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JEWISH LEGENDS FROM KRAKÓW

When I came to Kraków for the first time several years ago and tried to get some information about the Jewish Kraków, among the first-hand information I was offered in the bookshops were a few small booklets with legends about the Jews in this town. This is nothing special, for wherever one goes as a tourist one gets the same genre of literature: local legends and tales. It seems, therefore, that the popular legends indeed offer the first-hand information about the specific climate and the self-estimation of the inhabitants at a specific place. It is obviously the tales of a city that infuse life to its stones and places more than all exact historical data one can gather. The legend gives, so to speak, a short-hand résumé of the most typical and central features as well as the spirit of a place.

That being so, it is therefore worth having a closer look at those legends we are offered by the different storytellers. I am referring here to quite different sources: there are the small collections by Ewa Basiura,¹ by Henryk Halkowski, who kindly put at my disposal his published and non-published collections,² the literary collection by Maria Kłańska,³ some older ones, by Micha Josef Bin Gorion⁴ and even a few original Hasidic booklets by Menachem Mendel Bodek,⁵ Elieser Schenkel,⁶ Michael Levi Rodkinson,⁷ Menachem Mendel Sofer from Uschpizin,⁸ Nathan Neta ha-Kohen,⁹ and even Gedalya Nigals' collection of Dibbuk tales.¹⁰

The Cracovian Jewish legends in these collections number about 32 tales or fragments of tales. As these stories may not be all the existent material and since I have, so far, not succeeded in tracing the earliest sources of all of them, my following remarks can only be preliminary, and I hope that further research will shed more light and offer more definite answers to our questions.

¹ *The Jews of Poland in the Legend*, Kraków 1997; *Das legendäre Krakau – bekannte und unbekanntes Geschichten*, Kraków 1998.

² *Legendy z Żydowskiego Miasta na Kazimierzu pod Krakowem*, Kraków 1998. I quote the English version: *The Legends from the Jewish Town in Kazimierz near Kraków* (computer version).

³ *Jüdisches Städtebild Krakau*, Frankfurt a. M. 1994.

⁴ *Der Born Judas*, Wiesbaden 1959; *Mimekor Yisrael*, prepared by D. Ben-Amos, Bloomington–Indianapolis 1990.

⁵ *Sippurim Hasidijim*, ed. G. Nigal, Tel Aviv 1990.

⁶ *Ma'asijot mi-Zaddike Jesode 'Olam*, n.p. 1903.

⁷ *Sippure Mikhael Levi Rodkinson*, *Sippurim hasidijim*, ed. G. Nigal, Jerusalem 1989.

⁸ *Sefer Schloscha 'Edre Tzon*, Przemyśl 1874.

⁹ *Kuntras Me'irat 'Enajjim*, in: *Shivhe ha-Besht*, ed. B. Mintz, Jerusalem 1969.

¹⁰ G. Nigal, *Sippure Dibbuk*, Jerusalem 1994².

From the sum of these 32 tales some *nine* stories could be defined as aetiological tales telling of events from the past which occurred at particular places in the town and thus giving an explanation of the often specific and extraordinary shape and appearance of these spots. *Three* of these 32 tales are aetiologies of specific religious customs of the Cracovian Jewish community, a further *five* are biographical legends about the great rabbinical figures from Kraków, and *three* tales could be named as historical aetiologies. One of them gives a kabbalistic historiosophical interpretation to the rivalry of two great rabbinical figures of Kraków, namely R. Joel Sirkes (1561–1640) and Nathan Neta Spira (1585–1633); the second one gives an explanation why the Kabbalist from the Lurianic-sarugian school of Kabbalah did not become a follower of the Pseudo-Messiah Shabtay Zvi. The last historical aetiology, the story of Esterke, the Jewish lover of King Casimir, tries to throw light on the purported reasons for the privileges this king granted to the Jews of Poland.¹¹ That is to say, *twenty* out of the 32 tales try to give “historical” reasons for specific geographical, habitual and historical phenomena in the Jewish town of Kraków and for the biographical peculiarities of its great rabbinical figures.

