

TRAILS OF BLOOD

By Rabbi Mendel Gurkov

On a chilly September evening some time ago, a young girl told her mother she was going out to play. "Make sure to be back by nightfall" her mother said. Night came but the girl did not return. A search party made up of the townspeople and police was hastily assembled. After hours of frantic searching, no trace of the girl was found. The police began to suspect foul play, and they put together a list of suspects. The next day Rabbi Berel Brennglass was brought in. The chief eyed the Rabbi up and down, cleared his throat, and laid out the charges: "we have reason to believe that the Jewish community kidnapped a girl for ritual murder".

Sound familiar? Undoubtedly, this is not the first time you've heard a story about the infamous Blood Libel, European history in the middle ages is filled with them. These false claims were synonymous with illogical antisemitism, harkening back to a time and place where primitive views of society reigned supreme.

The story we began with, though, did not happen in Europe, in the middle ages. It happened in New York, 1928.

The christian claim that Jews murder their children to use their blood is so blatantly preposterous it seems ridiculous that anyone has ever believed it. Yet since its inception in the twelfth century, the Blood Libel has haunted the Jewish people. These claims have caused the destruction of large communities, incited murderous pogroms, and inflicted untold damage upon the image of worldwide Jewry. Perhaps the most disturbing part of this terrible accusation is how it has persisted throughout the generations. The world is a far different place now than it was in medieval Europe, yet Blood Libels still exists today.

The Blood Libel allegations have stampeded its way through Jewish history, leaving behind trails of blood.

It all began on a rainy day in March, 1144. Henry de Sprowston was riding through the Thorpe woods on the outskirts of the town of Norwich, England. He noticed a cluster of birds circling around what appeared to be a body. Shooing away the birds, Henry took a closer look. It was the body of a young boy, no older than twelve years old. Henry wrapped the body in his shawl and brought it to the Norwich Cathedral. In medieval England, the Church was the de facto authority in town. The monks in the cathedral identified the boy as William, a tanners apprentice. William belonged to a well respected family, one with significant wealth and prestige. The boy's mother told the local authorities that a few weeks ago a man had knocked on her door asking if her son would like a job for the archdeacon. William's mother claimed to have felt uneasy at the request, but eventually acquiesced and sent the boy off with the man. After not hearing from her son for a few days she told her daughter to look for William. Her daughter reported back to her

that she had seen William and the man enter a Jewish home. A few days later William's body was found in the woods.

Immediately, there were people in the boy's family who accused the Jews of killing William. Charges were brought to the local Bishop who attempted to have the Jews prosecuted. But the local Sheriff, Jon de Chesney, refused to entertain such notions. At that time, there was a civil war being fought all over the English countryside. King Henry I had died and both of his children, Stephon and Matilda, claimed to be the rightful heir to the throne. Finding a corpse in the woods was a common occurrence, and therefore, Jon de Chesney saw no reason to blame the Jews. Being a powerful man in the province he was able to protect the Jews from any attempts of retribution from the Church.

William's story faded into oblivion. He was buried in the woods where he was found, and after a short period of mourning William's family continued on with their lives.

Five years of peace and quiet passed. And then, all hell broke loose.

The year is 1149, and we once again find ourselves in the Thorpe woods on the outskirts of Norwich. A middle aged Jew named Aaron de Barnet was waiting impatiently in the midst of a clearing. A few moments later Sir Simon de Novers, a royal knight, rode up to him, "finally" Aaron muttered, "so Simon, where is the money you owe me?"

Simon laughed nervously, adjusting his knightly armor he replied, "see, that's the problem with you Jews, always greedy for money". At this point Aaron noticed that Simon hadn't come alone "This is the last time you harass me for money!" Simon shouted angrily.

Aaron was suddenly grabbed by Simon's accomplices. They pushed him to the ground and began to hit him. "Wait-" he tried to say, but it was too late. Simon took his sword and stabbed Aaron in the chest. Simon and his cohorts dragged Aarons lifeless body behind a tree, mounted their horses and rode back into town.

The story of Simon de Novers was quite a simple one. He had borrowed money from Aaron and did not have funds to pay him back. Therefore, he ambushed Aaron, and killed him.

Why had Simon borrowed money in the first place? Why did he not have the money to pay back? To understand this story we must first delve into a particular bloody passage in Jewish history, the history of the Jews and the Crusaders.

