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Satan in America 3.
The New Judea

III

The question of the Council of Four Lands, and its emergence from the 'free trade' Fairs is now clearer. The Fairs themselves were the models of what the Jewish world was, and could be again.

In 1918 after a hundred year domination by Russia, the national liberation of Poland was one of the unexpected consequences of the end of World War I.

For Jews the consequence was inter-community warfare that exceeded even the anti-Semitism they suffered.

The standard edition of Satan In Goray includes an introduction by Harvard Yiddish and Comparable Literature Professor Ruth Wisse.

There she picks up the unusually well hidden history of the resurrection, after more than a century, of Polish national sovereignty, of Poland and at the same time of the Poles approach to and attitude towards the Jewish community.

I'm going to review a few of the features of this relationship. Bringing it into focus will help us comprehend how, beginning in the 1920s, it would lead to the founding of the state of Israel. And we will see how modern Israel is the heir to and modeled on the Council of Four Lands.

Wisse: "...but of all of the novels only this one was conceived of within the society that formed him (I.B. Singer); Jewish Warsaw in what came to be known as 'between the world wars.'" 1918 – 1939. "Satan in Goray is a distilled image of Jewish civilization in Poland at the moment before it was interrupted and destroyed. It bears unsettling witness to a very troubled time."

Isaac Bashevis Singer would be awarded the Nobel Prize in 1978. He was born on November 21, 1902 at Leoncin, Congress Poland.

Congress of Poland means Kingdom of Poland. The Jews of the town of Leoncin, among them the Singers, were relocated to God knows where, by the Russians during WW1. And some returned after the rebirth of independent Poland after the Great War.

Now listen to this: “In the following years, due in part to economic difficulties, as well as Zionist agitation, many left in search of greener pastures.”

And then consider this passage from Satan in Goray and consider, speculate on what economic difficulties and Zionist agitation Singer must have been describing in the Jewish community he was raised in:

“...news of the one who would prove to be the false messiah had just reached the Jews of Goray...

“Shabbtai Tzvi is his name...certainly his repute must have reached your ears...that the time of the messiah was at hand....These tidings have brought great confusion to the tents of Israel in Poland, for the wound we got at the hands of the murderer Chelmnitzski...are still festering...and Israel is greatly impoverished and our pride is fallen to the earth, the like of which has never been seen since the day Israel was driven from the land.

“In every town...there sprang up empty and lightheaded men...that let themselves fall into the net
the wicked man has spread at their feet...and a number of men of wisdom and understanding were captured in that net...or feared to open their mouths.”

What is Singer saying here about the Jews who in 1920 inhabited the villages of former The Council of Four Lands.

According to Ruth Wisse, “Just below the surface of this seemingly antiquated story about Shabbai Tzvi throbs the messianic hysteria that Marxism generated in the ruins of Eastern Europe following WWI and that continued to dominate Jewish intellectual circles....”

But there is another element...its 1920, not only Marxism, but by the stress caused by emergent, militant Zionism. As Wisse noted, some left the town Singer lived in ‘due to Zionist agitation.’

Consider, then, another Jew, born in another part of the former Council of Four Lands, in this same world of Jewish Poland: Menachem Begin was born in 1913 in Brest-Livosk, a backwater at the confluence of the borderlands that then comprised Poland, Lithuania and Russia.

Impoverished and beaten down as these towns were, they still generated – because of the legacy of a full blossoming kingdom of the Council of Four Lands, in the minds of the people, a Jewish culture, and above all in their willfulness an unmitigated yearning for restoration. Begin came of age in a Jewish Poland that for two centuries desired to become what it had been.

Begin and I.B. Singer came out of the same terribly complex Jewish world. Consider: Even in 1920, “Poor as Poland was, it’s Jews... sustained enough daily newspapers and publishing houses to provide steady work for dozens of writers and reporters and although everything was subject to censorship, writers had greater freedom under Pilsudski (the Polish Prime Minister) that had been granted by the tsars.”

This, because of an extremely peculiar relationship that emerged after WWI between the newly independent Polish government, and Poland’s Jewish citizens, organizations and leaders.

From its inception after WWI, the Polish government sought through partnership with its Jews, in a clandestine but fully funded

government program called Prometheus, to create outside of Poland; in fact in partnership ultimately with Begin, the Betar Revisionists, and their leader V'ladmir Jabotinsky, to establish throughout the 1930s an independent Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan River, the west bank and the rest of Palestine, and to relocate all of Poland's Jews there. This was before the Holocaust, and before Hitler.

Although Jews on the left opposed Polish independence, during the times of the leadership of a prime minister named Pilsudski, "Poland was fertile ground for the development of an independent Jewish culture. Poland's exclusivist kind of nationalism has been described as an ideal environment for Jewish nationalism since it discouraged Jews from assimilating – while providing Jews with a model of ethnic separatism.

