

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

*Captivating stories full of Yiras Shamayim taken from Shmuessin that
Reb Kalman Krohn z'tl gave in Adelphia Yeshiva*

The Cantonist's Neilah

The era of the Cantonists is a sad and painful chapter in Jewish history. During the nineteenth century, a governmental edict in Russia forced every Jewish community to supply the Czar's army with a monthly quota of young conscripts. Being inducted into the army was a spiritual death sentence for these young boys, who were forced to serve the Czar for twenty-five long and bitter years.

No Jewish parent would willingly give up their sons toward filling their community's monthly quota. The community leaders therefore had a very difficult time meeting the required numbers. Pushed against the wall, they reluctantly handed over the community's orphans, who had no parents to advocate for them. But it was still not enough.

To 'help' a community meet its monthly quota, the army hired ruffians to abduct Jewish children from the streets. Community status and family background meant nothing to the abductors, who grabbed rich and poor indiscriminately off the streets of the Jewish quarter. Any boy unfortunate enough to be outside when they swooped in was fodder for the army. When the kidnapers were out and about, heartbreaking cries would resound throughout the Jewish quarter as parents ran after the wagon in a futile attempt to rescue their precious sons.

The kidnapped Jewish children were conscripted into battalions where they performed menial labor for the army, such as food preparation, cleaning, and shoe-shining. They were given meager, non-kosher rations and encouraged to forget about their heritage. Those who agreed to convert to Christianity were given better food and more comfortable quarters, and sadly enough, many young, innocent boys succumbed.

When the Cantonists were old enough, they trained as authentic soldiers and eventually saw combat. When they reached this point, the Cantonists were already in the army for over a decade, and they had only the faintest memories of home, of yiddishkeit. They were hardened Russian soldiers, through and through, and though some of them tried to retain whatever mitzvos they could remember from their youth, it was pitifully little.

Anti-Semitism was rampant in the Russian army. All the Jewish soldiers had a J marked on their identity cards, identifying them for torture and attacks by the other soldiers. And the torture would come, plentifully. The Cantonists suffered terribly from the hate of their fellow soldiers.

A favorite tactic of the anti-Semites was to force a Jew to pass between two columns of jeering

soldiers, who would beat him with their bayonets as he struggled to get to the other side. The more fortunate emerged bloody and badly bruised. The less fortunate never made it to the other side. Another favorite was to lay a Jewish soldier on the floor and test his pain tolerance. They would whip and whip until the Jew was near death, just to see how long it would take for him to reach that moment.

While these Jews had forgotten much of yiddishkeit, they never forgot how to speak to their Creator. Many of them had no memories of the tefillos, and even fewer could read, but with authenticity that can only emerge from a pained heart, the Cantonists would constantly pour out their hearts to Hashem. There was a shul in Leningrad, where large platoons of Cantonists were based, but they did not feel comfortable there. The Cantonists rallied together and petitioned for a shul of their own.

While the army was not keen on the idea, the pressure for the shul campaign was tremendous, and they feared mutiny among the Jewish soldiers. It was decided that it would be wisest to give in and agree. The Jewish soldiers were given permission to build a shul, but were warned that it be a simple and unadorned building and were tasked with finding their own lumber and financing the venture.

The Cantonists weren't deterred by these orders. They jumped right into work, chopping down trees, sawing boards, and begging for nails from people outside of the army. It took months and months of difficult labor, but when the shul was ready, it was beautiful. It loomed tall and large, rows and rows of homemade boards and nails, simple but striking. While the Jewish soldiers did not have the leisure to gather for davening three times a day, they would use the shul every Shabbos.

On the first Shabbos after construction was complete, the soldiers wept emotionally as they filled the large room, incredibly grateful that they had merited to reach this moment. They were joined by tens of Jews from Leningrad, who had come to daven and give chizuk to the soldiers. It was decided that only the Cantonist soldiers would be permitted to serve as baal tefillah in the shul that had been built on their broken backs.