Around fifty years prior to our story, in the year 1096, Pope Urban II called for a Crusade to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslims. Thousands of men joined the movement and began traveling to Jerusalem. Led by Peter the hermit and Count Emicho, the zealous mob veered off course and attacked the Jewish communities of the Rhineland. They murdered, raped, and pillaged the communities of Speyer, Worms and Metz. Many Jews committed suicide rather than fall into the hands of the mob. Fathers and mothers were faced with impossible choices regarding the lives of their children. These atrocities became known in Jewish history as 'Gezaros Tatno'. After these massacres, the Crusade continued on toward the Holy Land,

eventually recapturing Jerusalem. The Church then established various crusader states in the east.

Fifty years later, Pope Eugene III called for another crusade. One of the crusader states, Edessa, had fallen to the Muslims. After seeing the success of the first crusade, especially the financial windfall from the spoils, many European knights and noblemen were eager to join the second campaign. However; a military campaign is costly, and finding someone to borrow money from was not easy. In general, lending money for war was risky business, not knowing if the borrower would survive to pay his debts. The market became even scarcer when the Church outlawed all Christians from lending with interest. It is at this juncture in history where the "Jewish money lender" became a common sight. Many Jews started to lend money as it was one of the few professions in which Jews were allowed to join, and they were desperately needed. In order to offset the risk of lending to men who were putting their life at risk, Jewish money lenders would lend at a very high interest rate.

Getting back to our story... Simon de Noyers was one of the knights eager to join the second crusade. Needing money, he turned to the wealthiest money lender in town, a Jew by the name of Aaron de Barnet. Aaron lent him the money to be repaid upon return from the crusade. Simon and his fellow knights went off amidst great fanfare as the town of Norwich celebrated the certain victory of the second crusade. Alas, it was not to be. The crusade was an abject failure. The kings and knights of Europe were soundly routed by the Muslim Turks, culminating in a disastrous attempt to capture Damascus. Simon returned to Norwich with his head hung low in shame. The townspeople treated the homecoming warriors with disgust. Simon had lost everything; his prestige, honor and pride. Then Aaron de Barnet came calling for money. With no money from war spoils, Simon had nothing to pay back, and decided upon another course of action.

Aaron's body was discovered later that day in the Thorpe Woods. The Jewish community was in an uproar. They appealed to the king for justice, and a date was set for a trial. The Jewish community of Norwich vs. Sir Simon de Noyers.

The trial was a highly publicized affair held in London with the king himself in attendance. There were many facets at play here. On the one hand, it would not look good for the Church if the men who had served in the crusade were recognized as criminals. On the other hand, the king had to show that he was in control of his land. He was in the midst of a bitter civil war and the wealthy Jewish community was of great importance to his cause.

The trial began with the prosecution laying out the charges: "Simon de Noyers would not and could not repay Aaron, therefore he killed him" concluded the prosecutor for the Jews, the venerable Moses de Okret. He then turned to the jury and said "I have brought before you witnesses who testify to hearing the accused boasting in the local tavern about his crime" Moses' voice raised in an impassioned plea "If a man can murder his fellow without regret, and not only without regret, but to openly boast about his terrible deeds, he is laughing in the face of the very justice that this court represents. I beg of you, for the honor of the king and his court,

punish this man in accordance with his crime, sentence him to death". There was a stunned silence in the courtroom. There were no holes in the prosecution's case. It seemed like a done deal.

Bishop Turbe, the defendants counsel, stood and faced the jury: "It is indeed true that Simon de Novers killed Aaron de Barnet" he paused, building suspense "but he had good reason to, for Aaron de Barent was guilty of a far more heinous crime, a crime so shocking that when Aaron went unpunished Simon had no choice but to take matters into his own hands and deliver justice".

The Bishop now had the courtroom's undivided attention. His plan was a simple one, to create a diversion. He understood that across the country, antisemitic sentiment was growing. The overall spirit of the Christian populace was disheartened. Most of the crusaders had not returned, and those that had managed to survive the brutal wars, had returned home to find themselves in large debt, mostly to Jews. The people were looking for a scapegoat, and Bishop Turbe had found the perfect candidate; "I charge that five years ago the Jewish community of Norwich, led by Aaron de Barnett, kidnapped the child William as a reenactment of the suffering of christ. They strapped him to a cross and made him suffer for nine days before murdering him in cold blood" The Bishop's voice raised to a crescendo "I therefore say that Simon de Novers did the court a favor by killing a guilty man! It is not him who should stand trial but the Jews! They should answer for their crimes!".