The Polish government of the 1930s, officially anti-Semitic – in the classic sense, not racially as Hitler was - was a deeply troubled state. A rational state, caught between the Russian colossus and the German radical regime, Poland cultivated long before the Shoah, the revisionist Zionism of Jabotinsky and Begin. It did this as a way of removing its Jewish population, even though that population paid forty percent of Poland's taxes,

After all, it would never again be possible to imagine the resurrection of the Council of Four Lands in Poland.

But in Palestine...it could be, although perhaps not easily, done; serving both the Polish government well and its secret Prometheus division, training large numbers of Jewish soldiers in Poland for action in Palestine and financing and supporting Begin and Jabotinsky in every way; and the fundamentalist claim of revisionist Zionism: the diaspora has to be moved forcibly and fast to Palestine, and the British must be overthrown through armed resistance.

The foundation for the state of Israel was laid and the edifice constructed by what happened in Poland before the Nazis invaded the Polish state.

Leon Uris's novel Exodus.

His stirring, well written novel portraying the events leading up to, during and following the UN vote establishing the legal basis for the new state, sold more copies than any historical novel since *Gone With The Wind*.

That means that *Exodus* is the 2nd largest selling historical novel of all time. And there was a time when every Jew in America had read it.

The movie went on to have an extraordinary life of its own.

Both book and movie went on to have an extraordinary impact on the internalized narrative of the founding of the state of Israel.

Both the book and the film focus on the 1947 UN vote to split Palestine, partition was the word, and fold in dramatically the declaration of statehood in '48 and the admission to the UN in 1949, all are conflated in the reader or viewers mind as the birth of Israel, where it was actually born in activities of Begin culminating in the bombing of the King David Hotel and not in a UN vote.

And both book and movie make the subtle mistake of portraying the roots, vision and model of the state in the desperation of the 19th Century Pale of Settlement – the 19th century Russian part of Council of Four Lands, rather than in the dignity, self-confidence and self-governance of the 16th Century Polish-Jewish State, The Council of Four Lands.

The problem with this standard, legendary view is not only does it take us away from what happened earlier in Poland – the successful one hundred year Jewish state of the Council, but more importantly it takes us away from the most important part of Poland's brief existence in the '20s until Russia then Hitler invaded in '30s, when

the government of Poland in a major priority of all of its policies, created and sponsored Prometheus; sponsored the military training throughout the 30s, and invasion of Palestine, led by Begin, that actually, rather than any one or all three of the UN votes, led to Israel.

Leon Uris the author of Exodus, calls the Pale of Settlement, large as a country, a ghetto, and places Jewish self-government in impoverishment rather than dignity.

From Exodus: “Within the ghetto the Jews organized their own government under the over leadership of the rabbis. (not true – a romance). There were a hundred different offices and wardenships. There was a score of Talmudic and Biblical societies, There was an organization for the care of orphans... there were societies to care for the sick, the aged....Indeed the community moved as one for existence of all.”

Indeed that was the case.

As long as you followed the rules; but even so the quote from Exodus, as we can see, places the Jewish community vision in its decay, with no mention of its source and strength, and it also completely ignores what followed.

How would you feel if somebody looked at you that way?

Fiddler on the Roof placed in the Pale – the lands of Western Russia that Catherine the Great conquered from the Poles at the beginning of the 19th Century; Catherine the Great formally relocated Jews of the towns and into rural impoverishment, - and in Fiddler Tevya’s historic backbone, itself representing the Jewish future, is placed squarely on... “tradition!” Shabbat candles.

What does that mean?

No, what saved the Jewish future was actual skills, the greatest of all was taking the long view; and the memory of the dignity of the Council.

And, let me add that if you do think that it seems a remote likelihood that this memory of a 17th Century mighty Jewish nation was unlikely to both create the model, the very template of modern Zionism, and to motivate its actual creation, through the Polish Prometheus project, outside of Poland, if you think that memory seems unlikely to motivate all of the Jews who are descended from the Council of Four Lands – most of us, or our parents or grandparents, to modern Israel...

Then consider this: we were instead, called upon to believe that the memory of a 2000 year old Jewish State, one based on animal sacrifice, but instead in our ancestor Abraham's land, and where the rabbis are dressed in outfits of the 17th Century Jewish Kehilah.

With the centrality of Israel in all of our lives, does it matter that we live with the right understanding of its origins?

Otherwise we can misperceive its nature and actions.

If we are living in a dream we are more likely to find life unreasonable.

If you are living in a dream or in a way of knowing your life that has you unprepared for shocks, you are more likely to find life irrational.

Things might seem to be closing in on you.

If as good a person as you are, as your friends know you are and as you know you are, it's still possible to get things wrong about our life. Get things wrong, that can potentially ruin everything for us.

The same thing is true for us as a people.