Among the other tales we find *two* tales of deliverance which relate rescue missions helping the Jewish Community against the assaults by the Christian population or authorities. *Seven* other tales demonstrate a biographical interest in the lives and character of the great rabbis of Kraków. Merely *three* tales demonstrate the impact of the Hasidic movement on the Kraków Jewry in the 18th century, and *one* additional tale could be attributed to the influence of the Lurianic Kabbala.

The question I would like to raise here is: what kind of Jewish community is depicted in these tales? What is the character of this community, what are its outlooks and points of identification as reflected in these tales? How do these Jews see their situation in this city, and what are their points of confidence? When I try to learn all this from just a few popular tales, of course, no true historical picture will emerge. But if we analyze these few tales within the context of the overall Ashkenazi tale tradition, beginning in the West and including the tremendous Eastern output beginning in the 19th century, a very specific feature evolves that characterizes the Cracovian legendary tradition. From the comparison of the relatively few Jewish Cracovian tales with the richness of the Ashkenazi tale tradition we can draw the following clear conclusion: the legendary materials from Kraków show us a community with a clearly conservative, in a way medieval Ashkenazi character, having some common traits with some western medieval communities. But at the same time, this Cracovian tradition is quite different from the majority of the Ashkenazi tales. This concerns the plurality of characters which began to evolve already in the West and reached its climax in the Hasidic movement in the East. Kraków, obviously, was not participating in this plurality, but shows a more monistic outlook.

Let us, therefore, have a closer look at these Cracovian tales. Our first question should be: how do these tales deal with the geographical reality, with the place the Jews live in? We get the answer to this question from the local aetiological tales which pertain to specific local spots in Kraków. What are the geographic or material phenomena on which these tales are focused? These phenomena are actually only two, namely the synagogue

¹¹ See e.g. D. Gans, *Zemach David*, ed. M. Breuer, Jerusalem 1983: 358; Ch. Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yiddish be-Polin*, Jerusalem 1981; *idem*, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature: A Case Study in the Mutual Relations of Two Cultural Traditions*, Jerusalem 1985; Kłańska 2002: 636–639.

and the Jewish cemetery. The first tale to be mentioned here gives an explanation for the richness and the abundant interior of the Isaac Synagogue. We are told there that this richness actually hails from a celestial intervention. The founder of this synagogue, Jizchak, it is told, was directed to a formidable gold treasure by a prophetic dream sent to him from heaven,¹² and with this money he could afford to erect and embellish this magnificent prayer house.

The second local aetiology is a fragment only which is related to a pillar in the Great Synagogue. This pillar, we are told there, was carried by the river Vistula all the way from the Jerusalem Temple to the Cracovian synagogue, thus giving this synagogue a touch of Jerusalem authority in exile.¹³

Greater in number than these two references to Cracovian synagogues are the references to Jewish cemeteries in the town. There are no less than *six* tales dealing with curious burial places at the cemeteries of the town. As was common in Ashkenaz, the social order of the community was also retained regarding the order of the burial places in the cemetery. So it needs an explanation why, in opposition to this custom, single graves of obviously unimportant people were found there at the side of the graves of the renowned rabbis of the community. And the related tales offer a historical explanation for this extraordinary phenomenon. In one case a purported miser of the community had fulfilled the rabbinical Mitzvah of giving charity in secret, throughout his whole life, and this was the reason why the great rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller (1579–1654) wanted to be buried at his side.

In the second case, the extraordinary burial place for a non-rabbinical person was chosen by the command of Moshe Isserles (1525–1572), who used the deceased man's corpse in an act of atonement for the sins which sullied the community.