The courtroom exploded in shock. The king called for a recess, and convened with his officials. After some discussion, the ruling was passed: Simon de Novers' trial would be postponed until the Bishop's claim could be investigated. The Jewish community protested loudly, but to no avail. Simon returned to Norwich a free man, while the Jewish community was declared guilty in the court of public opinion.

Bishop Turbe's claims were never investigated, and Simon never again stood trial. No attacks on the Jewish community came to be, but the Jewish image in England was shattered forever. After the trial, a certain Brother Thomas wrote a book about William. He claimed that William was actually a saint, and it was because of Brother Thomas' work that the claims of Blood Libel were greatly promulgated. Jewish ritual murder became an accepted fact, and brought to fore the centuries old claim that the Jews were "Christ killers".

As slander of the Blood Libel spread, more and more governments began to decline the Jews their rights of protection. Violence was soon to follow. In the years following the trial the Jewish communities of Gloucester, Bloise and Paris would face violent attacks and expulsions, all based on claims of the Blood Libel.

While it would take many years for the Blood Libel to take the form we know it, the seeds had been planted. A few centuries later in Italy, those seeds would blossom into a terrifying behemoth.

In a dimly lit room in the town of Trent, Italy, an artist was hard at work. Taking a step back, he surveyed his work. The painting had come together nicely. It depicted a child held upright on a table; Three men, clearly Jewish, were holding him in place. A few Jews were watching from the sidelines, while another Jew stabbed the child in the abdomen. "It needs something else" the artist mused. Picking up his paintbrush he went to work. A few minutes later he put down the paintbrush and smiled. He had added one more character to his painting, a Jew holding a pan underneath the child, collecting the blood flowing from the child's wounds. Feeling satisfied he rolled up the painting and walked out of the room. He briskly walked to a shop in the center of town. As he entered the store he marveled at the large piece of machinery that stood in the middle of the room. "I would like this painting copied for print," he said to the shop owner. "That will be very costly" the shop owner replied "This is quite a new technology". The artist opened his purse and showed the shop owner a large quantity of gold, "That shouldn't be a problem" he laughed, "I have very wealthy benefactors".

A few weeks later in Germany, a wealthy businessman sat down for breakfast. As he munched on his strudel he picked up a leaflet that had been delivered to his door. "Jews murder christian child for blood to bake Matzah!" the headline screamed. Underneath the headline was a painting depicting in cruel detail; Jewish people murdering a young child. "Filthy scum!" the businessman raged "Is it not enough that they killed our savior, they now have the gall to attack our children!".

The businessman never stopped to question the authenticity of the leaflets claims. After all, if it was printed it must be true.

As the saying goes: when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.

In 1475 the body of a young toddler by the name of Simon was found in Trento, on Easter Sunday. Claims that the Jews of Trento had killed him sprang up immediately. The Blood Libel had been around for centuries, while the new detail of using the child's blood for Matzah had been added fairly recently.

Nearly the entire Jewish community was arrested. The Jews were tortured until they confessed to kidnapping and killing the boy for their Matzos. Fifteen of the leaders of the Jewish community were burnt at the stake. Despite the protests from the Pope in Rome, the local Bishop continued on with campaigns of violence against the Jews. That Pesach, the Jewish communities of Trento, Veneto, Lombardy, and Tirol were subject to vicious pogroms. In the years following the discovery of Simon's body, Jewish community rights were severely diminished, culminating in 1486, when the Jews of the area were expelled from their homes.

The plight of the Jews of Trento was unfortunately not unique. Many communities across Europe had suffered a similar fate since the charges of Blood Libel had come over from

England in 1150. What made the story of Simon of Trento so unique, was that it was the first claim of Blood Libel after the advent of the printing press.

