



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM
RE'EH / ראה
THE STORY OF THE CANTONISTS

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TUESDAY AUGUST 26, 2008 / כ"ה מנחם אב תשס"ח

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RE'EH / ראה

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THE STORY OF THE CANTONISTS

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In loving memory of

ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman אה who loved and supported Torah learning.



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RE'EH

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This week I had a conversation with the history teacher from one of the Jewish schools in the city. She lamented that the yeshivas don't teach history. I answered her that maybe officially they don't teach it but every religious child reads much about history. When I asked her if she had ever heard of the Cantonists, she, the big history expert, had not.

Nearly 200 years ago, from 1827 through 1857, there was a terrible decree against the Jews. The Czar had commanded that Jewish boys be drafted to the army at a young age and be placed in army schools where they were taught to be loyal soldiers. These schools were called "cantons" and the young soldiers called "Cantonists". The purpose of this law was to rid these children of their Judaism, so they were sent to very far off places where they would have no chance of contact with Jews and were easier to convert.

The actual decree was that every community had to send a specific number of boys to army officials. It was the responsibility of the community leaders to gather the quota of boys. Officially, boys were taken at age 12, schooled until the age of 18 and then served 25 years in the army.

Because Jewish community leaders had to make the decision of which children would be drafted, there were many arguments and fights over which children were

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destined to go the army and which were to stay home. As a result, the wealthy would pay to keep their children safe and the poor would hide their children as well as they could. This caused terrible rifts and great anguish in every Jewish community across Russia.

Community leaders would hire "catchers" whose job was to kidnap the children from their parents and hand them over to the army. When they showed up in town, you could hear from every house heart rending wails. These people, however, did their jobs without thinking about anything. The ones who suffered the most were, understandably, the orphans and children from poor families. That era was one of the most difficult times for the Jews in Russia and it's a terrible shame that most people have never heard of this.

The third Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, lived during those years and set up an organization called "the Resurrection of the Dead Society" which had two objectives: To find ways of decreasing the quota of children that every community needed to hand over to officials and, mainly, to bribe officials and redeem the children from the institutions they were in.

The way they got the children back was by bribing the official to return the child and write a report to his superiors that the child had died on the trip. These children, now called "the resurrected ones", were then sent to far away Jewish communities to be raised as Jews, as they obviously could not return to their homes.



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At the military academies, they would torture the children to pressure them into converting and many of them could not stay strong and did convert. Some of them died from the suffering and some of them were able to stand strong and even after 25 years of hardships they remained true to their religion.

One of these children was the grandfather of former Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir. She would tell with obvious pride that her grandfather was a "Cantonist" and that all 25 years of his service he did not eat anything cooked as it was not kosher. Even after his release and he had married and started a family, he still suspected that he hadn't been perfect with the food he ate in the army and as repentance, he slept without a pillow.

It is told that a delegation of Rabbis once went to the capital, St Petersburg, in order to affect the annulment of a decree. This trip was made around the time of the High Holidays. The few Jews who were allowed to live in the city in those times were "Nikolai Soldiers", Cantonists. Theirs was the only synagogue in the city and the Rabbis joined them for the Yom Kippur prayers. When they reached Ne'ila, the holiest prayer of the year, the Rabbis asked for one of the soldiers to lead the prayers. The soldiers of course refused, saying that they were simple people who barely knew how to pray. The Rabbis refused to give in and insisted that these simple Jews, who showed such self sacrifice to remain true to their religion were closer to G-d and their prayers would be more readily accepted than those of a great, learned rabbi.



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In this week's Torah portion we read that if a prophet comes and makes miracles happen, and then after building up his credibility, he tries to seduce you to worship idols, do not listen to him.

One must ask why G-d would give such a person the power to do these miracles. The Torah continues after this to add, "For G-d is testing you to see whether you love G-d wholeheartedly and with your entire being." G-d wants to test us to know how much we love Him and are ready to stick to Him even against the temptation of a following a miracle maker.

What is the real reason G-d gives us this test? It is because a Jew who passes a test and does a mitzvah is closer to G-d than one who does many mitzvos in comfort and safety.

What is the lesson for us? A test is not only in Russia, not only to starve for 25 years in Siberia. Nowadays we are also presented with tests. For example, when a Jew who did not receive a Jewish education turns down an invitation from his friends to play golf on a Saturday morning and goes to shul instead, that is much more appreciated by G-d than a religious Jew who goes to shul every day.

Or a Jew who has never kept Kosher decides that from now on he will only eat kosher meat; he is more precious and loved by G-d than a Jew who was raised in a kosher home and had never tasted non-kosher meat. This is because he has withstood his test and is proving that "...you love G-d wholeheartedly and with your entire being."

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