And finally, the third case telling of an unusual burial place is connected to a marvelous confirmation of the rabbinical law regarding the purchase of a burial place. A stranger came to Kraków and wanted to buy a prominent burial site at the side of R. Nathan Neta Spiro for himself for only a small sum of money. The president of the community, unwilling to deal with the matter, took the money and went away. The next day, however, the man, who was not considered an honourable person, died, and was buried not in the grave he had actually bought. After the deceased had intervened at the rabbinical court, his right was confirmed but still no action was taken. The following night, therefore, the dead man moved over and took possession of the grave he legally owned.¹⁴

Another, quite different, cemetery tradition is related to an empty piece of ground opposite the Remu-Synagogue. This "former" cemetery was, according to the legend, closed for further burials after a disastrous punishment ordained by heaven brought death to many people who were celebrating a marriage on this ground. They were all swallowed up by the earth on the spot.¹⁵

¹² Kłańska 1994: 210; Basiura 1997: 47; 1998: 102; Halkowski 1998, no. 6.

¹³ Kłańska 1994: 68.

¹⁴ Bin Gorion 1959: 684; 1990: 308 (according Nifle'ot Gedolot 3); Kłańska 1994: 212; Halkowski 1998, no. 4, no. 7; *Adat Zaddikim*, ed. Nigal, p. 79.

¹⁵ Kłańska 1994: 135; Halkowski 1998, no. 2B1; Kłańska 1994: 141; Halkowski 1998, no. 2B2; Basiura 1998: 99.

From all these tales we may conclude, then, that the identifying fix-points for the Jewish story tellers of the community of Kraków-Kazimierz seem to be only the synagogue and the cemetery – and nothing else.¹⁶

It fits this picture well when two additional aetiological tales explain why in Kraków there are no Jewish weddings on Friday,¹⁷ and why on Simhat Tora the seven Hakafot – that is the processions around the lectern – are interrupted after the fourth circuit as a reminiscence of an attack which has once taken place there at this time of the celebration.¹⁸ Again, the Jewish points of interest are focused here on the synagogue, religious rites and, again, the cemetery.

If we turn now from the spatial-geographical sphere to the social realm, we again meet the same, so to speak, unilinear picture. The only active and venerable heroes in the Cracovian legends are the Chief Rabbis or other high standing rabbinical figures mainly from the 16th/17th centuries – the most prominent of course being Moshe Isserles, the famous Remu.¹⁹ This is true regarding the following legends, which demonstrate a more biographical interest. Most prominently this concerns the birth tale of Remu, in which we learn that his birth was a reward for the saintliness of his father.²⁰ Like the beginning of Remu's life, his death and funeral were wonderful in a similar manner because he died at the age of 33 in the year 33 on LaG be-'Omer, for which reason 33 tales were told in his funeral addresses.²¹ The other biographical tales explain why Nathan Neta Spiro, in spite of being a Kabbalist, did not join the messianic movement of Shabtay Zvi,²² why Rabbi Joel Sirkes died immediately after he published the last volume of his *Bet Hadash*,²³ why R. Avraham Jehoshua Heschel (died 1663) did not publish any book in his lifetime,²⁴ why R. Eli'ezer Aschkenasy (1513–1586) from the remote Egypt became rabbi in some European Communities and then in Kraków,²⁵ and finally why Kalman ben Aharon Epstein (died 1823) became the closest pupil of 'Elimelekh of Lyshansk.²⁶

One historical aetiology tells of the supposed rivalry between two great rabbinical figures in Kraków, Rabbi Joel Sirkes and R. Nathan Neta Spira. Rabbi Spira's unfriendliness towards Rabbi Sirkes is explained in this tale by a sin of Rabbi Joel Sirkes which was disclosed to R. Nathan by the prophet Elijah. R. Nathan, in order not to endanger Joel Sirkes because of the celestial decree against him, caused the pain of rivalry to Joel Sirkes with the aim of providing him with atonement. In this tale we actually have the tale of the rivalry and victory of Lurianic Kabbala over the traditional rabbinical position – but the result was the subordination of the Kabbalist to the rabbi of the com-

¹⁶ An additional curious local legendary fragment is reported. It tells of a Hebrew inscription on the winged altar in the Mary Cathedral which one day was eradicated by the order of the authorities, with the consequence that later on the whole painting disappeared from the altar, cf. Kłańska 1994: 89.

¹⁷ Basiura 1997: 39; 1998: 99; Halkowski 1998, no. 2A.