In 1440, Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press. While woodblock printing had been around since the Eighth century, Gutenberg changed everything when he created hand moulded metal plates. His invention led to the creation of the movable type of printing press, the basis for the printing press that we have today. Gutenberg's invention drastically reduced the cost of printing books, and made publishing a profitable business. The new printing press exploded onto the scene, and within a few decades printing presses in Western Europe had produced over twenty million volumes. The printed word reigned supreme, and having a book published was the ultimate validation for claims made by the author.

While the charges against the Jewish community of Trento were nothing new, the dissemination of written accounts of the alleged crimes, and art propaganda depicting the ritual murder of christian children, spread those claims far and wide, giving them credibility without question.

No longer was the Blood Libel simply just a tool used by local Bishops and politicians to incite the ignorant masses against the Jews. Now, the charge that Jews murdered christian children for their blood for the Matzah on Pesach, had become the accepted fact. Peasants and noblemen alike believed these claims, and the state of the Jews changed to: guilty until proven innocent.

Blood Libels became a yearly occurrence. Rabbis began to outlaw red wine being used for the Pesach Seder lest it become fodder for the propagation of the Blood Libel. Jewish communities all over Western and Eastern Europe suffered harshly. In Spain, the Spanish Inquisition constructed a case of Blood Libel in order to facilitate the expulsion of the Jews. In Tyranu, women and children were tortured into claiming that Jewish men menstruate and that they needed children's blood as a remedy.

Then, in 1512, a Jewish boy was born who would single handedly battle the claim of Blood Libel, working tirelessly to prove the absurdity of such claims. His name was Yehuda ben Betzalel, or as he is most commonly known, The Maharal of Prague.

“Vehi Sheamda...” Rabbi Betzalel Lowe led the people seated at his Pesach Seder in song. Rabbi Lowe was the Rabbi of the large Jewish community of Posan, Poland. The Rabbi looked lovingly at his wife, who was seated opposite him at the table. She was nine months pregnant, yet she had insisted on coming to the Seder. As Rabbi Betzalel began to explain a passage in the Haggadah he was interrupted by a loud groan coming from his wife. “I think the baby's coming” she managed to croak in between gasps.

The Seder became a scene of chaos. "Get the doctor!" someone shouted. Three young men were sent to find the doctor. They sprinted outside, rushing down the empty streets of the Jewish Ghetto.

Noticing the commotion, the armed guards posted at the entrance to the Ghetto came to investigate. As they arrived on the scene they noticed two men carrying a large object at the side of the house. As they approached they realized that the men were holding a body, which they were trying to deposit into Rabbi Lowe's house via a basement window.

"Stop!" the guards shouted. The men looked up and realized they had been caught. They turned heel and began to run towards the entrance of the Ghetto. As they tried to make their escape, they ran directly into the young men and the doctor, who were rushing to aid Rebbetzin Lowe. They stumbled and crashed into the ground. The guards caught up and placed the men under arrest. Upon further inspection they found the body of a young christian boy. "Why did you murder this boy?" questioned the guards. They picked up their batons and waved it threateningly. "Don't hit me, I'll tell you!" The smaller of the two men squeaked "We were hired to plant this body at the Rabbi's house. We were told that it was to be done specifically tonight, in order to frame the Rabbi for ritual murder ". As the guards led the men away, the sounds of the Rebbetzin's labor could be heard. A few minutes later a Mazal Tov was in order, a baby boy had been born.

And so, even before Rabbi Yehuda Lowe was born, he was busy saving the Jewish people from the Blood Libel.

Rabbi Yehuda ben Betzalel Lowe was one of the great figures of Jewish history. His works are widely accepted for their genius, with his supercommentary on Rashi, the "Gur Aryeh", being the most famous. The Maharal is also considered one of the great Kabbalists. His great-great-great-great grandson, Rabbi Shneur Zalmen of Liadi, in his magnum opus [the Tanya], credits the Maharal for the ideas upon which Chabad philosophy was founded.

Any mention of the Maharal automatically brings to mind his most famous creation, the Golem. Legend has it, that upon his appointment as the Chief Rabbi of Prague, the Maharal noticed an uptick in antisemitic attacks upon the Jewish community. Looking for a solution, he used the powers of Kabbalah to create a Golem. One night the Maharal called upon his closest disciples, bringing them to the forest, he began drawing the figure of a large man on the earth. The Maharal then recited Kabbalistic incantations. Suddenly, the earth began to shift, and from the earth a clay man was created. The man was large and imbued with superhuman strength, he was a mute, and would only follow direct orders from the Maharal. The Maharal used the Golem to protect the Jews from antisemitic attacks, particularly from the Blood Libel. He would prowls the streets of the Jewish Ghetto at night, looking for anyone trying to plant a body. He was also used to track down the true perpetrators of the killings of young christian children and bring them to justice.

