



CANTONISTS: THE LOST BOYS

We can state the nature of the dilemma in three words: they were lost. A whole generation of Jewish boys, nearly 50,000 of them, were abused, abandoned, and stolen from their people and by their people. When reflecting on the 29-year period of the Cantonists, it's no wonder that the venerated sages Hillel and Rabbi Akiva considered *ve'ahavta lerei'acha kamocha* (love your fellow Jew as you love yourself) the “greatest principle in the Torah.”¹ From 1827-1856, this seemingly straightforward mitzvah was tested to the core in the Pale of the Settlement, Imperial Russia's Western region, where Jewish life was growing and thriving, yet separate from modern Russia. With the goal of Russifying them, Czar Nicholas I required a set quota of Jewish boys ages 12 and up to be conscripted

into military academies, where they would be trained for 25 years of Russian military service. The *Kahal*, self-appointed leaders of the Jewish communities, were charged with the responsibility of filling these quotas — meaning, it was up to them to take these boys from their homes and assign them a fate of torture, isolation, and oftentimes conversion. The implementers of the quota — also Jews — *the khappers*, took the young boys by whatever means — trickery, bribery, kidnapping — and turned them in for assignment. In this era, the main questions became: to what extent do we go to save a fellow Jew? If it's my son or your son, is it up to us to choose? When outside powers pit Jews against one another, how do we respond?

Firsthand accounts are few and far

between from this time period. Eastern European rabbis and laymen alike could never be sure whether their lamentations or sermons would be read or heard by Imperial soldiers or even a desperate fellow Jew, who could use their counteractive statements as immunity for their son. From what we do have though, it's clear that this was considered a matter of *pikuach nefesh* (mortal threat) and *pidyon shivuyim* (ransoming Jews in captivity), according to the studies of Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, Crown Family Professor of Jewish Studies, a professor of history and renowned expert in the Cantonist period. Russian officials found a few pages of Hebrew texts in the home of a Rabbi Solman of Starye Zhagary, where he compared sending Jewish boys to the Russian army to the mothers who ate their children during the

First Temple siege.² Other rabbis took a more practical approach, such as Rabbi David of Novardek (1769-1837) and Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, the Chafetz Chaim (1839-1933).

In a sermon given in Tevet 5594 (December 1833), Rabbi David of Novardek focused on the importance of those conscripted to do their best to maintain their faith:³

אחיי בני ישראל כתיב וזכור את בוראך בימי
בחרותך אף שבאמת אונס רחמנא פטריה
וממילא ע"פ אשר אתם אנוסים פטורין
אתם, אולם יש זמן וזמנים אשר מספיקין
לקבל עליכם עול מלכות שמים ערב ובקר ...
הנה יעקב אמר עם לבן גרתי ותרי"ג מצות
שמרתי אצל יוסף לא מצינו שיתפאר א"ע
בדבר זה שישמור כל התרי"ג מצות בהיותו
במצרים, אבל הענין הוא יעקב לא היה עליו
עול עבדות היה יכול לשמור כל מצות הבורא
משא"כ לעבד נמכר יוסף לא היה יכול לקיים
כל המצות אחרי אשר היה ברשות אחרים,
אעפ"כ קיים כל האפשרי ועי"ז זכה להיות
נושא חן בעיני שר בית הסוהר.

My brothers, the children of Israel, the verse (Kohelet 12:1) states, "Remember your creator in the days of your youth." Even though, in truth, one who is under duress is exempted by the Torah and thus, since you are under duress, you are exempt [from any culpability], nevertheless, there are moments that allow you to accept the yoke of heaven every evening and morning ... While Yaakov said, "I lived with Lavan and observed the 613 mitzvot," regarding Yosef, we don't see him praising himself about the fact that he observed all 613 mitzvot in Egypt. The reason is that Yaakov, who didn't have the yoke of slavery upon him, was able to keep all of the mitzvot. However, Yosef was sold as a slave and he couldn't fulfill all of the mitzvot while in the possession of a master. Nevertheless, he did the best that he could and because of this, he merited finding favor in the eyes of the prison warden.

In a sermon for Rosh Hashanah 5588 (1827) R. David laments the terrible situation, claiming that being conscripted this way is a punishment worse than death:

שבעוה"ר פקודה זאת לקיחות אנשי חיל
אשר ראוי לומר בזה אשר נבחר מות מחיים
שידוע אפילו אצל אומות יש כמה מהם אשר
מאבדים עצמם לדעת מבלי שיקחו אותם
לאנשי חיל אשר הד"ת אחת להם, מכש"כ
וק"ו אצלינו שמעברים על הדת והתורה
הקדושה בודאי נבחר לנו מות מחיים, אמנם
להאיש הנלקח אין רבותא כ"כ, אלא אפילו
לכל שארית נשארים מהמשפחה אנחתם
ויגונם רבה מאוד אשר נבחר להם המות.

