Rabbi Hayim haCohen (1585-1655) and the pirates who stole books

Rabbi Hayim haCohen was born in Egypt in 1585. His father, Ribbi Abraham haCohen, belonged to a distinguished family of Cohanim, descendants of Don Yosef haCohen of Spain.

From his childhood, it was clear that he had remarkable talents, not only for his tremendous love for the study of Tora but also for his elevated human qualities. While his classmates spent their free time playing as a child, Hayim went to the synagogue to study Tora and learn how to serve God. In his adolescence, when people gathered in the synagogue during Shabbat, he would go up to the pulpit and give sermons about the weekly section of the Tora, the laws pertaining to the approaching festivals, and lessons of musar (Jewish ethics) that attracted the heart of his listeners.

Later, he moved to the city of Tsefat (Safed) in Israel, where he studied with Rabbi Hayim Vital for about three years. From Safed, Rabbi Hayim HaCohen moved to the city of Aram Tsoba (Aleppo, Syria), where he settled permanently. There he was elected as the rabbi of the community to replace the late Rabbi Mordekhai haCohen, son-in-law of the famous Rabbi Shemuel Laniado, ba'al hakelim.

When Rabbi Hayim HaCohen began to serve as the rabbi of the community, the study of Tora flourished even more in Aleppo. New schools (ketab) and rabbinic academies (bate midrashot) were opened, and more benches were added in the synagogue.

Rabbi HaCohen served the community of Aleppo as rabbi and head of the rabbinic court for decades. His knowledge was so great that he received inquiries on very difficult rabbinical subjects from distant communities of the world. Finally, he

decided to organize all his writings and publish his books, especially his commentaries on the Shulhan Arukh, the code of law that had been written by his teacher's teacher, Rabbi Yosef Caro.

In addition to his commentary on the Shulhan Arukh, he composed many other books, including a commentary on the Song of Songs (Shir haShirim), a commentary on the book of Ekha (Lamentations), a book on Rut, a commentary on Daniel, and many more books, all in manuscripts. Up until the sixteenth century, books were copied by hand, but with the invention of the printer, that had changed. However, publishing books in Aleppo or the Middle East was impossible because the printing press had not yet arrived there. The only possibility was to print the books in Europe, and the best printers were in Venice, Italy, the city where half of Europe's books were published in the sixteenth century. It was in Venice where the first edition of the Talmud and the first edition of the Shulhan Arukh were printed.

Rabbi HaCohen sent his commentary on the book of Esther to Venice, but time passed, and the book did not come to light. He then decided to travel to Venice and personally take care of printing his book. Together with his son, they traveled by sea, carrying with them all the manuscripts of the Rabbi (probably no fewer than 20 manuscripts). But their ship was attacked by pirates from the island of Malta. The pirates boarded the ship to steal the cargo and kill the passengers or kidnap them and sell them as slaves. Rabbi HaCohen and his son jumped into the sea and miraculously managed to save their lives. But the books were left on the ship.

The Rabbi prayed to HaShem and asked for His help to recover his invaluable books or to help him rewrite them from memory. God granted him the second request, and he spent several years in Italy rewriting his precious lost books.

The first book that Rabbi HaCohen was able to print, which was

edited by Rabbi Moshe Zacuto, is called “Tora Hakham” (The Teaching of the Sage). This book is a collection of the Rabbi’s sermons on the weekly sections of the Tora. The book came to light in Venice in 1654.

The next book that he printed with the assistance of Rabbi Shemuel Abohab was “Meqor Hayim” (The Source of Life), a commentary on the Shulhan Arukh, consisting of various volumes. The first part was published in Venice, also in 1654.

To print the second volume of this book, “Pitda” (see illustration above), the Rabbi traveled to Livorno, Italy. It was in this city, Livorno, that Rabbi Cohen passed away in Perashat Qedoshim of 1655.

After the death of Rabbi HaCohen, some of the books that had been left on the ship hijacked by the pirates were found. The famous Chida, Rabbi Yosef Hayim David Azulay, in his book of chronicles Shem haGuedolim, affirms that he held in his hands the manuscript of Ateret Zahab, a commentary on the book of Esther, written by the hand of Rabbi Hayim haCohen.

Another of his books, Migdal David, a commentary on Megillat Rut, was also found. This book was printed in Amsterdam in 1680 by an impostor falsely claiming authorship for Rabbi Hayim haCohen’s book.

Recently, other manuscripts written by Rabbi HaCohen were found. Talmudic commentaries (agadot) of the treatise Berakhot were recently published in the monthly Israeli publication Qobets Bet Aharon veIsrael, in 1983.

Some books of Rabbi HaCohen still remain in manuscripts, hoping, someday, B”H to be published.

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