Whether or not the Golem existed as a real historical figure is hotly debated. While that discussion is beyond the scope of this article, what is certain is that the Maharal worked

tirelessly to combat the Blood Libel. Through a series of audiences, he formed a close relationship with the Monarch of Bohemia at that time, King Rudolph II. The King and his friends, such as the famed astronomers Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, were very impressed by Rabbi Lowe's overall wisdom. The Maharal used his friendship with the king, as a platform to discuss the plight of the Jews. Through a series of logical arguments, he succeeded in convincing the King that the various libelous claims, chief among them the claim of ritual murder, were baseless. The King eventually removed many of the restrictions on trade that had been placed upon the Jews and allowed the Jews the right to a fair trial.

Though the Maharal was not able to eradicate the claims of Blood Libel, he did greatly diminish their validity. The aristocracy in central Europe started to doubt the unquestioned truth of these claims, and the Church commissioned several internal investigations into the matter. We do not know an exact number of Blood Libel's the Maharal managed to thwart, but it is certain that countless communities were saved due to his efforts. The Maharal continued leading the Jewish community of Prague from his perch at the Altneuschul until he passed away in 1609. A statue of the holy Rabbi Lowe stands outside Prague's city hall to this very day.

A century later, a movement formed undoing a lot of the progress the Mahahral had made; the rebirth of the Blood Libel. It did not start in christian circles, rather, as it has been proven time and time again in history, the greatest threats come from within.

The year was 1756. The Shul in Brody was filled to capacity. Gathered in the room were some of the most illustrious Rabbonim in the country. "We are ready to begin," said the Rabbi who was leading the proceedings. He shifted the position of his glasses on the perch of his nose, looked down at the papers in front of him, and read "We are here to discuss the findings of the Beit Din of Satanow, in regards to the matter of the ritual held in the town of Lanckorona". Glancing up from his papers, he asked "Will the representative from Satanow please rise" a middle aged man named Boruch rose and approached the Bimma "Please provide a clear and concise rendition of the findings of the Bet Din of Satanow".

Boruch cleared his throat and replied "After hearing rumors about an immoral ritual held at Lanckorona, the Bet Din of Satanow interviewed many of the people who were alleged to have been there. After many hours of tough questioning the alleged participants admitted to being present at the ritual, and to participating in the blasphemous acts which were performed". Boruch paused, seemingly hesitant to continue. One of the most distinguished Rabbi's rose from his seat and spoke "Do not be afraid to talk bluntly, Halachik rulings must be succinctly expressed" Boruch nodded. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and forged ahead "They confessed to having studied banned Sabbatean books, and they professed their faith in Shabbetai Tzvi and his successor Jacob Frank. They also confessed to committing adultery, swapping wives, and engaging in various sexual transgressions while wearing the crown of a Torah scroll".

The Shul went deathly silent, it seemed as if everyone was holding their breath. Then, the Shul exploded, "Heretics!", "Meshumudim!", "Chazeirim!", the audience members shouted. The

Rabbonim sat there with stunned looks on their faces. After some time, the Shul was ordered empty. "We will have a decision by nightfall" the people were told. After much deliberation the decision was passed: "All the followers of the heretic Jacob Frank, known as Frankist's, are henceforth put into **Cherem**". The counsel had decided to impose their harshest possible measure, complete excommunication.

The Rabbonim were attempting to strike a deathblow to the Sabbatean movement. Instead, they started a war.

Jacob Frank was born in 1726, in the town of Buczacz, Poland. He grew up under the influence of the Sabbateans, a sect of Jews who believed in the false messiah, Shabbetai Tzvi. Jacob rapidly rose through the ranks of the Sabbateans, as he was a smart and charismatic man, he quickly developed a cult following. Eventually, Jacob became convinced of his own divinity and proclaimed himself the true messiah. He broke off from the main contingent of Sabbateans and established his own sect, the Frankists.