During that time period, there was an important asifah in Leningrad, where over twenty of the generation's gedolim gathered to discuss a vital issue. Among the many gedolim who attended the meeting was the Tzemech Tzedek of Lubavitch and Rav Itzele Volozhin, son of Rav Chaim Volozhin. Different solutions were addressed during the two-day convention, after which most of the gedolim traveled home. The Tzemach Tzedek and Rav Itzele Volozhin, along with a handful of others, remained to work out the details and to begin putting their plans into action. When all the finer points of the plan were established and set into motion, it was shortly before Yom Kippur. The gedolim realized that they wouldn't have time to make the few-day journey home in time for the holiest day of the year. There was no choice other than to remain in Leningrad for Yom Kippur. The two tzaddikim decided to make the most of their time in Leningrad and daven the tefillos on Yom Kippur at the unique minyan established by the Cantonists.

When the Cantonists heard about these plans, they were overjoyed. All their lives, they had been treated as second-class Jews whenever they encountered other members of their people. Now, two holy tzaddikim would be joining them, the unlearned Jewish soldiers, on the holiest day of the year. They felt honored and comforted, hoping that the merits of the gedolim would enable them to pass their personal judgements on Yom Kippur.

On erev Yom Kippur, as the sun began to wane, the Tzemach Tzedek and Rav Itzele Volozhin made their way to the large Cantonists' bais medrash. Dressed in stark white kittels with talleisim over their heads, they looked like angels. They scarcely entered the shul when throngs of people stopped them to request a brachah. As they made the slow trip to their seats, the two gedolim offered warm blessings to the desperate men crowding around them.

The shul was packed. There were the Cantonists, of course, dressed in their regular army uniforms. Their rifles were lined up on a table near the back of the room, where they had put them down after being made aware that weapons were muktzah and could not be carried on Yom Kippur. Along with the Cantonists were thousands of Jews who had chosen this shul to be in the presence of the two famous gedolim on Yom Kippur.

When the two tzaddikim finally reached the eastern wall near the aron kodesh and took their places, the Cantonist who was to serve as the baal tefillah rose and walked to the front of the room. Flanked on either side by the Tzemach Tzedek and Rav Itzele, he stood and recited an emotional Kol Nidrei. There was not a dry eye in the room when the tefillah was concluded.

Between Kol Nidrei and Maariv, a soldier approached the two tzaddikim and asked them to address the crowd, to provide chizuk to the downtrodden Cantonists.

Rav Itzele rose to speak first. A hush settled over the crowd as he spoke to the soldiers directly from his heart. "I want you to know just how precious you are to Hashem. Often, people go through hardships and wonder why they were singled out for this punishment. 'Why me?' they ask. 'Why was I torn away from my mother and father, from yiddishkeit, at such a young age? I have no idea if my parents are alive, if I have a family. I don't have a past, a present or a future. Why me?'"

"Often, after Cantonists are released from the army, they have no place to go. They do not know who their family is or which town they come from. They have no money and training to earn a respectable livelihood. Instead, they sleep in the hekdesch of the local shul, joining tens of other homeless individuals on the cold, hard floor. Living this way, it is difficult to comprehend why this is happening. Why me?!"

Rav Itzele's warm eyes surveyed the room. "They've torn away your homes and your families, your youth and your education. They've tried to tear away your heritage! And yet, despite everything they've taken, they'll never be able to damper the pintele Yid resting inside each and every one of you. Do you know who you are?! You are a Jew, so beloved to Hashem! We can't understand why Hashem makes challenges befall an individual, but one thing is certain: Hashem loves each and every Jew."

The Cantonists listened, enraptured, as Rav Itzele continued. "I want you to accept upon yourselves right here and now to nurture the spark of yiddishkeit inside of you, especially while in the army. Those of you who can daven, daven as much as you can. Those of you who cannot should at least say Shema Yisroel three times a day. Your Father in Heaven is waiting to hear from you!"

In a thunderous voice, Rav Itzele began reciting the possuk of Shema Yisroel, and the Cantonists repeated it after him, sobbing uncontrollably.

