

Rabbi Alan Berg
Satan in America 1, Satan in Goray.

In 1648, according to Isaac Bashevis Singer in his novel *Satan in Goray*, “a tiny star appeared in the eastern sky – ‘at war with all the others, gradually assimilating them, waxing larger until it became the size of the moon.’

‘This was taken as a sign that the smallest and most humble of nations, the beleaguered Jews of the Council of Four Lands- these were the Jews of Poland, Western Russia, the Baltic nations, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Ukraine...would be lifted from their sadness and their sorrow.’

The central figure at the onset of the story is Rabbi Ben-ish, really Benish, but the name means son of man, and the rabbi’s burden is that he, a rational man, feels a tremendous aching for his people.

It is 16 years later. 1664.

As Rabbi Benish watches a messianic fervor emerge among the lost of his community, he observes many extreme cults and sects obsessive about the Zohar; and a single figure dominating all others, menacing and at this point no more than a wraith: Shabbtai Tzvi.

The rabbi is very disturbed at what he sees but remains silent. He doesn’t know what to do because he seems to have no power over his doubts and worries, they pursue him. He lacks any power to change things.

The Jews of Goray, after generations of safe governance, as a town that was a member of Council of Four Lands found unleashed upon them in 1648, and upon all of the Jews of these lands, a hatred of Jews culminating in 100,000 killed, led by Bohdan Khelmnysky, a Cossack landowner, from the Ukraine.

Goray, the town that largely had not had an ego, now knew only grief and hard times. A town so humble that the single Goray stream had

two names, and no one knew what was the proper one to use to locate Goray on legal documents.

In those days: “Everything had preceded in an orderly fashion. Horses neighed, cows mooed, goats bleated.”

In a modern phrase to my ear, Singer says of Goray before the catastrophe, before the leveling of their city, “Living in Goray was easy and Jewishness in high repute in those days.”

“In those days Rabbi Benish reigned in Goray like a king.”

But after it was like this: “It’s best citizens had been slaughtered...the fear of new visitations never left the Jews.” (?) Worst of all at the time when unity was the most necessary, every man went his own way, no longer willing to share the common responsibility.”

“They would agree to everything but carry out nothing.” This suggests they had no will.

“The high cost of things had made people mean.”

Its important to keep *one thing* in mind, this disaster was not the way of the world, in no inevitable way did it have to happen. It happened because of politics that reduced the prosperous Jewish kingdom of the Council of Four Lands to rubble and even worse, evil.

As we will learn, this was not unlike the world Singer saw in his Polish town as he came of age during and after WW1. And it’s one that you do not want to see in the future for your town.

October 1666. Goray had fallen on evil days. 18 years after Russophile Cossack Chelmnitzki did complete carnage of the Jews of the Council of Four Lands.

The Cossack Chelmnitzsky led a Russophile crusade to overthrow Polish power, which included the power to tax his property.

Chelmnitzski's rallies were filled with this warlord declaring to the Ukrainian peasants that his hated personal enemies – the Poles, had sold them into the hands of the accursed Jews.” (wik)

Modern scholarship varies in its estimates of the Jewish population; some suggesting that there were as few as 40,000 Jews at that time who lived in the area.

It was for 100 years one nation, known to Jews as the Four Lands: Poland, the Ukraine, the Baltics, west Russia. 20,000 lost in this accounting, and as noted in a journal by a Polish soldier; “...the surviving peasants wander around in groups, bewailing their misfortune.”

This is the Goray that Rabbi Benish sees in October 1666, “More and more Jews divided into sects. Children who lost their father and mother wandered the streets.”

The few who were well off in Goray and had laid in stocks of food during the summer months remained secluded at home, fearful of worshipping in congregations lest they see the misery of the poor and hear their complaints.

For fear of this they lit no lamps at night.

The rumor that the days of the Messiah were drawing near aroused even Goray...people most often spoke of one great and holy man, Shabtai Tzvi, who was said to be the one whom Israel had been waiting for these several hundred years and who would be revealed in a short time.

At first Shabtai Tzvi – the heralded Messiah appeared only in stories and dreams.

From without: In the middle of the winter, a man with a snow covered beard and black earlocks arrives on a sleigh. “Judeans,” he calls to the unquiet town folk of Goray,

“I come from the Holy Land. I am a pure-blooded Sepahrdi. I have been sent by my brothers into the Exile, to tell you that the Great Fish that lurks in the River Nile has succumbed at the hands of Shabtai Tzvi, our Messiah and holy king...His kingship will soon be revealed, and he will take the sultans crown from his head...he will carry the Messiah into Jerusalem.

From within: Reb Joseph a local figure related that in a trance, Shabtai Tzvi had come to him and declared, “Mordechai Joseph, Thou shalt yet offer up the priestly sacrifices!”

The challenge for the Goray Jewish folks is that with everything that are facing, to figure out what is real, what is true, what demands wisdom, what suits common sense.