Jacob began travelling to various communities to try and attract new followers. He would gather new recruits in a room and perform a so-called "Kabbalistic" ritual. A woman would be placed in the center of the room while the men would surround her. Jacob would then lead those present with incantations of Kabbalistic verses from the holy Zohar. They were then encouraged to engage in promiscuous activity.

Frankism was in the midst of developing an ardent following, when in 1756, a Frankist ritual was witnessed in Lanckorona. It was reported to the Bet Din of Satanow, and eventually a Cherem by a counsel of Rabbonim was declared in Brody.

With the saga of Shabbetai Tzvi and the catastrophe it caused worldwide Jewry fresh in their minds, the Rabbis asked the authorities to intervene. They requested that the Frankists be penalized for their actions, as it was against both Jewish and Christian law. Unfortunately their plan backfired. Seeing an opportunity to destroy the Jewish community from within, the local Bishop offered the Frankists a deal. The Bishop would side with them, and in exchange they would have to turn on their brethren. The choice was an easy one. A book was published by the Frankists titled: *The errors of the Talmud, acknowledged by the Jews themselves*.

Many accusations against traditional Judaism were made in the book. The most damning was that the Talmud did indeed require Christian blood for the baking of Matzah.

The repercussions were immediate. Accusations of the Blood Libel came back with a vengeance. The Jewish communities of Woslawich and Zhytomyr were decimated by violent pogroms with the Blood Libel used as a pretext. Governments refused the Jews the right to a fair trial, using the Frankist's claims as a guilty admission for all Jews.

In the following century the Blood Libel would spread across Christian Europe and over to the Ottoman Empire. In 1840, the first claims of Blood Libel in a country under Muslim rule were investigated in Damascus. In Rhodes, the Jews were accused of murdering a Greek Christian boy, and many members of the community were jailed and tortured.

Jacob Frank eventually led the largest mass conversion to Christianity in Jewish history. His sect would fade into oblivion after his death. His overall impact on Jewish history was negligible, but the reverberations from his lies about the Blood Libel were felt for centuries to come.

Aaron Margolin opened his silver cigarette case and took one out. He lit the cigarette, took a drag, and let the smoke fill his lungs. Exhaling, he turned to Professor Vasily Chernov and spoke, "Professor, I understand your position as a supporter of the Monarchy, but if we do not stand for truth and justice then how is the rule of the Tzar any different than that of a ruthless dictator?" Aaron waved his hands excitedly, sending pieces of tobacco flying "Mendel Beilis is as innocent as the Russian winter is cold. The Blood Libel is no more than a terrible myth concocted by rabid antisemites!" Aaron leapt up from his place, sending his chair crashing to the ground "For god's sake, it's the twentieth century! Have we not moved past primitive views of society?". The Professor stroked his goatee and thoughtfully responded, "Hmmm, there might be a way for us to both get what we want... What if we were to blame the Blood Libel on the Chassidim? We could say that an extremist sect of Jews broke off from traditional Judaism and they use blood for their Matzahs. This way we could exonerate the rest of the Jews while still standing behind the monarchy." A murmur of approval could be heard from the Professors colleagues in the room.

Aaron was contemplating what to answer, when Rabbi Shlomo Ahronson, who had been sitting quietly throughout the whole discussion, spoke up. "Among us Jews, there are no sects or parties. There are groups of people who have different opinions from one another, but all of them turn on a single axis, the axis of Judaism. The Torah is one for all of us; belief and practice are the obligation of us all. The Chassidim are not sectarian at all, but a stream within Judaism, a very important stream indeed." Rabbi Aharonson's voice was calm, but his eyes were filled with fiery passion as he spoke "Do not fool yourselves into thinking that this case can in any way be portrayed as anything else than what it is: the wholesale subversion of Russian justice."

The room went silent as Rabbi Ahronson finished speaking. The Professor and his colleagues gathered together and began to talk in hushed tones between themselves. After a few moments of discussion, a scholarly looking grey haired man turned to Aaron and spoke "My name is Ivan Korsanovich, and I am the editor of the *Kievlianin* newspaper. In the near future we will publish an article denouncing this trial for the farce that it is".

A few days later the *Kievlianin* published a lengthy piece condemning the governments support of the of the accusations made against Mendel Beilis.