The Tzemach Tzedek stood up next. He spoke movingly, describing the tremendous impact that is caused in shomayim when a single Jew overcomes even a small challenge. The soldiers, who encountered no shortage of nisyonos in the army, were deeply strengthened by his words.

"I want to advise you of a takanah that you should accept upon yourselves," he continued. "In the army, you often have no choice other than to eat

the non-kosher food served to you. It's pikuach nefesh, and you are permitted to eat it. However, to remember who you are, spill out three spoons of it first. Break off a piece and throw it away first. This will enable you to keep your true identity, a Jew in Hashem's army, even while serving the Czar."

The soldiers nodded, accepting his words wholeheartedly, and it was on this note that they began davening Maariv.

After Maariv, all the participants of the minyan, soldiers and civilian Jews alike, lined up to receive a brachah from the two tzaddikim. As the line inched by slowly, Rav Itzele and the Tzemach Tzedek warmly blessed each man individually. The process took the entire night.

Soon, the sun ushered in the awesome day of Yom Kippur. Many of those in the Cantonists' shul had barely slept the night before. They now wiped the weariness from their eyes and plunged into an inspiring Shacharis, led by a Cantonist baal tefillah. A second Cantonist ascended to the bimah for Mussaf and led an equally powerful and moving tefillah.

While many of the soldiers did not know how to daven, they were swept along with the niggunim. Overwhelmed by raw emotion and sheer longing to be returned to the embrace of their Father with the coming of Mashiach, they wept and wept throughout the davening. The Jews who had joined the minyan to be with the two gedolim were swept up in the heart-stirring atmosphere. Soon, the simple wooden floor was wet with tears. After Minchah and a short recess, it was time for Neilah.

As the Cantonists conferred amongst themselves and chose a baal tefillah, a murmur ruffled through the crowd. It turned into a rumble, then a roar.

"We want Rav Itzele to daven before the amud!" a group of Jews on the left side of the room began insisting, and a grumble of agreement rose from around the room. "He's a tzaddik, an angel. We need him to get our tefillos through; surely his prayers will be answered!"

"We want the Tzemach Tzedek to daven," a different group countered. "He's acquainted with the goings-on in Heaven. Let him lead our tefillos!"

The Cantonists stamped their feet in protest. "Only a soldier may daven in this shul," they cut in firmly.

Loud shouting met their words. The soldiers had already led all the tefillos. This was Neilah! It was unthinkable that one of the two gedolim present wouldn't daven before the amud.

The gabbai, a former soldier, approached the bimah and gave a loud bang. "Quiet!" he commanded, and surprisingly, the crowd obeyed, settling down and waiting to hear what he had to say.

The gabbai surveyed the room. "Hershel!" he called to a soldier sitting in the back of the room. "Come on up, Hershel!"

The local Jews, getting ready to protest, watched as a Cantonist in uniform made his way to the front of the room.

"Stand in front of the rabbonim," the gabbai instructed. "Take off your shirt! Show Rav Itzele and the Tzemach Tzedek your back!"

Hershel hesitated, taken aback by the request.

"Go ahead, take off your shirt," the gabbai urged. Slowly, the soldier complied. He removed his army jacket and then began unbuttoning his shirt. At the gabbai's urging, he turned around,

displaying his exposed back for the gedolim to see. Brutal scars crisscrossed his skin, souvenirs of the many beatings he had received. The congregants close enough to glimpse the gruesome sight gasped as Hershel wordlessly donned his shirt again.

“Rabbosai,” the gabbai thundered. “No one is denying the greatness of the Tzemach Tzedek, of Rav Itzele. At the same time, what can compare to the terrible experiences this Jew, Hershel, has undergone? Recently, his comrades forced him to lay on his stomach as they tore into his back with leather whips, trying to see how many bloody lines they would be able to create on his flesh.”

The gabbai reached forward and turned Hershel gently around so that he faced the crowd. “Look at Hershel’s face! He looks like an old man, covered in wrinkles. Let me tell you, these are no wrinkles! These are old scars! Hershel is a young man, but his face is completely covered in scars. He was held against a wall, and his fellow soldiers put a knife to his face as they jostled to test his pain tolerance by inflicting him with one cut after the next.” He paused momentarily to let the crowd digest his words and then continued. “Hershel! Why have they done this too you? Why?”

