

THE RECRUIT

Adapted from "The Prisoner and Other Tales of Faith" by Rabbi Salamon Alter Halpern, published by Feldheim and reproduced with the kind permission of Rabbi Halpern.

We give thanks to You ... for the miracles, and for the salvation and for the mighty acts, and for the victories, and for the battles which You did for our forefathers in those days, at this season. In the time of Mattisyo'hu, the son of Yochonnon, the Kohen Ga'dol the Hasmonean, the evil Hellenist kingdom rose up against Your People Yisroel to make them forget Your Torah and to compel them to transgress Your Laws. But You, in Your great mercy, stood up for Your People in their distress. You took up their struggle, You gave them right and You avenged their wrong. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous and the arrogant into the hands of those who occupy themselves with Your Torah. Later, when Your children came to your Holy Abode, they cleansed Your Beis HaMikdash and they purified that sacred place and they kindled the Lights in the Courtyard of Your Sanctuary. At that time they established these eight days of Channukah, to thank You and to sing praises to Your great Name.

(From the "Al HaNissim" prayer said on Channukah)

It was with misgivings that Phidias saw Philodemos the philosopher crossing the courtyard towards him. Philodemos, though a Jew himself, was the strictest and most pedantically Hellenistic teacher of the Greek school at Jerusalem in which Phidias was a pupil, and the very sight of him always made him uncomfortable. "Well, Phidias," said the teacher, "let me hear the poem you were to compose. I hope its hexameters do not shuffle along as abominably as you were doing just now!"

That was just like Philodemos, always reminding him of his ungracious way of moving and talking. Was it his fault that he had come to the school when he was already twelve? He had been sent there by his uncle after his father's death; until then he had been at a Jewish school and had been called Yosef.

Phidias had tried very hard to become a proper Greek, all these three years, for he admired Greek culture. But it was no good, he could not be like the others, and that was what he had been brooding on this last hour instead of doing his poem.

True, he was good in Geometry and Natural Philosophy, and his pronunciation and style were improving; but he was no good at the real *culture* subjects. For instance, he still felt horribly shy to go naked at the sports and he still moved clumsily. "Here is one

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boy," the sports master used to say "who will never run at Olympia!" – and how they all laughed at that!

What would he not have given to be like the others! To walk and talk like a real Greek, to be able to throw the discus as gracefully as the beautiful statue, a copy of the famous one by Myron of Athens himself; which stood in the gymnasium, and not, as the teacher said, "like a Galilean shepherd throwing stones at his dog."

Or debating. Now, his teachers, and the best boys, could turn out the most elegant arguments about any subject you set them, even about nonsense, but whenever Phidias spoke, the teacher said: "You sound like one of your old prophets, and what's worse, as if you had been translated at Alexandria. Can't you stop shouting from your throat and think of some logical argument instead?"

And they were right. He made a fool of himself every time he spoke, no matter how true his point was. To be sure, there were many boys who couldn't think of anything original to say, good or bad, but nobody reproved them as long as they were good at Gymnastics.

No, Phidias had thought, he would never excel at anything worthwhile. He'd probably end up as a letter-writer, or with luck as an architect. Much as he would have liked to be a really cultured man he was just not good enough.

And then there was Religion. Now, he was exempt from assisting at sacrifices, but he had to attend and watch, and that was really painful. O, yes! Much of it was very beautiful to see. But he knew all the time that it was all so *wrong*. These gods the Greeks believed in! They robbed and killed each other like the worst of men. Sometimes it made Phidias doubt if the Greeks were really as clever as he believed. Of course, he didn't say a word. Socrates had died for doubting the gods, and Socrates was a great philosopher, even if one did not accept everything he had said. How would it look if a little Jew-boy were to try transforming the Greek Religion? Why, he would be killed like a dog!

All the same, why did they want the Jews to accept *everything* they did? Could one not have Greek learning, and yet keep the religion of one's fathers?

Alas, he kept very little of his own religion. He prayed sometimes, but not properly: he had forgotten the words. If he had stayed among Jews, he would be wearing T'fillin now – the very pair his father had bought for him when he was still too young to wear them and which his mother was keeping for him. He ate no pork if he could help it, and no meat at all if it *could* be managed. He had to write on Shabbos sometimes, but what could he do? He had to obey his uncle, hadn't he?

Of these things Phidias had been thinking, instead of the poem. Now he would have to find the best excuse he could ...

"I beg your forgiveness, Sir," said Phidias, "but I have been unable to concentrate on the poem."

"Yes," remarked the teacher, with that enigmatic smile he so often affected, "I thought as much. Perhaps your thoughts were occupied with the incident at Modi'in? A fine

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mess your priests are getting into! Well, never mind; give me your opinion on it, as if you were speaking in the debating lesson.”

Phidias had thought about the incident, though not just then. It was discussed everywhere and opinion differed from one extreme to the other. Phidias had considered them, and arrived at what he considered to be a balanced opinion.