The *New York Times* lauded the impressive display of journalistic integrity in their coverage of the case: "*Ritual Murder Case Going to Pieces: Anti-Semitic Journal Denounces the Prosecution of Beilis as Unjust*".

A momentous victory had been won. But Aaron Margolin knew it was just a start. He understood that although they had just won the battle, they had yet to fight the war.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Blood Libel spread like wildfire throughout Russia. In 1903, the deadly Kishinev pogroms were started on claims of a Blood Libel. Forty nine Jews were killed, while 700 houses in the Jewish quarter were looted and burnt.

As the Tsar began to lose his grip on power, his supporters looked for a scapegoat upon which to pin Russia's declining state. With the formation of the ultra nationalist party known as 'The Black Hundreds' antisemitic violence rose to an all time high.

On the morning of March 12, 1911, in the city of Kiev, a thirteen year old boy of Andrei Yushchinsky went missing on his way to school. Eight days later his body was found in a cave outside of town. Immediately, police were able to identify Vera Cheberiak, the head of a local criminal gang, as a prime suspect. Evidence began to mount, and it seemed like an open and shut case. Instead of arresting Vera, when the Ministry of Justice got wind of the case, they decided to go on a different course. Seeing a golden opportunity to distract the people from their growing discontent with the imperial government, the decision was made to frame the Jews for the murder. The Minister of Justice himself conspired with Georgy Zamyslovsky, a member of the state Duma, to try to implicate the Jews.

Their goal first and foremost was to prove that the Jews performed ritual murder as part of their religion. The actual person who they would frame for Andrie's murder was of little consequence to the overall case. Eventually they settled upon Mendel Beilis.

Menachem Mendel Beilis was born in 1874 to a Chasidic family. He was quiet and soft spoken, but a well respected man. A devout and honest man, Beilis was made superintendent over the Zaitsov brick factory in Kiev. Beilis was a former soldier, and had a loving wife and family. Beilis was chosen as the scapegoat simply because the Zaitsov factory was nearby to where Andrie had gone missing, and he was one of the few Jews who had permission to live in the area.

On July 21, Mendel Beilis was arrested and charged with the murder of Andrie Yushchinsky. The Ministry of Justice charged that Jewish ritual murder was a mainstay of Chassidic teaching. They claimed that over sixty years beforehand, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Lubavitch, had blood of Christian children sent from his chassidim to his residence in Lubavitch. They further claimed that every case of Blood Libel in Russian history could be traced back to the Schneerson family.

The reason why they chose to attack chasidim in general, and Chabad Chassidism in particular was multifaceted. The conspirators recognized that the chasidim were the lifeline pumping blood into Russian Judaism. Chasidim exhibited great self sacrifice in the face of terrible persecution, they were therefore deemed as the most dangerous "revolutionaries". Another reason for singling out the Chassidim was that the government felt that they could take advantage of the

well known dispute of the Chasidim and Misnagdim, and convince the Misnagdim to turn on their brethren.

The Jewish response was immediate. The great rabbis and community leaders of worldwide Jewry banded together to support Mendel Beilis. Delegations of representatives were sent from America to Turkey. It was readily understood by all Jews that not just Mendel Beilis and Chassidism stood on trial, but Judaism as a whole.

In the month leading up to the trial, a delegation of Jewish leaders, led by attorney Aaron Margolin and Rabbi Shlomo Ahronson, met with Professor Vasily Chernov and other members of the right wing intelligentsia. The Professor and his colleagues prided themselves with being the moral voice of the imperialists, and after a heated discussion agreed to remove their support of the government case.

A “dream team” of the most liberal lawyers in Russia was quickly assembled in defense of Beilis. Aside from the lawyers, a group of Rabbis were assembled to provide expert testimony on the Blood libel. This group included the chief Rabbi of Moscow, Rabbi Yaakov Mazeh. It also included Rabbi Mendel Chein, a Chabad Chossid who on multiple occasions represented the Rebbe Rashab, Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneerson.

The trial began in 1913, nearly two years after Beilis was first charged. It was a highly publicized affair, with members of the international media present. From the beginning it was apparent that the prosecution had a very flimsy case against Beilis. The defense had proven that Beilis was at work in the factory during the day of the murder. Therefore, the prosecution had no choice but to claim that Beilis had left his post at work, murdered the child, dragged the body to a cave outside town, and then returned to work, all within a short period of time. As the trial went on, the prosecution had to spend more time proving Vera Cheberiak’s innocence than Beilis’ guilt.

