're saying?"

"I don't know what I want!" Yoheved whispered vehemently. "I just don't want you to make these decisions without me!"

Yitzhak let that dissipate into the blackness surrounding them. And then he said, "You're right, Yoheved. I shouldn't have done that. I won't do it again."

They kissed and he turned over, but of course not to sleep.

What ate at him was how relieved he was that David had not taken him up on his offer. It was a foolish risk, quixotic, almost. There were already over 100,000 Jewish refugees from the Germans in Lvov, with more coming every day, many from Lodz. All it

would take was one, and both families would be on their way to Siberia, if they weren't executed here.

This way, he had hope. He had been a good Communist most of his life, from soon after he had left the Yeshiva where he and David had become friends. Judaism had given him the ideals of justice and love that had driven him from Judaism, and soon after graduation he had left to organize workers in Lodz, Lublin, Krakow, and finally Lvov. He had spent time in jail and had been beaten. He had paid his dues.

Now that he no longer had to worry about covering for David, he was home free. Thank God! he thought. Thank God! He had done the right thing and thank God he had been refused!

For which he felt guilty and disgusted with himself as he lay sleepless, helpless, waiting for the dawn when his good friend and his friend's wife and children would begin their journey back into Hitler's arms.