What had actually happened was this: Some Greek priests, accompanied by soldiers, had come to the township of Modi'in to try to induce the people there to sacrifice to Hermes. That was being done all over the country, on government orders, but in Modi'in there had been an incident. Mattisyo'hu the Hasmonean, an aged and pious Kohen who lived in the town, had seized a sword from a soldier and killed a certain Jew who had sacrificed. Then, lifting the gory weapon, he raised the ancient cry: "To me, whoever is for G-d!" Many local men had rallied to him and they had put the Syrians to flight. The rebels had taken to the mountains, and the government was collecting forces to hunt them down, but it was known that many Jews were joining the rebels and there might be resistance — though of course it could not possibly last long.

When Phidias had quickly gone over his points in his mind, he began, in his best style:

“In my opinion the rebellion at Modi'in must be deplored by every right thinking person. Armed revolt against the government can never be the correct and democratic way of settling a question. At the same time I must say that the local governors, or their executive officers, must bear a portion of the blame, for by their recent attitude of intolerance of Jewish beliefs — which is not in the highest tradition of Greek enlightenment — they have inflamed the feelings of the population. They should have been content to spread culture in the same quiet and peaceful way as our noble school, whilst respecting the religious feelings of the Jews. Or, if they wished to propagate the Greek religion, they should have done so in public speeches and philosophical argument, and not by force.

“Furthermore, I should like to observe that the rebels, deplorable though their action is, have shown a spirit of heroism and nobility which was thought to be dead amongst the Jews. By taking up a hopeless fight when nothing but ideas was at stake, they have followed in the steps of the old heroes of whom Greek poets sing.

“In this respect, the rebellion can be called a triumph of Hellenism, and I would conclude with the hope that when the wrongs of this unfortunate affair have been made good and are forgotten, the stand of the few will be remembered as an example to inspire future generations of young Jews to deeds of fortitude and nobility.”

The teacher's face had grown purple during this speech. At last, he replied:

“My dear Phidias! It seems that this school has taught you nothing at all. Either you are making a joke of a most serious thing or you are as impractical and illogical a Jewish dreamer as ever existed. To admit the action as wrong, and in the same breath to call it noble, nay, to compare it to the exalted exploits of Greek heroes, is the worst example of sophistry and blindness to truth I have heard for a long time. To accuse the King — for you know very well that the new policy was ordered by him — of

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intolerance, is the height of impertinence, apart from being rebellious. And are you suggesting that one should tolerate every local superstition that stands in the way of enlightenment, progress and the unity of the realm? Does your tribal law tolerate other religions? Did the Jews protest when all other tribes were induced to accept the truly universal religion of Greece, in which the philosopher and the washerwoman, the soldier and the merchant, can each find a god to his liking? Is not the need for force due solely to the stubbornness of the Jews alone amongst all the formerly barbaric tribes?

“Finally, how can you represent this ugly uprising as a protest against intolerance, when its first action was to slay a devout and innocent man, a Jew himself, whilst he was in the act of making sacrifice? No, my dear Phidias, I see that you are in a sad state indeed! In spite of what you say, you are more than half a rebel yourself. This is partly our fault. We have neglected our duty and pampered you, hoping that reason alone would be sufficient. I have watched you during sacrifices, and I know exactly what you think in secret. I shall put the matter before the Teachers’ Council, and I will tell you now what I am going to advise: tomorrow you shall officiate at sacrifice — or be handed over to the courts as a rebel and traitor!

“Do not come to classes this afternoon. Instead think and consider whether you really are with us Hellenist Jews in our struggle against the old superstitious religion of the rabbis and their Torah — whether you are for us or against us — so that tomorrow you shall be able to give us your decision in a clear and dignified way. Go now!”

* * *

Phidias went, hardly knowing where he was going. He was shaken and frightened. He would have wept, but he had been taught that only women and cowards ever cried. What had he done to deserve this? He had only stated what he had believed — and still believed — to be the truth. Had not this very man taught him that one must tell the truth even at the cost of one’s life? That one must listen to the opinions of others, even if they were wrong, without anger? That one must argue to the point and never about the person, and never take revenge on one’s opponent for his honest opinion? Was it possible that these cool philosophers did not practise what they taught? That they were at heart as excitable, conceited and selfish as ignorant people? If so, why had he admired them all this time? No, it could not be true, or—or he had been wrong all the time, and the dirtiest village boy with his simple ideas was better than he.

And what was he to do now? How was he to reason things out if his life was threatened? Should he bow to force and pretend he had changed his views? But if so, how could he go on learning Philosophy if he really felt that his teachers were evil men who had forced him to live a life of untruths? Besides, he just could not do it! Sacrifice to Hermes? He had broken many laws, but he was still a Jew! He could not deny the true G-d!

Ought he to kill himself, as Socrates had done? No! Socrates had been condemned by a court after defending himself bravely; he had known what he had died for, he had not run away from a problem.