Hershel spoke up, his voice strong. “Because I’m a Jew,” he said simply. “I live as a Jew, and I will die as a Jew. And now, in the army, I am constantly afflicted because I am a Jew.”

“Hershel will be our baal tefillah,” the gabbai announced, draping a tallis over the soldier’s coarse army uniform. His declaration brooked no protest from the local Jews who nodded silently as Hershel approached the bimah, still absorbing the horror they had just witnessed.

Rav Itzele jumped up, tears flowing freely from his eyes. “Please,” he pleaded, holding out a striped woolen cloth. “Let him use my tallis!”

“No,” the gabbai said, motioning to the ragged tallis Hershel was already wearing. “He is wearing the torn tallis belonging to the soldiers. His tefillos will come before Hashem as they are, the tefillos of a soldier who suffers for his yiddishkeit.”

Standing before the amud, Hershel prepared to begin the tefillah, but he could not speak.

“Nu, nu,” someone urged when the silence stretched.

“It’s getting late,” another Jew put in.

Still, silence.

“Baal tefillah, why aren’t you davening?” the Tzemach Tzedek asked gently.

Hershel’s face was bent forward and tears were streaming from his eyes, forming a small puddle on the machzor before him. He began murmuring to himself. “I remember that day, when they tore me away from my mother. Oy, the pain of my pious mother!” His weeping increased in intensity. “Those first few weeks in the army as such a young boy... how they tried to get us to abandon our yiddishkeit and convert...”

“Baal tefillah, the sun is going down,” Rav Itzele tried. “Can you begin davening?”

Hershel gave a shudder and shook himself to relieve the terrible memories. “Perhaps I can say a few words before I begin davening?” he requested.

The gedolim nodded simultaneously.

Hershel raised his voice as loud as he could so that it would carry throughout the room and began speaking straight from the heart. “Ribbono shel Olam! Why is there a baal tefillah by neilah? Because there are three things a Jew may need:

bonim, chayei, and mezonei- children, life, and food. We therefore put someone before the amud who truly understands the pain of all three of these things, and therefore comprehends the pain of the entire tzibbur. Such a person can truly bring the tefillos of his congregation forward.”

He paused for breath and his voice cracked. “Ribbono shel Olam! I don’t long for bonim. I know that after the physical torture I have been through, I will never be able to marry and bear children. This is not something I can daven for, since it is something I will never achieve. Chayim? Why would I want to continue living? My life is more bitter than any death could be. I don’t want my painful existence to be prolonged. As for mezonos? I have no use for food. I have no use for sustenance to fuel another few hours of this difficult life. No, I don’t need food!

“So why am I davening?” Hershel boomed. “Why am I here today, leading the tefillos for this distinguished congregation if I don’t want life or children? Only for one purpose am I davening today.

Yisgadel! V’Yiskadesh! Shmei rabah!” He fell forward onto the bimah, spent.

The Tzemach Tzedek and Rav Itzele burst into tears as they contemplated this precious Jew, a man whose suffering had brought him to a point where he had no desire for life. His sole purpose in praying, in living, was to glorify Hashem’s Name in the world. They continued weeping through entire Neilah, yet their tears couldn’t reach the intensity and depth of the simple soldier who had been through so much and still kept his priorities before him constantly.

Neilah wound down, the shofar was blown, and it carried up the tefillos of the brokenhearted soldiers together with its piercing sound. Yom Kippur was over.

The Tzemach Tzedek began a melody, and the congregants joined hands in dance. Rav Itzele and the Tzemach Tzedek danced in the middle of the crowd as the joyous feeling of purity that accompanies a properly experienced Yom Kippur surged through the room.

Someone pushed Hershel into the middle of the circle, and the two gedolim grasped his hands. A smile played on his face beneath his melancholy eyes as he danced. Watching him, the greatest longing of every person in the room was to rise to the level of this incredible soldier, a man who lived for the sole purpose of Shema yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # TG129

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