¹⁸ Kłańska 1994: 208; Halkowski 1998, no. 8.

¹⁹ Regarding his theology see Grözinger 2009: 281–312.

²⁰ Halkowski 1998, no. 1.

²¹ *'Adat Zaddikim* (Shivhe ha-Remu), ed. Nigal, p. 79–80.

²² Halkowski 1998, Add. no. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, Add. no. 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Add. no. 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Add. no. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Add. no. 9.

munity at the end.²⁷ One of the biographical tales again shows the prominent position of traditional rabbinical studies, insofar as R. Jehoshua Heschel (17th/18th c.) was invited to sit in paradise at the side of Rashi himself, because in his writings he always took the side of Rashi against the Tosafists.²⁸

In another tale about the Chief Rabbi Joel Sirkes again we hear about the great rabbinical figures. We learn about the extraordinary way he gained the knowledge of his imminent vocation to Kraków and, in one of the two versions, as a consequence thereof, about the legendary marriage of his daughter to the hidden scholar David ben Samuel ha-Levi, the TaZ. Her father, Joel Sirkes, had made a vow to marry his daughter only to a scholar as great as himself, but finally it happened that there was only a simpleton at hand who fulfilled the father's stipulation. But in the end this simpleton turned out to be a great rabbinical scholar as well, namely the great David Ben Samuel.²⁹

The only ethical exemplum among the tales is told about a rabbi, that is Rav Heschel, who is proving his incorruptibility in law suits as he refuses to accept a bribe.³⁰

This concentration on the outstanding rabbinical figures becomes even more striking if we turn to two tales which tell of the deliverance of the Jewish community from impending dangers from the side of the Christian population and its authorities. In one of the two tales it is a forced disputation by the young Moshe Isserles with the Christian clergy and the Polish philosophers which sweeps away the menace of destruction of the Jewish community by the Bishop of Kraków.³¹ In the second example of a deliverance tale we are told about the impending assault by Christian robbers against the Isaac Synagogue, which was prevented by a ruse of Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller.³² Normally, according to Ashkenazi tale tradition, these deeds of deliverance were the domain of a Baal Shem and not of a mere rabbi. The same is true for yet another act of deliverance, namely an act of exorcism, executed by the aforementioned TaZ (R. David ben Shemuel ha-Levi, 1586–1667). He does not execute this exorcism in the way that is common among the professional exorcists, who are normally a Baal Shem, but he executes the exorcism by a mere rabbinical command.³³ In these tales we meet a clear reluctance to use the otherwise widespread professional title of a Baal Shem.

But not only the figure of the Baal Shem is missing among the Cracovian tales. There are other heroes in Ashkenazi folktale tradition of West and East similarly which are not mentioned in the Cracovian legendary tradition. Here we only once meet a prophet of sin of the Lurianic type,³⁴ but not the type of the Renaissance Magician like in the tradition of Juda he-Hasid, Rabbi Adam from Bingen and Prague and the Wormsian Baale Shem, and we do not meet the pious simpleton, so prominent in Hasidic literature.³⁵

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Add. no. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Add. no. 6.

²⁹ *Ma'asijot me-Zaddike Jesod 'Olam*, ed. E. Schenkel, n.p., 1903; Bin Gorion 1959: 685; Halkowski 1998, no. 3.

³⁰ *Ma'asijot me-Zaddike Jesod 'Olam*, p. 9, no. 4.

³¹ *'Adat Zaddikim*, ed. Nigal, p. 72, no. 22.

³² Kłańska 1994: 209–210; Halkowski 1998, no. 5.

³³ Nigal 1994: 145–146.

³⁴ Namely the mentioned Nathan Neta Spiro.

³⁵ Regarding these types see Grözinger 2001: 169–192; 2005: 709–752.

