

“Rather Cut Off My Fingers, But Don't Touch My Beard”



The Kapischnitzer Rebbe zt'l was one of the most widely respected and beloved Torah leaders of our times*. With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the Rebbe fled with his family to Vienna. When Jewish life was shattered by the German occupation of Vienna, the Rebbe was seized and forced to clean the streets to the amusement of the jeering Germans. On one occasion in an attempt to humiliate the Rebbe, the Germans sent one of their officers with a scissors to cut off his beard. The Rebbe promptly stuck out his hand and told the officer, “Rather cut off my fingers, but don't touch my beard.” The German, startled by the Rebbe's courage, miraculously left without carrying out his evil orders.

Heard from the grandson of the Kapischnitzer Rebbe zt'l, who heard it directly from his grandfather. [This incident was recently published in “Heroes of Spirit – 100 Rabbinic Tales of the Holocaust” by Rabbi Dovid Hoffman (Israel Bookshop, 2009), pg. 320].

Throughout Jewish history, Jews were *moser nefesh* not to cut their beards. An entire chapter in sefer *Hadras Ponim Zokon* (Part II, Chapter 14) features documented, amazing incidents regarding Jews of all backgrounds who risked their lives and livelihoods rather than cut their beards -- including under Nazi persecution during World War II and under Communist persecution in Russia.

“Jews would consider the beard .. a sacred article .. as ‘an organ on which the soul depends’.... The possibility of living without a hand or a foot was more acceptable [even to a simple Jew] than the possibility of living without a beard” (*Imrei Simchah*, Vol. I, p. 310).

* The Kapischnitzer Rebbe (R' Avrohom Yehoshua Heschel, 1888-1967), won the respect and the esteem of all the *gedolim* of his era. He was a member of Moetzes Gedolei Torah of Agudas Yisroel and founding member of Chinuch Atzmai. The Ponovezer Rov, R' Yosef Kahanaman zt'l, would often say that from the day the *Chofetz Chaim* was *niftar* he hadn't had a Rebbe until he met the Kapischnitzer Rebbe.

For a comprehensive treatment of this subject, see:

Sefer Hadras Ponim Zokon / by Rabbi Moshe Wiener / The Cutting and Growth of the Beard in Halachic Perspective / Published with the Endorsements of the Leading Halachic Authorities of our Times / 1024 pages (in expanded third edition)