



The Petition for the Old Path

Ages 15-18



Chapter 1: Forty-One Names

Yehudah has forty-one signatures by the time he notices the second drawing.

The first drawing is the one he knows. A straight paved path replaces the curved gravel walk behind the community study hall. It passes through the corner where the old beech tree stands.

Someone marks the tree with a cross.

Yehudah writes his petition that morning. At seventeen, he is old enough to understand that a notice marked PROPOSED is a decision waiting for someone to disagree.

The tree gives shade to the outdoor benches. His grandfather plants it with two neighbors years before Yehudah is born. In summer, its branches reach over the little storage shed. The shade turns the courtyard into a place where people stay after the lesson ends.

Yehudah writes: Please preserve the tree and the old curved path.

Forty-one people agree.

Then, beside the notice, Mr. Berger pins up another drawing.

It shows the height difference between the courtyard and the rear entrance. The numbers mean nothing to Yehudah at first. He looks at the slope marked on the new path and the steps marked on the old one.

His friend Gedalia stands beside him.

"They're finally making it possible to come in that way," Gedalia says.



"Without steps?"

"For my grandfather. For anyone who can't manage them."

Yehudah looks down at the signatures.

His page says old curved path. It does not say anything about steps.

Chapter 2: The Story He Likes

At the evening meeting for the boys' volunteer group, Yehudah lays the petition on the table.

The group helps with book sorting and community events. It does not decide building work, but Mr. Berger asks for its suggestions before the trustees meet.

Yehudah explains the tree.

He is good at explaining things when he has already decided who is right. He describes its shade, the birds, the men who plant it. He does not mention the second drawing.

Gedalia lifts his hand.

"My grandfather stops coming to the weekday study group last winter. He can't get up the rear steps. The front entrance isn't always open at that time."

"Then they should open it," Yehudah says.

"There's still a step there. Mr. Berger shows me."

"There must be another way around the tree."



"Maybe. I want them to check. I also want a usable entrance."

A few boys look between them. Until now, the meeting has contained one simple problem and one simple petition.

Yehudah hears his own voice getting louder.

"Nobody wants to keep your grandfather out."

Gedalia closes his folder.

"Then don't answer as if I'm against trees."

Mr. Berger, in a plain kippah and white shirt, puts his pen down.

"We have more information to gather," he says. "Nobody here needs to settle the design tonight. Bring me questions, and I'll take them to the people assessing the site."

Yehudah adds a sentence about another route to his notes. He underlines it twice.

He can feel Gedalia not looking at him.

Chapter 3: After the Meeting

The other boys leave. Yehudah stays to collect the petition.

"You made it sound as if I don't care about people," he tells Gedalia.

Gedalia looks up.

"I told you why the path matters to my grandfather."



"In front of everyone."

"You brought the petition in front of everyone."

Yehudah rolls the edge of the page. If he rolls it tightly enough, he will have something to do with his hands.

"You could have told me first."

"I did. By the drawing."

That is true.

It is an inconvenient truth because Yehudah has prepared an argument for a different conversation.

Gedalia picks up his bag.

"I'm not asking you to stop caring about the tree. I'm asking you to care whether my grandfather can get inside."

He leaves.

Yehudah remains beside the empty table. Someone leaves a cup ring where the fortieth signature rests. He shifts the page away from it.

At home, Tatty asks how the meeting goes.

"Badly."

"The petition?"

"The petition is fine. It's the people."

Tatty waits.



Yehudah tells him the whole conversation, including the second drawing. When he reaches the part where Gedalia says he already tells him, Yehudah wants to skip it.

He includes it.

"What do you want to happen?" Tatty asks.

"I want them to keep the tree."

"And the entrance?"

"I want that to work too."

Saying both aloud does not produce a path. It does make the petition look less complete.

Chapter 4: In the Courtyard

Mr. Berger arranges a courtyard visit for the boys with the man assessing the proposed work. They come after afternoon learning. Nobody measures, digs, or touches the cracked paving; the adults handle the site inspection.

The man explains why the first route is proposed. There is limited space between the building and the boundary. A gentler slope needs length. There are drainage problems near the shed.

Yehudah points to the far corner.

"Could it go around there?"



"That option needs checking. We don't know yet whether the roots or the drainage make it workable."

"So it might work?"

"It might. Don't tell people it does until the assessment is complete."

Yehudah writes that down.

Gedalia asks how the rear door will open and whether someone using a wheelchair can approach it without being left in the rain. Yehudah has not thought about either question.

The man adds them to his notes.

By the tree, Yehudah finds a fallen leaf in the gravel. He leaves it where it is. It seems suddenly childish to pick it up, though picking up a leaf has nothing to do with the argument.

When the visit ends, Gedalia goes toward the gate.

"Wait," Yehudah says.

Gedalia turns.

"I didn't tell the group about the steps when I explained the petition. I knew by then."

"I noticed."

"I wanted the case to sound clear."

"It was clear. Just missing something."



Yehudah nods. He dislikes the answer and knows he earns it.

"I'm going to correct it."

"All right."

Gedalia does not shake his hand as if they have reached the end of a story. He has to get home. His grandfather is visiting that evening.

Chapter 5: The Names Belong to People

Yehudah drafts a new petition.

He crosses out three openings because each sounds like an attempt to make everyone forget the first one.

Finally, he writes that he wants a safe, usable rear entrance and asks the trustees to assess a route that preserves the tree if feasible. He includes the information about the steps and the need for a gentler slope.

