

One who kidnaps a man and sells him, and he was found to have been in his power, shall surely be put to death. (21:16)

Who would kidnap a fellow Jew? It would have to be someone who is depraved, an individual to whom human life has no meaning, certainly not someone who would refer to himself as an observant Jew. So we think. We must take into account that when one's life is threatened, especially when it means the possibility of losing one's own child, when the stakes reach such epic proportion – a person's mind becomes clouded and the rationality of his decisions become suspect. In other words, when it is "me" or "you" – it is not going to be "me." The following story, quoted in *HaMeoros HaGedolim*, is a classic which demonstrates that, when pushed up against a wall, the "finest" and the "best" might justify the most heinous, depraved acts against a fellow Jew.

It was during the reign of Czar Nikolai I, the Russian monarch who decreed that young Jewish boys could be taken from their families and forced to enter the Russian Army for a period of twenty-five years. This was the infamous Cantonist decree which destroyed the spiritual lives of many Jewish boys. In the army, they were forced to abandon their religion – which sadly became a reality. The city of Salant was not spared. It, too, was demanded to produce a required number of boys. The heads of the community were concerned with this decree, because they, too, had young boys of draft age. They decided to do what was unfortunately common in those days: they sought out the children of the poor to replace their own sons. (The reader might be shocked that an observant Jew could stoop so low, but when personally faced with the decision of "my" son or the "other fellow's son," I am not certain that some of us would act differently.) Obviously, this "exchange" had to be covertly arranged, since, if word got out, there would be a riot in town. As it would happen, a poor widow, accompanied by her orphaned young son, visited the town for the express purpose of begging from door to door for alms to sustain them. She played a harmonica and people threw coins into a cup held by her son.

When the leaders of the community heard about the town's visitors, they immediately sprang into action by grabbing the young boy, changing his name and using him to replace one of their own. The community was well aware of this terrible deed, but no one said a word. It was done – and accepted. The widow, however, was far from accepting. She went from door to door to the community's leaders screaming, pleading, but no one heard her pleas. They were all involved with themselves, unable to hear the cries of others.

It happened to be that *Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl*, visited his home town that week. When the widow heard that such a distinguished guest was in town, the *gadol hador*, preeminent Torah sage of the generation, she immediately proceeded to his home to plead with him to intercede on her behalf. *Rav Yisrael* listened, calmed her down and asked her to return after *Shabbos*. That *Shabbos*, *Rav Yisrael* attended services in the main *shul*. Following *davening*, the *chashuvei ha'ir*, distinguished leaders of the community, came to his home for *Kiddush*, to bask in the presence of the founder of

the *Mussar*, ethical refinement, Movement, one of the primary leaders of Torah Jewry.

As soon as *Kiddush* was recited, *Rav* Yisrael arose from his seat, looked at the assemblage, and raised his voice in rebuke: “Murderers! Kidnappers! How dare you do what you did!” He knew each leader and looked each one in the face, as he reiterated their egregious sin,

“You!” *Rav* Yisrael screamed, looking squarely in the face of one leader. “You are careful to tie a handkerchief around your neck on *Shabbos*, so that you will not carry; yet, you have no qualms about stealing a helpless child from the arms of his mother! Are you not aware of the prohibition against kidnapping?”

Rav Yisrael looked at the next fellow and said, “You are so careful and stringent with *mitzvos*. You picked the most beautiful *esrog*, but to give a Jewish child over to *shmad*, to be apostatized, means nothing to you?” He railed on like this, speaking individually to each leader and pointing out his individual hypocrisy.

The leaders were shocked and knew not what to say. They hung their heads in shame. Never had they been excoriated so vehemently – and especially by the *gadol hador*. *Rav* Yisrael concluded his rebuke, jumped up and left his house. He said, “It is prohibited to be in the presence of *reshaim*, wicked people.” He left the city on *Shabbos*! Word went out throughout the city that *Rav* Yisrael had stormed out of the community.

No one would dream of being insolent to *Rav* Yisrael. Thus, the leaders acknowledged that they must act immediately. The young orphan was redeemed and returned to his mother. One of the *rabbanim* in the community acquiesced to seek out *Rav* Yisrael and convince him to return – which he did. While this near tragic incident worked itself out, it required the input of *Horav Yisrael Salanter* to set the wheels in motion.

Regrettably, there still remains the double-standard whereby the high and mighty, pious and committed movers and shakers of various communities and organizations, continue to play the game of *mi yichyeh*: Who will live? Who will go to school, *yeshivah*, seminary? Are they playing any less with the lives of people? Is creating criteria for acceptance that applies only to certain families with specific pedigree and financial security, any different than what the “holy” leaders of Salant were doing? When an administrator, *Rosh Yeshivah*, *Menahel*, *Menaheles* says, “No,” do they think twice about the ramifications for the potential student and his/her family? True, there are only so many schools and just so much room, but the unequitable criteria, (to which, of course, no one will concede) should not be the determining factor.