Who is Satan in Goray? What’s with the title?
This is the revelation:

As recounted by Meyer Levin in his 1955 *New York Times* book review: Shabtai Tzvi had already departed for Stambol (Turkey) to claim his crown from the Sultan of Turkey who ruled the land of Israel.

Believers in Shabtai Tzvi – most Jews – let everything fall into idleness and confusion to stand ready for the miraculous cloud that would lift them to Israel on the Day of Atonement.

But months later they learned that Shabbtai Tzvi had become a Moslem while in Stambol.

And it was then, then after the failure of the one the Jews believed to be the messiah, after his inexplicable trauma inducing conversion, that Satan came to Goray.

As Levin writes: “Then began a strange period in Goray, as in other Jewish communities.”

Anything goes. “For Shabbtai Tzvi’s apostasy was interpreted as part of the final stage of redemption when all evil had to be embraced on the way to salvation.”

Tzvi was not the Satan, Satan was how the people acted at his apostasy.

The episode of the Golden Calf happened after the reality that the revelation at Sinai had not alleviated the people’s economic problems.

Eric Hoffer put the proposition forth in his book *The True Believer* that at the point at which one becomes a true believer, all true believers are the same, ready for the devil, available to do evil and justify it.

It was after the apostasy of Shabbtai Tzvi, after the big-shot converts, and this in an age when conversion means everything, religion was the only element in your identity; it was the disillusionment that came with everything, the apostasy of Tzvi, no magic carpet ride to Israel, no end to suffering, or the sorrow following the massacres by the Cossacks....

What would be the warning in this for us today?

We might be warned by conversations about what will happen to the American people when their messiah fails. Or anyone when their irrational hopes fail. False narratives open up like the earth that swallowed Korach.

What will happen to them, will they do evil? Will there be Satan in America. Will there be evil worship like as in Goray?

Behind every historical tragedy is too much grief.

For the Jews of Council of Four Lands, it was the Cossack massacres that were an outcome of the larger tectonic political movement involving Russia, Ukraine, Poland and the Baltics.

It's not coincidental these that these same political settings, in the same way, but with nuclear weapons, are in the news; - tribal alliances and loyalties never let go—they always seem familiar.

And adding to the familiarity today to us of the world of the Jews of Goray, a large majority of the people in this room right now are descendants of Goray or the other Jews of the Four Lands, as are most Jews in the world.

Tyrants destroy, not to only instill fear, but to create widespread grief, because they know it is grief that destroys the will to live, the art of living.

Most of us can perhaps handle a loss, and if there is more to bear... that's when the false promise is made – when our sons and our daughters in our inner cities...when a soldier comes home, more dead or alive.

Who needs more on that list!

That's the reason dictators do it, to control people where they are most vulnerable – that's when the messianic promise is made.

After the grief sets-in from too much sadness, after the messiah promises an end all sadness and sorrow, after that messiah proves to be a false messiah, and the people see that their lot hasn't changed, their cup hasn't budged, their aspirations still frustrated...
...that is when they act as if the devil is in them instead of the Holy One of Being.

With the proclamation by the self-described pure-blooded Sephardi from Israel of the coming of the Shabbtai Tzvi Messiah, a townsman by the name of Reb Mordechai Joseph, faints.

He awakens and says in his daughter's hearing, "...his green eyes burned like a wolf" and he adds, "A great light shall descend on the world. Thousand and thousands times greater than the sun! It shall

blind the eye of the wicked, and the scoffers. Only the chosen shall escape.

Troubled, as a response to the broad impact of the Sephardi messenger on the sad townfolk of Goray, Rabbi Benish summons him – called by Singer ‘the newcomer’, to his rabbinical chambers. What Rabbi Benish says to him is unknown – .

Immediately ‘the newcomer, the Sephardi messiah -messenger from Israel, rode away from Goray in the same sleigh in which he had arrived.

His visit, nevertheless, sets in motion a decisive, hard edged, violence-tinged conflict between Reb Joseph who denounces Rabbi Benish. “Benish is a heretic. Benish the Dog. Denies the Messiah!”

And when, from nowhere, and follow this closely now, a young boy with a feminine name, Chanina – his name means grace, Chanina, a charity student, a Talmud chuchum, yells out, “Shabbtai Tzvi is a false Messiah!”...

....Reb Joseph quickly assembles a gang that beats young Chanina close to death, in an episode that is prescient about todays rallies.

“Rabbi Mordechai Joseph himself proudly helped carry Chanina by the legs, spitting into his face and yelling out, “Thus rotteth the name of the wicked,” he said, “Now he shall know there is a God who rules the world.”

It would take the now impoverished daughter of Reb Eleazar Badad, before the Cossack massacres – the wealthiest man in Goray , a pretty good man – lost, no one knows where he has disappeared to, and his daughter Rechele, now living and reduced to the most dreadful circumstances to say to the abusive, unwell aged woman who has been given control over her, “Granny, I’m afraid.”

(End of part one of four parts.)