This decree of conscripting soldiers is worthy of saying that one might prefer death over life. It is known that even among the other nations, there are those who kill themselves rather than being taken as soldiers. These are people who are of the same religion. How much more so regarding our own, where they force [soldiers] to violate our religion and the holy Torah, it is certain that they would prefer death over life. For the soldier himself, this idea is somewhat obvious. However, this applies even to his family, whose sorrow and anguish is great. They might also prefer death over life.

The Chafetz Chaim compiled a volume called *Machaneh Yisrael* addressing the halachic and philosophical issues that Jewish soldiers would face in the army and

notably practical and empathetic solutions. While this volume was written in 1881, after the reversal of Cantonist decree, Jewish adults were still subject to conscription and the spiritual challenges, albeit less extreme, were similar. In the opening chapter, he addresses the spiritual challenge that these soldiers face and offers them words of encouragement:

ע"כ צריך שידע איש הצבא שלא נופל ערכו
עי"ז מבראשונה בשום דבר ... ועל אחת כמה
וכמה בזה שלא מכר את עצמו ברצונו רק
שנפל גורלו שיהיה הוא לעבודת הצבא בודאי
אין לו ח"ו שום פחיתות בעבור זה.

A soldier in the army should know that he is no less valuable [because of his conscription] than what he was before [his conscription] in any manner ... Certainly because he didn't willingly "sell himself," rather he was chosen to join the army, he is certainly not, God forbid, less valuable because of this.

Machaneh Yisrael ch. 1

Jewish leaders, both communal and spiritual, used every means they could to ensure that their boys would at the very least be allowed to hold onto parts of their heritage while in the army, such as celebrating Jewish holidays, eating kosher food, and having access to rabbinical figures. Despite their efforts, Jewish boys who clung to their faith, even in the mere utterance of their inner allegiance, were punished and



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- R. Yisrael Meir Kagan

tortured.

R. Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883) expended great efforts fighting against these quotas, even meeting with government officials who were sympathetic to his cause. He also decried community leaders who passively allowed Jews to select other Jews, particularly the ones from weaker families, for conscription. One particular incident involved a child of a widow who was taken by the Jewish community and chosen for conscription. When R. Yisrael visited the town for Shabbat, the boy's mother pled with him to do something. R. Dov Katz describes R. Yisrael's response:

אחרי תפילת שחרית, באו כל נכבדי המקום לאכסנייתו של רבי ישראל למסיבת קידוש. אחרי שקידשו על היין, קם פתאום רבי ישראל ממקומו בקצה נורא והתחיל לזנוף במסובים על השערוריה במעשה החטיפה ולכנותם בשמות גנאי: רוצחים, גונבי נפשות וכו'. בהיותו מכיר את ראשי הקהל, פנה אל כל אחד מהם באופן אישי. לאחד אמר "הרי צדיק אתה וקושר מטפחתך על הצואר בשבת כדי לא להוציא אף במקום עירוב, ואילו לעבור על הפסוק 'גונב איש ומכרו מות יומת' לא איכפת לך? לשני אמר: "הרי מחזר אתה אחרי הידורי מצוה ומדקדק בקלה כבחמורה ואילו למסור נפש מישראל לשמד מותר?" לשלישי אמר ... וכן לרביעי וכן לחמישי ... ר' ישראל קפץ בחמתו כאילו הכישו נחש תוך כדי זעקה מרה שאסור להימצא בחברת פריצים, עזב בבהלה את הבית ובאמצע יום השבת יצא את העיר.

After the morning prayers, all of the distinguished members of the community came to the lodging place of R. Yisrael for a kiddush reception. After they made kiddush over wine, R. Yisrael suddenly rose from his chair with great anger and started rebuking those gathered over the controversy involving the taking of this child. He started calling them derogatory names: murderers, kidnappers, etc.

Being that he knew the leaders of the community, he turned to each of them personally. To one, he said, "You are so righteous that you tie your scarf around your neck on Shabbat so that you don't have to carry even in a place where there is an eruv, but to violate the verse (Shemot 21:16) 'one who steals a person and sells him [...] shall be put to death' does not concern you?" To a second, he said, "You seek to perform mitzvot in the most preferred way and you are scrupulous about all mitzvot, but giving over a Jewish person for conversion to another religion is permissible?" To the third, he said ... and the same with the fourth and the fifth ... R. Yisrael jumped in anger as if he were bitten by a snake and cried out that it is prohibited to be present with a group of sinners, he quickly left the house, and on Shabbat itself, he left the city.