After discussing the details of the murder case, the real subject of the trial was broached. The prosecution called upon their so called “experts” to prove that Jewish ritual murder was sanctioned by the Talmud and Kabbalah. The defense of Judaism was left to Rabbi Yaakov Mazeh. Rabbi Mazeh prepared extensively for his rebuttal with the help of Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Shchneerson, the chief Rabbi of Yaketriaslav.

On the appointed day Rabbi Mazeh delivered a resounding defense of Judaism. Speaking for nearly eight hours, the Rabbi started by explaining the origins of the Jewish nation from their Exodus from Egypt, to the founding of Chassidism and the integral role it plays in Jewish society. With eloquence and in an articulate manner, he managed to explain some of the most complicated sections of Jewish law. He spoke in the language of the simple man, proving beyond a doubt that the Blood Libel has no basis in Judaism.

The eyes and ears of the world turned toward the Jury. The fate of Russian Jewry lay in the hands of twelve jurors. The jury which was assembled mostly of simple peasants. More than half of them belonged to the openly antisemitic political party, the Black Hundreds. The real

question of the trial was, if these simple people could look beyond their prejudices and cultural antisemitism and see the case for what it truly was? Could these simple people stand up to a powerful government and acquit an innocent man and his people?

After hours of deliberation, the Jury returned their verdict: Mendel Beilis was found not guilty. The press hailed it as a momentous occasion in Jewish history. A sense of euphoria swept the nation, and it seemed like the Blood Libel had finally been put to rest.

Alas, it was not to be. Upon a closer reading of the verdict, it was clear that while the Jury had found Mendel Beilis not guilty, in terms of the larger question of the validity of the claims of Jewish ritual murder, the Jury was ambiguous, and left the question unanswered.

Mendel Beilis eventually settled in the United States of America. There he published a memoir of his story. He passed away in 1934, surrounded by his family.

In 1928, the Blood Libel would reach the shores of the United States. The Jewish Community of Massena, New York was accused of ritual murder upon the disappearance of three year old Barbara Griffith. After Barbara was eventually found, lost in the woods, the Jewish population of the United States went into an uproar, and demanded an apology from police. The Sheriff wrote a written apology to the community, but the damage was already done. The accusation hung in the air of Massena, tarnishing the Jewish community's image. It slowly dawned upon the Jews of America that they were not impervious to such claims, even in the land of the free.

In 2005, members of the Russian State Duma accused the Jews of engaging in ritual murder. They published a letter addressed to the Russian prosecutor general asking to ban all Jewish organizations, writing that their claims had been proven in court numerous times.

In 2007, Israeli Professor Ariel Toaff wrote a book titled *Passovers of Blood: the Jews of Europe and Ritual Murder*. In it he hypothesized that Ashkenazi Jews in medieval times used small quantities of blood. The book was pulled from circulation a week after publishing, but just as the case was with his Predecessor, Jacob Frank, Toaff's book is used as "Proof" for the proponents of the Blood Libel.

In 2013, the non for profit organization MIFTAH, which campaigns for an independent, inclusive, and tolerant Palestinian state, claimed the Jews engage in ritual murder. They published an article asking if President Barack Obama knew what ingredients Jews use to make the Matza which was eaten at the White Houses' annual Seder.

In the written manifesto of the Poway synagogue shooter, he writes of Christians murdered by Jews as one of the reasons for his deadly attack. The horrific events in Poway took place in 2019, less than a year ago.

“Those that do not remember history are condemned to repeat it”.

Our story is one of blood and tears. We have suffered more than any other nation throughout history.

Yet, when looking back at the thousands of martyrs who gave up their lives for their beliefs, one cannot help but draw incredible strength.

With every incredible sacrifice, every family torn apart from libelous claims, every charge, every trial, every community decimated by violence, a chain of undying faith was formed. A chain of millions of souls, reaching out to me and you, handing us the opportunity to form a new link.

The chain of Jewish souls has withstood the Blood Libel, and remains unbroken to this very day.

May the memories of the holy Kedoshim be a blessing onto us.