It is less stirring than his first page. It is also asking for something the trustees can actually consider.

He takes it to Mr. Berger.

"Can I attach the signatures from the other one?"

Mr. Berger reads both.

"They signed the first wording. Some may agree with this. You need to let them decide."



Yehudah looks at the forty-one names. They take an entire afternoon to gather. It feels wasteful to begin again.

But the names are not a supply of agreement he owns.

With Mr. Berger's help, he puts a correction beside the original notice. He speaks to the volunteers who collect signatures with him. They ask people again and make clear that the old signatures are not being counted for the revised request.

Some people sign the new wording. Some say they want no change to the courtyard at all. One man says access should come first and does not want to sign a paper that includes the tree.

Yehudah tries to persuade him.

"We're asking them to assess both."

"I understand," the man says. "I still don't want to sign."

Yehudah puts the pen back in his pocket.

On Thursday, the new page has twenty-three names.

That number bothers him more than he expects.

Chapter 6: Twenty-Three

At the next volunteer meeting, Yehudah asks for two minutes.

He stands with both pages on the table.



"I left out important information last time. The old route has steps that keep some people from using the entrance. My first petition asks for the old path to stay, without dealing with that. I'm not using its signatures for the new request."

Someone at the far end asks, "Are you giving up?"

"I'm asking for a different thing."

"But now they'll think nobody cares about the tree."

"Twenty-three people signed this one. Others still care. They don't all agree on the path."

The boy looks disappointed.

Yehudah is tempted to mention the forty-one again, just to recover the sound of success.

Instead, he reads the revised request.

Mr. Berger accepts it for the trustees. He makes no promise about the tree.

Afterward, Gedalia sits beside Yehudah while they sort donated books.

"My grandfather wants to see the drawings," he says.

"Could I come when you show him?"

"If you want."

"I do."

Gedalia holds up a book with a loose cover. "Repair pile?"



"Repair pile."

They continue sorting. The first five minutes feel careful. Then they argue about whether an atlas belongs with history or reference books, and the argument feels normal enough to be a relief.

Chapter 7: The Drawing on the Table

Gedalia's grandfather spreads the drawings beside his teacup.

He knows the beech tree. He sits beneath it many summers. Yehudah feels foolish for being surprised.

"It would be good to keep it," the old man says. "And good to go in without a pair of young men having to lift me. I don't enjoy being a piece of furniture."

Gedalia laughs. Yehudah does too.

"I thought they'd simply chosen the easiest way," Yehudah admits.

"Perhaps they did. You can ask them to look harder. You can also look harder yourself."

His grandfather points to the door. "Don't forget the entrance once the drawing reaches the wall. A good path to a door you can't open is still a problem."

They write that question for Mr. Berger.

On the way home, Yehudah passes the courtyard. The tree is dark against the sky. He does not suddenly find it less important.



He is beginning to understand that caring about something does not make him an expert on everything around it.

That feels like a loss for a while.

Then he remembers the question about the door. He would never have known to ask it by standing here alone.

Chapter 8: The Decision

The assessment takes three weeks.

Yehudah does not enjoy waiting. Each time someone says the trustees meet again, he wants to ask for an answer immediately. Mr. Berger keeps him informed when there is something to report.

The alternative route cannot provide the needed slope within the available space. The trustees review the assessment and approve the route in the first drawing, with the entrance changes Gedalia asks them to consider. The tree cannot stay.

Yehudah reads the decision twice.

He puts it down and goes outside. For a while, he walks without deciding where to go. He wants someone to tell him the assessment is wrong. He also knows the trustees give the alternative route the review he requests.

At home, Tatty asks whether he wants company.

"Not for a bit."



Later, they sit on the back step. Yehudah explains the result. Tatty does not say that a tree is only a tree. He also does not invent a way to stop the approved work.

"I'm glad I asked them to check," Yehudah says. "I still hate the answer."

Tatty nods.

At the volunteer meeting, someone tells him the petition is a waste of time.

"They assessed the other route," Yehudah says. "It doesn't work in that space."

"So we lose."

Yehudah looks at Gedalia, who is putting books into a carton.

"I don't want us to call his grandfather getting inside a loss."

The boy shrugs. Yehudah does not make him agree.

Before the work begins, Yehudah asks Mr. Berger whether he can draw the tree from a safe place in the open courtyard. He spends one afternoon on it. His grandfather comes with him and tells him which of the original planting neighbors keeps forgetting the water bucket.

Yehudah writes their names beneath the drawing. He does not call it as good as keeping the tree.

The courtyard closes while adults do the work. When it opens again, there is a new path and a rear door with the agreed access arrangements. The corner without the tree looks larger and harsher than Yehudah expects.



Gedalia's grandfather comes to the study group and enters without being lifted.

Yehudah stands beside Gedalia near the entrance.

"I miss it," Gedalia says, looking at the bare corner.

"So do I."

"My grandfather says he does too."

Yehudah looks through the open door. The old man is greeting someone inside.

He is glad to see him there. The gladness does not put shade back on the courtyard.

"You know," Gedalia says, "I still think they need this path."

"I know. So do I."

They are quiet for a moment. Neither tries to make the other say the afternoon is entirely good.

Then Mr. Berger asks whether they can help carry the empty cartons to the storeroom.

Yehudah picks up two. Gedalia takes the others.

Inside, Gedalia's grandfather has already found his seat.