R. Yisrael's rebuke made an impact. The matter was quickly resolved and the boy was returned to his family.⁴

In Their Own Words

Why though, would any of these boys cling to their faith? Their leaders let them go. Their communities let them go. Their parents, whether willingly or not, let them go. When the only person they had to count on in the world was themselves, why did some of them decide, at such a young age, that Judaism was worth constant sacrifice, suffering and rejection? Once the Cantonist era ended, memoirs, plays, and poetry about the boys' experiences were published in the years that followed. There are many stirring accounts that relay tragic realities: one son being chosen to hide over another, children being beaten and starved until they agreed to be baptized, young men belonging nowhere, unaccepted by neither their

old community nor their new one. What gave this lost generation any reason to hold onto an identity that fated them for a life without family, community, or a sense of belonging? An excerpt from *Der Yiddishe Shtral*, no. 1127, found in Rabbi Yitzchak Zilber's biography, *To Remain a Jew*, may give us a clue:

I was nine when I was taken away from my mother and drafted to be a soldier. My mother was a widow; I was her only child ... I can only vaguely remember the village we lived in, Pyatocka. According to the law, as an only son, I should have been exempt. But the law, as it seems, wasn't written for poor people. Some rich relative, from either my father's or mother's side, bribed the authorities and presented me as one of his sons, so I was drafted instead.

Those times are still like a nightmare to me that I don't want to remember ... They locked me and ten other unfortunate boys in a room for days. The soldiers were smoking and swearing. All the other boys had visitors — father, mother, or some relative ... But nobody came to visit me ... Every day I grew angrier and angrier ... I was angry at them all...

But between all those wretched memories, there was one happy memory that warmed my heart. When we entered the spacious barracks, we were surprised to meet five or six Jewish men. One stood out among them ... In his eyes there was so much empathy, so much love, such wonderful kindness! I was so young, tired, frozen and hungry, longing for love and warmth...

"Shalom aleichem yiddelach" he said. His voice was sweet and calming ... This man was Rav Naftali of Lyutzin...

Since I had been taken away from my mother, I had not cried, not even once ...

but when I saw [Rav Naftali] something began to wake up inside of me and I started to cry...

With tears in my eyes I said, "My mother didn't come to say goodbye to me." I cried and cried. I felt like my heart would burst. His warm hands were stroking me. We sat on a log outside ... he said over and over, "Cry, cry lonely child, orphan..."

We had to come to the base to check in every morning and evening. Rav Naftali used to come with us for about an hour, sometimes even more ... He told us about Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon, about Daniel, Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya, and about the Inquisition and the Crusades. But most of all, he liked to repeat the story of Yosef Hatzaddik...

Yosef was sold by his own brothers. Using his talents, wits, and honesty, he managed to reach the high position of viceroy in Egypt. During that long period he was far from his loved ones — his family, his father, his nation ... He had been hurt; his own brothers ... threw him out! Nevertheless ... he saw the face of his father Yaakov before him and knew that Yaakov was mourning and longing for him...

After many years, I understood why this

rabbi told us about Yosef so many times ... Yosef was young, in his teens when his brothers — fellow Jews — sold him ... He could have gotten angry with all the Jews and abandoned his religion. But Yosef did not...

And then that dreadful day came [to be taken to the Cantonist academies] ... When we lifted our eyes, there was Rav Naftali ... He began to cry: "You are Jewish children, don't forget that you are Jews. Remember Daniel, Chananya, Michael, Azarya, Rabbi Akiva, and Yosef!"

There was another Yosef that spoke of what it felt like to be lost and alone — Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik z"l. In the opening chapter of his magnum opus, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rabbi Soloveitchik echoes a pain reminiscent of the Cantonists:

I am lonely because at times I feel rejected and thrust away by everybody, not excluding my most intimate friends, and the words of the Psalmist, "My father and my mother have forsaken me" (27:10), ring quite often in my ears like the plaintive cooing of the turtledove.⁵

How awful it is, how invisible one must feel, when even his own parents cannot be counted on for consolation and salvation. Yet, this is the story

of nearly 50,000 Jewish boys whose days in the *cheder* were cut short, who were never called up to the Torah, who never had the chance to marry and raise families. Jews have been lost throughout our history, in ways we wish we could forget but never will. Let us add these boys to our memories and remember that every mitzvah we do, no matter how big or small, is one that some of these boys gave up their sleep, rations, and lives for. On this day, when we remember that we are still waiting for the Ultimate Redemption, let us focus on the one mitzvah that was so gruesomely tested in the Cantonist era: *ve'ahavta lere'acha kamocho*.

Endnotes

- 1 *Shabbat* 31a; *Parashat Kedoshim, Torat Kohanim*.
- 2 "The Empire Reforms, the Community Responds." *Jews in the Russian Army, 1827-1917: Drafted into Modernity*, by Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 46-54.
- 3 These sermons are printed in *Yeshurun* Vol. XII, pp. 714-726.
- 4 R. Dov Katz, *Tenuat Hamussar*. Vol. I pp. 203-205.
- 5 R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*.

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