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Run away? Was that what the teacher really wanted him to do? Was that why no one had prevented him from leaving the school — for, he had just noticed, he had wandered far away from the school buildings; he was now among the vineyards of the Kidron valley. But what was the point in running away? He would be caught in the end, if the government agents really wanted him, and then he would be called a coward as well as a traitor —and this time it would be true! No, he was no traitor, he *was* loyal to the king and loved the Greek way of living — but why could they not leave religion alone?

* * *

What was that? Something was rustling amongst the vines near the road. No one could be working in the vineyards at this time of year — the grapes were far from ripe. A stray goat, perhaps? Phidias decided to look.

He climbed over the stone fence and followed the sound. There *was* somebody there; Phidias saw him creeping through the vines: a boy about his own age, but dressed in Jewish garb, in the long tunic of a Yeshiva boy, and he was wearing T'fillin. But why was he hiding? Phidias had nearly reached him when suddenly the boy turned round — pointing a dagger at Phidias. "Stand!" he ordered in Greek, "or you die!"

"What is the matter?" exclaimed Phidias, in Hebrew. "Why are you threatening me? I only came to look"

"You are a Jew," said the other, "but you are dressed like a Greek" And raising his dagger he demanded: "To whom do you belong?"

"Belong?" wondered Phidias. "What do you mean? Oh! Are you talking of the rebellion? But that is a local affair, far away! What are you doing here in Jerusalem?"

"It is not a local rebellion any more," replied the Yeshiva boy. "It is a battle which all Israel has to fight. And I must know on which side you are, for I cannot let you betray me to the soldiers."

"Is that all?" said Phidias. "Well I promise I will tell no one that I saw you. I swear it, by the G-d of Israel!"

"You swear by the G-d of Israel," said the boy, "but do you believe in Him, do you follow Him? Are you on His side? You're a Hellenist, aren't you?"

"I believe in G-d!" declared Phidias. "Perhaps I shall have to give my life for Him tomorrow!" And he told the boy what had happened.

"And you are still hesitating?" asked the partisan. "You say you will not give way. Then why let them kill you, when it is clearly your duty to be rid of them? Why don't you come away now and join us?"

"But what is the good of it all?" demanded Phidias. "How long do you think it can last? You are hiding in the mountains now. But as soon as the army gets its reinforcements you will all be killed."

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“Lord of the universe!” exclaimed the partisan. “Is that how a boy speaks who has once learnt of the Torah and the Prophets? Don’t you know that G-d can help with many or with few? Don’t you remember Gideon, and Yonosson, and Chizkiyo’hu? And if it be G-d’s Will that we die — is it not our duty to die rather than bow to the idols?”

“But what do you hope to achieve?” asked Phidias. “Supposing you could throw the king’s armies out of Judah, what do you want the country to look like? Do you want to give up all the things we have learnt from the Greeks all this time and go back to a life of shepherds?”

“What does all that matter?” exploded the boy. “We can keep the crafts and the sciences, they belong to everyone! But don’t you see the real point? For a hundred years and more our people have been taking the gifts of the Greeks and we have allowed ourselves to be deceived by their smooth tongues. We have become lazy in the wealth they have brought into the country, and — G-d forgive us! — we have treated His commandments lightly. You are only one of the Hellenizers, and not the worst of them. But all over the country Jewish children are growing up with the playthings of Athens, with arts and philosophies and sports and tales — and without knowing a word of Torah! And now they want us to worship their idols! Well, you have seen that philosophy does not make a man good. Your philosopher teacher wants to kill you in honour of idols in which he probably does not believe himself — or if he does, the more foolish his philosophy. There is nothing in it, the whole lot of their fancy stuff. What matters is that they are heathens, and all they want in the world is to enjoy themselves — and to be the masters of everybody else. We have the Torah, we and no one else — and instead of teaching others something of the truth and beauty of HaShem’s Torah, we have been learning, bit by bit, to be like them. At last they have shown their true face. Where are their philosophy, their democracy and their morals if they kill people, even women and children, just because they will not exchange the true G-d for naked marble figures? They are just as bad as any enemies of G-d have ever been! No, worse! Because they do not want to kill our bodies — but our souls!”

They were silent. How fiery, thought Phidias, and how brave and confident. And I, with my drill and training and sports, and my philosophy? / am supposed to be the noble one, the one who “will die for truth.” Maybe he is right, and I have been playing with words while the soul of my people is bleeding to death. Is that the spirit of Epiminondas — no, forget all that rubbish! Is that the spirit of a son of Judah?

He held out his hand and said: “Tell me where to go! From this moment, I fight on your side — on G-d’s side!”

And fight he did — from the ambush actions to the pitched battle in which the Syrian army was beaten, and on to Jerusalem where they drove the garrison from the Temple area. As he helped to pull down the idols that had been put there, he remembered how he had torn down the Greek lies within his own mind. And as he learned of the miracle of the Lights, he knew that the light of the Torah would never be extinguished, but would one day illuminate the whole world.