There is, however one tale about the execution of a “Tikkun”, that is a rite of expiation for a sin from a former life in the transmigration of the souls. Tales of this type have been known since the legends on the Kabbalist Jizchak Lurja from the beginning of the 17th century, and have since then spread all over Ashkenaz and most prominently in the Hasidic literature. And again, the executor of the Tikkun is normally a special charismatic expert in the knowledge of transmigration and not the rabbi of the community. But in the single Cracovian example of this type it is again the unnamed rabbi of the community who performs the Tikkun. And in addition, he does not, as usual, prescribe one of the common penances for the guilty person, but he does something which a rabbi normally has to do: he passes a sentence in a professional law suit; in the case in question it is a death sentence.³⁶

Whereas in many areas of the Ashkenazi tale tradition there exists a great variety and plurality of different heroes, in the tales about Kraków we meet an exclusive concentration on the rabbis. It is therefore the rabbi in whom the Cracovian tale tradition has its figure of identification. He is the representative of the Jews, their figure of identification, their helper and their ideal person – the rabbi is on the one and the entire community on the other side. There are actually no important figures in between worth mentioning in the legends.

This judgement is supported by the somehow extraterritorial geographical point of identification of the Cracovian Jews as depicted above. These points of geographical identification are not Poland or the precincts of the town of Kraków, but the religiously defined non-Polish places, namely the synagogue and the Jewish cemetery. This picture is totally different in a large number of Hasidic tales, where on the contrary the non-religious places outside the synagogue and outside the Jewish cemetery are transformed into holy places. In those tales, which I described some time ago^{36a}, the secular places of Poland are transformed into new Jerusalems and Mount Sinais etc. All this seems unfamiliar to the Cracovian legendary tradition.

Thus the legends from Kraków depict a sort of isolated Jewish Community in Exile whose sole points of identification are in a way extraterritorial and whose social point of identification are the rabbis of the community.

I have, however, so far found *three* tales which begin to breach into this rabbinically oriented fortress of Jewish Kraków. The first tale tells of the beginnings of Hasidism in Kraków in the days of Kalman Epstein (died 1823)³⁷ when the first Hasidim of Kraków used to travel to see the Rebbe, Dov Berish, of the nearby Ushpizin. But the second tale is the more important one. For it antedates the Hasidic infiltration into Kraków from the 19th century back to the final days of the Besht himself, that is to 1760 – though this infiltration begins among the “celestial” population of Cracovian Jews only. In this tale we are told that one of the great rabbinical figures of Kraków, the then already deceased Head of the Yeshiva, Nathan Neta Spira (1583–1633), the so called Megalle ‘Amukot, was hindered at fulfilling his obligation towards a Jew who was still alive. This

³⁶ Sefer Pe'er Mekuddashim Bodek 1990: 147.

^{36a} Grözinger 2004.

³⁷ On him see *Sefer Schloscha 'Edre Tzon*, Przemyśl 1874: 41; Bałaban 1936: 497; J. Alfasi, *Ha-Hasidut*, Tel Aviv 1974: 120.

tale shows us, so to speak, the Hasidic “assault” on the rabbinical fortress of Kraków. I would like to end my paper by quoting this text in full length:

The great Rav, Rabbi Lieber, who was a Preacher in the town of Berdichev, was used to his deceased grandfather, the Rav Megalle ‘Amukot, visiting him every night in order to learn with him.

Once it happened that his grandfather did not show up for several nights. And R. Lieber was very unhappy about this. So he sent his son, R. Yehiel to Kraków, to visit the grave of the Megalle ‘Amukot, where he should pray in this respect. And the deceased told him, that only some days ago the Baal Shem Tov died and because of his honour the celestial Yeshiva was closed for the thirty days of morning. And this was the reason why the Megalle ‘Amukot had no time to visit his grandson.³⁸

Here we have a clear sign of the change of paradigms. The kabbalistic but nevertheless rabbinical authority from Kraków had to pay homage to a non-rabbinical figure, namely the Baal Schem Tov, and even had to change his own habit and schedule in honour of the founder of the Hasidic movement. This is an indication of a clear impact and first breach into the rabbinical realm of influence in the royal city of Kraków, dated by the legend nearly half a century before it had taken place in reality.

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³⁸ Kuntras Me’irat ‘Enajim, in: *Shivhe ha-Besht*, ed. B. Mintz, Jerusalem 1969: 262.

